

Martha Nussbaum's Theory of Emotion and Death Issues

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Abstract

The aim of the article is exploring Martha Nussbaum's theory of emotions and their meaning in human life. Authors pay attention also to one of the most frequent emotions in Nussbaum's writings, to the fear of death. She explores the fear of death especially in her research of Hellenistic philosophy and ethics. Following this research, Nussbaum argues that the fear of death is understandable in case of premature death of young people. According to her, death is an interruption of human activities, for this reason, it is bad. Authors confirm that despite Nussbaum's little focus on the meaning and role of positive emotions in human development and human flourishing, her theory of emotions as one of the core capabilities is a very useful tool how to improve human life and to reach good life and well-being of human beings. It also concerns her view that philosophy can be like medical treatment very useful diminishing the fear of death.

Keywords: Martha C. Nussbaum, emotions, human development, human flourishing, fear of death.

Introduction

Human development is one of the noble goals of almost whole human history. A turn of the 20th and 21st centuries offers to us, on the one hand, the new ideas how to go on with human development. One of the significant contemporary theories is Martha Craven Nussbaum's theory of human development based on the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2002; 2003; 2011; 2016). Nussbaum, following Amartya Sen, defines capability as the opportunity to achieve plans and goals of a human being has reason to value in its human development. The aim of the article is to analyze the meaning of emotions in human development.

Capabilities approach and theory of emotions

Nussbaum's capabilities approach includes mental states which mean being able to have connections to things and people outside ourselves and in their means of human development; to like very much those who love and take care for us, to mourn at their absence; generally, to love, to mourn, to experience longing, gratefulness, and justified anger.

What concerns emotions in Nussbaum's theory, it possible to see them as a significant contributor to the method we think and learn about human development and also life's deepest secrecies, especially our personal vulnerability, our reliance on others, and about ways we can help out the flourishing of ourselves and other people (Plumb, 2014). According to Nussbaum, the emotions are, indeed, a form of knowledge through which we think about things that we take care about but that are beyond our control. With Stoic philosophy as her guide, Nussbaum opens a much broader view of the emotions and of their contribution to moral thinking as one of the most significant factors of human development (Nussbaum, 2016).

Nussbaum states her theory of the emotions as neo-Stoic. We have already laid the groundwork to realize what this might mean. The Stoic opinion of the emotions is that they are a form of knowledge, that is, a way of reasoning about things in our human development. Different from other forms of knowledge, the things that are the object of the emotions are things that concern to us, that we take care about or feel connected to. Given the changes of life and the ultimate finitude of objects of concern, however, they are also features of our lives that are eventually out of our control. If something happens somehow to either improve or jeopardize an object of concern, our emotions are how we think about it (Plumb, 2014). Nussbaum claims, emotions are *eudemonistic*, that is, they refer intrinsically to a human being's sense of human flourishing and human development. Nussbaum wants to maintain that our *eudaimonia*, or flourishing happiness as a form of human development, depends upon our formulating a cluster of aims and goods to which we join value, which in turn are constituent elements of a conception of what it means for us to live good life, to reach well-being and human flourishing. For compassion to then occur, we must make the eudaemonistic decision that the other's well-being is involved in our personal conception of well-being, good life and human flourishing (Gallagher, 2009).

In Nussbaum's estimation, the reality of the emotions is open-ended, and ever-emerging than many would hope. Still, as a form of rational thought, emotions are far from being unreasonable or hopelessly not capable of contributing to the good life, well-being, and human development. The emotions take part in the real world, where real objects of concern flourish or feel pain. The evaluations of the emotions are subject to being more or less right or wrong, and the perceptions and beliefs that support them, and the judgments that they sustain are still cooperative to both *epistemic* and, particularly, the *phronetic* reasoning of our human development involving human flourishing. The advantage of Nussbaum's neo-Stoic theory of

emotions, it that, at the same time as it considers the complexity of the emotions, it retains a keen sense of their capacity to support to moral reasoning and human flourishing and development of the human beings (Plumb, 2014). Nussbaum's reason for exploring emotions also in animals is to point out how emotions are "elements of our common animality with considerable adaptive significance: so their biological basis is likely to be common to all" (Nussbaum, 2003, 141).

