

Martha Nussbaum

Upheavals of thought: The intelligence of emotions

CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2001

Reviewed by Claudia Moscovici

ISBN: 9780521462020

In weaving the fabric of its argument, *Upheavals of Thought* performs a chiasmic philosophical operation. It shows that emotion is thoughtful rather than distinct from judgment and ethics and, conversely, that thought is fundamentally tied to desires and emotions.

Up to Martha Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought*, philosophy assumed an ambivalent attitude towards the volatile subject of emotion. Even those philosophers who were generally sympathetic to the emotions—including Aristotle, the Stoics, Smith and Rousseau—warned against their uncontrollable nature and the danger they posed to reason (in the pursuit of knowledge) and to ethics (in the pursuit of the good life). Finally, it was assumed that if a study of emotion belonged to any branch of philosophical thought, it was above all to aesthetics to explain how good art moves us in overwhelming ways. Given this philosophical ambivalence towards emotion, Martha Nussbaum's systematic defense of the ethical and cognitive dimensions of emotion in her book, *Upheavals of Thought*, makes a significant contribution to contemporary philosophy and to feminist theory.

Emotions, the author declares from the outset in Part I, are expressions of value. Because they are tied to one's sense of flourishing or well-being, the author calls emotions "eudaimonistic." Such an Aristotelian understanding of emotion in turn incorporates "three salient ideas: the idea of a cognitive appraisal or evaluation; the idea of one's own flourishing or one's important goals and projects; and the idea of salience of external objects as elements in one's own scheme or goals" (4). These ideas inseparably intertwine cognitive appraisals—the information and beliefs we have about life—to ethics—the values we consider important in life.

Parts II and III examine more closely the connection between emotions and ethics by considering the main philosophical objections to using emotions as ethical guides. The author focuses in particular upon the understanding of emotions presented by the Stoics because they provide one of the foundations for her own theory as well as a springboard for her critique. Nussbaum borrows from the Stoics the notion that emotions are cognitive values as opposed to being blind and uncontrollable forces unrelated to what we know about the world and what we value in life. At the same time, she argues against the Stoic charge that emotions are ethically undignified because they manifest a high degree of dependency and vulnerability upon human beings or objects outside of one's control. Such vulnerability and interdependency, the author maintains, is part of what makes us human.

Nussbaum also considers closely the Kantian argument against emotions, which posits that emotions are too subjective, unreliable and volatile to provide an adequate basis for moral conduct. To address this objection, Nussbaum breaks it down into its component parts. First, such an argument tells us that emotions can be dangerous because they focus upon the individual

and his or her personal goals or projects rather than the good of society. Second, the argument goes, emotions are connected with extremely close and intense attachments that may be “too partial or unbalanced” to yield ethical decisions. (12). Third, it is objected that even those emotions which we consider positive—such as love or compassion—are often linked to destructive emotions, such as jealousy, anger and hatred. Although Kant articulated this argument most compellingly, many philosophers that Nussbaum examines in her book—including Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Adam Smith, Rousseau, and Kant himself—attempt to prove in one way or another that emotions are unreliable motivations for ethics (13).

In light of these critiques, Nussbaum qualifies her argument in defense of the emotions in several respects. She acknowledges that emotions provide no more reliable foundations for ethics than other aspects of our faculties and beliefs. Nothing about human behavior or belief should be accepted thoughtlessly. More importantly, if emotions are to be conducive to ethics, they must fulfill certain criteria. “In particular,” she explains, “I assume that an adequate view [of emotion] should make room for mutual respect and reciprocity; that it should treat people as ends rather than as means, and as agents rather than simply as passive recipients of benefit; that it should include an adequate measure of concern for the needs of others, including those who live at a distance; and that it should make room for attachments to particular people, and for seeing them as qualitatively distinct from one another” (12). To show that, once they fulfill the above conditions, emotions can be conducive rather than destructive to ethical life, the author focuses upon an emotion which already has been commonly tied to ethics: compassion. Philosophers such as Smith, Hume and Rousseau considered compassion essential to the ethics of social life.

Why? Above all because compassion involves a move away from egocentric needs towards a concern about the wellbeing of others that is necessary to ethics. As Nussbaum puts it, “Compassion takes up the onlooker’s point of view, making the best judgment the onlooker can make about what is really happening to the person, even when that may differ from the judgment of the person herself” (306). But there are strong philosophical objections to compassion as well. Nussbaum responds in detail to the Stoic critique of compassion in particular, which maintains that dependency upon people or things beyond one’s control is necessarily a manifestation of weakness and lack of dignity. She counters that “there is nothing wrong with acknowledging that human beings have certain needs to flourish and are vulnerable” (371). In elaborating this argument, she alludes to her previous theory of human capabilities, developed in *Sex and Social Justice*.^{<1>} If we assume that human beings have certain fundamental external needs without which they cannot lead properly speaking human lives—that they need not only water, food and shelter, but also basic freedoms of movement, action, expression and belief as well as protection from harm and from government oppression—then it makes sense that we feel pain or experience compassion when we or other human beings can no longer fulfill those capacities.

In Part III, Nussbaum moves on to an even more difficult and complex subject: erotic love. If compassion was, relatively speaking, easy to relate to ethics, erotic love will be much less so for the reasons we have already mentioned. Perhaps the most intense and tumultuous emotion, erotic love is often tied to uncontrollable and sometimes selfish desires and psychological needs, excessive dependency, possessiveness, and negative emotions such as jealousy and hate. Yet because of its intensity and the closeness and warmth it generates, love is at the same time the most exciting and enriching human emotion.

To explore the ethical potential of erotic love, Nussbaum examines some of its most compelling literary and philosophical representations, beginning with Plato, continuing with Christianity (Augustine, Dante), culminating with the Romantics (Bronte, Mahler) and declining with Modernism (Whitman, Joyce). Her analysis shows that the “ascent of love” traditions, even when they begin with personal feelings (as the Platonic account does, for example), eventually render love too abstract to allow for real concern for particular, imperfect human beings. By way of contrast, she shows that individual, tangible erotic love—with all its vulnerability and imperfection—can be an important part of leading an ethical and fulfilling life.

In weaving the fabric of its argument, *Upheavals of Thought* performs a chiasmic philosophical operation. It shows that emotion is thoughtful rather than distinct from judgment and ethics and, conversely, that thought is fundamentally tied to desires and emotions. Her work deepens our thinking about emotion and enriches existing feminist scholarship on the subject. For given the link between emotions and femininity and the devaluation of both, feminist scholarship has much to gain from Nussbaum’s thorough and thoughtful defense of the emotions.

Claudia Moscovici teaches political philosophy, aesthetics and art history in the philosophy department at the University of Michigan. She has published five books on citizenship and feminist theory including *Erotisms* (1996), *From Sex Objects to Sexual Subjects* (1996), and *Gender and Citizenship* (2000). She is currently working on a project called *Romanticism and Postromanticism: The Art of Passion*, which attempts to revive some of the romantic values for our times.