



# Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions

*Martha C. Nussbaum*

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What is it to grieve for the death of a parent? More literary and experiential than other philosophical works on emotion, *Upheavals of Thought* will engage the reader who has ever stopped to ask that question. Emotions such as grief, fear, anger and love seem to be alien forces that disturb our thoughts and plans. Yet they also embody some of our deepest thoughts--about the importance of the people we love, about the vulnerability of our bodies and our plans to events beyond our control. In this wide-ranging book, based on her Gifford Lectures, philosopher Martha Nussbaum draws on philosophy, psychology, anthropology, music and literature to illuminate the role emotions play in our thoughts about important goals. Starting with an account of her own mother's death, she argues that emotions are intelligent appraisals of a world that we do not control, in the light of our own most significant goals and plans. She then investigates the implications of this idea for normative issues, analyzing the role of compassion in private and public reasoning and the attempts of authors both philosophical and literary to purify or reform the emotion of erotic love. Ultimately, she illuminates the structure of emotions and argues that once we understand the complex intelligence of emotions we will also have new reasons to value works of literature as sources of ethical education. Martha C. Nussbaum is Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics, University of Chicago, appointed in Law School, Philosophy department, and Divinity School, and an Associate in Classics. A leading scholar in ancient Greek ethics, aesthetics and literature, her previous books include *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, 1986), *Loves's Knowledge* (Oxford, 1992), *Poetic Justice* (Beacon Press, 1997), *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton, 1996), *Cultivating Humanity* (Harvard, 1997), and *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford, 1999). Her reviews have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *New York Review of Books*, and *New Republic*.

## Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions Details

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## From Reader Review *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* for online ebook

### Keith Wilson says

The emotions could use some better PR. They have been blamed for everything from each personal crisis to the insanity that is called this year's election. We shrinks have mobilized the troops of rationality and have sharpened the swords of Stoicism, recast as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, to do battle against these pesky, animalistic aliens called feelings.

"But wait!" calls out a professor of philosophy and the classics, stepping between the battle lines. "Emotions are suffused with intelligence and discernment... Instead of viewing morality as a system of principles to be grasped by the detached intellect, and emotions as motivations that either support or subvert our choice to act according to principle, we will have to consider emotions as part and parcel of the system of ethical reasoning."

Martha Nussbaum, the professor of philosophy and the classics, is brave, but if she's going to be the PR person for emotions, she's going to have to punch up her copy. Just kidding. She's done a lot to argue their cause throughout her career, especially in her magnum opus, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*.

The phrase, *upheavals of thought*, comes from Proust. It vividly describes the effect emotions have on what would be a flat landscape of our rationality. We assume that the hot lava that makes our lives uneven, uncertain, and prone to reversal are animal energies that have no connection to our thoughts. Not so, says Nussbaum, emotions are deep, deep thoughts, with a wisdom that should not be dismissed. To demonstrate how this is so, she begins by describing her own grief at the death of her mother. She goes on to do the same with guilt, love, and compassion. She devotes another book to my favorite: anger.

There is so much I could comment on, but to illustrate her point, I'll summarize the argument for and against compassion.

If all you had to go on was the attitude of shrinks, ministers in the pulpit, Oprah, your Yoga teacher, and sentimental feel good articles in the newspaper, you might think that compassion is always a good thing; but, some say, that's not the case. There's a long philosophical tradition arguing against compassion and, once you become acquainted with it, as I was reading Nussbaum, you begin to recognize it in the statements of ordinary people. You might even agree with them, and argue against compassion, yourself.

Let's say you encounter a homeless person, begging on the street. If you were to act out on your emotions, you might do various things. If you felt disgusted at the homeless person's appearance, smell, or what you believed was in his character, you would curl your lip and walk away. If you felt angry at his intrusion, you would, more likely, chew him out, rather than give him money. If you were afraid of him, you'd cross the street to avoid him. If you were contemptuous, you might question what he would do with the money. If you felt compassion, you would open your wallet.

