

The Heart of the Political

An interview with Martha Nussbaum

Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice

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Martha Nussbaum's latest book, *Political Emotions*, is at its core about the limits and beauty of the human condition. Nussbaum sees the human conception as being at the heart of the political conception, and her book is an investigation of the individual's engagement with the world beyond the self. Moving from our first anxious encounters with limitation to the violent segmentation of our societies, Nussbaum shows us that the realization of a just society depends on our reconceptualizing, and then loving, precisely what it means to be human.

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Martha Nussbaum is the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago.

Drawing on a broad range of work in political thought, animal behavioral science, and empirical psychology and psychoanalysis, Nussbaum sees the human condition as framed by striving and vulnerability. The human drama is played out in the tension between these two essential states. We strive for eudaimonistic aims—aims that we are emotionally attached to and that constitute our conception of a worthwhile life. The eudaimonistic emotions are directed toward things outside the self because they contain visions of the world's being a certain way, and this makes them intrinsically political. But this means that our striving is necessarily accompanied by vulnerability: attaining eudaimonia is to some extent outside the control of our will because our happiness is contingent, in part, upon a certain desired vision of the world. External forces and chance—the death of a loved one, chronic sickness, or war—remind us that our

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attainment of happiness is not simply dependent upon the force of our individual wills, that we face limitations.

The striving and vulnerability that frame the human condition are not fundamentally bad, but often manifest themselves as narcissism and anxiety. These states are so fundamental to our lives that Nussbaum borrows the Kantian phrase “radical evil” to describe them; they are radical in the sense that they arise directly from the striving and vulnerability that are the basic conditions of human life. Narcissism makes an individual see others as less than human, as slaves to the self, as objects rather than as ends in themselves. Anxiety is the product and state of “anthropodenial.” It is the reaction to a deep shame that is rooted in a rejection of all things of the “body,” all things that remind us of our mortality and vulnerability, and is the first principle of the desire to transcend the basic “animality” of our existence. Our anxiety projects itself into the fabrication of an ideal state of the “truly human,” an almost solipsistic state of transcendence, unity, and omnipotence.



I have
not a
farthing,
my friend

This anxious yearning for the more than human manifests itself on the political level in the form of social hierarchies. The disgust that begins with a rejection of the body is transformed into a “projective disgust” for other groups of human beings that compartmentalizes the human world into the “truly human,” reserved for the self and those most similar to oneself, and the “utterly nonhuman,” reserved for “others.” Nussbaum argues that not only are these hierarchies unjust, they are not even constitutive of freedom for the dominant group. As the product of an aggressive reaction to a sense of helplessness, hierarchies reflect anxieties that are aggressively projected away from the self but in no way overcome. Even those at the top are left in a state of perpetual striving that they have only partially managed to conceal from themselves. Human beings remain in a state of horror at the “merely contingent,” and desire “an experience of transcendence and unity” that will not and cannot come because the world is not a reflection and representation of one’s singular will.

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Eudaimonia, for Nussbaum, does come through striving, but not in striving for a state of “truly human” godliness. Instead, our very human limitations must be met with a spirit of loving affirmation. Only after we are pulled into a love of something beyond the self can we affirm our own vulnerability, finitude, and incompleteness. Love alone makes it possible to see others as ends in themselves and as possessing wills entirely independent of our own. Most importantly, love alone makes possible the recognition of and striving for a true happiness. Only in love can one desire a world that is not founded upon one’s own omnipotent will, but instead in which one desires to trust, to become dependent on another, and to enter into relationships of true reciprocity.

The experience of love for another human being brings recognition of the fundamental individuality of other people and, consequently, the irreducible heterogeneity of society. Individuality and heterogeneity are affirmed in love and no longer seen as obstacles to the just society. To recognize others as individuals and to affirm heterogeneity is to recognize that the world beyond oneself is not and should not be the projection of one’s own will. Perhaps counterintuitively, Nussbaum sees the affirmation of limitation as the only way to harmonize the striving and vulnerability that constitute the human condition. In the recognition of our incompleteness as solitary beings, we free ourselves to find happiness in relationships of loving reciprocity in romance, in the family, and in the society of individuals aspiring to an inclusive justice.



