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AN INTERVIEW WITH MARTHA CRAVEN NUSSBAUM. EMOTIONS: WHY LOVE MATTERS FOR JUSTICE (SECOND PART)

abstract

My contribution consists in an interview with Martha Craven Nussbaum, one of the most popular philosophers of our time. Following the questions raised by the interviewer, Nussbaum introduces her book Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice, Harvard University Press (2013). Developing the interview in Phenomenology and Mind, 3, 2012 (pp. 160-165), here Nussbaum focuses on emotions influence on political life, specifically considering emotions as a possible cognitive way to access the values and to inform people acts. Among the most prominent topics, she points out the idea of a “civil religion”.

keywords

Emotions, Values, Politics, Acts, Civil Religion

Martha Craven Nussbaum (born May 6, 1947) is a philosopher and Professor at the University of Chicago (<http://www.law.uchicago.edu/faculty/nussbaum/>). Her major research areas include ancient philosophy, ethics, politics, law, etc. One of the most popular philosophers of our time, Nussbaum is interested in the foundation of ethics and politics on emotional life, starting from the Aristotelian theory of the “good life” and going deep into liberal and Indian thought. She is well known for her civil commitment: she has been dealing actively with human rights for years, holding important international offices such as the membership of the Committee on Southern Asian Studies and Founding Presidency of the Human Development and Capability Association. Together with Amartya Sen, she defends a Capability Approach to justice, also suggesting development policies.

In the present interview the author introduces her last impressive book, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, Harvard University Press (2013). The core of this book is the insight into emotions influence on political life, when specifically considering emotions as a possible cognitive way to access the values and to inform people acts. Nussbaum talks about a “civil religion”, that is a cultivation of emotions necessary to politics in order to promote people confidence in social institutions as well as people involvement in social institutions improvement.

What makes such a “religion” possible? As we know, emotions in politics can play both a positive and a negative role. How can emotions have positive influence on politics? What is the challenge of emotions in politics? Is there a possible link between emotions, justice and human acts?

The present interview develops and enriches the one conducted by Emanuele Caminada and me to Martha Nussbaum 3 years ago (*Phenomenology and Mind*, 3, 2012, pp. 160-165). The concepts there still *in nuce* are now disclosed, enlightening the real interest of the author intuitions about the relationship between emotions and political life. Among the most prominent points of interest, we point out the following ones: the fact that a society is required to be well ordered; the need to overcome a neutral idea of “civil religion” without admitting, for this reason, an illiberal society; the possibility of a cognitive ethics which is different from a metaphysical one and which takes into serious consideration the theme of dissent.

1. In our last interview we asked you how emotions and values are related in your view. You answered that “emotions always contains appraisals of an object as either good or bad for the

creature who has the emotion. So in that sense they contain values”. Can you kindly precise this statement and give us some examples?

Emotions are distinct from mere feelings (feeling hot, feeling cold, feeling pain), and also distinct from bodily appetites such as hunger and thirst, since they point at an object: joy, grief, fear, anger, envy, compassion ... all are about something, a person or an event. But not all object stimulate emotions: only those that seem important from the point of view of well-being. The standard evolutionary account of emotions is that they evolved because they steer creatures away from danger and toward things that are good for them, by giving a kind of “news headline”: HERE IS SOMETHING BAD (or: GOOD). For example: we don’t feel fear every time a small insect comes across our path, but we do feel fear if we appraise the animal as dangerous: a snake, a tiger, a lion. Sometimes our fears are mistaken: Aristotle already mentions people who fear a mouse running across the floor. But it is because the person thinks that the mouse is a big danger (mistakenly) that she feels fear. Again, we don’t feel grief every time someone in the world dies: only when we think it is a person really important to us. So emotions contain a road-map of what we think important to our well-being and thus contain values in that sense. These are not necessarily moral values of course.

2. As we already asked you, In *Political Emotions* you connect pillars of your philosophy: your cognitive theory of emotional life and your capability approach as a theory of justice. Can you better explain why emotions and political principles are deeply interrelated?

