

Martha C. Nussbaum's Public Ethics Lyric Opera and the Dignity of Emotions

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Abstract

The aim of this contribution is to shed light on the public role of emotions as it emerges from Martha C. Nussbaum's philosophical and political reflections. Democratic and just societies are not solely reliant on laws and institutions; they are also contingent on the collective emotions that underpin their public values. Shared feelings are needed to unite citizens, ensuring cooperation and respect. However, alongside positive emotions such as civic love, critical patriotism and social gratitude, there is a risk of negative emotions that are destructive in the public sphere, such as fear, disgust, anger. Our contribution examines the research conducted by the American philosopher over the past decade, focusing in particular on works such as *Upheavals of Thought* and *Political Emotions*, while awaiting the publication of her new book on the connection between social emotions and lyric opera (forthcoming 2026). Our goal is to reflect on the dignity of emotions through her philosophical and moral interpretation of Operas.

Keywords: Martha C. Nussbaum, Political emotions, Dignity, Lyric Opera, Public imagination.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The opportunity to reflect on such an important topic is truly valuable. It allows us to discuss something that is really close to our hearts. That something is emotions, their importance to human dignity, and how to manage them in order to

live a happy life. It is equally important that we are doing this today, at this historic moment. The question of what it means to be human and to maintain human dignity is becoming urgent in the face of ongoing wars and the rapid penetration of AI and advanced robotics. It is also urgent in the face of the ongoing indifference, disrespect and outright violence towards human fragility and ontological vulnerability that we see in society.

For this reason, we must always strive to reconsider humanity in all its aspects, including dignified emotions: “dignified” because this is how Martha Nussbaum approaches them.

They are dignified not in the sense that they are acceptable, or that there is a minimum standard for the contribution they make to our lives, but in the sense that they uphold the status of our human dignity. Dignity exists in emotions; collective emotions such as fear, anger and shame may exist, but dignity upholds the personal dimension of these emotions.

Before delving into Nussbaum’s reflections, it is worth recalling the classical foundation upon which our Western concept of dignity is based. The measure of dignity lies in the awareness, shaped by the actions one is called upon to perform out of duty. In the *Eudemean Ethics*, Aristotle outlines a hierarchy in which the person who is aware of their own merits and of their potential stands at the summit.¹ However, this position is not fixed: even those who desire modest things yet recognize their own merit are not less worthy than the magnanimous. It is the actions performed that determine the difference in dignity, not the qualities of the person.

This ‘active’ dimension of dignity requires social recognition, just as honor does in the Roman concept of *dignitas*. The flip side of this first type of dignity, is the second type: “passive” dignity. This is the dignity of someone or something that endures an action, insult or injury yet remains steadfast in self-awareness and an unchanging sense of identity. This passive approach can restore dignity even when it seems to have been lost or negated.²

Later on, we will examine characters from famous Operas and see how the emotions they express are rooted precisely in this active and passive dignity, and how, through this awareness, they become political emotions.

2 BACKGROUND AND SITUATIONAL EMOTIONS

In 1993, Martha C. Nussbaum gave lectures at the University of Edinburgh. The title of those lectures was *Need and Recognition: the Emotions*.

¹ ARISTOTLE, *The Eudemean Ethics*, III, 5, 1233, translated by A. Kenny, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.

² F. ABBATE, *Il futuro della dignità. Un percorso nell’etica di Martha C. Nussbaum*, preface by M. C. Nussbaum, Studium, Rome 2024, pp. 23-36.

This marked the beginning of a journey that has lasted more than thirty years, through philosophy, literature, music and opera, bending to the urgent needs of the contemporary world. This inaugurated a kind of 'warm philosophy', which is different from the 'coldness' of logical positivism, which does not allow any disciplinary contamination.³

In 2001, the book *Upheavals of Thought* made it clear from its title (given by Marcel Proust in *À la recherche du temps perdu* with his observation on love in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, which 'provokes real geological upheavals of thought') that emotions represent for thought what geological upheavals produce in a territory: they are earthquakes that disrupt and reshape the landscapes of mental and social life, and as such are actually "intelligent responses to the perception of value,"⁴ they derive from the judgments we make about objects and people outside ourselves, objects and people we need and over which we have no control or certainty, but which are important for our well-being and for building our dignity in life.

