
Compassion as the Foundation of Humanistic Ethics: A Study of Martha C. Nussbaum's Thought

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Abstract

This article investigates compassion as the epistemic and normative cornerstone of humanistic ethics by critically engaging with Martha C. Nussbaum's philosophical corpus. Rejecting the long-standing dichotomy that casts emotions as irrational forces, Nussbaum reconceptualises compassion as a cognitively enriched sentiment integral to moral deliberation and public justice. The study unfolds in three parts: first, it delineates the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of compassion in Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach; second, it mounts a critique of rationalist moral theories that marginalise affective experience. In the third section, we enter into comparative dialogue with Theravāda Buddhist ethics, focusing on *karunā* (compassion) as articulated in canonical Pāli texts and elaborated by contemporary scholars. We show that *karunā*, far from being a passive sentiment, is cultivated through systematic practices of mindfulness, ethical habituation, and insight into suffering. By juxtaposing Western and Buddhist perspectives, the article illuminates convergent principles, such as non-attachment, empathetic imagination, and communal responsibility, that underpin both traditions' understanding of compassion as a transformative moral faculty. Engaging these Western and Buddhist perspectives in concert, the study argues that compassion can serve as a transformative force for realising justice, human dignity, and flourishing in our globalised world.

Keywords: Humanistic ethics; Compassion, Moral emotion; *Karunā*; Martha C. Nussbaum

Introduction

In an era defined by rapid technological innovation, intensified global interdependence, and unprecedented economic growth, one might anticipate a corresponding flourish of moral sensitivity and collective ethical responsibility. Yet contemporary societies are often marked by widening socioeconomic disparities, deepening political polarisation, and a troubling indifference to the suffering of others (Haidt, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Conventional ethical frameworks, whether Kantian deontology or utilitarian calculus, offer valuable analytic tools for adjudicating moral dilemmas, but they frequently neglect the affective dimensions of human vulnerability and the lived realities of injustice (Singer, 2011; Smith, 2009).

Martha C. Nussbaum (2001) confronts this lacuna by challenging the traditional Western notion that emotions impede impartial moral reasoning. In *Upheavals of Thought*, she redefines emotions as “cognitive appraisals” that embody judgments about what we value and what matters most in the world. From this perspective, compassion is not an irrational surge of feeling but a cognitive–evaluative emotion that reveals moral salience and motivates action on behalf of those who suffer (Nussbaum, 2001; Ekman, 2003). Such a reframing is especially urgent amid global crises, from mass displacement to pandemics, where human suffering transcends abstraction and calls for a response that is both emotionally attuned and rationally grounded (Goleman, 2006; Nussbaum, 2013).

Nussbaum extends this argument in *Political Emotions*, insisting that compassion functions as a social emotion essential to democratic solidarity: “Compassion requires us to imagine the pain of another as our own” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 30). This imaginative identification, she argues, creates the affective bond necessary for sustaining public commitment to justice and human dignity (Held, 2006). In giving compassion its rightful place in public morality, Nussbaum breaks from the rationalist tradition by insisting that ethical reasoning is incomplete without an account of emotional insight, a claim that resonates powerfully with non-Western moral traditions.

Theravāda Buddhism offers a parallel account of compassion, or *karuṇā*, as both an ethical virtue and a meditative practice. In the *Visuddhimagga*,

Buddhaghosa (2010) describes *karuṇā* as one of the Four Brahmavihāras, arising upon witnessing suffering and characterised by a determined intent to alleviate it. Unlike pity, which may stem from self-centred grief, *karuṇā* in the Theravāda framework is a purified disposition rooted in *vipassanā* (insight) and an understanding of *dukkha* (suffering), *anattā* (non-self), and *anicca* (impermanence) (Bhikkhu Analayo, 2003; Payutto, 2003). Cultivated through systematic practices of *sati* (mindfulness) and *samādhi* (concentration), *karuṇā* transforms personal sentiment into a disciplined moral faculty that underpins both individual liberation and communal well-being (Gethin, 1998).

By bringing Nussbaum's humanistic ethics into dialogue with Buddhist praxes of *karuṇā*, this article constructs a dialogical framework in which compassion emerges as the foundation of a robust, cross-cultural moral discourse. Guided by three objectives, philosophical and psychological foundations, critique of reason-based ethics, and comparative ethical dialogue, the article argues that compassion must occupy a central role in our ethical imagination. Far from being a private sentiment, compassion offers a transformative pathway that bridges personal virtue and structural reform, enabling us to envision justice not simply as abstract rights but as a lived commitment to alleviating suffering and promoting human flourishing.