According to Gallagher, an encounter with Nussbaum's rich and nuanced exploration provides a possibility to reflect upon one's own emotionality as a part of our human nature, on the things one takes cares about in life, and about one's own sense of neediness and vulnerability in face of the finitude of things of the world. It provides one a chance to reason about the various alternatives one might use to deny or rage against one's own sense of vulnerability and, in doing so, be a negative force in the lives of other people as well as how to make them better (Gallagher, 2009). The two cardinal ways that Nussbaum sees this occurring are, first, through overcoming the emotion of disgust, because it is a barrier of our human development as well as due to a fact that an emotion divides us from others insofar as it pushes the other away as different and subordinate to us; and, second, by cultivating the mental capacity of imagination, which Nussbaum believes will make possible us to understand and feel the pain of those who undergo tragic events who are not in our recent empirical orbit, not just humans, but also animals (Gallagher, 2009).

The identification of emotion as part of moral thinking and human development holds the potential to promote reflection of marginalized groups through the tying of fairness to equality: since compassion is conceptualized as a pain that is felt for others where there is a breach of capabilities and where there is inequality. Moreover, the encouragement of emotional recognition with each and every other, by taking the other into one's concept of 'I', offers a way of negotiating the controversial elements of individual and collective-focussed approaches to organizing difference in our effort how to overcome our limits in human development and human flourishing.

Nussbaum's idea of empathy is one of the brightest: empathy is "an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience without any particular evaluation of that experience" (Nussbaum, 2002, 302). According to her, the evaluation that a person is in anxiety, and a desire to do something about it, is a judgment of *compassion* rather than empathy. It is significant to note that she is not claiming that this is *all there is* to compassion, but that compassion, when it overcomes negative emotions such as disgust, envy, and shame, entails evaluation. She argues that sympathy is also close to the term compassion, though lacking its strength (Deane-Drummond, 2017).

According to Celia Deane-Drummond, for Nussbaum, compassion has three elements that require a reasoned decision. The first decision of compassion is one of measurement of *size*—it means what has happened to the human being or other creature is a serious event. The second decision is one of *nondesert*: the being did not

deserve this to happen to it. The third decision is *eudaemonistic*, meaning this being is important in terms of my goals (Deane-Drummond, 2017). Nussbaum also names wonder the ability to reason the worth of the other even apart from our own sense of flourishing and human development (Nussbaum, 2002). For Nussbaum, empathy requires recognition of the *otherness*, rather than simply feeling as if it were its pain, which is an emotional infection. Thus, empathy means both an awareness of another's pain and *yet* knowing that it is not mine (Nussbaum, 2002). Empathy requires sure imagining of what the other being (not only human being) is feeling and is a prelude to compassion where those feelings are connected with bad feelings. Empathy, however, can result in a lack of compassion, as when enemies read the intentions of their rivals or enemies and manipulate them for their own purposes. Nussbaum also reasons that compassion may be without empathy, however, empathy is a good `pilot for compassion (Nussbaum, 2002).

According to Deane-Drummond, Nussbaum's analysis is extremely illuminating in clarifying the relationships between empathy and compassion, as well in her examination of the Greek ancient literature in order to define more specifically what compassion means for human development and human flourishing. However, her idea that empathy is merely a *pilot* for compassion seems a little bit weak. So while theoretically, in accordance with her definitions, it might be possible to show compassion without empathy, compassion is more significant and fuller as a virtue if it is *inclusive* of empathy rather than excluding it of human nature and human development. Modifying her definition, any account of compassion needs therefore to involve in a primary meaning a positive affirmation of the evaluation of compassion toward the other informed by love for the other as a part of human flourishing and human development, rather than, in the way that she sets up her argument, an answer to large negative events that have happened to another that were underserved. Such answers can be included, but her idea of ordering toward "wonder" needs modifying to one of effective compassion guided by love (Deane-Drummond, 2017).

