

A comment on Martha Nussbaum's “Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance” Andrea Bertazzoli

In “Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance” (2004) American philosopher Martha Nussbaum tries to defend her thesis, which claims emotions to be a particular form of judgments. More specifically, evaluative judgments «in which we acknowledge our neediness and incompleteness before those elements that we do not fully control»¹.

Her view has become one of the most relevant ones in regard of the problem of emotions' nature. This is why I think it is of much interest to analyze the validity of the arguments she brings to support it.

Here, before proceeding, I want to provide a little context, that I think will be very useful to understand better Nussbaum's article. In fact, her text has a strong polemic tone and, therefore, it is important to know against whom her arguments are directed.

She has an adversary, as she clearly states, and that is one of the most common views regarding emotions: that of emotions as bodily feelings (that she often refers to as "nonreasoning movements"), born with William James in the nineteenth century and then further developed by many others.

According to this view, an emotion is nothing but the feeling of the modifications that happen to our body when we experience something. While we may be more prone to say the opposite, for James «we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful»².

James sustains this view particularly saying that if we were to take out all these physical reactions from our emotions we would remain with «nothing left behind, no “mind stuff” out of which the emotion can be constituted»³. For example, it would be impossible to imagine being scared without imagining also ourselves sweating, our heart beating fast or having goosebumps all over our skin.

After William James, his theory was further developed by many and, with an increasingly accurate knowledge of the way our body functions, the same

definition of "bodily changes" started to expand going even to include facts concerning the nervous and the endocrine systems.

In this short essay I will not take any of the two sides. Still, I will try to point out some of the biggest flaws in Nussbaum's thesis and in the argumentations brought to support it.

Nussbaum starts her essay briefly narrating her discovery of her mother's death and describing all the emotions she went through. Throughout the text, she only refers to this experience to draw concrete examples of how her theory can be applied to explain our emotional responses. This is a bigger problem than it may seem. Indeed, she always refers only to emotions such as fear, despair, grief or hope. With these emotions in mind, it may seem plausible to suggest that with our emotions «we acknowledge our neediness and incompleteness»⁴, but as soon as a different kind of emotion is taken in consideration the whole building risks to collapse. We certainly feel an emotion when we are satisfied with ourselves, for example, when we are proud of a job we have done. In this case, the emotion would be quite the opposite of an acknowledgement of our neediness and incompleteness. On the contrary, we feel proud and satisfied with ourselves when we recognize our self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, even considering an emotion like fear, which she often refers to in order to prove this precise point, it would still be problematic to say that when we feel emotions «we acknowledge our neediness and incompleteness before those elements that we do not fully control»⁵. A viewer who is watching a horror movie, for example, is presumably experiencing fear, yet he is not a passive spectator of a situation he has no control over. Indeed, he could easily turn off his TV or walk out the theater whenever he wants, putting presumably an end to his emotion.

Nussbaum acknowledges that her thesis could seem strange, being that when we think of emotions we often think of «their urgency and heat; their tendency to take over the personality and move one to action with overwhelming force; [...] one's sense of passivity before them; their apparently adversarial relation to rationality in terms of cool calculation»⁶. All these features could seem to be easily explained by thinking of emotions as "nonreasoning movements", «unthinking forces that have no connection with our thoughts, evaluations, or plans»⁷. It would seem much more difficult to believe that emotions are judgments, being that, for example, the latter are actively made, while the first ones seem to be passively suffered.

Anyway, Nussbaum claims that a Neo Stoic view can serve the job better.

She therefore tries to prove how emotions cannot be said to be “nonreasoning movements”, going thus clearly against James’ theory. She does this continuing to refer only to the example of her mother’s death.

She argues that the fear, the grief, and the despair she was feeling, were all *about* something. She was not simply experiencing grief, but precisely grief for her mother’s death. This connotation of having an object differentiates emotions from the “nonreasoning movements” that her adversary’s view talks about.

According to Nussbaum, this characteristic has to be considered a part of the emotion’s identity.

Is that the case though? Could not it be that what she refers to as the object of an emotion serves instead only as a stimulus for that emotion, but do not belong to the identity of the emotion?