Martha C. Nussbaum: Life and Philosophical Background

Martha Craven Nussbaum is a prominent American philosopher whose scholarly contributions span ethics, political philosophy, law, and contemporary humanities. Born on May 6, 1947, in New York City, she currently holds the position of Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, where she serves jointly in the Law School and the Department of Philosophy (The University of Chicago Law School, n.d.).

She is widely recognized for her influential role in developing the Capabilities Approach, a normative framework created in collaboration with economist Amartya Sen. This approach emphasizes the assessment of individual well-being based on actual capabilities to lead a life of value, rather than merely measuring income or access to resources (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen & Nussbaum, 1993). In addition to her work on capabilities, Nussbaum has argued that emotions, especially compassion, play a vital role in ethics and the construction of a just society. In *Upheavals of Thought and Political Emotions*, she explores

how emotional life intersects with public reason and moral judgment. Nussbaum contends that systems of justice must not ignore the affective dimensions of human life and that compassion, as a moral emotion, should inform legal and political structures (Nussbaum, 2001; Nussbaum, 2013).

The Ethical Foundations of Nussbaum's Thought

Martha C. Nussbaum's ethical framework is grounded in the conviction that emotions are central to moral life and should not be excluded from ethical reasoning. Her approach challenges Western traditions that prioritize detached rationality and downplay the moral relevance of emotional experience. Drawing on philosophical anthropology, classical sources especially Aristotle and the Stoics and contemporary moral psychology, she repositions emotions, particularly compassion, as fundamental to both personal ethics and public life.

Central to Nussbaum's ethical vision is the idea that emotions are not irrational impulses but value-laden judgments. As she writes in *Upheavals of Thought*, "emotions are appraisals or value judgments, which ascribe to things and persons outside the person's own control great importance for that person's own flourishing" (Nussbaum, 2001). In this view, compassion is not merely a feeling but a form of moral perception that recognizes the suffering of others as morally urgent.

Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, developed with Amartya Sen, offers a normative framework for evaluating justice, human development, and dignity. It focuses on what people are able to do and be in real life, emphasizing the conditions necessary for meaningful agency. "The Capabilities Approach begins with the idea that all human beings are entitled to live a life of dignity and to be treated as ends, not means" (Nussbaum, 2011).

For Nussbaum, ethics must respond to human vulnerability, bodily needs, and emotional interdependence. Abstract reasoning alone, she argues, fails to engender the empathy necessary for social justice. As she explains, "Compassion... is a cognitive, eudemonistic emotion: it is focused on the suffering of others, but always with reference to the person's own flourishing" (Nussbaum, 2001).

This perspective yields a humanistic ethic - one that understands flourishing as dependent not only on rights, but on love, care, education, health,

and political participation, rooted in the recognition of human dignity. Her thought aligns with non-Western traditions such as Buddhism, which emphasises the cultivation of *karuna* (compassion) as a virtue essential for overcoming ego and attaining moral clarity.

Ultimately, Nussbaum's ethical foundations lie in the integration of cognitive-affective understanding with political theory. Her vision seeks not to suppress emotion but to educate it in the service of justice, reclaiming emotion as essential to living ethically with others in a fragile, interconnected world.

The Capability Approach: Building a Life of Dignity

At the heart of Nussbaum's ethical philosophy lies the Capability Approach, a framework that shifts attention away from material resources or aggregated utility and instead focuses on what individuals can do and be in their lives. According to Nussbaum, justice requires that all individuals possess access to a threshold level of fundamental capabilities that enable them to live with dignity.

These central capabilities include life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, relationship with other species, play, and control over one's environment (Nussbaum, 2011). She argues that societies must be judged not merely by GDP or material wealth, but by their ability to guarantee these capabilities to all citizens.

“The Capabilities Approach focuses on what people are able to do and to be, and not just on the resources or income they command” (Nussbaum, 2011).

Among these, emotions play a vital role in a good life. Nussbaum emphasizes that emotional development is not a private or secondary concern, but central to human flourishing. Emotions, in her view, are not opposed to reason; rather, they are essential for moral insight. To feel compassion, grief, or love is to make evaluative judgments about what and who matters in our lives. “A life without the development and expression of emotions would be lacking in key elements of human flourishing” (Nussbaum, 2001).

