

'TO DO JUSTICE AND JUDGMENT': THE PLACE OF PASSION IN PUBLIC LIFE

by

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Consider what the human mind *en masse* would have been if there had been no such combination of elements in it as has produced poets. All the philosophers and *savants* would not have sufficed to supply that deficiency. And how can the life of nations be understood without the inward life of poetry – that is, of emotion blending with thought?
– George Eliot, Letter to Lady Ponsonby [Qt. "Introduction," *Silas Marner* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 7].

Abstract

In *Upheavals of Thought/The Intelligence of the Emotions*, and, indeed, throughout most of her philosophical work, Martha C. Nussbaum argues that the emotions have been inadequately understood and, consequently, unfairly restricted in moral and political theory and practice to our own disadvantage. She attempts to redress the first of these complaints by ascribing to the emotions much greater rationality than has been ascribed to them by ancient and modern philosophers and psychologists in the West. Against mechanistic and irrationalist conceptions of emotion, which dominate Cartesian rationalism, Humean skepticism, and Kantian idealism, Nussbaum not only posits that there are cognitive components of the emotions, a thesis that has become a commonplace among contemporary philosophers, but also that the emotions are themselves rational judgments. It is through their rational or intellectual content that Nussbaum proceeds to redress aspects of the second complaint – that the emotions have been unduly prevented from informing normative theory and practice in both the private and public realms. I argue that she draws conclusions about the emotions that exceed the nature of her evidence and that traditional concern with the emotions at the normative level is justified, if at times overstated and ill-conceived.

First, because Nussbaum describes her own account as neo-Stoic, I examine some of Cicero's Stoic-inspired theory of the emotions, along with the radical normative conclusion – the wholesale extirpation of the emotions from conceptions of the good life – advanced by Seneca and other Stoics. Second, I offer a competing general theory of emotion, one that revisits Aristotle's rich but complex philosophy of mind, including its distinctions of sensation, perception, and understanding. This theory is intended to be neo-Aristotelian, drawing on the works of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and more recent work in the same tradition. With this measure in hand, I critique Nussbaum's *strong* cognitivist account as being too intellectualistic. In the subsequent chapter, I look to Nussbaum's normative privileging of compassion, which she had earlier characterized as *the* basic social emotion, that derives from her *intellectualist* theory. Much of what she has drawn our attention to here is valuable, but some of her recommendations are undermined by their dependence on her flawed theory of emotion. In keeping with Nussbaum's own privileging of literary texts in her argument, I also offer a reading of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in which I disagree with her on the content that such texts are said to teach. Finally, I turn to the place of the emotions in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Here I

argue that Nussbaum has discovered a real flaw, but I do not see it as necessary to revert to her *strong* cognitivist account of emotion in order either to recognize or attend to it.

Even though it is rife with valuable detail, I conclude that as conceived Nussbaum's project claims more than it can prove. Yet the emotions will not go away: so it *is* worth taking a closer look at both neo-Aristotelian and neo-Stoic accounts. The former, I hold, furnishes a truer explanation of emotion as well as a truer and more useful moral and political theory, which is grounded in the virtues. Further investigation will, I think, lead to a significant re-conceptualization of the emotions, and it should re-invigorate discussion of the place of the passions in both private and public life. For like Nussbaum, the neo-Aristotelian sees the passions as central to determinations of human flourishing in ethical theory and the roles that political institutions must play in relation thereto. But she/he has a greater respect for the tradition that approaches the passions with care and concern because of the unreliable and unpredictable manner in which and extent to which they constrain deliberate and free choice, the central feature of any sustainable political and moral philosophy.