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# **Emotions, Political Polarization, and Martha Nussbaum's Theory of Emotion**

The Role of Suspending Judgment

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Professor Dennis Beach

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Political polarization is frequently discussed in the United States, and poses a great risk to the stability and health of the country, as well as any democratic system. When highly-public news events occur, hasty judgments that “my opinion is right and yours is wrong” is a common cause and effect of polarization. These attitudes further widen the gap between groups, and diminish the possibility of healthy discourse.

Using Martha Nussbaum’s theory of emotion as detailed in her landmark text, *Upheavals of Thought*, I argue that suspending judgment when evaluating news events that are clouded in uncertainty, would improve public discourse, help renew trust in American media and reduce political polarization. That being said, this paper is relevant for American media and citizens alike. First, a brief account of Nussbaum’s theory of emotion will be given. Next, the current state of political polarization and media distrust, with its connection to rushing to judgment, will be highlighted. Last, a proposed solution will be offered. We begin with an outline of Nussbaum’s theory.

Nussbaum describes her account of emotion as a Neo-Stoic theory. The Stoic account is fundamentally that emotions are cognitive judgments. Or, another way to think about it, is as a decision in front of appearances. So, it happens in two stages: “First, it occurs to me or strikes me that such and such is the case” (37). Second, once the appearances have been apprehended, I can:

1. Assent to the appearances, judging that they are as they appear to be.
2. Dissent, making the judgment that what is, is not what it appears to be.
3. Suspend judgment and wait for more information before making an assenting or dissenting judgment.

According to the Stoics, because emotions are cognitive judgments, they are in our control, and thereby, we are responsible to shape and altogether avoid them.

Nussbaum expands on the Stoic account, making room for emotions in children and animals through non-linguistic judgments. While there is plenty of room for debate as it relates to these claims, they are outside the scope of this paper.

Still, for Nussbaum, emotions are fundamentally cognitive judgments, concerned with objects outside of our control that play a role in our eudaimonia, or well-being. She writes, “most of the time emotions link us to items that we regard as important for our well-being, but do not fully control. The emotion records that sense of vulnerability and imperfect control” (43). Thus, emotions are determined in large part by our beliefs, for beliefs are what link us to objects. For example, if I believe that a certain person is important for my well-being, and that person experiences a misfortune, I will likely have the emotion of grief. Nussbaum explains: “the fact of having an emotion depends on what the person’s beliefs are, not on whether they are true or false” (46). If the object is not apart of my belief system, by definition, I will not be emotional about it.

However, “the judgment can be false if I am wrong about the evaluative aspects of the judgment” (47). In this case, Nussbaum says we should be careful that the objects in our life are valued correctly, and that we are not emotional due to the loss of an insignificant object. She writes that “the anger we feel is proportional to the size of the harm that we think has occurred” (55). Thus, the loss of a toothbrush should affect us differently than the loss of a career prospect.

Further, these objects are intentional. Following the loss of a loved one, I might experience both grief and fear, as I grieve over the loss of the deceased person, but also fear that another loved one might die. The intentionality of the object is what distinguishes one emotion (judgment) from another.

Far from being static, the nature of emotions is dynamic. Nussbaum stresses that reason, as playing a role in the cognitive judgment, is “dynamic, not static. Reason here moves, embraces, refuses; it can move rapidly or slowly, it can move directly or with hesitation” (45). Thus, after the initial decision in front of the appearances, there is ensuing space where “one accepts or assents to that proposition continuously” (46). This dynamic, ongoing process is an important aspect of emotion, and will be especially relevant when examining news events.

Now that a theory of emotion is established, we turn to the state of political polarization and media distrust. Connected with polarization is a sense that reactions to news/political events are exceedingly emotional, not guided by reason or justified beliefs. In certain cases, the judgments seem to “reach beyond the evidence” (Kennedy). I now want to offer a few examples of news events that elicited strong emotional reactions and where I think hasty judgments were made.

### *Covington Catholic*

In February 2019, high school students from Covington Catholic (CC) were videotaped in an apparent confrontation with Nathan Phillips, a Native American man, at the March for Life event in Washington, D.C. One student, sixteen-year old Nicholas Sandmann, was captured grinning at Phillips (see appendix for video links). The initial public framing of the event was captured in the original *New York Times* headline: “Boys in ‘Make America Great Again’ Hats Mob Native Elder at Indigenous Peoples March.” Within a few hours, there were numerous emotional reactions blaming the students, a few of which are highlighted below:

- Author and scholar, Reza Aslan, [tweeted](#): “Have you ever seen a more punchable face than this kid’s [Sandmann’s]?”