For this reason, we cannot help but consider emotions an integral part of the ethical reasoning system. Therefore, we strive to understand how they work, with their origins rooted in our childhood and upbringing, as well as their cultural significance.

Shame, disgust, anger, fear and pride are all emotions described in Nussbaum's most recent publications. Despite their bias, each of them reveals a way of thinking that is full of values and must be accepted if we want to create a fair world, one that is open to understanding and compassion.⁵

The idea that our capacity for action, the *agency*, and our experience of *victimhood* are incompatible is false; it is precisely our agency that makes victimhood tragic.

On the one hand, emotions refer to things beyond our control; they reveal our needs and our lack of self-sufficiency, showing our ontological vulnerability in the form of powerlessness in the face of events, and our dependence on our environment and others. However, on the other hand, they also indicate our 'eudaimonistic' vision, showing what we consider to be good for our life project and human fulfilment in Aristotelian terms.

This applies to both *background* and *situational* emotions.

³W. STEINER, *The Philosophy of Love*, New York Times, Nov. 18, 2001, Sec. 7, p. 66; <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/18/books/the-philosophy-of-love.html>. Accessed 28 March 2026.

⁴M. C. NUSSBAUM, *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2001, pp. 1-5.

⁵EADEM, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 2009; *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, and Justice*, Oxford University Press, New York 2016; *The Monarchy of Fear*, Oxford University Press, New York 2021; *Citadels of Pride: Sexual Assault, Accountability, and Reconciliation*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2021.

The former ones persist throughout various situations and therefore remain fundamental, while the latter ones are linked to specific circumstances and events.

One example is the belief that death is a negative event and that our mortality is something we continue to believe in throughout our adult lives. Similarly, the importance of health and the possibility of illness is something we also believe, and this gives rise to fear as a basic emotion.

However, a basic fear of death can become situational when combined with a specific event that highlights our fragility. This is similar to a woman's underlying anger at the injustices she experiences in her domestic life. This anger only surfaces situationally when a certain destabilising event occurs, causing her to feel offended and despised.

Nussbaum's cognitive-evaluative theory of emotions is part of a neo-Aristotelian tradition and dialogues with ancient Stoicism and contemporary theories of emotions. Emotions are value judgments. They have at least three fundamental characteristics. Intentionality: every emotion is "directed" toward something (it has an *object*). Evaluation: the object is considered significant for the agent's well-being. Eudaimonia: the value attributed is linked to a conception of one's own well-being.

For example, fear implies the perception of a threat to something important, whereas anger implies the perception of a significant injustice. In this sense, emotions are not mere physiological states, but cognitive configurations with propositional content.

Moreover, they attest that our well-being depends on factors not fully under our control. This element, clearly Aristotelian and tragic in origin, contrasts with the Stoic ideal of self-sufficiency. Our emotional experience reveals that we are exposed to contingency, that our personal identity is intertwined with relationships, and that this relationality is essential for human flourishing.

No view that makes the emotion just like merely a physical object hitting us can do justice to the way the world enters into the self in emotion, with enormous power to wound or to heal.⁶

The experience of emotion typically involves very specific and concrete perceptions of the object, substantiated by powerful and vivid imagery. Ultimately, it is this imaginative element that enables us to communicate and share emotions with others through language.

3 EMOTIONS AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS

The defining feature of Nussbaum's discourse on emotions is the social dimension: she is not interested in writing about applied psychology, nor in making

⁶EADEM, *Emotions as Judgments of Value*, in *Upheavals of Thought*, cit., p. 78.

phenomenological analyses of lived experience, nor in using the lens of existential philosophy or analytical case studies.

