
The Ethics of Emotions and Moral Judgement: A Critical Study of Martha Nussbaum's Ethical Framework

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Abstract: *This research examines Martha Nussbaum's Ethics of Emotion, focusing on how emotions play a significant role in moral philosophy. Traditionally, emotions have been seen as irrational forces that should be controlled or excluded from ethical reasoning, but Nussbaum challenged the traditional view of emotions, by presenting emotions as forms of judgment that reflect our values, attachments, and sense of what matters. This paper aims to understand how emotions work alongside with reason in shaping moral judgment and guiding ethical choices. The project begins by examining the historical background that influences Nussbaum's thinking, especially the ethical theories of Ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle, as well as developments in hellenistic, modern, contemporary, and feminist philosophy. This paper involves close reading and interpretation of Nussbaum's major philosophical works, supported by relevant academic commentary. Through this approach, the research uncovers how Nussbaum defines emotions as cognitive judgments and why she believes they are essential to understanding human experience and making sound moral decisions. The findings reveal that Nussbaum's theory of emotion is relevant in moral philosophy. Emotions are not treated as distractions or personal weaknesses, but as necessary tools for navigating moral situations. The implications of this work suggest that any ethical system that ignores or downplays the role of emotion risks being incomplete.*

Keywords: emotions, eudaimonia, reason, ethics, moral philosophy

INTRODUCTION

The study of ethics has traditionally been dominated by theories that emphasize the role of reason and rules in guiding moral decision-making. Jeremy Bentham argued that "moral actions should

be based on universal principles and rational calculations"¹. Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, for instance, posits that "moral actions are those that conform to universal moral laws, regardless of personal desires or emotions"². Similarly, Bentham's utilitarianism seeks to maximize happiness or well-being through rational calculation. However, these theories have been criticized for overlooking the importance of emotions in shaping our moral judgments.

Critics like David Hume and Adam Smith, argue that emotions play a crucial role in moral decision-making, and that neglecting their importance can lead to overly rigid and abstract moral frameworks. David Hume and Adam Smith developed emotivism, which highlight the central role of emotions in moral decision-making. Adam Smith, for instance, argued that "emotions are not just irrational impulses, but rather complex psychological and social phenomena that are essential for human flourishing"³. David Hume, in his view, maintained that "emotions are the foundation of moral judgments, and that reason plays a secondary role in moral decision-making"⁴.

Martha Nussbaum's work on the ethics of emotion builds on this tradition. She draws on ancient Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*. Nussbaum argues that "emotions are not secondary to reason, but rather essential for making informed moral decisions"⁵. She believes that "cultivating emotional awareness and sensitivity is crucial for moral development and human flourishing"⁶. Nussbaum's ideas have been influenced by psychoanalysis, particularly the theories of Sigmund Freud. She recognizes that "our emotions can be driven by unconscious factors, which can sometimes contradict each other and impact our moral choices"⁷. By considering these complexities, Nussbaum provides a nuanced understanding of the role of emotions in moral decision-making.

Nussbaum's work has had a significant impact on public discourse and policy. She has driven critical discussions about social justice, human rights, and economic development. By engaging with feminist theory and criticism, Nussbaum challenges traditional notions of rationality and morality, highlighting the importance of emotions in shaping our moral judgments. Throughout her career, Nussbaum has refined her theory of emotions, drawing on a diverse array of sources. Her book, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, provides a comprehensive account of her theory. Nussbaum argues that "emotions are not opposed to reason, but rather complement

1Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. edited by J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999: 193.

2Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by James W. Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993: 30-31.

3Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. edited by D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982: 9.

4David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978: 3.1.1-3.1.2.

5Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press, 2001: 91.

6Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*,93.

7Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 112-113.

reason to make informed moral decisions"⁸. Her insights continue to shape transformative discussions on the role of emotions in moral decision-making.

Nussbaum's theory has far-reaching implications for various fields, including ethics, and education. By recognizing the importance of emotions in moral decision-making, an effective strategy for promoting moral development and human flourishing will be developed. Ultimately, Nussbaum's work challenges human to rethink the relationship between emotions and morality, and to cultivate a more compassionate understanding of human experience.