Nussbaum's explaining compassion that focuses on the specific cognitive evaluations required in compassionate deeds fails to consider adequately the priority of relations between love and compassion in human flourishing and human development, specifically, that part of compassion that is actively involved, rather than just in answer to another's distress. While empathy exactly speaking means the ability to feel what the other feels, and therefore is potentially either passive in the ethical and moral sphere, compassion is more positive and aside from some uncommon exceptions requires the capacity of empathy for its using in human development and individual flourishing (Deane-Drummond, 2017).

A fear of death in Nussbaum's theory of emotions

In *Theory of Desire* Nussbaum very intensively focuses her research on the fear of death, especially in context with Hellenistic philosophy and ethics, in Epicurus and Lucretius. She expressed that we see in society people who are ignorant of life and

death issues on the first look. Their response can be that they do not have fear of death and they are full of optimism. However, Nussbaum states that the fear of death is deeply rooted in their hearts (Nussbaum, 2009).

Following research on Hellenistic ethics, she affirms the diagnostic argument confirming deeply rooted the fear of death. According to Nussbaum, the diagnostic argument has four parts:

“1. A description of a pattern of behavior that seems to lack adequate explanation. It will be argued that the most powerful explanation of these symptoms is fear of death.

2. A description of a subjective condition which, although not consciously felt as fear, lacks, as described, adequate explanation. Again, it will be argued that the fear of death is the best explanation of these inner symptoms.

3. A description of occasions of confession or acknowledgment: situations in which the patient, dropping her habitual defenses, will grant that fear is in fact what she feels.

4. In the background, a normative picture of the healthy unconstrained person, a person whose life is not burdened by fear and who lacks, in consequence, the bad symptoms associated with it” (Nussbaum, 2009, 196).

Nussbaum mentioned Epicurus’ and Lucretius’ rejecting the fear of death as counterproductive for human life and very useful to religious beliefs and religious authorities. She follows their reasoning and affirms that death frustrates human projects and desires. The fear of death is not only the fear that makes human projects empty but also they are diminished (Nussbaum, 2009).

The fear of death can be, according to Nussbaum, rational for a person who has valuable activities, it means who is able to love, work, choose, enjoy the beauty. “Death will be most terrible when it is, in conventional human terms, premature; for then the value of many preparatory activities – activities involving training oneself so as to be able to act in some valued way in future – will be completely lost, in that they will never lead on to the fruition that gives them their entire point. To devote a large part of one’s life to merely preparatory activities is characteristic of youth. But the elderly, too, have valuable lives; and their activities, too, are interrupted by death. It would perhaps be irrational for an elderly person to devote the whole of his or her time to activities whose value is entirely preparatory and instrumental; but even the activities that are constitutional of a good life can, as we have said, be interrupted. And even if there should be a person for whom death arrives just as all current projects are, for the moment, complete and at a standstill – if such a thing ever happens for a person who loves living – still, the bare project to form new projects is itself interrupted; and it seems that this project is itself a valuable one in a human life...” (Nussbaum, 2009, 209-210).

Nussbaum presents the view that philosophy is able to answer the fundamental human life questions including questions of life and death. Philosophy, according to

her, can be like therapeutic medical treatment helping people to understand their lives and also the fear of death in contexts with human activities and their life plans.

Conclusion

However, some of the authors argue that Nussbaum' pays a little interest in positive emotions and her capabilities approach list reflects a Benthamite opinion of positive emotions that are out-dated in light of current psychological research. Positive emotions not only make people feel good; they also broaden and build, and allow human development and also human flourishing. They hope that the research on the positive values of positivity will move Nussbaum to the acceptance of positivity as a valued capability (Jayawickreme & Pawelski, 2013). Really, we think that despite a critique of Martha Nussbaum's little focus on the meaning and role of positive emotions in human development and human flourishing, her theory of emotions as one of the core capabilities is a very useful tool how to improve human life and to reach good life and well-being of human beings. It concerns also her approach to the fear of death as well as the usefulness of philosophy like medicine for the mental health of people.

Acknowledgement

The paper is a part of project VEGA 1/0521/17 *Critique of theoretical and methodological issues in contemporary bioethical debates on death and dying.*

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