She does not use the philosophical categories with which we are familiar, which can create disorientation for those who adhere to the supposed technical rigor of the subject.

Nussbaum adopts a narrative approach to emotions, enabling her to describe phenomena and trace cognitive pathways. She draws on her personal experience of grief and loss following her mother's death.

But let's get back to what we were talking about: emotions and social bonds.

To illustrate this, she draws comparisons between her own mourning and that of other cultural groups. For instance, the *Ifaluk* Inuit community responds to the death of a five-year-old child from meningitis by gathering around the mother and joining in with her tears, cries and heart-wrenching wails, accompanied by dramatic gestures of despair. This is because the Ifaluk believe that failing to weep loudly for the death of loved ones will result in illness.

In contrast, a young domestic worker from Bali asks her employer for a few days off for her fiancé's funeral in remote parts of the island. However, she asks for this time off in cheerful and lively manner, which makes her employer doubt her sincerity. This doubt is compounded when the domestic worker returns after the funeral looking even more cheerful and carefree than before, as if she had been on holiday rather than attending an important funeral.

Once again, let's be careful: Balinese people believe that sad emotions are bad for your health, so if you become depressed and cry, your vital energy weakens and you fall prey to evil forces. Finally, the third example comes from Nussbaum herself as she grapples with managing the emotions of her grief: on the one hand, the norms of American customs, which do allow for crying but then immediately call for the dignified response of carrying on with one's commitments and work; on the other hand, the temptation to give in to sadness, canceling lectures and public engagements (which she did not do).⁷

Although emotions are universal, rooted in vulnerability and our connections to the external world, the way we experience them is shaped by our individual histories and social norms. Just as linguistic ability varies in the ways language is used, different societies shape emotions in specific ways. In the above cases, it is the behavior associated with grief that differs from situation to situation. Yet who can deny that these differences impact the experience of grief itself?

⁷EADEM, *Emotions and Human Societies*, in *Upheavals of Thought*, cit., pp. 139-144; the two cases are reported respectively by her anthropologist colleagues Lutz and Wikan in their texts, with comments highlighting the difference in customs and traditions: C. A. LUTZ, *Unnatural Emotions*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1988; U. WIKAN, *Managing Turbulent Hearts: A Balinese Formula for Living*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1990; cf. M. CERULO, *Sociologia delle emozioni*, il Mulino, Bologna 2018.

In all three situations, we are dealing with serious losses and how people react to them. However, in the first case, social norms dictate that mothers and their relatives must openly and dramatically give in to their grief, otherwise they may fall ill. In the second case, Balinese custom demands cheerfulness and light-hearted thoughts to drive away the negativity of loss and mourning. Finally, Nussbaum herself admits to oscillating between “the belief that it is a sign of respect and love to the dead to focus on loss and sadness, and the belief that one should distract oneself and go about one’s business, showing that one is not helpless. These differences marked not only my behavior, but also my inner experience.”⁸

Therefore, there is a social construction of emotions that cognitive-evaluative emotional theory must acknowledge. Despite their limitations, the Stoics recognized this and wrote about it, publicly committing themselves to bringing about societal change—to freeing society from the manifestations of hatred, anger and envy that undermine it from within. Just consider the writings of Seneca, from which we still draw inspiration for ethical and social behavior today.

Although this is not the right place for an in-depth analysis of the subject, it is worth noting that this dialogue with anthropology on the social construction of emotions is one of the most significant contributions of Nussbaum’s moral philosophy.

At one extreme, we find certain emotion theorists, primarily from the field of evolutionary psychology, who, with their universalist outlook, do not consider the role of society at all. Alongside these theorists are the so-called ‘naturalists’, led by Charles Darwin, who in 1872 published *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, and William James, who in 1884 wrote an article titled *What is an Emotion?*⁹

At the other extreme, however, we find the cognitive psychology of James Averill and a large number of anthropologists.