For Nussbaum, the ability to experience and express emotion is part of what it means to live a fully human life. Moreover, a just society must cultivate

the emotional capacities of its citizens and not suppress them. Education, culture, and politics should help individuals develop empathy, compassion, and the emotional imagination necessary for ethical engagement with others.

Thus, the Capability Approach is not only a political or economic theory, but a moral vision grounded in the belief that every human being has the right to live a life of dignity that includes emotional richness, ethical agency, and the freedom to pursue what one values.

Nussbaum's emphasis on compassion as a moral emotion finds a profound resonance in Buddhist ethics, particularly in the teachings on *karuna* (compassion) and *metta* (loving-kindness). In Buddhism, these qualities are not mere sentiments but are cultivated mental states that underpin ethical conduct and spiritual development. According to Buddharakkhita (2013), the Buddha taught that the highest form of moral life is exemplified by one who conquers anger with love, evil with good, meanness with generosity, and falsehood with truth. The cultivation of the *brahma viharas* are lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—reflects a commitment to transcending ego and responding to the suffering of others with wisdom and care (Harvey, 2000). This parallels Nussbaum's view that compassion involves evaluative judgment and moral perception, not mere emotional reaction. Just as Nussbaum argues that compassion is central to justice and dignity in society, Buddhism teaches that compassionate action is essential for overcoming suffering and achieving ethical harmony. Together, these perspectives support a view of compassion as a cultivated moral capacity essential to both individual flourishing and social well-being.

Emotions as Instruments of Ethical Understanding

In many philosophical traditions, emotions have been treated with suspicion, regarded as sources of bias, irrationality, or moral weakness. However, Martha C. Nussbaum offers a powerful re-evaluation of emotions as essential components of ethical life. For her, emotions are not mere feelings or impulsive reactions, but forms of rational insight, what she calls "intelligent responses to the perception of value" (Nussbaum, 2001). They reflect what we care about, what we fear, what we hope for, and what we are willing to defend. As such, emotions are central to how we make moral judgments, engage with others, and imagine a just society.

Far from being irrational impulses, emotions such as love, fear, anger, hope, and compassion are, for Nussbaum, deeply evaluative states. They are shaped by beliefs about what is valuable and who matters, and they reflect a person's orientation toward the world. In *Upheavals of Thought*, Nussbaum challenges the Cartesian legacy that separates reason from emotion, arguing instead that emotions are forms of 'cognitive appraisal'—ways of understanding the world that are inseparable from ethical judgment (Nussbaum, 2001).

Love, for Nussbaum, reveals our deep attachments and vulnerabilities. It opens the self to joy and loss, making us ethically responsive to the well-being of others. In contrast to views that treat love as irrational or private, she emphasizes its role in public morality. To love another is to acknowledge their dignity and to become invested in their flourishing. According to Nussbaum, love involves a profound judgment about the importance of another person's life to one's own (Nussbaum, 2001).

Fear, while often associated with self-protection, can narrow our moral vision. It tends to prioritise the self and may lead to exclusion or even dehumanisation. For this reason, Nussbaum warns that fear must be critically reflected upon to prevent its manipulation, especially in political contexts.

Anger is particularly complex. Nussbaum argues that while anger can be a response to injustice, it often contains a desire for payback or retribution that is ethically problematic. Instead, she advocates for what she calls *Transition-Anger*—an emotion that recognises wrongdoing but focuses on constructive forward-looking solutions rather than retaliation. According to Nussbaum, "The central insight of *Transition-Anger* is that the important thing is not to inflict pain but to right the wrong" (Nussbaum, 2016).

Hope, in Nussbaum's account, is a vital emotional attitude for sustaining democratic societies. Unlike passive optimism, hope is an active investment in the possibility of justice and progress. It enables individuals and communities to imagine a better future and to act toward it, even amid adversity. Without hope, compassion falters, anger turns destructive, and fear prevails. For Nussbaum, nurturing hope is a political and ethical task—one that fosters resilience, solidarity, and moral imagination (Nussbaum, 2013).

Among all emotions, compassion holds the most central role in Nussbaum's moral philosophy. It is the capacity to feel the suffering of others as significant and unjust, and to respond with care. She insists that compassion is not a weak or sentimental feeling but a rational moral emotion, an ethical judgment that someone's pain matters and demands attention. According to Nussbaum, "Compassion is a central bridge between individual morality and public justice" (Nussbaum, 2013). In this light, compassion is not only a virtue of personal life but also a political necessity.

