

In Defence of Sentimentality: Why Emotions Matter in Democratic Politics

Abstract

How to create a society wherein people not just deliberate on principles of justice, but feel them, be passionate about them, actually motivated by them. This paper argues that in order to achieve the ideal of justice in a true sense, societies must not only frame their policies according to the reasonable principles of justice, but that such societies must also cultivate political and civic emotions, like that of love and sympathy, in their members. This paper thus seeks to explore ways in which emotions can support the basic principles of morality and justice in contemporary liberal societies.

Keywords: Civic Sentiments, Liberalism, Democracy, Justice, Politics, Civic Education

Introduction

Liberal political philosophy has always construed reason to be as central driving force behind our moral motivations. Since liberals are profoundly committed to the twin goal of freeing morality from religious prescriptions and subjectivities of human nature, they ground their moral principles solely in reason. This is evident, for instance, in Locke's silence about the psychology of a decent society, Kant's abstract principles of rationality, Rawls's obsession of procedural fairness, Habermas's idea of perfect speech situation as condition for democratic deliberation and so on. In most of these thinkers, celebration of reason is often accompanied by the exclusion of emotions as a category of analysis in their formulations on justice. The presumption on which liberals tend to ignore the role of emotions rests on their understanding of emotion and reason as inimical to each other. For Kant, since part of instinctual and impulsive human nature, feelings cannot yield a universalizable maxim for conducting morality. This is a commonly and widely held belief in liberal philosophy that though emotions are the undeniable and unavoidable part of human nature, yet should be constrained and excluded from any final judgment on public matters.

Denigration of emotions in liberal political thought can be attributed to liberal's mistaken belief that emotions are antithetical to reason or rationality. This paper argues against the mistaken notion that emotions are impervious to either will or reason. Emotions are not mere feelings prompted by certain physiological changes. On the contrary, they should be viewed as intentional states having propositional content with phenomenological groundings.¹ For instance, compassion is always directed towards the object to whom it is expressed, it involves evaluation and judgment about that object being loveable or not. Hence this research denies any necessary dichotomy between reason and emotion.

Aim of the Study

The objective of this paper is to explore the question of how can the category of emotions figure in the political analysis. In doing so, this paper seeks to search ways in which democratic societies can have emotions playing positive role in terms of strengthening the democratic project.

Hypotheses

This paper seeks to advance following hypothesis: (a) Emotions are the primary driving force behind our moral motivations. (b) Solution to justice is located in our capacity to feel.

Methodology

This paper seeks to explore the ways in which political emotions can figure as an important category of analysis in political philosophy. As we have already indicated in the beginning, the category of political emotions has been rarely treated as an independent unit of analysis in political theory. This research therefore is an attempt to explore in political philosophy the



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moments wherein emotions have been dealt systematically and methodologically.

Review of Literature

Though the subject of emotions has rarely received systematic treatment in political theory, yet one can find substantial literature in this field across disciplines. Lately Political thinkers have too begun to understand the relevance and scope of political emotions. In last two decades, various new conceptualizations have come up on emotions. For instance, Nussbaum's work appears to be most compelling in this regard where she has not only reacquainted us with emotions by presenting a philosophical and systematic conceptualization, but also suggested ways in which political emotions can be cultivated towards creating a just society.

Marcus (2003) has argued that political theory and philosophy has been trying to treat emotions as a problem and reason as the real building block for the political conceptualization up to very recent times. Recently however, this dichotomy has been proved to be problematic and emotions are considered an avoidable part of human society. Now the challenge that remains is the question as to how to deal with emotions.

The first framework which was suggested was to treat reason and emotions as mutually incompatible. From Plato onwards political philosophers have been assuming that passion is blinding in the sense that it hinders the rational decision and judgment. Starting from Plato, down to stoics, Descartes and Kant, emotions were considered to be essentially avoidable and reason and passion were considered to be mutually contradictory with reason being the instrument to understand this world while passion being something which diverts you from the real assessment of the given situation. The mind for reason and heart for emotions is a well known dichotomy.