They are staunch advocates of the social construction of emotions, even at the expense of biology and shared conditions. When we evaluate cultures as “systems of emotions” in a particularistic way, taking for granted that they have little in

⁸M. C. NUSSBAUM, *Emotions and Human Societies*, cit., p. 142.

⁹For James, bodily changes directly follow our perception of an affecting event, and our sensation of these changes is precisely what can be defined as emotion. See G. PECCHINENDA, *Embodied Cognition e processi comunicativi. Per un’antropologia delle emozioni estese*, «EXagere», VIII (2023), pp. 25-32. To broaden the perspective, consider the work in cognitive psychology on the universality of facial expressions as indicators of emotion. In particular, Paul Ekman argues that certain expressions are recognised across all cultures as signals of fear, anger, disgust, sadness or joy. Cf. P. EKMAN, R. J. DAVIDSON (eds.), *The Nature of Emotion: Fundamental Questions*, Oxford University Press, New York 1994; cf. A. WIERZBICKA, *Emotion and Culture: Arguing with Martha Nussbaum*, «Ethos», 31/ 4 (2003), pp. 577-600; cf. G. SACCO, *L’emozione entro i limiti della ragione. La coltivazione delle emozioni in Martha Nussbaum*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino 2023.

common, we risk viewing a culture as monolithic, without considering its nuances and complexity.

Over twenty years ago, Nussbaum noted how “more complex conceptions of culture have been emerging in anthropology, with an emphasis on plurality, conflict, and porous boundaries.”¹⁰ This has certainly fostered a more balanced analysis of *emotional patterns* in society. Over the past twenty years, not only has anthropology made progress in this area, but sociology too has begun to contribute, focusing on emotions as a powerful lens through which to understand the relationship between the individual and the social context at various levels.

The “interactionist” approach is one of the fundamental perspectives in the sociology of emotions (the other being the positivist perspective). A society’s emotional culture consists of the set of words that express those emotions, the beliefs surrounding them, and the norms that govern them—such as ‘at a funeral, one must feel sad’. Regarding norms, it is necessary to distinguish, as Arlie Russell Hochschild does, between *feeling rules*, which establish what one must feel in a given situation, and *display rules*, which establish when and how emotions and feelings must be expressed.

A society’s emotional culture is expressed not only through language, but also through daily rituals, marketing pressures, artistic expressions, scientific publications, religious texts, and even *self-help* books.¹¹

In this context, it is worth mentioning the ideas set out in David Le Breton’s *Anthropologie des émotions*, as they are relevant to the discussion. Le Breton begins with the premise that feelings and emotions are not absolute states or merely physiological processes of which the body is the repository, but rather ‘relationships.’

The way in which individuals experience events differs from one human society to another, depending on the emotional perspective and cultural context. Every term in society’s or social group’s affective lexicon is tied to the local context of its application. This is why emotions cannot be naturalized by carelessly transferring them from one culture to another through a translation system that is blind to the social conditions surrounding affectivity. Emotions are ‘thoughts in action’, underpinned by a system of meanings and values. Rooted in an affec-

¹⁰M. C. NUSSBAUM, *Emotions and Human Societies*, cit., p. 144.

¹¹A. R. HOCHSCHILD, *Ideology and Emotion Management: A Perspective and Path for Future Research*, in *Research Agendas in the Sociology of Emotions*, ed. by T. D. Kemper, State University of New York Press, Albany 1990, pp. 122-124; *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2003; consider, for example, the study on the emotional labor performed by flight attendants: they are required to behave in a manner that is kind and accommodating toward customers, carefully managing their own emotional expressions and conforming to the conduct established by the airline. See P. IAGULLI, *Cultura ed emozioni*, in «Nuovo Meridionalismo Studi», 2 (2016), pp. 9-23.

tive culture, they manifest in language of gestures and facial expressions that is generally recognizable to individuals with shared social roots.¹²

Aesthetics has long explored emotions as ‘social objects.’ By this is meant that they are produced by processes of social construction and possess a substance, a solidity and a degree of objectivity that manifests itself aesthetically. Emotions are always experienced in the company of others, within the interactive processes that underpin sociality.

