



Interview With Martha Nussbaum

By **Vera Fisogni**



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Martha Nussbaum, born Craven, 6th may 1947, is one of the most brilliant philosopher of the world. Graduated in classics, she taught at Harvard, Brown and Oxford University. She was the only female thinker to be indicated, by French weekly magazine «Le Nouvel Observateur» (January, 2005), among the 25 leading thinkers of our times.

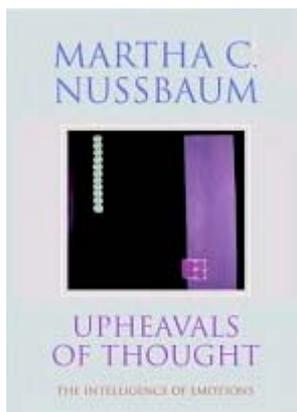
Professor Nussbaum is the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics, appointed in the Philosophy Department, Law School and Divinity School. Her academic publications include *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium* (1978), *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck*

and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy (1986), *Love's Knowledge* (1990), *The Therapy of Desire* (1994), *Poetic Justice* (1996), *For Love of Country* (1996), *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997), *Sex and Social Justice* (1998), *Women and Human Development* (2000), *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001), and *Hiding From Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (2004). Her new book, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, is forthcoming.

This interview is especially focused about professor Nussbaum's theory of emotions, in occasion of the recent Italian translation of *Upheavals of Thought*.

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V. F.: Professor Nussbaum, in *Upheavals of Thought* you argue that it cannot be an ethical theory without an adequate theory of emotions. Is the ethical content stronger in some particular emotions (love, grief, compassion) and, if your answer is affirmative, why?



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M.N.: In my view, all emotions have ethical content, since all concern our evaluation of things and people as extremely important for our well-being. Those evaluations are a central part of the ethical content of our lives. And I also believe that all emotions can be evaluatively appropriate or inappropriate. Compassion, which seems so nice, can go wrong by attending only to the importance of our local group and neglecting the legitimate concerns of different people. Anger, which seems threatening, can be an important part of the struggle for justice, if its object is an unjust wrong done to people who deserve to be treated justly.

V. F.: Would you please indicate in what aspects is the "neo stoic" view of emotions different from the classical one?

M.N.: The Classical Stoic view survives only in fragments, so we can't be sure what questions it answered, or whether it really had the gaps that it appears to have. One thing my neo-Stoic theory does is to plug gaps in the classical view, by answering a lot of questions that they apparently didn't answer. But I also make three major changes in the view. First, I modify its account of cognition to make room for the emotions of non-human animals and small children: there is no longer an emphasis on language as an essential element in emotion. Second, I show how the view can deal with cultural variety in emotion, the contribution a society's value system makes to the emotional repertory of its members. Third, I provide a developmental account of the genesis of emotions in infancy and their gradual development in childhood. This account is based on developmental psychology and object-relations psychoanalysis.

V. F.: "Upheavals of Thought" begins with a moving chapter about your mother's death. Was this event also at the origin of your philosophical investigation?

M.N.: No, I had already agreed to deliver the Gifford Lectures on this topic, and I had a general idea of what I wanted to say. Indeed, a very similar example of grief appears in my earlier book *The Therapy of Desire*, without reference to a particular person. But the experience of my mother's death showed me subtle aspects of the question that had eluded me before, and gave me a way of beginning the book. I needed an example that readers of many different kinds would comprehend, and that would seem to them similar to things that had happened in their own life, so that readers would begin to remember their own experiences of emotion and thus be in a good position to assess the arguments of my book. The death of a parent (or older relative) is as universal an experience as there can be in life, so it was a good place to open a conversation with my readers.

V. F.: You defend that emotions are a form of judgement. This perspective brings us to reevaluate the cognitive attitude of the human beings, but also, of the other animals. Is it correct?

M.N.: Notice that I do not actually maintain, in the end, that emotions are forms of judgement. I say in the chapter on animals that this view has to be modified, and that in place of judgement we need a looser view of emotions as involving "seeing X as Y," where Y includes an idea of value for the creature's own well-being. I think that the intelligence of animals has often been underestimated in accounts of these matters, and that they are capable of seeing things in the world as having significance for their

well-being. Indeed, we could not explain their actions without ascribing such perceptions to them.

V. F.: Your philosophical view holds that emotions are appraisals or value judgements. That's why they are so important for person's own flourishing. But what does exactly mean, in your philosophical perspective, the idea of "flourishing"? What the relation with the Aristotelian concept of "*eudaimonia*"?

M.N.: To flourish is to live a complete good life, lacking in nothing that would make that life better or more complete. That's Aristotle's basic notion, and the things that are constituent parts of a person's *eudaimonia* are just those things without which life would not be complete, the most important things or activities in the life.

V. F.: The origin of ethical relativism, according to the Pope Ratzinger, belongs to the development of modern Western thought. Did the separation between rationality and emotional life play a major role in it?

M.N.: I don't think he is correct about relativism; it has many origins in many different ethical traditions. And I don't think that the Western philosophical tradition has typically separated rationality from emotion. That separation began relatively recently, with the British empiricists, and, in a different way, with William James. But it would be wrong to call Hume a relativist, and just as wrong to call William James a relativist. So I don't see any interesting connection between these two issues.

V. F.: Your activism is very well known also in Italy. How *Upheavals of Thought* does reflect your experience? I mean: your commitment in many fields - you published books on topics such as education, justice, patriotism, women's health - did it help you to define your theory of emotions?

M.N.: I was working on emotions well before I began being active in politics and international development, but of course that experience has shaped the theory of emotion in many ways, particularly in the section on compassion. I am now in the process of writing a book that brings together the account of compassion with the normative political philosophy of the capabilities approach, so we will see what comes of that!

V. F.: Proust, Dante, Withman. In *Upheavals of Thought* there is a deep dialogue between philosophical concepts, argumentation and literature. Does it depends on the fact that there are some cognitive structures that can be given only in narrative form?

M.N.: I think I might have used literature to exemplify these philosophical issues even if I didn't believe that there are some cognitive structures that can only be given adequately in narrative form, but since I do believe that, and have argued for it, that was one further reason to focus on literature (and the narrative dimensions of music).

V. F.: Professor Nussbaum, how did you decide to become a philosopher? At the very heart of your choice was there an emotion or the intellectual fascination of some peculiar concept?

M.N.: I was fascinated with philosophical questions already at the age of fourteen or so, and particularly the question of how one learns through emotions, about which I wrote a long paper when I was sixteen. I didn't know this was called philosophy; I thought it was part of literature, because the writers whom I was reading (the Greek

tragedians, Dostoyevsky) were literary rather than philosophical, and we don't teach philosophy in American high schools. Later on I learned that there was this field called philosophy that pursued these questions. But at first I wanted to be an actress, and it was only later that I decided to go to graduate school. And my graduate studies were in Classics, not philosophy, though I increasingly focused on philosophy, and insisted on taking a job that was at least partly in a philosophy department.

[Martha Nussbaum in Amazon.com](#)