What she probably wants to say is that, for example, the fear felt for a spider is really different than that felt for the risk of one’s mother dying. This could definitely seem plausible. However, do we really need to refuse the “bodily changes’ theory” to give an explanation to this case? Do we really need to think that these two types of fear have different identities?

I think that even viewing emotions as bodily feelings it would be possible to understand why we do find these two fears to be different. We could say, for example, that they vary in intensity, or that, thinking of our mother dying rather than of a spider, we feel changes in different parts of the body. That could be due to the fact that these two thoughts do not come only with fear, but also with other different emotions accompanying them, such as sadness for our mother and disgust towards the spider.

Nussbaum, then, goes on to say that another reason why emotions are not “nonreasoning movements” is because they not only have an object, but they have an *intentional* object. That means that the identity of the emotion is affected by the way one perceives this object.

Furthermore, «emotions embody not simply ways of seeing an object, but beliefs [...] about the object»⁸ too.

A big problem here is that the same examples she brings to support her thesis can be actually used instead to contradict it. In order to have fear, she says, one must believe that something bad is going to happen. Anyway, this belief is not necessary at all. Watching a horror movie, one does not believe to be in danger. He knows that what is on the screen is not real, yet he still is scared. This has been called the “paradox of horror”⁹ and perfectly shows how emotions can act against our own beliefs.

Also, she seems to be suggesting fear to be more rational than it is and people more coherent than how they really are. Indeed, people often act in disregard of their beliefs, so why would they always re-act according to them?

Finally, she says, the value given to a certain object has a part too in defining the identity of a certain emotion felt towards it. The more one loves his mother the more he will feel sad for her death. Again, this could be easily explained viewing emotions as bodily feelings, simply saying that the value given to a certain object causes more or less intense bodily changes.

Considering proved that what object an emotion is about, its intentionality and the beliefs and values connected to that object are all parts of the identity of an emotion, Nussbaum claims that all these features show how an emotion is not different from a thought.

My point here is that none of Nussbaum's arguments are sufficient to claim that emotions are not bodily sensations, but forms of judgments. It could easily be the case that the judgments and the thoughts she is talking about are just a possible cause for emotions to take place.

Nussbaum then proceeds claiming emotions to be eudaimonistic, meaning that they are concerned with the agent's flourishing and giving clarifications about what the term "judgment" means to a Stoic point of view. A judgment is an assent to an appearance.

If something occurs to me, I have only three possibilities. The first is to accept the appearance, taking it into me as the way things are. That would have then become my judgment. The second is to reject the appearance and that would mean to judge the contradictory. The third and final option is not to commit myself one way or the other.

The appearance is always propositional and evaluative. It would not be possible to assent to the idea of the loss of one's beloved mother without an emotional reaction, because the proposition (the appearance) one is recognizing is an evaluative one. The acceptance of a proposition with no evaluative concept like "X is dead" could at most be a cause of grief according to Nussbaum but not identical with grief itself.

Nussbaum therefore believes to have proved that the judgments she has described (evaluative of value and importance) are both necessary and sufficient constituent elements of an emotion.

Towards the end of her essay, she seems to be acknowledging the main objection that I have brought against her: that the judgments she talks about could be just causes of emotions, without identifying with them.

The answer she gives to the problem is disappointing. «I do not first of all coolly embrace the proposition “My wonderful mother is dead” and then set about grieving»¹⁰. According to her, this would prove judgment not to be simply the cause for emotions, as it does not precede them temporally. This argument is very weak and easily rebuttable. Considering the incredible speed our brain works at, the time between the judgment and the emotion could be so little that we see these two coming together. It could also be the case that the judgment happens unconsciously, despite the fact that Nussbaum in her theory seems to suggest that this is not.

Furthermore, she really does not seem to be interested at all in the bodily changes that happen during the experience of an emotion. She dismisses the problem quickly simply saying that «we do not withdraw emotion-ascriptions otherwise grounded»¹¹ if we discover that certain bodily changes have not happened or even that the subject is not in a certain brain-state. This means that these things are not necessary to have an emotion.

