

POLITICAL EMOTIONS. WHY LOVE MATTERS FOR JUSTICE
MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM
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Martha C. Nussbaum's truly magnificent contribution to ethics and to social system reform has been widely acknowledged and applauded. Professor at the University of Chicago, Nussbaum was appointed by its Department of Philosophy, the Law School, and the Divinity School as the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics. An active writer since the 1970s and author of more than a dozen books, her most recent publications include *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality* (Basic Books, 2008), *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law* (Oxford University Press, 2010), and *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

Her most recent book, *Political Emotions. Why Love Matters for Justice*, addresses the importance of forging a public culture that fosters emotions that sustain a decent liberal society. As Nussbaum herself points out, her account on just societies is greatly indebted to John Rawls's ideal society, as presented in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), one of freedom and equality. But unlike Rawls, she does not deal with the inner workings of just societies, but rather with those societies that aspire to justice. Moreover, Nussbaum's book focuses on only one of the various elements that Rawls takes into consideration, and that any society seeking justice –whatever justice may be– that wants the political principles underpinning it to be stable over time must take into account: emotions directed toward the common good. In her opinion, other political theorists' doctrines lack this element.

For Nussbaum, it is undeniable that without emotions that take as their object something beyond the self, human beings tend to enclose themselves within narcissistic projects. This is why she firmly believes that the emotions that ought to be fostered are “eudaimonistic” emotions– meaning that they evaluate the world from the individual's point of view, as she had already discussed in *Upheavals of Thought* (2001)– which include others in one's own “circle of concern.” Therefore the others' worries and concerns might be felt as one's own. Nussbaum goes on to suggest that Rawls' approach relies too heavily on emotions that take as their object abstract principles rather than particulars, overriding the fact that human beings identify themselves more easily with abstract

values when they are mediated by particular emotions attached to particular symbols, memories, and collective history.

Thus Nussbaum argues for the need to promote concrete emotions –directed to the concrete nation’s aims, its institutions and leaders, its geography and fellow citizens– that support certain principles and values, among which she particularly underlines equal opportunities for all, the badness of several forms of discrimination and hierarchy, and social redistribution (in the form of health, education, housing, and a decent level of welfare for everybody). She further explains that any promoted values cannot be typical of one concrete group, but must be an area of a Rawlsian “overlapping consensus.”

Nussbaum hastens to point out that emotions prove crucial for supporting any political view –be it liberal democracy, fascism, etc.– and therefore her books can also be of interest to people whose notion of justice could not be further from her own.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first, she discusses earlier sources that inspire her work and she discusses their strengths as well as their weaknesses to be overcome. As a starting point, she chooses a highly original political reading of Mozart’s and Lorenzo’s Da Ponte *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786) in which a flexible and compassionate attitude of love, life affirmation, and reciprocity –which according to Nussbaum opens up democracy– is privileged over the rigidity of the *ancien régime* hierarchies. Mozart, like Herder, seems to suggest that culture be “feminized” by forging a “civil religion” that encourages said attitudes. But according to Nussbaum said proposals met with two strong oppositions: the honor-based emotion approach typical of the *ancien régime*, on the one hand, and the new capitalist culture based on individualistic ambition, on the other. Nussbaum then goes on to consider other intellectuals’ “civil religions,” such as Comte’s and Mill’s, and the way Tagore recast Comte’s ideas in a project more imbued with love, longing, and joy, which rejects the control typical of Comte’s.

To a large extent, Nussbaum leaves aside Locke’s ideas, because he does not acknowledge a need for good attitudes to be promoted by political culture; she leaves aside Kant’s because in order to protect freedom of speech, his concept of the state excludes the psychological emotions needed for stability; and Rousseau, whose “civil religion” is to be imposed coercively. And she aligns herself with Mill and Tagore, although she claims that they fail to focus (sufficiently) on the importance that institutions should have in the promotion of the aforementioned values.