The philosopher, belonging to this long tradition of skepticism towards emotions, might open up his wallet, too, but he would not do it out of compassion. He would be suspicious of any emotion, including compassion, as a guide for his choices.

He would say that compassion, in this case, is based on a false belief that homelessness matters. It might matter a little, but, what's really important is not accidents of fortune, the cards you are dealt; what's

important is how you play the cards. The most important thing is not whether a person has a roof over his head, but whether he is the best he can be, no matter the circumstances. There is no need to be a victim, one can be a survivor. Compassion insults the dignity of the person who suffers. The homeless person doesn't want your pity.??The philosopher of the long tradition of skepticism towards emotions may very well give money to the homeless person, not because the homeless person needs it, but because the philosopher doesn't. The philosopher of this tradition treats money, and any external good thing, as something that doesn't matter.

Reading this argument against compassion, you may feel as I did, simultaneously intrigued and repelled. I've seen many people suffer misfortune, but retain their dignity and I admire them more than the ones who have never had misfortune. At the same time, there's something inhuman, not to mention inhumane, about disregarding compassion. How does Nussbaum say we can show compassion to a homeless person and still respect his dignity?

It's not necessary to make a choice, she would say. You can feel sorry for the homeless person's bad luck at the same time that you admire him for how he handles it. Having respect for the humanity of others ought to include a concern for their material well being. ??Furthermore, there are many setbacks and hardships that a person may endure that really do irreparably damage him. Poor nutrition, poor health, exposure to toxins, trauma, and genetic disorders, really do effect a person's ability to think clearly and choose wisely. This is particularly the case when they occur early in development or are sufficiently prolonged. The philosopher would like us to believe that we are never victims, but the truth is we are often at the mercy of the world and its random vicissitudes. When the tsunami wave hits you, you're going to shit your pants and cry for your mommy, and you'll probably die; you deserve respect for trying to swim, but, if someone can save you, they should.

The philosophers of the long tradition of skepticism towards emotions are not done arguing. They have more points to make:

Compassion is narrow. If you give money to a homeless person because he crossed your path and you were moved to compassion, you would have so much less money to give to the homeless, and starving, person in Somalia, who is not likely to cross your path and never arouse your feelings, but may have a better claim on it.??Compassion is unreliable. Today, the homeless person may arouse your compassion, but tomorrow, if you're in a bad mood, the same homeless person might arouse your anger, or disgust, or fear, or contempt.??Compassion is bigoted. You're more likely to feel compassion towards people who resemble you in some way. People who look different or act different are more likely to arouse fear, anger, disgust, or contempt.

Compassion is cheap. Having a feeling of compassion towards a homeless person, without taking action based on that feeling, does nothing to put a roof over his head. The feeling itself is useless, or worse than useless, if you believe that feeling sorry for someone, by itself, helps them in any way.

Because compassion is so limited, it is better not to rely on it. If you're going to give, it's better, says the philosopher of this tradition, to execute an objective needs assessment and not privilege the cute, cuddly, close, and familiar over the ugly, strange, distant, and incomprehensible. Indeed, it may be the very people you are least likely to be compassionate about that deserve your help more than others.

Nussbaum argues back: If compassion is problematic because it's limited, then the answer is not to overwrite compassion, but to develop it further; to extend your compassion outward, from the people near you, to foreigners, to other living things. Develop your compassion by taking action on it. Develop it by choosing compassion over anger, disgust, contempt and fear. Then, when you have developed your compassion to its utmost, then you have a better idea of how to fairly distribute your charity.

The philosophers of the long tradition of skepticism towards emotions have one more point to make. Compassion is closely allied with anger and resentment; they are all rooted in the same place: the belief that a person can be hurt by someone or some circumstance other than herself. If you hold this belief and you see someone else hurt, you will feel compassion. If you hold this belief and you are hurt, you will feel angry or resentful; you might even be moved to revenge. Anger and resentment and the endless need for revenge are so corrosive and so dangerous that we must question the beliefs that support them.

Nussbaum asserts that sometimes anger is not only justified, but called for, especially if it leads to positive change. Therefore, don't get rid of anger or compassion; mix the two together and use your compassion to temper your anger.