All societies need to think about stability: indeed a reasonable degree of stability seems necessary to justify a set of political principles. So all societies need to think about how citizens will learn to care about and support the things that are crucial to the political principles. But a society based upon my “capabilities approach” will need to think more about the emotions than many other types of society, for two reasons. First, my approach requires a great deal of redistribution of wealth and income between rich and poor, and this requires a very robust sense of a common good and an extensive altruism and willingness to sacrifice. Second, my society includes as equals people who are often views with fear or disgust: racial and sexual minorities, immigrants, etc. So it won’t be enough to pass a good set of tax laws: if people don’t love their fellow citizens and want them to flourish they will just change the laws, and they will simply do away with the whole social safety net if their hearts don’t want it. Racial animosity can’t be overcome by law alone, but only by a spirit of brotherhood and fellow-feeling.

3. What emotions and political principles should a liberal society promote? We are used to believe that emotions are promoted by illiberal society. Is there a difference between liberal and illiberal society way to promote emotions? Can liberal values, such as freedom and autonomy, be conciliated with public care of emotions?

As I point out, the interest in emotions was not, historically, promoted by illiberal thinkers: it originated with Rousseau, Mazzini, John Stuart Mill, all of them great liberals (though Rousseau is complicated here!). But one has to be very careful if one is a liberal to make sure that the public cultivation of emotions is compatible with liberal freedom and a vigorous critical culture. This is one of the prominent themes of my book. A nation that cultivates emotions (of racial brotherhood, for example) must also strongly protect dissenting speech and peaceful protest, and it must convey the idea that individuality is prized, not repressed.

Indeed, I give many examples of how emotion comes to be attached to the very idea of a vigorous critical culture. The most popular book in US schools is *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a story of passionate dissent and critique. The liberal message is the more powerful for being conveyed in an emotionally powerful narrative.

4. In our last interview we asked you if a right exists independently of legal *guarantees*. You answered “Yes, since rights inhere in human dignity itself”. What is human dignity in your perspective?

I think that the notion of human dignity has very little independent content, and should not be treated as a debate-stopper, as if it has self-evident content on its own. It derives its meaning as part of a fabric of principles and judgments. But the very thin content the notion does have is that of being treated as an end, not as a mere means. Of course I think that animals all have dignity, not just the human ones.

5. In the historical part of *Political Emotions* you refer to a cosmopolitan tradition: Rousseau, Herder, Mazzini. They talk about a “civil religion”. What do they mean with ‘civil religion’? Do you agree with them in considering “civil religion” as the ideal of a cosmopolitan society?

I’m not sure why you call this a cosmopolitan tradition. I myself don’t, and I think it would not be appropriate, since Rousseau was quite opposed to ideas of global brotherhood, although Mazzini favored them. I myself think that global justice is an important part of what a good nation should try to promote, but not all the thinkers in the tradition I describe would agree with that statement. What they mean by “civil religion” is a set of public practices that form sentiments that support the political principles. In the nineteenth century it was generally thought that the “civil religion” would eventually replace the usual religions, and that we would just stop being Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, etc. and get our emotional nourishment entirely from our nation’s public culture. Today we don’t think this is an appropriate idea, since we think a decent society must respect people’s religious attachments. So the term “civil religion” does not seem appropriate today, and I do not use it of my own proposals.

6. In your work you say that your political liberalism owes a lot to Kant and Locke perspective, but it also moves further. How does it move further? What are the problems of neutrality in a liberal view of politics?

Rousseau saw the need for emotions in sustaining the political principles of a society – but he did not understand the importance of protecting dissent and diversity. His “civil religion” was thus very dictatorial, imposing harsh penalties on people who did not affirm it. Locke and Kant, by contrast, understood the importance of protecting freedoms of speech and belief – but they neglected the whole question of political emotion. Locke does urge people to cultivate a spirit of charity and compassion, when he talks about religious toleration, but he proposes no public project for supporting these good emotions and discouraging the bad ones. Kant, too, thinks that people should cultivate a fraternal spirit toward one another, but he does not propose any public mechanism for this. His views on the emotions are not well-developed in any case, and he has little of value to contribute on that topic.