A different way of looking at emotions is the *pragmatist* approach, as explored by John Dewey and George Herbert Mead. They investigated the connection between deep, pre-social emotionality and the social demands that lead to emotional labor. At the same time, they kept a constant focus on the bodily, organic and physiological aspects that set them apart from radical forms of constructivism.

On the contrary, the pragmatist approach to emotions is continuist—writes Roberta Dreon—that is, it is based on a theoretical framework that assumes human cultural development to be rooted in the natural conditions of the human way of life, in the physical, postural and physiological characteristics that mark individuals’ lives from birth, as well as in the naturally social structure of the human environment.¹³

Returning to Nussbaum, she has made a significant contribution to the anthropological and sociological debate on the evolution of emotions, as we said.

This debate has recently become particularly prominent in discussions concerning our relationship with animals, a subject on which the philosopher has expressed her views in her most recent book *Justice for Animals*. This is already a significant debate, destined for further developments in the realm of interactivity within artificial intelligence platforms featuring ‘virtual environments’—topics which Nussbaum does not address, but to which she may make a useful contribution, albeit indirectly.

The references to Richard Lazarus, Anthony Ortony and Antonio Damasio in *Upheavals of Thought* are linked by a shared approach to cognitive-experimental research. This approach draws on findings regarding emotional responses in animals to their environment, in order to understand the areas in which humans and other animals converge, as well as the areas in which they differ. For Lazarus, emotions are fundamental to *adaptation* because they enable an animal to recognize that something important to its goals is happening in its environment.

¹²Cf. D. LE BRETON, *Anthropologie des émotions: Être affectivement au monde*, Payot, Paris 2021; J. R. AVERILL, *A Constructivist View of Emotion*, in *Theories of Emotion*, ed. by R. Plutchik, H. Kellerman, Academic Press, New York 1980, ch. 12, pp. 305-339; *The Social Construction of Emotions*, ed. by R. Harré, Blackwell, New York 1988.

¹³R. DREON, M. SANTARELLI, *Emozioni naturalmente culturali. Un recupero dell’eredità pragmatista*, «Società Mutamento Politica», 12/24 (2021), pp. 61-72 [translation my own]. Cf. R. DREON, *Emozioni pragmatiste*, in *Nuovi usi di vecchi concetti. Il metodo pragmatista oggi*, a cura di M. Striano, S. Oliverio, M. Santarelli, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2015.

He applies this mechanism to the way humans relate to their environment, likening it to the way animals relate to theirs through an 'adaptive encounter centered on some personal matter', in which personal goals can be realized within environmental conditions.

A taxonomy of emotions is thus a taxonomy of a creature's goals, in relation to environmental events and temporal location. Taken as a group, a creature's emotions summarize the way it conceives of its very identity in the world, its sense of what selfhood is and what is central to selfhood.¹⁴

This is why we can say that the dignity of both humans and animals depends on our ability to understand and respect emotions. For Damasio too, emotions are cognitive and significantly contribute to practical reasoning by functioning as "internal guides" in the relationship between the individual and their circumstances. However, he focuses on demonstrating how emotions are linked to specific areas of the brain and argues that they ultimately relate to the individual's physical state. Nussbaum only agrees with this in part: while it is true that every emotional subject is aware of their own purpose and connection through which the emotion arises, this self-positioning—which is also awareness of one's own body—is only part of the experience of every emotion.

Nevertheless, the body is not the object of emotion; the object is the person or thing with which the subject is concerned.

Neuroscience, when not wedded to a reductionist program, can make richly illuminating contributions to the understanding of emotions, their intentionality, and their role in the economy of animal life.¹⁵

4 OPERA AND POLITICAL SENTIMENT

Literary and musical emotions play a prominent role, so it is unsurprising that lyric opera features heavily in her work: it combines narrative and music, language and harmony.