Nussbaum's Concept of Emotions

Martha Nussbaum's concept of emotions is a theory that challenges traditional views of emotions as mere sensations or feelings. According to Nussbaum, "emotions are appraisals or judgments about the world that involve a cognitive component, where we assess the significance or importance of a particular event, person, or situation"⁹. Her theory posits that emotions are not just raw feelings, but evaluations that involve cognitive assessments of the world. Emotions, in this view, are appraisals or judgments that attribute significance or importance to specific events, people, or situations, highlighting the intricate relationship between thought and feeling. She views emotions as embodied experiences that are rooted in our bodily sensations and feelings, yet are also embedded in our social and cultural contexts. This means that emotions are shaped by our individual experiences, cultural background, and social norms. Furthermore, emotions have intentionality, meaning they are directed towards objects or goals in the world. Emotions are not just internal states but are always related to something outside of ourselves. The cognitive component of emotions is important in Nussbaum's theory. She argues that "emotions involve thoughts, beliefs, and evaluations that are essential to understanding emotional experiences"¹⁰. This challenges the traditional dichotomy between reason and emotion, highlighting the intricate relationship between the two (reason and emotion). Nussbaum's view of emotions also suggests that "emotion is a source of knowledge and insight, rather than just irrational feelings"¹¹.

In the realm of moral philosophy, Nussbaum's concept of emotions has profound implications, as it emphasizes the active role emotions play in shaping our moral values and principles. By acknowledging the agency of emotions in moral judgments and decisions, Nussbaum's theory highlights the interplay between emotional experience and moral reasoning. This perspective suggests that emotions are not merely ancillary to moral decision-making, but rather are integral to the process, influencing our perceptions of right and wrong, and informing our moral compass. As a result, Nussbaum's theory offers a detailed understanding of human experience, one that acknowledges the intricate web of emotional, cognitive, and social factors that promotes our moral lives. This perspective has the potential to inform more empathetic and contextualized approaches

8Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 157.

9Martha C. Nussbaum. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 4.

10Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 1-4.

11Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 16.

to moral philosophy, and to enable a deeper appreciation for the complexities of human moral experience.

Nussbaum's concept of emotions provides a clear understanding of emotional experiences, highlighting their cognitive, embodied, and social aspects. Her theory challenges traditional views of emotions and offers new insights into the role of emotions in shaping our moral values and principles.

The Relationship between Emotions and Reasons in Nussbaum's Ethical Framework

Martha Nussbaum challenges the traditional philosophical view of emotions, particularly the position held by the Stoics. According to the Stoic tradition, "emotions were seen as irrational impulses; internal disturbances that distracted individuals from living a rational, virtuous life"¹². Emotions, in this framework, were thought to be misleading and harmful, pulling the soul away from the clarity and calm required for wisdom. As such, the Stoics encouraged their suppression, viewing them as obstacles to achieving inner peace and moral excellence. In contrast, Nussbaum argues for a radically different understanding. She contends that emotions are not irrational or opposed to reason, but are "intelligent responses to the world"¹³. For her, emotions are closely linked to our beliefs, values, and judgments. They are not random or chaotic feelings, but are forms of evaluative cognition, ways in which we assess and respond to what we perceive as important to our well-being. In this view, emotions arise from our recognition that certain things; people, goals, experiences, matter deeply to us, and they reflect how we interpret the world in light of those concerns. When humans feel sad, frightened, loved, compassionate, they are simply not reacting, but making a kind of judgment, whether realized or not. That judgment portrays that something in the world matters and someone is important to them. Also, that, something valuable is at stake, or that a harm has occurred that should not be ignored. Nussbaum's philosophy places emotions at the heart of moral life, not as distractions from rationality, but as essential guides to what humans' value, what we fear to lose, and what we strive to protect. By uniting emotion and reason, Nussbaum offers a powerful model for understanding human agency, moral judgment, and ethical responsibility. Emotions reveal our values and our beliefs. For instance, feeling fear might indicate that we believe a danger threatens something we care about. Feeling compassion might express our recognition of another person's suffering and our belief that their pain deserves a response. Emotions, in this way, are bound up with our capacity to evaluate the world. They are a form of practical insight, helping us not only to understand what is happening but also to care about it in morally relevant ways.