Nussbaum's cognitive-evaluative theory ultimately reclaims emotion as a legitimate and necessary source of moral insight. By integrating emotion with ethical reasoning, she challenges the entrenched dichotomy in Western philosophy that separates reason from feeling. Her approach does not seek to suppress emotions but to cultivate them as tools of moral perception. This perspective resonates strongly with non-Western traditions, particularly Buddhist ethics, which regard emotional awareness, especially mindfulness and compassion, not as obstacles to wisdom but as pathways to moral clarity. Taken together, these converging insights suggest a richer and more holistic ethical framework: one that takes seriously the human capacity to feel as inseparable from our ability to act justly, live wisely, and care for others in a fragile, interconnected world.

The philosophical and psychological foundations of compassion converge in viewing it as a disciplined, cognitively informed emotion rather than a spontaneous affect. Nussbaum's synthesis of Aristotelian virtue ethics and modern appraisal theory repositions compassion as a judgment-laden response, rooted in imaginative identification, practical reasoning, and affective resonance, that discloses moral salience and motivates ethical action (Nussbaum, 2001). Theravāda Buddhism's elaboration of *karuṇā* in the *Visuddhimagga* similarly frames compassion as a cultivated quality born of insight (*vipassanā*) and non-attachment, systematically developed through mindfulness and concentration (Buddhaghosa, 2010; Payutto, 2003). By mapping these parallel accounts, we see that both traditions regard compassion as an educable moral faculty requiring cognitive clarity, ethical intention, and sustained practice. This integrated understanding lays a sturdy groundwork for embedding compassion at the heart of moral education and public life.

Compassion as the Heart of Nussbaum's Ethics

Among the emotions explored by Martha C. Nussbaum, compassion stands out as a central moral emotion, integral to her vision of a just society. In *Upheavals of Thought*, Nussbaum articulates a cognitive-evaluative theory of emotions, positing that emotions are not merely passive feelings but are deeply intertwined with judgments about what is significant in human life (Nussbaum, 2001). Compassion, in this framework, is understood as an emotion that arises from the recognition of another's suffering, coupled with the belief that such suffering is serious, undeserved, and that the sufferer is a significant part of one's own scheme of goals and projects (Nussbaum, 2001).

Nussbaum further distinguishes compassion from related emotions such as empathy. While empathy involves the capacity to imagine oneself in another's situation, compassion encompasses a set of judgments and thoughts that acknowledge the severity of another's suffering and its moral relevance (Nussbaum, 2013). This distinction underscores compassion's role as an active, evaluative response that motivates ethical action, rather than a mere emotional resonance.

In the context of justice, Nussbaum argues that compassion is essential for recognizing and responding to the vulnerabilities and needs of others. She contends that legal and political systems often marginalize emotions, favoring detached rationality. However, she posits that emotions like compassion are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of justice, as they provide insight into human experiences that abstract principles may overlook (Nussbaum, 2001).

Moreover, Nussbaum emphasizes the importance of cultivating compassion within public institutions and civic life. In *Political Emotions*, she explores how societies can foster emotions that support democratic values and social justice. She asserts that public education, cultural narratives, and political discourse should aim to nurture compassion among citizens, thereby strengthening the social fabric and promoting inclusive policies (Nussbaum, 2013).

In summary, Nussbaum's ethical framework positions compassion as a foundational element of humanistic ethics. By integrating cognitive evaluations with emotional responses, compassion enables individuals and societies to

address suffering and injustice in a manner that is both rational and deeply human. This approach challenges the dichotomy between reason and emotion, advocating for a more holistic understanding of ethical life.

Realising Ethics through Compassion: Transforming Society

Ethical theories are often criticised for their abstraction, yet Martha C. Nussbaum argues that compassion must move beyond private sentiment into the core of public institutions, policies, and education (Nussbaum, 2001). Compassion, she insists, is a reasoned, evaluative emotion, “judgments that embody ways of seeing the world” (p. 4), that reveals human vulnerability, fosters solidarity, and anchors justice in the protection of dignity. This expanded treatment explores how compassion can be systematically cultivated and embedded across three domains, education, political culture, and public policy, to transform society.

1. Cultivating Compassion through Education

Nussbaum’s *Upheavals of Thought* (2001) situates compassion within the architecture of moral intelligence. She contends that emotions are not irrational forces but reflect “cognitive appraisals” that shape ethical perception (p. 5). To develop this capacity, moral education must integrate cognitive and affective learning. Nussbaum (2001) champions literature, narrative arts, and structured dialogue as pedagogical tools that invite students to inhabit others’ experiences and respond empathically to suffering. Empirical studies in moral education corroborate her view: programs combining reflective writing, discussion of literary case studies, and community engagement demonstrably raise empathy scores and broaden moral horizons (Denham, 2024).