Although insights into the aesthetics of artistic expression are relevant, they would require more time than we have in this context. However, it is clear that musical emotions are intentional and have cognitive content. It is music itself that generates these emotions due to its unique non-linguistic form. Nussbaum is committed to a theory that preserves the cognitive and symbolic complexity of

¹⁴M. C. NUSSBAUM, *Humans and Other Animals*, in *Upheavals of Thought*, cit., p. 107. Cf. R. LAZARUS, *Emotion and Adaptation*, Oxford University Press, New York 1994; F. GUMA, *Una teoria oggettiva del benessere animale. La giustizia interspecifica di Martha Nussbaum*, «Filosofia morale/Moral Philosophy» 1 (2022), pp. 27-44.

¹⁵M. C. NUSSBAUM, *Humans and Other Animals*, cit., p. 119. Cf. A. R. DAMASIO, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, Penguin, New York 2005.

musical experience, without considering music as “a mere means to a cognition that is extramusical in nature.”¹⁶

Here is the point from which she starts:

On the one hand, music seems to be profoundly connected to our emotional life, indeed perhaps more urgently and deeply connected to that life than any of the other arts. It digs into our depths and expresses hidden movements of love and fear and joy that are inside us. It speaks to us and about us in mysterious ways, going to the “bottom of things,” as Mahler put it, exposing hidden vulnerabilities and, so to speak, laying our souls open to our view. “A burning pain crystallizes,” writes Mahler of his experience as conductor/listener of his own work [...]. On the other hand, it also seems plain that music usually does not contain evident representational or narrative structures of the sort that are the typical objects of concrete emotions in life, or even in literary experience. So it is than less obvious how it *can* be about our life, or how the emotions it arouses can be real emotions with a definite intentional content.¹⁷

Let us examine some of the many references found in her pages to understand their significance. We should begin with Giacomo Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*, as referenced in *Cultivating Humanity*: the emotion underpinning the entire musical narrative is “compassion,” which is evoked in the audience in response to the ruthless and disrespectful treatment that the protagonist endures.

This opera offers a tragic denunciation of the prejudice of “descriptive romanticism.” The character Pinkerton, a US Navy lieutenant, marries Butterfly, who is fifteen years old, according to Japanese custom, and then abandons her with a child. He views Japanese culture as exotic and distant from his American identity, to the extent that he disregards Japanese moral order, believing that a Japanese woman does not deserve the same moral consideration as his Western wife. The work itself disapproves of Pinkerton’s behaviour and, at the same time, evokes compassion for Madama Butterfly.¹⁸

We should also mention *The Marriage of Figaro*, which is featured in *Political Emotions*.

Nussbaum argues that Mozart’s opera is politically significant in similar way to Beaumarchais’ play, which inspired it. In fact, she believes that Mozart’s work is even more profound because it explores the very emotions that are necessary for a public culture of freedom, equality and fraternity. Mozart’s vision of social solidarity is rooted in the kindness and reciprocity of the two female characters, Susanna and the Countess, rather than in Figaro.¹⁹ Moreover, the duet between

¹⁶M. C. NUSSBAUM, *Music and Emotion*, in *Upheavals of Thought*, cit., p. 265.

¹⁷*Ibidem*, p. 254.

¹⁸EADEM, *Cultivating Humanity. A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1997.

¹⁹EADEM, *Equality and Love: Rousseau, Herder, Mozart*, in *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, Belknap Press, Cambridge (MA) 2013, ch. 2.

the female voices, 'Sull'aria ...che soave zeffiretto' (*On the breeze...What a gentle little Zephyr*), is so famous that it was used in the well-known film *The Shawshank Redemption*, starring Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman. It is Red-Freeman (Red is the character's name) who utters this phrase:

I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don't want to know. Some things are best left unsaid. I like to think they were singing about something so beautiful it can't be expressed in words and makes your heart ache because of it.

Then there is *Fidelio*, Beethoven's only opera. He wrote it when he was fascinated by the story of *Léonore ou l'amour conjugal* by Jean-Nicolas Bouilly. This story is based on a true event that took place in France during the Reign of Terror. There is a prison, Florestan locked inside and his wife Leonore, who, in order to find him, disguises herself as a man and becomes Fidelio, who will save him from the violent power of Don Pizarro.