The second formulation was to argue that the reason and emotions are inseparable and it will not be possible to divorce them. Passions are as much a part of human essence as the reason. Therefore it was suggested that the reason be treated as sovereign to passion so as to utilize the positive force of passions constructively and positively (Marcus 2002). Freud was one of the prominent advocates of this approach. One of the key political thinkers who advocated this approach was Thomas Hobbs. Reason creates civilizations and sustains them. Therefore treating reason as sovereign and the master to passions was supposed to be the solution for the proper functioning of the politics and society.

The third formulation in the field of political philosophy argued that the relationship between emotions and reason is not contradictory and destructive but positive, harmonious and constructive. This line of thinking has its roots in the works of Aristotle and can be also traced in the works of Martha Nussbaum.

The fourth formulation can be traced in the scotch enlightenment ideas. The scotch enlightenment argued that reason is not the sovereign master but on the contrary is commanded by the

emotions. The emotions have the primary role to play and the reason is ordered and commanded and thus called upon to do the critical assessment and calculations. Reason in this respect serves the emotional need and requirement in the most optimal way (Marcus 2003). This view is further substantiated by certain recent philosophical developments and neuro science. Barnard Williams has argued that Kant's categorical imperative is not a big success because it has no motivational emotional driving force.

"Nothing great was ever achieved," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "without enthusiasm." That statement is empirically verifiable, and the evidence for it is overwhelming. Unhappily, it is equally true—the evidence is equally overwhelming—that nothing terrible was ever achieved without enthusiasm" (Walzer 2004: 113).

Passions divide societies. They press inexorably towards violent resolutions. In this understanding, largely subscribed by liberals, identity politics and religious fundamentalism could be some instances wherein passions get manifested in their perverted forms. Conceived in this manner, passions would appear as uncontrollable and unreasonable expression hence should be avoided. Michael walzer (2004) seeks to challenge this theses in this book and makes a case for positive role of passions in a democratic society. He argues that privileging of reasonableness over passions is worked out on the assumption which creates a dichotomy between reason and passion—both being antagonist to each other. However, walzer says that our experience of various social movements in history would tell us that passionate engagement with the cause can help people in terms of intense motivations. For example, he asks us to Think about some of the people who have challenged established social orders: nineteenth-century workers demonstrating for the right to organize; feminist agitators chaining themselves to lampposts and assaulting the police in England in the first decades of the twentieth century; civil rights marchers, black and white, in the American South in the 1960s; their counterparts in Northern Ireland in the 1970s; "velvet" revolutionaries in the streets of Prague in 1989. One can conclude here that the passion-reason dichotomy can make no sense of these cases. What we see in all of them is "conviction energized by passion and passion restrained by conviction" (Walzer 2004: 112). Hence Walzer seems to have explored a possibility in political theory debates wherein reason and passion can be seen existing in a mutually reinforcing relation—passions can be rationalized, and reason can be impassioned.

However, Walzer's defense of passions in politics appears to be too simplistic and inadequate. His argument for passionate intensity rests on few abstract assumptions like that of reason and passion mutually supporting each other. One may simply ask here: why to believe that passions which are dangerous can be overcome by people? In my opinion, walzer requires more philosophical account—grounded on psychological and anthropological

studies—in order to give us more plausible defense of passions.

Nussbaum (2001) develops a new framework in which reason and emotions are no longer seen incompatible forces, a rather harmonious link between them is being suggested. Emotions, in her view, are not just impulses, but contain appraisals that have an evaluative and cognitive content. She argues that emotions should not be seen as thoughtless natural energies; nor are they directionless, visionless movements, for they're always directed to some object. For instance, emotions like love and grief always have an object to which they're directed (Nussbaum 2001: 21). Nussbaum also reminds us that the object is an intentional object: that is, it figures in the emotion as it is seen or interpreted by the person whose emotion it is. Hence, it is clear that emotions involve judgments about important things.

Nussbaum argues that such an account has consequences for political thought as well: for understanding the relationship between emotions and various conceptions of the human good will inform our deliberations as we ask how politics might support human flourishing. If we think of emotions as essential elements of human intelligence, rather than just as supports or props for intelligence, this gives us especially strong reasons to promote the conditions of emotional well-being in a political culture: for this view entails that without emotional development, a part of our reasoning capacity as political creatures will be missing.

However, this book is fundamentally a philosophical inquiry into nature of emotions and does not offer a framework in which role of emotions in politics could be understood. The question can be raised as to how exactly emotions should function in our practical political life.