A fig
for thy
universal
reason.

THE INTERVIEW

I want to ask about the relationship between beauty and anxiety in Political Emotions. Anxiety plays a major role, and it’s the root, or one half of the root, of what you call “radical evil,” which manifests itself in the formation of unjust social hierarchies, cruelty, and the compartmentalization of human society. But on the other hand, anxiety is the root of at least one image of beauty: the idea of unity, transcendence, overcoming limitation and contingency, overcoming the

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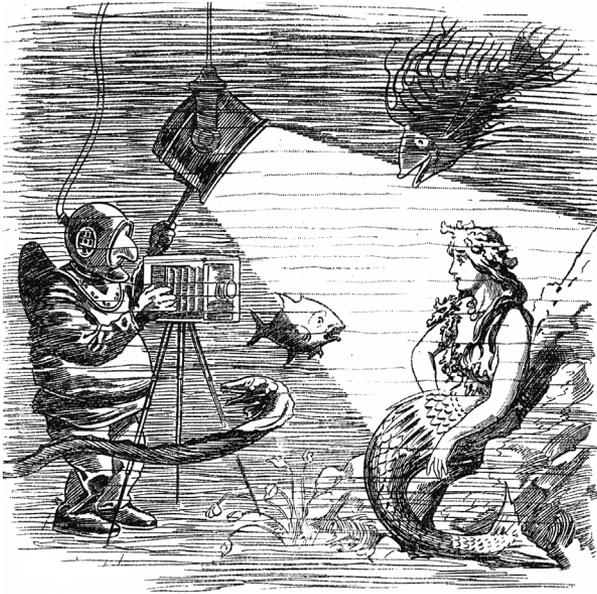
incomplete, the imperfect. If in the aspiring society anxiety is either reduced or overcome, what happens to such images of beauty?

That's a very interesting question, because it's not one that I actually take up in the book, but of course it is there in a way. As you might guess, I'm not a huge fan of that idea of beauty as transcendence, and you see this in my chapter on *The Marriage of Figaro*, where at the end I talk about Charles Nussbaum, who happens to be my brother-in-law. He is a philosopher who writes about music who thinks that musical beauty is all about transcendence of the body and of human limitation, and I say that's too simple. It might do well for some works, but works that interest me are actually works that help us come to terms, in a delighted way, with our human finitude. And so what I love about *The Marriage of Figaro* is the fact that it shows characters—and then I think promotes this in the audience as well—overcoming the anxiety of the finitude of the body. That's a big theme in my work generally: that we're in flight from our vulnerability and our humanity and that creates great trouble in society. And in this book I say that anxiety about the body is the root of a lot of bad stuff because we find that disgust toward minority groups, in my view, expresses the denial that we, the dominant group, are really finite and human.

The role that I see for the arts, or at least a big role for the arts in society, is to give pleasure and certainly beauty, but of a sort that brings us together and helps us overcome the anxiety of finite, bodily humanity. For example, in my little section on Millennium Park in Chicago, I say that it's a wonderful example of a complex artwork that is funny, unifying, but, because of the way that it makes people recognize what's comical and strange about the human body, is actually delightful, and we can celebrate it without thinking, "oh, now we want to be gods and we want to get rid of the body." In short, I think it helps overcome racial anxieties, gender anxieties, and so on.