The opera was not successful, partly due to its excessive length, but also because it was performed at a troubled time in Vienna's history. In those days, the city had been invaded by Napoleon's army, creating a climate of fear for its inhabitants. *Fidelio*, nevertheless, is an opera of great political significance: Beethoven was deeply committed to the struggle against tyranny and the affirmation of freedom and justice, and these themes could be directly related to the situation in the Austrian city.

Nussbaum wrote the program notes for a stage production at the *Lyric Opera of Chicago*, and these are the final lines:

Beethoven's ending is perilous and temporary—and, I believe, intended to be heard as such. And yet it tells us that the struggle for justice is not futile, that there are “moments”—openings for decent people to struggle for change, and sometimes for a while to succeed, propelled by hope and love. There may be no solid reasons for hope, but hope is all we have to inspire us to fight for justice. And we must continue to fight because we can. We might call *Fidelio* Beethoven's—and our own—*Humanitätsoper*, the opera of humanity, striving for the light.²⁰

Finally, we come to Gustav Mahler and his *Kindertotenlieder* and *Second Symphony*.

The *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs for Dead Children*) are a cycle of five lieder for voice and orchestra, composed by Mahler between 1901 and 1904 and setting poems by Friedrich Rückert to music. How is it possible for music to express the deepest sorrow of a parent who has lost a child? Mahler attempts to do so, and succeeds.

²⁰EADEM, *Beethoven's Fidelio: Reaching Toward the Light*, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Chicago 2024; <https://www.lyricopera.org/lyric-lately/Reaching-Toward-the-Light/>.

The music invites the listener to assume, throughout, the posture of the grieving parent. The world is seen entirely from that viewpoint; no posture of detachment is offered within the music of an observer, or for an observer's sympathy [...]. Thus the listener's emotions will be the emotions of one who sees the world from such a perspective and meditates on her own possibilities in such a light.²¹

In the Fifth movement of the *Second Symphony*, the emotions of pain, separation and loss are balanced by those of resurrection, love for all that remains until the end—light, altruism and the value of life.

This work, while claiming to solve the problem of our own all-too-human self-repudiation, is itself filled with disgust and repudiation: at everyday life, as is short-comings and half-heartedness, at the very existence of fixed social forms. Acceptance of all humanity is achieved musically, but a considerable distance from real human beings, who continue to be condemned from the viewpoint of authentic creativity.

We wonder what this visionary perspective has to say about real people with their real and everyday shortcomings; we would need to know this, for example, in order to know what approach to the particular loves of real people is promised in the perspective of the work.

Nonetheless, despite these questions, we are left with a remarkable claim, the claim that love, while remaining human and embodied, can overcome hatred, exclusion, and resentment.²²

Of course, we could argue that some emotions are more valuable to her than others. But that is not the case, it must be said. This is not the criterion by which Nussbaum chooses which emotions to address. Nevertheless, certain emotions are more clearly and distinctly politically significant than others.

In other words, some emotions contribute more than others to the building, maintenance or destruction of the social networks in which we are embedded, as well as our democratic systems. The issue at hand is the significance of emotions in public discourse and their protection against those who have historically excluded them from rational decision-making and effective governance.

This defense is based on the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom. In our age, even more so than in Aristotle's, "the power of 'scientific' pictures of practical rationality affects almost every area of human social life, through the influence of the social sciences and the more science-based parts of ethical theory on the formation of public policy."²³ Therefore, we believe that the comparison with

²¹EADEM, *Music and Emotion*, cit., p. 283.

²²EADEM, *The Romantic Ascent: Mahler*, in *Upheavals of Thought*, cit., p. 643.