As for neutrality: I don’t think that a good society should be ethically neutral. A good society must be in favor of human equality, not inequality, in favor of anti-racism not racism, and

so forth. Its political principles should express a definite moral vision. But it is a vision that is incomplete, deliberately, leaving lots of spaces within which citizens pursue their own comprehensive conceptions of the good, whether religious or secular. Indeed in order to show equal respect to citizens it must refrain from taking up too much space, so to speak. And it ought to remain neutral on metaphysical matters, such as the existence and destiny of the soul, that divide people along lines of religious and creed.

7. What do you think about political dissent?

Dissent is crucial to the health of any society, and is to be strongly encouraged, so long as it takes a peaceful form. I myself think that dissent ought to be not only peaceful but also courteous and respectful, but I don't think that we should limit public expression on grounds of civility – only on grounds of an imminent threat to public safety. I do support traditional laws of defamation that protect individuals whom hostile speech has harmed, but I strongly oppose laws banning “group defamation,” on the grounds that they lead to the persecution of scholars and other dissenters.

8. In your work it seems that John Stuart Mill and Rabindranath Tagore are the two thinkers you agree with most. In which sense do you agree with them?

Both Mill and Tagore understood that true human development requires a lot of space for individual self-expression. So they advocated a lot of material support for human capabilities (Mill was a socialist, and Tagore's interest in the material development of rural India was a lifelong passion), while also defending liberties of speech, association, and expression. And both felt that the arts were keys to this new type of freedom. Mill advocated “aesthetic education” as a key to the advancement of humanity, although he never gave much detail about his program. Tagore gives us a lot more detail, because he actually founded a school and university that were based on critical thinking and the arts. The school had worldwide influence, and was imitated by educational reformers in Europe and North America. So I agree with their basic conception of human development, and with their sense that a kind of passionate love of others, of the sort that poetry and music nourish, is key to a healthy society.

9. Among the other emotions, you focus your attention on disgust. Power of disgust can be very aggressive in excluding abnormal subjects and disgust probably protect us from fear of our own fragility. How could disgust be conciliated with more inclusive emotions, such as love and compassion, and how should we consider human fragility?

One should bear in mind that I have written two prior books about disgust, both of which have appeared in Italian translation: *Hiding From Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (2004), and *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law* (2010). So the treatment of disgust in *Political Emotions* builds upon these prior lengthier discussions. What I say there is that disgust probably has an evolutionary origin, and that its original function was to keep us away from things that are genuinely dangerous, like rotting food, corpses, and human waste products. Disgust, research shows, does not track the dangerous very well: there are many dangerous foods that are not found disgusting (poisonous mushrooms, for example), and many non-dangerous substances that are found disgusting (such as a cockroach that has been sterilized and sealed in a plastic capsule!). But on the whole the overlap is great enough that disgust was useful. Even now, when we can test for bacterial contamination, it is often good to

follow disgust: for example, if the milk smells disgusting, it's better to throw it out, rather than to wait for the results of a laboratory test!

Even “primary disgust,” meaning disgust at human waste products and corpses, has problematic tendencies: for as we flee contamination from these parts of ourselves we often tell ourselves that this is “not us,” and that we are not really animals who excrete and die. Bad attitudes to sexuality and death often result. But a far worse set of problems comes with what I call “projective disgust”: the projection of disgust properties (such as bad smell, foulness, animality) onto groups of people. The dominant group says, “These are animals, and we should avoid contact with them.” Think of the irrationality of U.S. racists, who refused to share drinking fountains, lunch counters, and swimming pools with African-Americans. The irrational fear of contamination turns into a horrible mechanism of exclusion and subordination. I do not agree with you that it is “abnormal subjects” who are excluded. In India, untouchability applied to a very large proportion of the population for no reason at all. (You can't identify a dalit by any physical trait, only by a hereditary name.) In the US, racism was applied to a very substantial part of the population. Other groups targeted for disgust in various times and places include Jews, gays and lesbians – and women, who happen to be the majority in most societies. I think you are referring to the application of projective disgust to people with physical and mental disabilities. However, when we consider that aging people often fall into this class, that class, too, is extremely large, and could not be considered “abnormal” in any statistical sense. Nor is it “abnormal” in any normative sense: weakness, disability, and vulnerability are facts of human life.