The terms for the question that articulates her whole book are then set: how can a decent society promote stability and motivation without resorting to coercion?

The book's second part explores the resources inherent in human psychology that ought to be kept in mind in such a project. Some emotions should be cultivated –good emotions towards collective rights, and anger directed to the violation of other's people rights. Others, such as the tendency to protect the weak by subordinating others, should be discouraged. And others encouraged only when associated with certain goals –think for example of shame: feeling ashamed of excessive greed ought to be favored, but the shame of having physical impairments should be overcome. She also claims that dissident voices –and a wide and solid critical culture– should not only be welcome but also encouraged.

Nussbaum then refers to a set of human tendencies toward “radical evil”, but believes that culture can do a lot to shape them. She lays special emphasis on how the love that children need in order to leave behind their initial solipsism, helplessness, anxiety, and consequent narcissism, must be continuous throughout life. Otherwise, this helplessness informs humans' tendency to transform others into slaves, as we all did as children. This love –this outward erotic movement toward the world– must not only be cultivated in personal relationships, but also in the “potential space” of culture and the arts, because it is crucial for developing compassion –that is, an emotion that takes as its object the suffering of another being–, which in turn is indispensable for the project in question. This is why certain patriotism –namely, love for the nation– that manages to build a narrative to include those groups usually excluded can be of great help. Special care must be taken in order to prevent individuals from inhibiting their compassion when they think that the other is in trouble because he has made defective choices, and also in order to ward off any form of anthropodenial –that is, classifying any group of other people as lower because of being supposedly “more animal.” Imagination and love should be used to overcome such problems.

The third and final part examines how the aforementioned emotions can be cultivated thanks to certain works of public art, songs, texts, political rhetoric, and even the design of public spaces. Nussbaum primarily focuses on the United States and India, illustrating her proposal with the deeds and words of figures who mobilized a wide range of positive emotions, such as Washington, Lincoln, Gandhi, Nehru, and Roosevelt. What is telling in this regard is that Roosevelt –to take an example– did

not aim to unleash a debate about whether redistribution was just, but to foster emotional support for redistribution.

She further exemplifies her ideas with works of public art. Of particular relevance, she shows, are some recent attempts undertaken in Chicago, such as the Millennium Park (2004), commissioned by the City Council, and the playful atmosphere fostered in it by the Cloud Gate, by Anish Kapoor, and the Crown Fountain, by Jaume Plensa, which create a friendly atmosphere, one of inclusion, bodily joy, and loss of formality that makes people less suspicious of each other. She also points out the University of Chicago's ongoing effort to destigmatize certain areas surrounding the campus associated with crime by building, for example, the Logan Arts Center, where activities in cooperation with the adjacent district of Woodlawn are planned, and the everybody-welcome Ice Rink, in the midst of what was considered a dangerous no-man's land that separated the university from neighborhoods with a rather high index of poverty and crime.

Nussbaum concludes by asking if love should be only a tool to reach the aforementioned political goals, and would therefore no longer be needed were said goals achieved, or if it is rather one of the goals. She stands clearly on this second option: loving citizens are not only a crucial instrument for her project, but also one of its aims, since they are more desirable than citizens who just do the right things but who actually are mere "empty shells."

Resting upon a realistic picture of human nature that seriously takes into account its flaws, *Political Emotions* constitutes an optimistic approach to the path that leads to justice. It must also be highlighted that Nussbaum protects her project particularly well from potential objections. First, she makes it clear that she is well aware that, despite focusing her work on them, emotions without arguments are useless. Second, she suggests that her theory of justice might need more than emotional support—meaning economic support—, but explains that examining whether economic issues could constitute an obstacle for her project is just not within the scope of her book. Nussbaum's work therefore warmly invites scholars from various disciplines to complement her work. She opens up a fertile path, and does not deny that there is definitely a lot to be done to make her project a reality.

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