²³EADEM, *The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality*, in *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford University Press, London 1992, p. 55. Cf. L. HUNT, *Martha Nussbaum on the emotions*, «Ethics», 116/3 (2006), pp. 552-577; cf. S. SLOMAN, *The Cost of Conviction: How Our Deepest Values Lead Us Astray*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2025.

Aristotle arises from a shared passion for finding an alternative to viewing ethics as *episteme*.

Shame and disgust play a significant role in law, influencing legal formulations and the administration of justice. Transitional anger is necessary to achieve justice; compassion, fuelled by moral imagination, becomes social solidarity (consider the mutual love that prevails in *Fidelio* and *The Marriage of Figaro*). These emotions function as instruments of justice and dignity, forming political bonds that strengthen the community.

As Martha Nussbaum points out, any political or normative project that aspires to be enduring cannot be based solely on abstract legal principles or agreements founded on mere individual interest. Rather, it requires a form of legitimacy rooted in social stability. This stability is grounded in a shared sense of belonging to the same political community among citizens. From this perspective, emotions play an essential role in making it possible to commit to collective projects that require sacrifice, responsibility, and mutual commitment. In fact, shared duties cannot be sustained solely by utilitarian calculations, but must be understood and embraced as part of a shared set of values.

Nussbaum draws on a tradition of thought rooted in the work of authors such as Rousseau, Comte, and Mazzini. These authors recognized that cultivating moral sentiments, particularly sympathy, fraternity, and solidarity, was essential for the cohesion of the political community. A society based solely on temporary compromises and short-term gains risks being fragile and unable to deal with the crises that inevitably arise in collective life.²⁴

These reflections have significant points of contact with the analysis put forward by Tzvetan Todorov in *The Fear of the Barbarians*. Todorov, too, attributes decisive importance to emotions in the public sphere, but focuses his attention on the political consequences of fear. According to the author, contemporary societies are often permeated by feelings of insecurity that fuel the symbolic construction of the 'barbarian', that is, the other perceived as alien, threatening or incompatible with the community to which one belongs. Fear, in this context, is not merely an individual reaction, but a collective emotion capable of shaping political choices, institutions and social practices. When it becomes the primary criterion for interpreting reality, it breeds isolation, exclusion and hostility towards diversity.²⁵

Todorov's perspective complements and expands upon Nussbaum's by showing how emotions can serve a dual function in political life. On the one hand, they form the emotional foundation of solidarity and civic engagement; on the other,

²⁴See M. C. NUSSBAUM, *Equality and Love: Rousseau, Herder, Mozart, cit.; Religions of Humanity: Auguste Comte, J. S. Mill, in Political Emotions, cit., ch.3; G. MAZZINI, The Duties of a Man, Kessinger Publishing, Montana 2010.*

²⁵T. TODOROV, *The Fear of the Barbarians*, Polity Press, New York 2010.

they can be mobilized to generate division and conflict. Fear of the other, if not tempered by the recognition of our shared humanity, risks undermining the very stability it claims to defend. Todorov's famous thesis that "the fear of barbarians risks turning us into barbarians" highlights the paradox whereby a community, in attempting to protect itself from a perceived threat, may end up renouncing the democratic and humanistic principles that form the foundation of its own identity.

From this angle, emotional education assumes crucial political significance. While fear fuels processes of exclusion, feelings such as sympathy, fraternity, and civic love can foster mutual recognition and the development of inclusive citizenship. It is therefore not surprising that Nussbaum's latest work *The Republic of Love. Opera and Political Freedom* ²⁶ is a logical progression from the ideas presented in *The Monarchy of Fear*. While the latter analyzed the destructive dynamics generated by fear in democratic life, the new volume appears to focus on exploring the emotional conditions necessary for a more just and supportive political coexistence.

In this sense, Nussbaum and Todorov's perspectives converge in suggesting that the future of democracies depends not only on institutions and norms, but also on the capacity to cultivate public emotions oriented towards recognition, trust, and mutual care.

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²⁶M. C. NUSSBAUM, *The Republic of Love. Opera and Political Freedom*, Oxford University Press, New York 2026.