

Martha Nussbaum

Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice.

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Martha Nussbaum's *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* seeks to complement the work of John Rawls by advocating for the role and promotion of the emotions (especially love) in establishing a just society (384, 386). It is passionate, eclectic, idiosyncratic, and engaging—but also deeply frustrating for its omissions. At the very least, writing a 480-page book of ethics and moral philosophy, which seeks to cultivate public expressions and solidarity of love, justice, and emotions with no substantive reference to God, the Divine, Jesus, Allah, Buddha, Confucius, the Talmud (and so on), is an impressive feat. Like Ernest Vincent Wright's 1939 novel, *Gadsby: A Story of Over 50,000 Words Without Using the Letter "E"*, Nussbaum's *Political Emotions* exhibits similar constraint (skill, or obstinacy) in eschewing such explicitly theological or religious terms and figures. Wright's work is noteworthy for his technical skill in crafting such a long work without the use of that crucial vowel. Its omission adds to the value (and perhaps, pleasure) of reading it. While Nussbaum expostulates on thinkers like Comte, Mill, Mozart, Abraham Lincoln, Rousseau, Tagore, Whitman, Martin Luther King Jr., Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Gandhi, Nehru, Frederick Law Olmstead, Daniel Batson, Donald Winnicott, and (most importantly) John Rawls; comfortably working in a transdisciplinary manner in fields like philosophy, ethics, history, music, empirical psychology, primatology, opera, literature, architecture, ancient Greek tragedy and comedy, urban studies and the modern university; she painfully (or stubbornly) avoids God-talk.

Thus, for example, the Christian ethos that inspires the social justice reforms of King, Lincoln, or Roosevelt are never mentioned, let alone discussed, as if they derive fundamentally from some other mysterious, or solely human-based source. Nussbaum, thus, notes Gandhi's influence on King and ambiguously adds "the prophets" (without any details, and immediately adding: "though also from Shakespeare and popular music", 387) and so omits Jesus. If Jesus is intended under prophets, then she disingenuously adds to her omission of who was central for King's ministry and social justice work. Likewise, discussion of Gandhi omits the Hindu religion, and especially the Bhagavad-Gita's inspiration for him (let alone Gandhi's useful study of Christianity).

In a telling, "tough" question, Nussbaum asks: "How can the public culture of a nation that repudiates all religious and ideological establishments have enough substance and texture to be capable of the type of poetry, oratory, and art that moves real people?" (387). While the simple answer: "It can't" comes immediately to mind, the key problem is in how the question is phrased (especially as anchored in that over-strong word 'repudiate' and the failure to acknowledge that explicitly repudiating all so-called religious and ideological establishments is itself such an establishment). In other words, this is another attempt, which in the name of political liberalism, law, and secularism, seeks to promote a unity, moral spirit, and openness by near total dismissal of the religious and theological impulse. As outlined by Charles Taylor and Jocelyn Maclure, in their *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, the secular includes a more robust notion, if not partnership with, the reality, plurality, and benefit of religions. Nussbaum's clear sidelining of religious foundations in the service of maintaining national unity and cohesion only serves to

alienate the majority of people for whom such comprehensive beliefs (as Rawls came to recognise) cannot be relegated to the merely private realm.

Nussbaum is careful to state her distance from the extremist views of Comte and his attempt to replace traditional religion with civic religion (Nussbaum states that the religion of humanity should constitute “a public supplement to [existing religion]” (74), but there is a reason she begins her work with Comte and praises him for “his many valuable ideas” (69): namely, she too is seeking in this work to establish a purely civic religion, just one that is more politically correct (by referring to existing religions) and ‘edgy’ (promoting dissent and dialogue). As a convert to Judaism, Nussbaum’s choice to omit Jewish, and especially Talmudic and Biblical ethics, is additionally quixotic, if not a missed opportunity. Her readers could have greatly benefitted not only from that esteemed corpus of ethical writings (and analysis of them by 20th century thinkers like Levinas, Buber, Berkovits, and Fackenheim) along with the work of Elie Wiesel, Irving Greenberg, Jonathan Sacks, Judith Plaskow, Joseph Telushkin, and Melissa Raphael, among others. It also seems to go against what she has written elsewhere, including this statement in her 2010 publication *Not for Profit*: “For this reason I have argued that all colleges and universities should follow the lead of America’s Catholic colleges and universities, which require at least two semesters of philosophy, in addition to whatever theology or religious courses are required” (55).