Now to your question: what should we do? Part of this work belongs to the family, as it brings children up, as far as possible, without “projective disgust” and without too much disgust at primary objects. Toilet training has changed a lot in the past century, and children are no longer encouraged to feel disgust with their waste products, but, rather, encouraged with positive reinforcement to please parents by learning to use the toilet. This is very good, and it is perfectly compatible with sensible policies promoting sanitation. But a part of this work also needs to go on in societies, by promoting the sense of joy and delight in physical proximity, as through festivals of many sorts that bring people together across racial and ethnic lines. Sports are another powerful vehicle of overcoming disgust, as Nelson Mandela wisely saw. When bodies are in close contact with joy and cooperation and for an attractive goal, that quickly undermines projective disgust. The arts also play a role: I give examples of how public art and public parks promote joyful physical contact.

10. In your opinion what is the power of art in politics? How can art, media, architecture and public music influence emotions and public life?

The arts have enormous power, because great artists know how to go to the roots of our most powerful emotions. This power is not always used well, and of course fascists have also used the arts. But that only means that public art projects must be chosen to promote values compatible with the nation's political principles. We certainly want the individuality and the freedom of fine artists, not socialist realism, which was a total failure, artistically and emotionally. So artists should be given a lot of freedom to be themselves. Still, a competition for a public park or monument or memorial is bound to take into account the values that are expressed. I discuss examples of this in my book, such as the wonderful Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which has such a haunting combination of mourning and love, of abstractness and particularity.

11. To what extent do you believe that political liberalism needs humanities? And what about nature and technical sciences? Do you think that they also contribute to liberal education?

I think a decent liberal society very urgently needs the humanities, because citizens need trained critical capacities and trained imaginations, and a knowledge of the world informed by the study of history. I certainly think that citizens need certain sorts of scientific knowledge too, since many decisions they will need to make concerning the environment, for example, require that learning. The liberal arts model of university education requires science courses of all students, and this should continue – but the courses are typically somewhat different from those that specialists in science take. I don't spend much time discussing this part of liberal education because that part is not under threat at present. I think that good education in the scientific method has a natural affinity with humanities education, since both emphasize the cultivation of rational argument, critical thinking, and the evaluation of evidence.

12. In your perspective a liberal society contributes to shape the affective education of a person. How could the affective education of a person contribute to shape a liberal society? Is there a virtuous circle?

Most definitely. Let me take the example of race. Parents raise children to have, let us hope, respectful and inclusive views on racial questions. Those children then go out and shape the institutions of their society, hopefully sustaining and increasing its commitment to non-racism. The virtuous circle has to begin somewhere, however. In a situation of profound injustice, how do young people ever get the views that enable them to build better institutions and principles? Well, first of all, the excluded never endorse the views that oppress them. In most movements for racial justice the oppressed racial groups themselves have taken the leading role, as with the ANC in South Africa, or Martin Luther King, Jr.'s movement in the US. But both of these movements were greatly helped by white allies, and these often were people who grew up in families that taught them to differ from the dominant view. Nelson Mandela notes the great importance of South Africa's Jewish minority in giving support to the freedom movement. People such as Helen Suzman, Albie Sachs, Nadine Gordimer, and many others grew up with values of liberal Jewish culture that opposed apartheid. Nonetheless, we should also note that children don't always follow their parents, and the virtuous circle can begin in many ways. My father was from the deep South, and he was a very intense racist. And the Philadelphia in which I grew up, though not in the South, was pretty racist too. I got my non-racist views from my schoolteachers, from the ministers in my church, from the time I spent acting in the theater, and just from reading and thinking on my own.