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Book Reviews

Edited Trevor Curnow

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Martha C. Nussbaum

Upheavals of Thought: the intelligence of emotions

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. pp. xiii + 751

ISBN: 0521462029 (hb) £30/\$39.95

This is an enormous book, impressive in its erudition and wide-ranging in its scope. However, the very breadth of its scope makes it difficult to say concisely what it is really about. Fully a third of it is dedicated to mining such disparate sources as Augustine, Emily Bronte and Mahler for insights into the nature of love, but love is really a derivative theme rather than the book's core subject matter. Another large section concerns itself with seeking to understand the nature and significance of compassion, but again that is more of a secondary issue than a primary one. The real nitty-gritty of the book comes in the first section where a cognitive theory of the emotions is advanced and defended, and on which I will therefore focus.

Cognitive approaches to the emotions are nothing new, and, as Nussbaum frequently makes clear, her analysis owes much to the work of the Stoics. The difference, the important difference, that links the various parts of the book together is that whereas the Stoics regarded the emotions with deep distrust if not outright hostility, Nussbaum holds them in a much higher regard.

The essence of Nussbaum's analysis is that emotions are evaluative judgements with a eudaimonistic dimension. The qualification is important. Not all evaluative judgements are emotions. They differ from other evaluative judgements in that they always have an implicit connection with the kind of life one wishes to lead. However, while they are in that sense self-referential, they are not (purely) egoistic, since the kind of life one wishes to lead involves a context that importantly includes others, both personally and in society at large.

That there is a cognitive dimension to emotion is a point many would be more than happy to concede. That eudaimonistic evaluative judgements are all there is to emotions is another matter, but this is the position Nussbaum seeks to maintain. To take a simple example: I believe there is someone outside my front door who wants to kill me, and I experience this perceived threat to my welfare as fear. Of course, my belief can be mistaken, and if I find that it *is* mistaken, the fear disappears. The question, then, is essentially whether the judgement *causes* the fear in some way, or whether the judgement *constitutes* the fear. Nussbaum argues for the latter, but I am not so sure. Does an explanation in terms of judgements do full justice to the phenomenology of fear? Is the introduction of the eudaimonistic dimension sufficient to explain why some evaluative judgements manifest themselves in strong feelings? All I can say is that I remain unconvinced. (One possible solution to this problem is to advocate, as I believe G. E. Moore did, that *all* cognitions have an emotional dimension or 'tone', which might then be consciously experienced when it reaches a certain level of intensity. But Nussbaum does not wish to go down this road.)

I would be more inclined to give Nussbaum the benefit of the doubt if there were not other aspects of her analysis that gave rise to concern. For example, when dealing with anger, a subject to which she often returns, she insists that it is always directed at someone who has (probably intentionally) done wrong (p. 29). But who is the object of my anger when I am faced with a missed bus or recalcitrant computer? (The image of Basil Fawlty beating his car with the branch of a tree springs to mind.) And if these are not genuine cases of anger, why not?

In the end (and it takes a long time to get to the end), I am not convinced that what is presented here, for all its breadth of scholarship, constitutes any genuine development in the cognitive theory of emotion beyond what has already been achieved by such as Robert C. Solomon (1993). Although the book is an interesting read, it is ultimately a rather disappointing one.

Trevor Curnow