- Actress Debra Messing [tweeted](#): “I’d be ashamed and appalled if he [Sandmann] was my son.”
- Howard Dean, former six-term governor of Vermont, [tweeted](#): “#CovingtonCatholic High School seems like a hate factory to me.”
- The Covington Diocese quickly “condemned” the actions of the students, and indicated it was exploring disciplinary actions, “including expulsion.”

After the initial fallout, more video footage emerged and the event was positioned in a much more ambiguous way. The extended footage showed some CC students doing inappropriate things, such as the tomahawk chant at Philips when he entered the circle. But the notion that they mobbed Philips, or that Sandmann mocked him, was refuted, and it was made clear that a third party of Black Hebrew Israelites had initially provoked and were verbally hostile to the high school students (Flanagan). Further, the Diocese of Covington, after a third-party investigation was completed, exonerated the students of wrongdoing. The bishop said the students “were placed in a situation that was at once bizarre and even threatening,” and their actions could be “expected and one might even say laudatory” (Sanchez and Hassan). After more information emerged, the *New York Times* ran a second story, with the title, “Fuller Picture Emerges of Viral Video of Native American Man and Catholic Students.”

### *Police Brutality*

In many recent instances of police violence, the events evoked strong emotional reactions. Take for example, what ensued after the death of Eric Garner in New York. Garner was approached by police for selling cigarettes without the proper legal requirements. After initially resisting arrest, police officers tackled Garner and put him in a chokehold. Garner later died in the hospital from his injuries. After his death, David A. Paterson, former governor of New York, said, “We will not stop until somebody goes to jail” (Goodman). Despite the grand jury’s decision to not indict the implicated police

officer, there is plenty of material to reasonably argue the police officer's guilt or at the very least, his incompetence, and to be angry at the loss of Garner's life. That being said, to say "we will not stop until somebody goes to jail" before the investigation is concluded, seems to be a rush to judgment that bypasses the basic "innocent until proven guilty" legal tenet in the U.S.

Another instance occurred in Minnesota, where a police officer shot and killed Philando Castile after conducting a traffic stop. Speaking after the incident, Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton said, "Would this have happened if those passengers, the driver and the passengers, were white? I don't think it would have. So I'm forced to confront, and I think all of us in Minnesota are forced to confront, that this kind of racism exists" (Epstein). Following the case, the police officer was acquitted of all charges. Again, there is plenty of room to debate whether this was a just verdict. However, to say it was a racially motivated killing before the investigation was completed, seems like a judgment that extends beyond the evidence.

First, we should ask if these events are deserving of emotion, in the sense that the objects in question are significant and have a place in my eudaimonia. I think in large part the answer is yes. Of course, individual events vary and must be discerned, and whatever the case, our emotional reactions should be in proportion to the value the object has for our well-being, but the above events deal with occasions of life and death, justice and injustice, and raise questions about our freedom and the integrity of the rule of law in the U.S. These issues certainly affect my eudaimonia. I do not want to live in a world where people are innocently killed, or conversely, assumed guilty until proven innocent.

So what? What are the consequences of hasty emotional reactions? I argue that jumping to conclusions and hasty emotional responses have contributed to the current political polarization and lack of trust in American media. According to a Pew Research report, in 1994, 64% of Republicans were to the right or more conservative than the median Democrat, compared to 92% of Republicans in 2014. For Democrats across the same time span, the numbers were 70% and 94%, respectively (“Political Polarization”). These numbers show that the middle is moving out to the two poles – the definition of polarization

Based on results from the 2018 General Social Survey (GSS), conducted by the University of Chicago, in 1973, the percentage of Americans who reported a “great deal” or “only some” trust in the media/press was 84%. In 2018, it had fallen to 54%. Further, the divide is greater by political party. In 2018, 73% of Democrats reported a “great deal” or “only some” trust in the media/press, compared to just 30% of Republicans (“For Americans”). Last, according to a 2017 Gallup/Knight survey, more Americans have an overall unfavorable (44%) opinion of the news media than a favorable (33%) or neutral (23%) opinion. Asked whether there is a “great deal” of political bias in news coverage, 25% of respondents said yes in 1984, compared to 45% in 2017. Asked if news media do a good job of separating fact versus opinion, 42% said they don’t do a good job in 1984, compared to 66% in 2017 (“American Views”). These just briefly highlight the waning trust in the American media.