In *Not for Profit*, Nussbaum (2010) extends this argument to higher education, warning against the narrowing of curricula to market-driven technical skills. She argues that a democratic society requires citizens equipped with “emotional literacy”, the capacity for compassionate judgment alongside analytical rigour. Courses in ethics, literature, and the arts become vital forums for students to confront real-world dilemmas, practice perspective-taking, and cultivate a disposition to care. By embedding compassion in core curricula, educational institutions can shape not only skilled professionals but also responsible citizens committed to the common good (Nussbaum, 2010).

2. Fostering Compassion in Political Culture

In *Political Emotions*, Nussbaum (2013) observes that the stability and resilience of democracies depend on shared affective dispositions as much as on institutional design. She analyses Franklin D. Roosevelt's empathetic "fireside chats," which acknowledged the hardships of the Great Depression and galvanised collective hope. By publicly naming suffering and offering inclusive narratives, FDR fostered trust and solidarity, an affective glue that bolstered democratic norms (Nussbaum, 2013).

Contemporary democratic politics can take similar lessons. Public rituals, such as commemorations of historical tragedies or civic campaigns that highlight stories of marginalisation, can cultivate compassion at scale. Educational narratives, from school curricula to public media, should integrate testimonies of diverse communities, allowing citizens to connect emotionally with experiences beyond their own. When compassion becomes part of the political culture, citizens are more likely to support redistributive policies, human-centered governance, and inclusive decision-making.

3. Embedding Compassion in Public Policy

The Capabilities Approach, co-developed by Nussbaum and Sen (1993), reorients policy assessment toward what individuals can do and be, rather than solely on resource distribution or formal rights. Nussbaum (2011) emphasises that compassion motivates policymakers to attend to human vulnerability and structural injustice. For example, universal health coverage programs reflect compassionate insight into shared fragility, ensuring that illness does not translate into destitution. Likewise, inclusive education policies, providing tailored support for students with disabilities or from marginalised backgrounds, exemplify compassion in action by recognising each person's potential for flourishing.

Moreover, compassion can inform policy processes themselves. Participatory budgeting, deliberative assemblies, and impact assessments that incorporate narrative testimony ensure that policymaking is not abstract but grounded in real human stories. By institutionalising channels for the voices of the vulnerable, governments demonstrate compassion as both a motive and a method

Compassion (Karuna) in Theravada Buddhist Ethics: A Comparative Insight

In the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, *karuṇā*, commonly rendered as compassion, is one of the Four Brahmavihāras or “Divine Abodes,” alongside *mettā* (loving-kindness), *muditā* (sympathetic joy), and *upekkhā* (equanimity). According to Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga*, *karuṇā* arises upon witnessing another’s suffering and is characterised by a resolute intention to alleviate that suffering through wisdom and non-attachment (Buddhaghosa, 2010). Unlike pity, which can stem from personal sorrow, *karuṇā* in the Theravāda framework is a purified mental disposition grounded in insight (*vipassanā*) and an understanding of *dukkha* (suffering), *anattā* (non-self), and *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent origination).

Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P. A. Payutto) emphasises that genuine *karuṇā* is not an impulsive affective reaction but a deliberate volition informed by *paññā* (wisdom) and *sīla* (ethical conduct). It is cultivated through systematic practices of mindfulness (*sati*) and concentration (*samādhi*), as outlined in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*Satipaṭṭhāna*) and the Brahmavihāra meditation sequence (Payutto, 2003). Through repeated training, practitioners develop an equanimous concern for all beings, understanding their interdependence and the impermanent nature of all phenomena, thus transforming compassion into both an ethical response and a spiritual path toward liberation (*vimutti*).

Martha C. Nussbaum, writing from within a liberal humanistic tradition, reconceptualises compassion as a cognitive-evaluative emotion that is essential to moral reasoning, public policy, and social justice (Nussbaum, 2001). In her view, compassion involves imaginative engagement with others’ lives, practical judgment about when and how to act, and affective resonance that motivates political and educational reform. This aligns closely with the Buddhist vision of *karuṇā* as a disciplined moral faculty: both traditions reject the notion that compassion is a mere feeling and instead treat it as an educable capacity that requires cultivation, intentionality, and institutional support.