Rather than being outside reason, emotions are shaped by reason. They can be questioned, reflected on, and revised, just like beliefs. We might ask ourselves whether our anger is justified, whether our sadness is based on a true loss, or whether our fear is reasonable. Through such reflection, reason and emotion work together. Reason does not cancel emotion; it gives it clarity and direction.

¹²Julia Annas. *The Morality of Happiness*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993: 103.

¹³Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 1.

And emotion gives reason moral depth and personal meaning. This understanding has important consequences. It means that moral and ethical decisions are not just a matter of cold logic. They involve the whole person; feeling, thinking, and caring. Emotions make us attentive to the needs of others. They help us recognize injustice, respond to loss, and imagine a better world. Without emotions, moral reasoning would be detached and incomplete. To truly understand emotions and reason, is to recognize that they are not enemies but partners. Together, they make us capable of responding to life in a thoughtful, human, and ethical way.

Nussbaum's theory is heavily informed by ancient philosophy, particularly Aristotle's informed treatment of emotions. Unlike the Stoics, Aristotle recognized that emotions play a key role in ethical life. Nussbaum draws on this tradition to argue that emotions are not just compatible with reason, they are necessary for it. They help us recognize what matters in human life: the vulnerability of others, the reality of suffering, the impermanence of joy. Without emotions, our moral reasoning would be abstract, cold, and disconnected from the lived experiences that give ethics its urgency and relevance. Furthermore, Nussbaum insists that emotions can be examined, critiqued, and even reshaped through philosophical reflection. They are not fixed or uncontrollable. Just as our beliefs can be clarified and refined through rational inquiry, so too can our emotional responses be deepened or corrected. This makes emotions morally significant, not just in their content, but in their development. An ethically mature person, in her view, "is not someone who suppresses emotion, but someone who understands and cultivates emotions that reflect a just and caring vision of the world"¹⁴. In this way, emotions become central to ethical engagement. Compassion, for instance, is not a weak or sentimental reaction. Rather, it is a powerful expression of the recognition of another's suffering and humanity. It involves understanding the complexity of another person's situation and responding to it with moral concern. For Nussbaum, this kind of emotional responsiveness is an essential aspect of justice and practical reason.

Nussbaum redefines the relationship between reason and emotion. Instead of being opposing forces locked in conflict, they are shown to be mutually supportive. Emotions carry judgments about what is meaningful in human life, and reason helps us to interpret, evaluate, and act upon those judgments wisely. Ethics, therefore, is not merely a logical exercise in applying universal principles, it is a deeply human activity, rooted in our emotional life and our capacity to care.

Emotions as a Source of Moral Knowledge

For a long time, many philosophers believed that emotions and reason were completely separate, and often in conflict. This traditional view, sometimes called *rationalism*, holds that "reason is the only reliable source of knowledge, especially when it comes to making moral decisions"¹⁵. According to Immanuel Kant, "emotions are seen as unstable, irrational, and unreliable"¹⁶. They are thought to cloud our judgment or lead us to act on impulse rather than careful thinking. For

¹⁴Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 3.

¹⁵Kant. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 36.

¹⁶Kant. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 10–12.

example, if someone gets angry and lashes out, a rationalist would say this proves that emotions cannot be trusted when it comes to doing what is right. However, this way of thinking has been increasingly questioned, especially by Martha Nussbaum. Instead of seeing emotions as enemies of reason, Nussbaum argues that emotions can actually help us understand what is right and wrong. In fact, emotions can offer important insights into human life and moral situations. This idea challenges the traditional belief that only cold, logical thinking can lead to moral knowledge. For instance, when we feel compassion for someone who is suffering, like a friend going through grief, or a stranger who has lost their home, we are not just feeling sorry for them in a random way. That emotion is based on the understanding that their pain matters, that their suffering is wrong or unjust. In that moment, one's emotion is doing more than reacting; it is showing you something about the moral importance of the situation. In this way, another person's wellbeing is worth caring about. Compassion helps guide one sense of what is right to do, perhaps to help, to comfort, or to speak up.