So I love your question, and I think you get right to the heart of a problem that's always plagued me, namely, that a lot of appreciation of Western art is in the grip of a certain picture of

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transcendence that I think of as pretty damaging at the end of the day. Another place where I talk about this is in my book on the emotions, *Upheavals of Thought*, where I have my last chapter about Joyce's *Ulysses*, and about the way that we need to turn the ladder of love upside down, so to speak, coming back down into our bodily humanity and being accustomed once again to the smells of the body, the fluids of the body, and so on. And what I really love about James Joyce is just that delighted immersion in real human life. Now that doesn't mean we don't want to transcend in a way. I once wrote a paper about two types of transcendence. There's one that I called "internal transcendence," and I think this book is really about that. That is, trying to make the real world better, trying to aspire to more justice, a more accurate treatment of people, and that's a kind of transcendence that's real and that we can do without lying to ourselves. But there's another type that consists in saying, "well, now we're just going to forget about bodies, we don't really have bodies, and there are other people who smell and who excrete and so on, but we'll just subordinate

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and marginalize them and then we can be happy that we're the ones who have transcended." That, I think, is a very pernicious tendency in virtually every society.

The example of Millennium Park is particularly interesting because it is right next to Grant Park, which you mention in your book as well as an example of that problematic vision of beauty as purity, transcendence, and hierarchic greatness. But Grant Park will still be there, so how should the citizen in the aspiring society be oriented toward these two fundamentally incompatible ideals of beauty?

It's part of our history. It's part of who we are. And so I guess keeping them there reminds us of some difficulties we had in our past. I mean, what do I think of those buildings over there [points across the Midway to the Harper towers]? I talk about our campus in the same way. I think those buildings expressed an aspiration to be outside of time, outside of the community, and we surround them with different buildings which express different values—with the Robie House, which expresses a love of the earth, and then the Booth building—which I think is a wonderful building—which has both the horizontal and the vertical. And so we're saying, "yeah, we had that history, it's

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still there, but we now have a kind of wisdom about it and we can laugh at it.” I think the Palevsky dorms laugh at it, and that’s great, because it really did make people upset when they were first put in. We can also build it in to a structure like the new Booth building or the Logan arts center that alludes to it but transcends it in a good way toward greater inclusiveness and a greater embrace of the full city existence of this university. And so I don’t think you just have to tear everything up, but you contextualize it in a new way, the way this building [the Law School] does. I think this building, already in the late fifties, made everything different because now here’s something on the south side of the Midway that, you know, is beautiful, but it’s human, and its scale is human, and its whole design focuses on community and interaction. So I think that’s what you do with the old; you just put it in a different context and you create a commentary upon it.

Love finds in the unreal a beauty greater than the lofty ideal, as you say. Love has the power to transform the imperfect into the perfect, to make the incomplete, complete, to make what might not have seemed beautiful before, seem beautiful, and what might not have seemed harmonious or unified before, harmonious and unified. In some sense you begin the book by saying that we have to set our sights lower, that we have to embrace who we are, that we can’t aim at transcendence and unity, and that you’re not pretending that we’ve reached the promised land. And I think that that all makes sense, but the flipside seems like maybe instead of locating the promised land or the ideal beyond us or above us, you’ve found it in or among us.

That’s, again, very good. But I wouldn’t put it quite that way because I’d rather not use those same words: perfect, complete, harmonious. What I would rather say is, let’s just take the love of people: that if you want the perfect partner, and you spend your life looking for the perfect romantic partner, then you’re bound to be disappointed by the real person that you’re with and that is a real problem in human life. But if you come off of that for a minute and you look at the real person, then you find the real person. I would rather not say you find completeness or perfection, because I don’t think you find that. Instead you

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find something that's much more interesting, much more fun, and just much more real, in the real person in front of you, who is quirky and imperfect and not harmonious. And if you can do that, if you aren't so hooked on the idea that "I'm going to keep looking until I find the one who's perfect," which means you're never going to be happy at all, then you could really enjoy life and have a lot more real happiness. So that's the way I would rather put your point. If you think about the *Figaro* chapter, what are they doing? None of them is finding something perfect, and this is what I emphasize in talking about the Countess. She's a smart woman. She knows that her husband is imperfect, so when she goes on with that relationship, she does so in the embrace of something that is quite imperfect. But love embraces imperfection.