Nussbaum (2013) presents a fascinating account on political emotions. she argues that The tendencies of bad behavior, or what she calls the "radical evil," such as disgust and envy, desire to inflict shame upon others, narrowness of sympathy, are some of the instances of imperfectness—present in all the societies and very likely in every human life—that come in the way of successful accomplishment of ideals like justice. Though Liberals have sought to reconcile in variety of ways with the given inevitability of "radical evil", but failed in doing so. One such attempt was made in "political liberalism" of 20th century. "Political liberalism" refers to John Rawls's later philosophy—his post-A Theory of Justice work on domestic justice was published as Political Liberalism. Rawls considers questions of political stability and moral psychology and emotions in the final section of A Theory of Justice but never revisited them in the light of his later ideas of political liberalism. Nussbaum (2013) thus proposes a theory of political love (and its affiliated emotions) that addresses these questions in a manner consistent with the spirit of political liberalism.

Nussbaum (2013) argues that though Great democratic leaders, in many times and places, have understood the importance of cultivating appropriate

emotions, but Liberal political philosophy has, on the whole, said little about the topic. Perhaps because liberal political philosophers sensed that prescribing any particular type of emotional cultivation might easily involve limits on free speech and other steps incompatible with liberal ideas of freedom and autonomy. Such was explicitly the view of Immanuel Kant.

Thus, here lies the challenge this book takes up: how can a decent society do more for stability and motivation than Locke and Kant did, without becoming illiberal and dictatorial while cultivating political emotions?

To the end of cultivation of appropriate political emotions like that of compassion and sympathy, Nussbaum proposes various public strategies aimed at fostering a sense of public morality. Focus here is on the ways in which a desirable public culture can be developed having emotions as essential motivating force. First of all, Nussbaum highlights the importance of teaching patriotism in cultivating extended sympathy. Then she turns to few other strategies. In my view, the most appealing of all is the idea of tragic festivals. As she puts it: "The central emotion aroused by tragic spectatorship is compassion, an emotion that responds to the misfortunes of others. Tragic spectatorship with its insistent focus on bodily vulnerability is a powerful device toward overcoming segmentation in social life (p. 288).

However, she has said very little on the question that whether emotional life of people should be regarded as worthy object of public policy. This research therefore fills this gap and asks whether it is appropriate to use emotions as a device to bolster public morality.

Bringing Emotions in Political life

Strengthening of Democratic commitment

In what has been said, it is clear that This paper seeks to argue that it might be necessary to frame the principles of justice in accordance to reason, but this cannot form sufficient grounds to create a society wherein people are morally motivated in a real sense—it is one thing to have principles of justice in place, and quite another to actually believe in them. Hence reason alone seems inadequate in terms of fostering a political culture in which people are passionate towards the ideals of justice. Nothing great was ever achieved," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "without enthusiasm." That statement is empirically verifiable, and the evidence for it is overwhelming. Here lies the challenge this research takes up: how can political emotions help in creating a society wherein people not just deliberate on principles of justice, but feel them, be passionate about them, actually motivated by them. The idea is that To achieve this ideal, societies must not only frame their policies according to the reasonable principles of justice, but that such societies must also cultivate political and public emotions, like that of love and sympathy, in their members. Hence aim of this paper is to explore ways in which emotions can support the basic principles of morality and justice.

Before we begin to address these issues, let us first begin with more fundamental question which we've already started posing in different forms: why do we need emotions at all? Why not directly go for the appropriate principles and institutions? Why appeal to the compassion of citizens at all, rather than urging them to follow the correct rules?

Solutions to some of these questions can be found in Nussbaum's account of Political Emotions. Her view is that merely having in place the right institutions and procedures would not do much for stability of liberal democratic societies. Possibility of successful implementation of the political principles in such a society remains pretty bleak, and sources of moral motivation are quite fragile. People are not motivated in a real sense—passive compliance with rules may not prove sufficient to achieve liberal ideals such as equality and justice. Hence what we need is a strong and consolidated source of our motivation so that commitments for justice could be strengthened. Rawls himself recognized this limitation of his work Political Liberalism. He acknowledged the need for engendering some kind of collectively shared sentiment (Nussbaum: 2013). The idea is this: liberal democratic societies need more for ensuring stability than just relying upon rules and institutions. Such societies need positive emotions; societies need to cultivate in their citizens the civic sentiments such as compassion and sympathy.