The main point I believe Nussbaum makes throughout the book is that thinking and feeling are not opposed to one another, they are one and the same. Emotions are deep, primary thoughts; expressions of values; conclusions you have made that are so central to your well being that they have become the default setting. It is a good thing that compassion is a default setting. It may be the one fragile, fraying cord that binds us together.

*Keith Wilson writes on mental health and relationship issues on his blog, Madness 101*

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### **Doni says**

Way too meandering. Would have been much better if it were just the intro, chapter 1 and chapter 6.

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### **Indradeep Ghosh says**

This book is a masterpiece of scholarship and clear exposition. The early chapters are riveting, as they lay the groundwork for a theory of emotions, which the later chapters build on, test, and then apply to two specific and important emotions, compassion and love. Part IV of the book on the ascent of erotic love is just phenomenal, the final two chapters on Walt Whitman and James Joyce providing a staggering climax that I know I'll be returning to again and again. A remarkable feat! Something special.

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### **Henrik says**

Have only begun this today (Dec. 4, 2007), but Nussbaum's LOVE'S KNOWLEDGE was a marvel, so I have high expectations about this one. (Not that I necessarily agree with her on all points.)

FEBRUARY 11:

I've read it... And like it quite much. Unfortunately I don't have much time these days to review books in-depth. This I apologize; when I get more time at hand I will return and write one!

**August 7:**

Argh--time flies! Re-read the last portion a few days ago. So I figured it was about time I wrote down at least the basics of what I like about it;-)

First and foremost it's a nice supplement to her *Love's Knowledge*, a publication I enjoy very much but always struck me as missing a phenomenological side to its points. This is nicely filled with this book:-)

This one is largely evolving around the first part being primarily theoretical and the last part focusing on using the theory on chosen literature and music (Mahler). All, of course, with a keen eye on the concept of "Love"--just like in the first book.

It would have been nice if more of the first book was elaborated in this one too--to clarify the general theory--but I don't blame Nussbaum for not doing it. After all, it's quite long as it is, and if she had met that demand it would probably make the first publication look outdated (which it isn't).

Anyway, the entwining of everything she says is for others to do... Which, incidentally, I am currently in the process of doing (writing a Thesis on the horror genre, based on what she says in her two major publications). I appreciate that;-)

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### **Colleen says**

Western philosophical treatment of emotion from the Greeks, through early Christians, Enlightenment, Romantic authors and musicians, up to Walt Whitman. Nussbaum is a law professor who comes at philosophy from a practical viewpoint that assumes some emotions are too explosive to control - that's why there is second degree murder as opposed to first degree. And what is life without emotion - the hollowness of Puritan Christianity. Excellent, but scholarly. She's hammering out a new kind of philosophy that includes the breadth and depth of emotion, delights in that which is alien and unknown, and doesn't view anything with shame or disgust.

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### **Jean Kelly says**

while I feel unqualified to review from a philosophical perspective, I found her premises and her discussion absolutely fascinating. I struggled a bit in the beginning until I think I raised my level of thinking to closer to where she comes from.

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### **Nick says**

Pity the poor philosopher. If she defines her subject area narrowly enough, she can say something thoroughgoing and profound about the topic. But she risks opining about something too small to interest many people. And if she takes on something large, then she risks getting lost in the collision between the immensity of the topic and the need for philosophy to define terms and stick to precisely narrow bounds.

Nussbaum takes on something huge in trying to advance the philosophical terrain by including emotion in her world view. And the result is a deeply rational and thoughtful essay on the role of emotion in human life. But I was left with the uneasy feeling that the more her argument made sense the more it was because it made common sense -- she wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know. Her project is to enlarge philosophy. however; not necessarily to instruct us in the vagaries of human thought. But as to that, I couldn't help thinking that Wittgenstein was already there before her, rendering hopelessly inadequate any such arguments about human experience so necessarily based on ordinary human language. Wittgenstein

would call them language games and say that they were far too imprecise to say anything useful.