Martha Nussbaum argues that "emotions are not just blind surges of affect; they are modes of seeing the world"¹⁷. They are shaped by what we believe and value. For example, if one believes that honesty is important, one might feel guilt when one lies. That emotion does not come out of nowhere; it reflects one values and helps guide one back towards what one thinks is right. In this way, emotions are part of how one learns, understand, and grow morally. This challenges the rationalist idea that "only reason leads to truth"¹⁸. Emotions, when properly understood, can be intelligent and insightful. They help us connect with the human experiences of others, recognize suffering, and respond to the world with a sense of care and responsibility. Rather than being opposed to reason, emotions can work alongside it, giving us a detailed understanding of what morality requires.

From the foregoing, emotions should not be dismissed as unreliable or irrational. Instead, they can be powerful sources of moral knowledge. They help us recognize what matters in life and motivate us to act in ways that reflect our values. When we take emotions seriously, not as distractions, but as meaningful responses, we gain a deeper understanding of ethics.

The Role of Emotions in Moral Decision-Making

Martha Nussbaum offers a powerful rethinking of the role emotions play in our ethical lives, particularly when it comes to making moral decisions. In contrast to the traditional view that treats emotions as obstacles to clear thinking, Nussbaum argues that emotions are not only compatible with moral reasoning, they are essential to it.

From Nussbaum's perspective, "emotions are not random or irrational feelings that disrupt judgment, they are deeply connected to our beliefs about what matters"¹⁹. They reflect our

¹⁷Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 1.

¹⁸René Descartes. *Discourse on the Method*, trans. Ian Maclean Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006: 25.

¹⁹Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 1–19.

perceptions of value in the world. When we feel an emotion, we are not simply reacting instinctively, we are expressing an understanding about a situation's significance. For example, feeling grief reveals that someone's death is not just a fact, but a meaningful loss. That feeling embodies a judgment that the person mattered, and their absence alters the fabric of our life. This understanding of emotions, as evaluative and cognitive means that they contribute directly to moral decision making. Emotions help us grasp the moral dimensions of a situation in ways that pure reason alone might miss. When we feel compassionate, we are not merely having a passive emotional experience, but recognizing another's suffering as something that deserves attention and care. This emotional awareness becomes a guide to action. It sharpens our moral sensitivity and enables us to respond appropriately.

Martha Nussbaum's view is especially concerned with the real-world complexity of human relationships and ethical challenges. "Moral decisions are rarely made in a vacuum of logic"²⁰. They are made within the context of people's lives, needs, histories, and vulnerabilities. Emotions, on this account, help us engage meaningfully with these human realities. They make ethical reasoning more responsive, more sensitive to particular circumstances, and more grounded in what it truly means to live with and care for others. An instance is a doctor faced with the task of telling a patient about a terminal illness. While a strictly rational approach might emphasize truth telling and informed consent, an emotionally attuned response might recognize the patient's psychological state, family situation, and timing as morally relevant. The emotion of compassion does not override reason; it adds depth and humanity to the moral decision. Another instance is a person witnessing someone being harassed in public. It is often an emotional response that compels them to step in, rather than a detached calculation of moral duty. These emotions reflect values about fairness and human dignity, and they motivate action where pure logic might hesitate.

Nussbaum does not argue that all emotions are automatically reliable. Instead, she insists that emotions, like beliefs, should be examined critically. Are our emotional responses based on fair and accurate judgments? Do they stem from prejudice, or do they reflect genuine moral concern? This process of emotional reflection, guided by reason, helps us develop morally trustworthy emotions. In ethical decision-making, emotions do not merely sit in the background, they shape how we interpret situations, consider the needs of others, and respond with care and responsibility. Far from being an enemy of reason, emotion completes it. It provides the motivation, insight, and human connection that moral reasoning requires in order to respond fully to the complexities of life.

Nussbaum's Concept of *Eudaimonia*: Human Flourishing and the Good Life

Martha Nussbaum's philosophical work on *eudaimonia* provides a reimagining of what it means to live a good and fulfilling life. Drawing on Aristotelian ethics, yet reshaping it to meet the demands of modern pluralistic societies, she argues that "human flourishing must be understood not merely in terms of internal virtue or subjective well-being, but in terms of what individuals are

²⁰Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*.

actually able to do and to be”²¹. Her account is rooted in a respect for human dignity, and she insists that the good life must be one in which every person has the freedom to pursue a life of meaning, emotional depth, and social belonging.