A key aspect and driver of the current emotional landscape is the changing nature of news consumption, with less being consumed through print media and more through television and social media. In 2018, 68% of U.S. adults consumed some news

via social media. Further, 67% of Facebook, and 71% of Twitter users consume some news from these platforms (Matsa and Shearer). Videos and still-images more effectively convey and elicit emotion compared to print news, as they overcome some of the “limitations of time and distance” (Cho et. al 312). Further, with social media, anyone with a smartphone can record and post a video to a platform in a matter of seconds, which has increased the likelihood that stories are taken out of context. Last, media framing can significantly shape public perception of an event (Fridkin et al.), and alter the “emotional balance” of the viewer (Gross and Brewer), making it all the more important for the media to make framing judgments carefully, and for viewers to consume the news in a responsible and cautionary manner.

The problem now being clearly defined, we begin to see how Nussbaum’s theory of emotion can help. Because emotions are fundamentally cognitive judgments, and rest on our beliefs about objects and events, many times we can withhold or suspend our judgment in the wake of events, thereby suspending emotion.

Medical diagnoses are one area where suspending judgment is relevant. Ashley Kennedy, assistant professor of philosophy at the Wilkes Honor College of Florida Atlantic University, argues that physicians should suspend judgment when diagnosing medical conditions that are draped in uncertainty for three reasons:

1. Encourages ongoing investigation, which is a methodological virtue.
2. Promotes epistemic humility, which is an epistemic virtue.
3. Shows respect for the patient, which is an ethical virtue (495).

Extending Kennedy’s formulation, I believe the same virtues apply when suspending judgment about news events that are covered in uncertainty. For the media and journalists, avoiding hasty judgments would improve the accuracy of information and aid

public discourse. For civilians, suspending judgment would lead to more mindful news consumption and participation in political and current events.

First, it leads to further inquiry to find the truth, a key methodological virtue for anyone, but especially journalists. Especially in the internet age, information spreads quickly, often without complete context – the CC incidence is a perfect example. There are many more instances we can imagine where information arrives with little context, such as police body camera video footage that arrives isolated from witness statements, third-party investigations and so on. Important to note, however, is that suspending judgment does not have to be a passive, indifferent attitude. Rather, it is an active inquiring frame of mind, where the inquirer is curious and open to the event in question, and is “sensitive to information that bears [on it]” in order to make more refined judgments (Friedman). As Friedman explains, just because I suspend judgment about an event at time  $t$ , does not mean I must remain “in that state for a lifetime” (319). Instead, if possible, I am working to finally “close” the event in question.

Second, it fosters epistemic humility, an epistemic virtue. Humility helps in learning from others and building a common social fabric. It helps us move away from an attitude that “my knowledge is greater than yours,” which simply further extends the distance between political poles. Epistemic humility also helps us avoid “gullibility and jumping to conclusions. Both involve failures to withhold [judgment]...both are epistemically bad” (DePaul 97). As DePaul explains, the goal should not be simply to assent to as many true propositions as possible, while simultaneously assenting to false propositions. Rather, believing false propositions should be rigorously avoided, making withholding judgment all the more important in ambiguous scenarios.

Third, it establishes a relationship of respect with the “news target,” an ethical virtue. A relationship of respect (even compassion at times), is necessary, because in many of the above instances, the potential damage to the news target’s reputation is at once serious, and uniquely public. In the CC incident, a sixteen year-old high school student was accused in front of millions of viewers for mocking a Native-American man. Although his character has since been vindicated, exposure and condemnation at such a wide public level can have drastic effects on someone’s identity and public image, regardless of the target’s age. In the instances of police violence, there is a risk of unduly damaging either the victim or the police officers’ reputation and character before adequate information is learned – whether through extended journalism or third-party investigations.

What does suspending judgment look like? In the case of the Covington Catholic story, the appearances within the first hours of the video being released seemed to be that the students surrounded the Native-American man and Sandmann mocked him with a grin. Many assented to this appearance immediately and were outraged that a Trump-supporting high school student would disrespect a person from a historically-oppressed group. Conversely, if one suspended judgment and waited for further information to emerge, the judgment might not have been full of anger, but maybe one of curiosity. From an informed citizen, but especially from a journalistic perspective, I believe this would help in lowering the level of emotional responses to events. Gerard Baker, British columnist and former editor of the WSJ, summarizes the special role journalists have and how they have fallen short:

It neatly underscores how far many “reporters” have strayed from a core—perhaps the central—objective of journalism: to challenge what is supposedly

clearly visible...When a received version of events bursts into public view, the response of the thoughtful journalist isn't to pile on with the outrage. It's to stop and look skeptically and ask if there's another angle.