Nussbaum (2013) makes a very comprehensive case for the cultivation of civic sentiments. She assigns two related tasks for the cultivation of political emotion. One is "to engender and sustain strong commitment to worthy projects that require effort and sacrifice--such as social redistribution, the full inclusion of previously excluded or marginalized groups, the protection of the environment, foreign aid, and the national defense" (Nussbaum: 2013, P. 20). In other words, replacing tendency of indifference or passive compliance with rules with compassionate engagement with the political principles. Second task is to keep at control the negative forces that lurk in every society such as tendency to denigrate and subordinate others, disgust, envy, shame etc.

What kind of emotions liberal societies may want to cultivate? Nussbaum emphasizes on love and compassion. what is compassion? Compassion, Aristotle argues, is a painful emotion directed at another person's misfortune or suffering (Nussbaum: 2001, P.306). There are three further elements in this definition. The first cognitive requirement of compassion is a belief or appraisal that the suffering is serious rather than trivial." Indeed grief is triggered only when sense of loss is intense one—we do not grief for the loss of trivial things. The second requirement is the thought of non-fault. That is, the sufferer is not responsible for the misfortune. The third requirement of compassion is the Judgment about the similar possibility of suffering. Aristotle argues that compassion cannot be felt unless the person has some experience or understanding of suffering. People thinking themselves above suffering would not be in a position to understand what compassion feels

like. So the awareness of one's weaknesses and vulnerabilities is a precondition to compassion. However, the thought of the similar possibility is not a necessary requirement for compassion, Nussbaum argues, because absence of it might not necessarily restrict our compassion. For instance compassion for animals does not include any realization of similar predicament (Nussbaum: 201, P. 313).

Let us return to the two tasks that she assigns for the cultivation of political emotion. First task was related to the cultivation of strong commitments for political principles. It is essential, in her view, that institutions and procedures are supplemented with more stabilizing motivations. Political emotions, like that of compassion, and if cultivated appropriately, can become such a stable source of motivation. Passive compliance to rules may lack in terms of engendering strong commitments to the ideals of a democratic society but emotional attachment to those goals has immense potential to move people in a real sense—towards the successful accomplishment of the same. So motivation is needed at emotional level for actualizing what we regard as democratic principles. Let us take up an example to explain it more concretely. Cast discrimination is an evil in Indian society that persist even after sixty years of implementation of a democratic set up. Despite of having constitutional provisions and laws against the practice, yet cast based atrocities is a reality. Why is it so? Building a society free from cast practices has been one such ideal which figures most prominently in our democratic discourses. Yet we have achieved very little at ground in this regard. One of the ways Nussbaum would explain this problem could be that in the absence of a strong motivation towards eliminating cast discrimination, and because of the weak commitment to the ideal of equality, we have failed to create a society in which people feel compassion for each other. Our circle of concern "remains restricted. In such context, those remaining outside the circle are either treated with indifference, or inflicted injustice upon them. So there is a need to think of the ways in which citizens of a democratic society engage with one another compassionately and imaginatively So that the circle of concern could be expanded and more and more people can be brought into it. Such circle of compassion should not be narrow and exclusionary: must include people regardless of their class, cast, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. hence making all the humans loveable.

Educating emotions

For emotions to be a source of stability in our moral motivations, they require appropriate orientation and direction. Emotions must be educated and trained in such a way that they can yield desirable results. This leads us to the second task Nussbaum assigns for the cultivation of political emotions—keeping at control the negative forces that lurk in every society. She rightly argues that the "tendency of the fragile self to denigrate and subordinate others" presents a major challenge in the way of applying compassion in a "right" manner. Tendencies like Disgust and envy, the desire to inflict shame upon others--all of these are present in all societies, and, very likely, in every

individual human life. Unchecked, these can inflict great damage to society. Nussbaum, in *Political Emotions*, points out three such negative forces—“compassion’s enemy: fear, envy, shame.” fear, she argues, is a narrowing emotion—restricts our circle of concern. In fear, tendency is to be concerned only to oneself; hence sympathy is prevented from extending outwards. Another related problem is that Fear and exclusion fed on together. In every society, rhetoric and politics is worked upon what is dangerous. But often perceptions of dangerous might be constructed in order to exclude certain group of people. Similar tendencies are exhibited in other negative forces like disgust, envy, shame etc. clearly there are several prejudices, biases, and what we can call negative emotions that limits the scope of compassion and excludes certain group of people from the circle of its concern. How, then, to keep such forces at control is an important question to be investigated.