At the center of Nussbaum’s idea of living a good life is her *Capabilities Approach*, a way of thinking about well-being that she developed together with economist Amartya Sen. While traditional moral theories (utilitarian, deontological, and Aristotelian) often focus on outcomes, duties, or character traits, Nussbaum redirects attention to the real opportunities available to individuals. Her approach focuses on whether people truly have the freedom and real opportunities to choose and live the kinds of lives they find meaningful and worthwhile. In this view, human development is not measured merely by economic wealth, technological progress, or even personal happiness, but by the extent to which people can actually exercise core human capabilities in their everyday lives. Nussbaum identifies ten central capabilities, which she argues are essential conditions of a flourishing human life. These include; “the ability to live a normal life span without dying prematurely, to maintain good health, nourishment, and shelter, to have physical safety, freedom of movement, and reproductive choice, to be able to use one’s senses, imagination, and reasoning in a fully human way, to experience emotions such as love, grief, and gratitude, to form a conception of the good and make life choices accordingly, to engage in social interaction, show concern for others, and enjoy equal respect without discrimination, to recognize our connection to animals and the environment, to play and recreate, and to have control over one’s environment, such as having property, work opportunities, and being treated with dignity in the workplace”²². Together, these ten capabilities represent the minimum threshold that societies should guarantee for all individuals to lead lives of real human dignity.

These are not abstract ideals or optional enhancements, they are necessary thresholds. Nussbaum believes that if even one of these is systematically denied, a person’s life is not a fully human one. This way of thinking about a good life is different from Aristotle’s original idea, which mainly focused on developing the mind and using reason. Nussbaum’s view puts more emphasis on having real opportunities to live well in many areas of life, not just thinking or being rational. While Aristotle was concerned with the idea of a complete life of reason in accordance with virtue, Nussbaum introduced a more inclusive and justice-oriented dimension. Her account acknowledges that many people, due to poverty, discrimination, illness, or violence are systematically denied the basic conditions that would allow them to pursue a good life. Thus, flourishing becomes not only a moral goal but a political and social obligation. A just society, in her view, must ensure that all individuals have access to the necessary capabilities for full human functioning.

One of Nussbaum’s most important contributions is her insistence that “flourishing cannot be understood apart from emotion”²³. Unlike ethical traditions that view emotions as threats to moral

21Martha C. Nussbaum. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge University Press, 2000: 5.

22Nussbaum. *Creating Capabilities*, 33–34.

23Nussbaum. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 13.

judgment, she views emotions as “essential to how we perceive the world and respond to its demands. Flourishing is not simply about rational decision, making or fulfilling roles in society, it also involves feeling and being emotionally responsive to the lives of others”²⁴. The presence of emotions like compassion, grief, joy, and love signals that one is alive to what matters. In this way, emotional vitality becomes a key indicator of human flourishing. She is especially concerned with those whose dignity is routinely violated or overlooked; women, children, persons with disabilities, refugees, and marginalized communities across the globe. Her notion of *eudaimonia* is therefore “universal in aspiration but particular in application”. In her view, there is no one single way of life that everyone must follow. Rather, she emphasizes that “people must be free to pursue their own versions of the good life, within a framework that guarantees real opportunities and removes systemic barriers”²⁵.

Moreover, Nussbaum resists purely economic or technocratic models of development, which often assume that rising GDP or increased access to goods automatically leads to better lives. For her, “a person living in a wealthier country may still be prevented from flourishing if they are socially excluded, emotionally stifled, or structurally oppressed”²⁶. Development, in her account, “must be *human-centered*, sensitive to both material and emotional needs”²⁷. “It must also be measured not just by average outcomes, but by whether even the most vulnerable members of society have the real freedom to live fully human lives”²⁸.