A brilliant essay by an ambitious and fascinating philosopher. But don't read it hoping for new wisdom in the mysteries of the human heart.

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### **Peter Mcloughlin says**

This is an excellent exploration of the role of emotions in cognition and as a necessary part integral to what we call thinking as a form of appraisal of one's situation. Explores the cognitive aspects of emotions and their relations to norms and the proper place for them in philosophy and it ends with an exploration of emotions as a driver as ascent in erotic love, divine love, individual love, in transforming ordinary life into exploring authors like Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Dante, Bronte, Whitman, Joyce. I like Nussbaum's taste in philosophical and literary writers and sparked an interest in Mahler which I will pursue in Apple music. This is the second reading but it was so long since I looked at this work that much of it was new to me after a long forgetting from most likely a shallow reading of a callow youth.

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### **Leonardo says**

Citado en el artículo de Pugno en Capabilities and Happiness.

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### **Jason says**

This is one of the most penetrating examinations of the nature of emotions and emotionality published ever. I marvel at this philosopher's insight and critical acumen. Its a big one, but well worth the read.

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### **Ditte says**

Didn't read everything, because I had a deadline. Maybe I'll do another attempt later on. Although some parts were horrible to get threw, I'm still referring to others, even though it has been years since I read it. An interesting book.

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### **Maria says**

A magnificent book on how storytelling rewires us and why 'taming' our neediness is highly significant for happiness.

I consider Martha Nussbaum one of the most compelling philosophers of our time. In this book, she examines the nature of the cognitive intelligence and the way we can underline its power and also offers a lucid counterpoint to the idea that our emotions are related to primal impulses which are clearly separated from our cognition. Instead, it is argued the fact that these emotions are a centerpiece of moral philosophy. Any considerable theory of ethics needs a considerable comprehension of what Emotion means.

One of the most interesting central points in this book is that the cognitive structure of the emotions has a

narrative form. So, the stories we tell ourselves or to each other shape our emotional reality, particularly our very own relationship with neediness.

Pathological perfectionism is one of the undesirable consequences of our perception related to neediness and the struggles it arises and, after all, is how we build our own unhealthy box and keep ourselves small.

This book remains a revealing read in its complex entirety. The way of exploring how the narrative arts can reshape our psychoemotional constitution and understanding how the intelligence of emotions really works it is absolutely fascinating and a great tool to manage the navigation through the haze of love, fear or grief.

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### **Brian Boyce says**

What a corker! Should be essential reading for anyone approaching bereavement. It certainly goes a long way towards a strong claim for emotions as a form of intelligence and not an irrational impulse. After reading this book I am assessing my emotional state as indicators of my values and responding in an affirmative, yes Nussbaum is right, I feel this way because I value what the object of my emotions is about. Similarly I have been through the death of my Father in the recent past and my Mother is in a protracted Dementia state moving towards death at a slow pace. It was the immanence of their demise that I realised my great love for them and that this was a positive state that made me behave in specific ways in regards to their state within life. Without the great insight of Nussbaum I would not have had an intellectual framework to recognise and appreciate this properly and I may have merely had respite to behavioral psychology to explain my behavior as that which had been shaped by years of parental training.

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### **Steven Williams says**

Nussbaum is a very good philosopher. Her arguments are well thought out. Her subject matter is both interesting and timely. Having read this book sometime ago, I don't remember much detail. I do remember liking it very much.

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### **Andrew says**

A long, dense, broad-ranging book, grounded in classical Greek thought (especially that of the Stoics), with long digressions into exploration of emotion as processed by Proust, Whitman, Mahler, Emily Bronte, and Joyce. I know that's going to turn a lot of people off right then and there, and to a certain extent I'm not on board, but I know that for a lot of people this will totally be their thing. Nussbaum is clearly a profound thinker, with a sensitive understanding of how human emotions by no means run "counter to" thought, but a valuable albeit indirect way of gleaning information. I can't say I'm 100 percent on board with either her philosophy or her big, sprawling thing, but my curiosity is piqued, and I will read more.

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