While the entry ‘God’ is also not in the index of Rawls’ revised *Theory of Justice* (though it occurs in the text when discussing Kant, Rousseau, Locke, and Ignatius of Loyola), its general omission in Nussbaum is even more striking because of the weight she wants to give political emotions in discussions of love and justice. If ever one expected God and religions to be dealt with substantively in a work of political philosophy (based on a stubborn bias that claims Enlightenment-based reason exposes the vacuity of religious beliefs), it would be a work promoting the value of emotions in education, politics, and the public realm. And yet, the word ‘God’ can only be found in *Political Emotions* in quotations from others, and is never directly referenced by Nussbaum, like the ‘e’ of Wright’s work.

Consider another well-received recent work by a major philosopher on love and justice, which is also deemed to be complementary to (or influenced by) John Rawls: Nicholas Wolterstorff’s 2011 *Love as Justice* (a follow-up to his 2008 *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*). Wolterstorff, of course, is an unapologetically Christian philosopher and so his discussion of love and justice is permeated by biblical and Christian reflections and analysis and (for this reason, perhaps) is never referenced by Nussbaum, though it would have seemed a more than fitting work to complement and challenge Nussbaum’s aims. Again: it is not the promotion of secular ethics that is at fault here (I highly recommend the Dalai Lama’s *Beyond Religion*, in that regard), but the avoidance of such discussion with religious and theological terms and texts.

For her foundational understanding of love, Nussbaum chooses Mozart’s Cherubino (From *The Marriage of Figaro*, proclaimed “a key text in the history of liberalism”, 29), Tagore, and Whitman as her main guides (interestingly, they are all male, though often labelled androgynous). They are chosen for their celebration of compassion, nurturing, of the beauty and animality of the body, and their promotion of equality (and thus can be used to counter the vices of shame, disgust, fear, and envy which divide communities and lead to violence). Her later turning to King and Gandhi yield more fruit, but if they are leading lights for her project, and she is interested in how

love can support justice, a deeper, more extensive analysis of various kinds of love is also needed. It has already been clear that any notion of Divine Love is omitted, but love as an emotion (38) is emphasised at the cost of love as a decision, à la Erich Fromm. Nussbaum writes that the forms of love she refers to are “intense attachments to things outside the control of our will” (15). While Fromm’s own personal life is not the best exemplar, he was right to stress that mature, lasting love is not a ‘falling in’ or a pure emotion (as represented by Cherubino and the free love of a Whitman) but a decision and a commitment, whether to God, or spouse, or friend, that demands much sacrifice, trust, humility, and perseverance. The love Nussbaum is most concerned with here is patriotism, which like many of these topics, she has also written about elsewhere (for example, in *For Love of Country?*). Yet the virtues highlighted above are too easily co-opted in the name of patriotism. Love of country should only be promoted as a means of loving all of humanity (my celebration of my American (and increasingly Irish) context seeks to complement and learn from other cultures); thus patriotism should be simultaneously nurtured and transcended (advocating the value of the particular and the universal). Such a love drastically differs from the love of God which is a believer’s foundation, aim, and end. Nussbaum is too shrewd to be unaware of the faults of closed and excessive patriotism (212), but her attempt to cultivate it still resonates more with Plato’s *Republic* and its crafted schemes to instil some type of unity in the polis. To be fair, however, most of us would undoubtedly prefer Nussbaum’s compassionate, loving, egalitarian (and still competitive) utopia than Plato’s virtual dictatorship.

Nussbaum, as almost every review takes pains to show, is a prolific writer, and one cannot read her works without references like the following: (“I have written extensively about these predicaments in Nussbaum (1986, chs. 2–3), Nussbaum (1989), and Nussbaum (1990 ...for a detailed account ... see Nussbaum (1986)” (426–427 n. 15). Despite the above foundational flaws in *Political Emotions*, the work is classically Nussbaumian, in its grace of writing, its rich and interesting transdisciplinary examples (especially the WWII cartoons of Bill Mauldin), and its virtuous goal to establish a more just and loving society. Yet, while Wright’s omission of the letter ‘e’ aided his work’s value, Nussbaum’s decision here to steer clear of religious texts and beliefs in a work promoting emotions instead produces at least one dominant feeling in this reviewer: disappointment.

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