I just want to push back a little bit there. You say that the human condition is essentially limited, and part of our problem is that we think that the real part of us is beyond those limits and that if we could just get to it we would be whole and we would be complete. But it seems like if we affirm those limits and understand that there is nothing beyond them, then haven't we become whole?

What we keep doing is trying to make things better. And there's a way of doing that—what I've called inner transcendence—that doesn't involve denial of the inner conditions. I don't think we should say, "okay then, we're all going to die at thirty-five. That's the way it is, and don't worry about research and healthcare." I would like to live to be one hundred and fifty! Since my grandmother lived to be one hundred and four and she had a very happy life until then, well, I'd like to live longer than that! You know, if we say, "oh the human condition is this," that's a recipe for misery. And so maybe the urge to make things better, we should keep. And it's a very tricky business to say when that flips over into becoming the view I oppose. Because there's no essence to human life; the conditions are always changing, and they change in part because of our efforts, and so the minute we say we're happy with the way things are, then that's not so good. You know, would it not be human life if you lived to be three hundred and

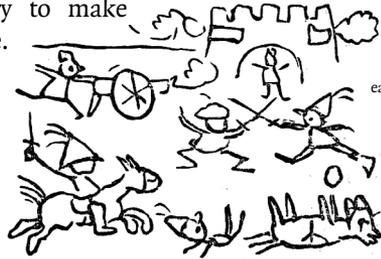
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fifty? I don't know. Bernard Williams, my great teacher, wrote an article about this opera *The Makropulos Case*, the Janáček opera, where Alina Makropulos has been frozen at the age of forty-two and then it goes on for three hundred years and she gets tired of life; she doesn't want to live any more. I think that's a particular case, but I don't think we're all like that. I think we'd actually love it if we actually lived to be three hundred. There are resource problems, of course, but that's a separate issue. So I think striking the right balance, between wanting human life to be better and wanting it not to be human, is a very delicate business.

But I think heroic efforts to make things better are *great*. I mean, look at the books that are on my desk: Gandhi, and Mandela, and so on is what I'm writing about now. I think we want a conversation about what it means to accept your humanity, what it means to try to make it better, and certainly I feel removing pain and suffering, removing poverty, is *great*. So, you know, Gandhi and Nehru had these exchanges where Gandhi would say, "simple village life is more pure," and Nehru says, "there's nothing good about being impoverished, about being poor, about not having enough to eat." I'm on Nehru's side. We should always try to make

conditions better for people. And who's to say it's not human that we would have a society where everyone has enough to eat? That's perfectly possible, and it hasn't happened simply because of bad behavior.

There's tragic fatalism that says, "oh well, what can we do, human life is tragic," and I don't like that at all. I think you're quite right to say that if we interpreted my idea of accepting humanity in that spirit, that would really not be very good. But maybe transcendence to some just means giving people enough to eat and giving them adequate healthcare. And if it's that what they're talking about, then I'm all for that.



The earth was strewed with brains, arms, and legs.

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What form does striving take in the aspiring society? In your book, the human condition is framed by striving and vulnerability, and I'm wondering whether the soul is harmonized in the aspiring society. You seem to say that the aspiring society allows for striving freely. It's not the striving that's the product of anxieties that can't be resolved, but instead a striving that opens the possibility for a true freedom that had not been possible before and that is maybe the most important constituent of happiness.

I think that's very good. I guess I think it's always a difficult question, what forms of vulnerability are bad and should be addressed by a good society and what forms are bound up with things that are good. So, for example, having children be hungry seems to be a totally useless and bad form of vulnerability that we should just eliminate. But being vulnerable to disappointment in love is bound up with what love is and what makes love great. You can't really have the kind of trust that makes love great without having the vulnerability that goes with that. You could eliminate that simply by not having love or by replacing it with some kind of willed friendship, but I don't want to do that. I think it's a big and ongoing question, always, what we really want to do to make life better.