Where Nussbaum foregrounds curricular reforms, such as integrating literature, case studies, and reflective dialogue into moral education to foster compassionate judgment, Buddhist praxis emphasises meditation as the primary vehicle for ethical transformation (Nussbaum, 2001; Payutto, 2003). Yet both

propose that compassion must be woven into social structures: Nussbaum through policies grounded in the Capabilities Approach, which prioritizes individuals' real freedoms to pursue well-being (Sen & Nussbaum, 1993), and Buddhism through community support for monastic and lay meditation centers that sustain ethical training.

By placing these perspectives in dialogue, we arrive at a richer understanding of compassion as both an inwardly cultivated discipline and an outwardly directed force for structural change. Compassion, whether articulated as *karuṇā* or as a cognitive-evaluative emotion, bridges personal virtue and public life. It invites us to reimagine ethics not as abstract theorising but as a lived commitment to alleviating suffering, protecting human dignity, and promoting flourishing at the individual and societal levels.

Comparative Dialogical Framework for Global Ethics

Martha C. Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach into constructive conversation with the Theravāda Buddhist praxis of *karuṇā*, aiming to articulate a shared, cross-cultural foundation for compassion-based ethics. Nussbaum and Sen's Capabilities Approach (1993) shifts the focus of justice from resource distribution and formal rights to what individuals can do and be, emphasising real freedoms for human flourishing. Compassion, for Nussbaum (2011), plays a catalytic role in identifying which capabilities matter most and in motivating the political will to secure them. Likewise, Theravāda tradition situates *karuṇā* as both an inward cultivation through *sati* (mindfulness) and *samādhi* (concentration), and an outward ethical commitment to alleviating suffering (Payutto, 2003).

This dialogue will proceed in three thematic strands. First, it will analyse educational practices: Nussbaum's proposals for curricula grounded in literature and dialogue to foster imaginative empathy (Nussbaum, 2001) alongside Buddhist monastic and lay meditation programs that systematically develop *karuṇā* (Buddhaghosa, 2010). Second, it will compare institutional supports: from Nussbaum's advocacy for public policies, such as universal healthcare and inclusive education, that manifest compassion in legislation (Nussbaum, 2011) to the Buddhist sangha's communal structures that uphold ethical training and social welfare. Third, it will examine civic rituals and narratives: Nussbaum's emphasis on public ceremonies and narratives that sustain democratic solidarity

(Nussbaum, 2013) together with Buddhist rites, such as *dana* (generosity offerings) and festival commemorations, that cultivate collective compassion.

By mapping these convergences and divergences, the framework will highlight how compassion can be embedded at multiple levels, from individual cognition to societal institutions, thus offering a robust model for global ethics. This comparative, dialogical approach aspires to bridge cultural divides, fostering an ethics in which compassion is both a personal virtue and a transformative force for structural change and human dignity worldwide.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the body of knowledge by demonstrating how Martha C. Nussbaum's ethical philosophy redefines compassion not as a private sentiment but as a cognitively evaluative and morally significant emotion that plays a central role in public justice and human dignity. Through the Capabilities Approach, emotional development is repositioned as a core component of human flourishing, challenging traditional justice paradigms that prioritise formal rights or economic indicators. Additionally, the cross-cultural comparison between Nussbaum's theory and the Theravada Buddhist concept of *karuna* (compassion) reveals a shared ethical foundation across traditions. This synthesis establishes a holistic framework of emotionally grounded ethics that bridges the divide between reason and emotion, offering new directions for ethical education, civic engagement, and interreligious dialogue. Ultimately, the study affirms compassion as both an inner moral capacity and a transformative force for social justice.

At the heart of Martha C. Nussbaum's philosophical project lies a bold yet profoundly humane proposition: that compassion is not a secondary sentiment or private emotion, but a foundational element of ethical reasoning and public life. Her account challenges traditional rationalist paradigms and reclaims emotion as a source of moral intelligence, one that is deeply responsive to the realities of human suffering and injustice.

By bringing this perspective into dialogue with *karuna* as taught in Theravada Buddhist ethics, this article highlights the universality of compassion as a cultivated moral faculty that transcends cultural boundaries. In both traditions, compassion is not a passive or sentimental reaction but a disciplined

and intentional response to suffering, grounded in either meditative wisdom or cognitive-emotional judgment.

Through this comparative framework, the article affirms that compassion, whether as *karuna* or as a civic virtue, holds transformative potential for moral education, social justice, and collective flourishing. Recognising and cultivating this shared ethical foundation invites us to imagine a global humanism rooted not merely in abstract rights, but in sincere concern for the well-being of others.

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