Another striking aspect of her concept of *eudaimonia* is its practical application. Unlike abstract theories that remain confined to philosophical texts, Nussbaum’s work is intentionally geared toward real-world use. Her capabilities list has influenced public policy, legal thinking, and global development programs, especially in contexts where issues of gender, education, and human rights are at stake. Her ethical vision is not utopian but achievable, built on the idea that small, sustained efforts to expand human capabilities can lead to a just and flourishing society.

The Role of Emotions in Achieving *Eudaimonia*: Nussbaum's Perspective

Thinkers from Plato to the Stoics frequently portrayed emotions as irrational impulses; forces that distract the mind from reason and undermine moral clarity. Even in some modern ethics, emotions are seen as unreliable, subjective, and secondary to rational thought. Martha Nussbaum challenges this long-standing tradition by placing emotion at the very heart of ethical life. In her view, “emotions are not only compatible with *eudaimonia*, they are essential to it”²⁹.

Nussbaum’s treatment of emotion is grounded in the belief that emotions are cognitive in nature. This means “emotions are not just feelings or moods that happen to us passively, but judgments

24Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 1.

25Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, 25.

26Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, 31.

27Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, 24.

28Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, 25.

29Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 3.

about things we care about”³⁰. She believes that when we feel grief, love, anger, or fear, we are not merely reacting, we are interpreting the world. These emotions are shaped by our beliefs, our values, and our understanding of what matters. They tell us something about the people, relationships, and ideals that we hold dear. As such, emotions can be rational, morally insightful, and responsive to reality.

This cognitive theory of emotion is central to how Nussbaum integrates emotions into the concept of *eudaimonia*. If flourishing means living a full and meaningful human life, then our emotional responses must be taken seriously. They are not obstacles to reasoned living; they are part of what makes life ethically meaningful. For example, feeling compassion for the suffering of others is not a weakness, it is a recognition of another's dignity and vulnerability. Nussbaum gives particular attention to compassion, which she sees as a foundational moral emotion. Compassion, in her view, “is the ability to see another person’s suffering as significant, and to recognize their pain as worthy of concern”³¹. This emotion requires us to see others not as distant strangers, but as beings whose lives are bound up with ours. Compassion opens up the moral imagination, it allows us to step outside ourselves and see the world from another’s perspective. For Nussbaum, “a flourishing life is one that includes this openness to others, this emotional capacity to recognize shared vulnerability and respond with care”³².

Beyond individual morality, emotions also have social and political significance in Nussbaum’s work. In her book *Political Emotions*, she argues that “emotions like love, grief, pride, and hope play crucial roles in sustaining democratic societies”³³. A just society cannot be built on laws and institutions alone, it must also cultivate the emotional habits that bind people together; habits that affirm human dignity, promote solidarity, and inspire action in the face of injustice. Here, flourishing is not just a personal ideal but a collective possibility, made real through emotional engagement and public feeling. This emphasis on emotion also connects with Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach. Among the ten capabilities she outlines as essential for human flourishing, is the capacity to experience and express emotions in a fully human way. This means being able to love, to grieve, to feel anger at injustice, and to experience joy in meaningful relationships. Societies that stifle emotional expression through oppression, trauma, or rigid gender roles, are not just limiting people’s psychological health, they are denying a core component of flourishing. Emotional freedom, in this sense is not luxury, it is a human right.

Importantly, Nussbaum is not naive about the dangers of emotion. She acknowledges that “emotions can be destructive or poorly directed”³⁴. Anger, for instance, can become vengeful or oppressive when untethered from justice. Fear can lead to exclusion, prejudice, and cruelty. But

30Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 4.

31Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 301.

32Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013: 346.

33Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, 1.

34Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, 2.

her point is not to idealize all emotional states, but to argue that, like reason, emotions must be cultivated, refined, and educated. Just as we develop habits of critical thinking, we must also develop emotional intelligence: the ability to feel appropriately, to interpret emotional experiences accurately, and to respond ethically.

Thus, Nussbaum's perspective on emotion fundamentally reshapes how we understand *eudaimonia*. Rather than separating feeling from thinking, or emotion from reason, she presents a vision of human flourishing that integrates emotion into the moral fabric of life. Emotions are not peripheral, they are central to how we come to know the world, relate to others, and pursue the good. A flourishing life, therefore, is not only a rational life but an emotionally awake one; a life marked by compassion, depth, vulnerability, and ethical responsiveness.