We have been struggling to answer: why do we need emotions for stability of contemporary liberal democratic societies? Can emotion be treated as reliable and stable source of moral motivation? So far we can conclude that cognitively speaking, emotions are potentially stable and reliable states. Positive emotions like compassion, if directed in an appropriate manner, can contribute immensely for the stability of contemporary liberal democratic societies. However, for this task to be accomplished there is a need to educate and train emotions accordingly. Since the evaluative and cognitive interpretation has shown us that emotions are triggered by certain beliefs and evaluations, it is imperative therefore to work at the level of reforming those very beliefs and evaluations. And educate emotions so as to make them compatible to the goals a liberal democratic society aspires to achieve.

Findings and Suggestions

First of all, This paper helps to explore the ways in which political emotions can figure as an important category of analysis in political philosophy. secondly, One of the dilemmas of justice in liberal societies has been the indifference to each other citizens obsessed with reason may induce in the absence of collectively shared emotional bond. This paper attempted to develop a framework of political emotions in which such indifference caused by “liberal reasonableness” may thought to be overcome.

Yet there remains copious scope for research in the field of political emotions. There are several aspects of political emotions and their relation to morality and justice that have not been explored so far. For instance, discussion on political emotions has largely focused on western context and debates have occurred within the boundaries of liberalism. future research has a scope to move beyond western context and liberal tradition via analyzing emotions in Indian context and interpret thinkers like Gandhi in the framework of political emotions.

However, there is another reason why political emotions shall receive a comprehensive treatment in political theory: all the great political leaders across countries have sought to appeal to emotions in variety of ways in order to unite the

masses. Actually these leaders understood quite well the motivating potentials and political relevance of human emotions. For instance, Gandhi always spoke the language of love and sympathy and appealed people emotionally. Evidently, he was able to unite and motivate a large population far more effectively than any other leader because he was always appealing to people’s emotions.

Political philosophy therefore must recognize that emotions do matter in our moral life!

Conclusion

In what has been said, it is clear that Cultivation of a virtuous self endowed with certain emotive capacities remains at the centre of our proposal of bringing emotions to political life. Cultivation of a self endowed with emotive capacities entail new forms of civic engagement. The civic sentiments like that of compassion if cultivated appropriately in citizens can have immense implication how citizens relate to one another, And also influence the way citizens interact with political principles of their society. Relating to one another here implies the how people respond to the forces and events that are likely to pose threat to democratic project of a society--inequality, marginalization, subordination are such forces impeding justice. Whether citizens are indifferent to such problems and allow them to persist, Or motivated enough to eliminate them depends to a great extent on their emotional motivation. Citizens endowed with certain emotive capacities therefore derive their ethical motivations from their capacity to feel—not from their ability to reason alone. Hence political theory needs to take emotions seriously while thinking about matters of stability And justice of a liberal democratic society.

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Footnotes

1. We're indebted to cognitive theories of emotions developed by many philosophers. we are specially grateful to Martha Nussbaum (2001) and Robert Solomon 1976) for enhancing our understanding about the nature of emotions. cognitive view conceives emotions as judgments. Emotions are appraisals which contain evaluative and cognitive content (Nussbaum: 2001, P. 21). It is a judgment about the object to which the emotion is directed to. So emotion is always felt about an object: it could be a thing or a person. For instance, when we feel love, anger, hate, or any other emotion, it is always about somebody or something that we feel those emotions about. But these feeling are not blind pushes, or mere physiological movements. These are responses having evaluative and cognitive content. There is some thought process and evaluation that goes into the making of the emotion—evaluation of the object to which the emotion is directed to plays an important role in determining the nature of that particular emotion. thus emotion always involves thought of an object combined with thought of the object's salience or importance; in that sense, they always involve appraisal or evaluation.