A possible objection can be made. What about the immediate judgments (emotions) we experience that don't seem voluntary? While the Stoics believed "assent was always a voluntary act," Nussbaum moves away from this, by saying that at times, "habit, attachment, and sheer weight of events may frequently extract assent from us; it is not to be imagined as an act that we always deliberately perform" (38). I am thinking of an instance in my own life, when my college basketball team was in the first-round of the national tournament. We were heavily favored but ended up losing by double-digits. After making it to the locker room I was furious, angry. With the loss, our chance of making a run in the national tournament was over. My cognitive judgment was that an external object – post-season success – which had a significant place in my eudaimonia – for I had invested a tremendous amount of hard work to achieve the goal – was gone. I didn't need to suspend my judgment in this scenario (although the reaction may have been disproportionate to the event) because the information and facts were intuited immediately (the loss wasn't magically going to reverse to a win).

This brings up Marvin Sterling's important distinction between passive and active thoughts. Passive and active thoughts are analogous to passive and active judgments. A passive judgment is more akin to a gut reaction or automated response. For example, in the wake of a mass shooting, we might have the passive, immediate judgment of grief at the loss of innocent life. Or, we might be angry at the shooter. We are not responsible for our passive thoughts. However, a secondary judgment/emotion is more complex, and might look like assigning a motive to the shooter. As Jennifer Robinson explains, it is not the case that all "judgments central to emotion are necessarily urgent

[judgments]” but rather, some “may be made after a long and careful scrutiny of the grounds for the emotion” (733). This type of secondary thought/judgment/emotion we are responsible for, and thereby, have the ability to suspend judgment.

Jane Friedman, assistant professor of philosophy at NYU, notes that it is widely thought that as human beings, we are averse to uncertainty and ambiguity, which may explain emotional reactions to unpredictable events. Robinson raises a related point about desires. Desires, she says, may color the way we view events (739), not allowing us to see what happened clearly. For example, in the CC case, some viewers may have had the desire to show or “prove” that Trump supporters have racist tendencies; thus, they might have been predisposed to believing that the high school students acted with malicious intent.

Ultimately, it is an ongoing, discerning process. We might “make” or passively experience a preliminary emotion/judgment in front of the raw information. Then, we suspend judgment until more information emerges and we learn more context. We make a more complex judgment and the cycle continues. For example, in an instance of a white cop killing a person of color, my primary (passive) emotion might be grief over the loss of a human life, and anger that black communities have high instances of violent confrontations with police. Then, I may suspend judgment as to whether it was a racially motivated killing before the third-party investigation is complete. After the investigation is complete, I might make a secondary judgment (emotion), such as assigning a motive to the officer, judging the officer was simply incompetent, or maybe I judge the investigation’s findings to be faulty. In this way, I avoid making blanket judgments, and remember that “individual cases are unique, and often are notoriously

difficult to judge” (Epstein), making it all the more important to suspend judgment in unclear and developing situations.

Political fragmentation within a country poses significant risks to the health of a democracy. The tendency to rush to judgments when viewing news events (especially with the emergence of “instant” news stories on social media) contributes to the current seesaw of emotional reactions, which fosters distrust and animosity between political parties, and between citizens and the media. However, viewing these hasty judgments as emotions through a Nussbaumian lens, we are offered a way to ease this polarization through the suspension of judgment.

Of course, the process of making and suspending judgments is an ongoing, developing one that requires an element of prudence. Preliminary judgments may be made, followed by a period of suspension on more complex judgments, which may change when new information emerges. In turn, I think if journalists and citizens consistently adopted this attitude, it would improve public discourse, help renew trust in American media, and reduce political polarization, for judgments would more consistently be proportional to the evidence. Ultimately, as media members and democratic citizens, it is our job to ensure that our cognitive judgments (emotions) are well-formed and well-timed.

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## Appendix

*Covington Catholic*

One Original Video Footage: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=74e6Rvry0KQ>

Full Video Footage: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQyBHttqb38>