The Ethics of Emotion as a Framework for Human Flourishing: Implications and Applications

Martha Nussbaum's approach to ethics shows how both people and societies can grow in ways that support true human well-being. She puts emotion at the center of moral life, challenging the idea that being ethical is only about thinking logically. Instead, she shows that our emotions like compassion, anger, or love, play an important role in how we treat others and shape our world. These feelings affect big issues like law, education, fairness, and how we build a better society. At the core of this ethical framework is the idea that emotions are intertwined with human values. They are not irrational impulses to be controlled or suppressed, but intelligent evaluative responses to the world around us. Emotions reveal what we care about, what we fear losing, and what we believe to be important. This makes our emotions ethically significant. Emotions shape how we make decisions, treat others, and respond to injustice or suffering. A truly flourishing life must allow for emotional expression, emotional development, and emotional connection. Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, which defines flourishing in terms of real freedoms to be and to do, explicitly includes the capacity for emotional engagement as a central human need. This recognition has powerful implications for how we design societies, institutions, and policies.

In legal and political contexts, the ethics of emotion pushes back against the idea that justice must be coldly impartial or detached. While Nussbaum does not advocate for emotionally driven legal judgments, she does argue that "emotions like compassion and indignation can guide moral insight"³⁵. For example, legal systems that entirely exclude emotion may fail to recognize the lived realities of those affected by structural inequality, domestic violence, racism, or poverty. By integrating a careful and critical role for emotion, justice becomes more responsive, more humane, and more inclusive. A concrete example of this can be seen in the treatment of marginalized groups. Nussbaum's ethics of emotion compels us to pay attention to the emotional lives of those who have been historically silenced or dehumanized. This ethical model also applies to public culture and civic life. In her book *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, Nussbaum

35Martha C. Nussbaum. *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, Princeton University Press, 2004: 70.

explores “how emotions play a role in sustaining a democratic society”³⁶. She argues that “political stability and social cooperation depend not just on laws or procedures, but on shared emotional bonds, such as love of country, grief for shared losses, or hope for collective progress”³⁷. These emotions must be cultivated deliberately, especially in diverse societies where fear, resentment, or indifference can easily take root. Through art, education, memorials, and public rituals, citizens can be emotionally drawn into a shared moral vision. Thus, the ethics of emotion becomes not just a private concern, but a public responsibility.

Importantly, Nussbaum's framework does not suggest that all emotions are ethically valid. She is careful to distinguish between morally productive emotions like compassion, hope, justified anger, and destructive ones like hatred, envy, or fear rooted in prejudice. The task, then, is to educate emotions, to shape emotional habits in ways that align with justice and human dignity. Individuals must learn to reflect on their emotional reactions, and societies must create environments that encourage the development of emotionally mature citizens. In practical terms, this means that human flourishing must be supported not just by access to food, shelter, and education, but by emotional structures: the right to express grief without shame, to love without fear, to resist injustice with righteous anger, and to hope for a better world without ridicule. When these emotional freedoms are denied, human flourishing is not possible. Emotionally numb or emotionally repressed societies may be materially stable, but they fail the ethical test of human development.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Martha Nussbaum’s ethics of emotion offers a compelling challenge to the traditional view that emotions are irrational forces opposed to moral reasoning. By interpreting emotions as cognitive value-judgments that express our deepest attachments and evaluative commitments, Nussbaum repositions them at the center of ethical life rather than at its margins. Through a critical engagement with her major works and their philosophical antecedents—from Aristotle and the Hellenistic tradition to contemporary and feminist thought—this paper has demonstrated that emotions function not as obstacles to reason but as indispensable components of moral deliberation. They disclose what we care about, illuminate the significance of human vulnerability, and guide responsible ethical choice. Ultimately, any moral framework that neglects the cognitive and normative dimensions of emotion risks rendering itself incomplete. A philosophically adequate account of ethics must therefore recognize emotions as integral to moral judgment and to the flourishing of human life.

³⁶Nussbaum. *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, 2.

³⁷Nussbaum. *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, 2.

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