But what does this really mean? Maybe there would be nowhere to ground these emotion-ascriptions she refers to if no bodily change had taken place. Maybe the discovery she talks about, that of finding some bodily changes not to have happened, is an impossible one, thus compromising her whole statement. Indeed, for what I know, this discovery has never been made and she does not prove or even state otherwise.

Nonetheless, Nussbaum claims that what she was feeling in the hospital the day her mother died would have been fear even if her hands had not been sweating.

What she does not realize saying this is that her hands **did** sweat. So how can she know what she would have felt otherwise? It seems that the same fact she decided to take this extreme situation for her examples has misguided her. She clearly cannot be satisfied saying that her fear was a drop of sweat, her despair a tear. This would seem to her like a minimization of what she went through. The main problem may be that she is looking at something too personal to be able to rationalize properly about it.

In addition, I believe that she is not treating correctly her adversary's view, trivializing it in a wrong way. No one ever said that a strong emotion like fear could be simply reduced to a hand sweating. William James himself addressed the risk of his thesis being interpreted in a similar oversimplified way in his 1884 article “What is an emotion?”, responding that the number of body parts modified in each emotion is “immense”¹². Not just a drop of sweat then, but an incredibly

articulated set of bodily reactions, made even more complex if the mechanisms of the nervous and of the endocrine systems are added to the equation.

This whole argumentation, I think, is built upon a logic fallacy.

Her point could be summarized like this: “Even without any bodily change, I would still think what I experienced was fear. This means bodily changes are not a necessary condition to feel fear”¹³.

In reply to this argument, one could ask: “Why would you still think what you experienced was fear? How can you know what you would have thought in that situation if that situation had been different from the one you were actually in?”.

I believe that her argument contains a very dangerous *petitio principii*. To say “Even without any bodily change, I would still think what I experienced was fear.” one must have already decided that bodily changes are not a part of the essence of an emotion. Therefore, what she presents as the conclusion of the argument is actually already its premise and, if someone was not to agree with that premise, then the whole statement would fall apart.

In my opinion, without any bodily change, our experience of an emotion would be different in a way that one cannot confidently predict; maybe so much different that we would not be willing to say any more that what we experienced was an “emotion”. Clearly, Nussbaum does not think so and never really explains why.

This is what moves me to say that it is already from the start that her whole reflection considers bodily changes not to be a part of an emotion’s essence.

I have now spent many words examining this last argument of hers, as I believe it to be the one Nussbaum’s whole theory is grounded over. It is indeed the one supposed to address the main reason why she refuses her “adversary’s theory”. With this argument she is not only telling us that emotions are not based entirely on bodily feelings, like the opposite view claims, but that these bodily feelings do not even play a part in the identity of an emotion. She just sees them as accidents that have nothing to do with the real essence of the emotion. This inevitably delivers emotions completely to the sole field of the mind (not the brain), thus transforming them into those pure evaluative judgements Nussbaum’s theory is all about.

In conclusion, as Nussbaum ends her article saying that «emotions can be defined in terms of judgment alone»¹⁴, I can conclude my analysis thinking to have proved that she did not succeed in bringing sufficient arguments in support of her thesis.

Bibliography

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James, W. (1884) *What is an Emotion?* in *Mind*, Vol. 9, No 34 (Apr. 1884), Oxford University Press on behalf of the Mind Association, 188-205.

¹ Nussbaum, M. *Emotions as Judgements of Value and Importance*. p. 308

² James, W. *What is an Emotion?* p. 190

³ *ibid.* p. 193

⁴ Nussbaum, M. *Emotions as Judgements of Value and Importance*. p. 308

⁵ *ibid.* p. 308

⁶ *ibid.* p. 311

⁷ *ibid.* p. 314

⁸ *ibid.* p. 316

⁹ An in-depth analysis of the paradox of horror can be found in Noel Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart*

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 327

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 328

¹² According to James, "the immense number of parts modified in each emotion is what makes it so difficult for us to reproduce in cold blood the total and integral expression of any of them". James, W. *What is an Emotion?* p. 192

¹³ This is not a quote from Nussbaum's article, but an explication of the logic argument she is making.

¹⁴ Nussbaum, M. *Emotions as Judgements of Value and Importance*. p. 329