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Review of "Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach"

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Book Review | *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*

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***Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Martha C. Nussbaum; Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press. 2011; 209 pages + preface, bibliography and index; \$22.95 hardcover; 978-0-674-05054-9**

Martha Nussbaum is one of the most well-known contemporary philosophers; her prolific and diverse body of work includes books on emotions, political theory, literature, ancient philosophy, law, feminism, and the value of a liberal arts education. In her most recent book, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, Nussbaum does not tackle a new topic. Instead, the book offers a shorter and more accessible summary of the work done in three of her previous books: *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*; *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality and Species Membership*; and *The Quality of Life* (edited with Amartya Sen). For those familiar with these excellent books, *Creating Capabilities* does not offer much that is new. This book provides a short and accessible introduction to Nussbaum's work; as such, it is ideal for those who are new to her writing or for those looking for a short supplementary text for a class in political philosophy.

As many people know, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has long been the official measure of a country's quality of life: the higher the GDP, the higher the quality of life. In *Creating Capabilities*, Nussbaum convincingly problematizes this assumption. For example, because GDP is an average, a country with a fairly high GDP may not be a just society; GDP "doesn't tell us where the wealth is located, who controls it, and what happens to the people who don't" (49). Furthermore, GDP does not look at some factors that are important when evaluating the quality of people's lives: their health, education level, and living conditions, for example. In short, it's overly simplistic and misguided to call a country "developed" just because its GDP has increased; measuring the quality of

life of a nation in narrow monetary terms ignores issues of justice, distribution, equality, oppression, and freedom.

Creating Capabilities does not just offer a critique of GDP; it goes further by presenting an alternative. Developed by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen—a Nobel prize-winning economist—the “Capabilities Approach” (also known as the “Capability Approach” or the “Human Development Approach”) presents a new theoretical paradigm. Although fairly new, this approach has had increasing influence on the World Bank and the United Nations. The Human Development Index, for example, is a measure of quality of life that has been increasingly replacing GDP in policy discussions.

The Capability Approach (CA) asks, “What are people actually able to do and to be?” (p. x) and which capabilities are the most valuable, “the ones that a minimally just society will endeavor to nurture and support?” (28). For Nussbaum, a good, flourishing life requires the protection of ten central capabilities: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment (33-34). She notes that this list is just a proposal and admits that it could be contested and is “subject to ongoing revision and rethinking” (108). She believes, however, that the list gives a good indication of the central capabilities that are important to all people and argues that societies need to ensure that every person's central capabilities are protected up to a minimum threshold. Nussbaum is particularly interested in developing the CA as a theory of social justice and developing guidelines that might be useful to those working in constitutional law.

The book presents an overview of this theoretical approach as well as its application to a number of contemporary issues. The first chapter of the book immediately grips the reader with the story of Vasanti, an Indian woman who has had a difficult life. The story gets to the tenets of the CA in an intuitive way, showing us the important aspects of life that GDP leaves unaccounted for.

In chapter two, she gives a more detailed explanation of the CA and its central concepts such as the difference between functioning and capability. To illustrate this difference, Nussbaum gives a vivid example—a strategy she often employs in her work. Here, she presents the case of a person who is fasting and one who is starving. The two have the same functioning, but they have different capabilities. The person who is fasting has the freedom and ability to eat, while the person starving does not. The CA focuses on the promotion of capabilities, not functioning; in other words, it aims to promote freedoms and choices for people, so that they can have the capabilities to experience a higher quality of life.

One might wonder here if focusing on giving people choice is the correct move. In criticizing preference utilitarianism, Nussbaum points out people may suffer from

adaptive preferences. These are preferences deformed by oppressive living conditions. Women, for example, may not complain about being illiterate or unable to vote if they have grown up in a culture that tells them from an early age that women should not be literate or vote. Nussbaum argues that deferring to these women's preferences in this case will not improve their quality of life. Yet, in developing her own theory, she argues that, except in the case of children, societies need to "honor the person's lifestyle choices" (26). Various scholars, including Cass Sunstein, with whom Nussbaum has worked in the past, have pointed out that people often do not make the most rational choices; we can "nudge" them to make better choices for themselves—such as picking fresh fruit instead of unhealthy desserts—and thus come closer to ensuring that they live longer and healthier lives. However, Nussbaum makes it clear that she is not interested in directly promoting health or education (two central capabilities); she is only interested in allowing people the freedoms that would enable them to make the choice to lead healthy and educated lives.

Surprisingly, Nussbaum argues that two capabilities "play a distinctive *architectonic* role: they organize and pervade the others" (39; italics are hers). I expected her to name "life" and "bodily integrity," but instead she argues for the centrality of affiliation and practical reason. At first, I was not at all convinced that affiliation should play such an important role, and it was not clear to me why practical reason should play a more important role than "life." Nussbaum argues that practical reason allows us to choose and order the functioning corresponding to the various capabilities" (39). But life is a prerequisite to having capabilities at all, and physical and mental health allow us to exercise our practical reason and other capabilities, including the ability for affiliation.

Although she does not present an argument for giving priority to practical reason, Nussbaum might be able to argue that if we are not allowed to develop our practical reason, we are not able to make rational choices involving the other capabilities and are more likely to fall victim to adaptive preferences. Furthermore, without practical reason, we cannot make informed choices about important aspects of our lives, such as terminating or extending our lives. Practical reason can thus be said to be a prerequisite for all other capabilities. Nussbaum also does not justify her claim that affiliation should play a central role. However, if I were to guess, I would say that she would give two reasons. First, affiliation involves appropriate interactions with other people including interactions with people who are different than us. This allows us to exercise and develop our practical reason and make more inclusive and informed decisions. Second, affiliation, as defined by Nussbaum, involves caring for other people and attempting to protect their well being. This is particularly important for the CA because, as Nussbaum herself admits, the CA depends on altruism much more than contractarianism or other ethical theories. I am still not convinced that practical reason and affiliation are more important than life and health—especially if this includes mental health—, but if these are the type of arguments that Nussbaum has in mind, I might be persuaded.

Titled “A Necessary Counter-Theory,” Chapter 3 of the book outlines the problems with GDP that I described above. It also briefly discusses problems with utilitarianism and resource-based approaches. The chapter ends with a discussion of the similarities and differences between the CA and human rights approaches.

Chapter 4 gives an overview of the main philosophical questions that arise when thinking about the CA. A non-philosopher is likely to be lost in the intricacy of the philosophical debates as well as the names and terms thrown around (Rawls, Kant, consequentialism, deontology, informed-desire welfarism). On the other hand, a philosopher is likely to find this chapter short and lacking, since it only briefly touches on serious and complicated philosophical questions. However, for those interested in writing about the capabilities approach, this chapter might offer some inspiration and some possible questions to address.

In Chapter 5, Nussbaum focuses on defending the CA against charges of cultural imperialism. Although she makes a persuasive argument, my concern is that she goes too far, giving nations too much power. Nussbaum claims that the government’s role is to raise “citizens above the threshold on all ten capabilities” (109); setting the correct threshold is thus pivotally important. It may be surprising then to hear that Nussbaum believes that “setting the threshold precisely is a matter for each nation, and within certain limits, it is reasonable for nations to do this differently” (41). Why should nations have so much power? Nussbaum has written extensively about this, and she addresses the topic again in Chapter 5. Suffice it to say that the answer has to do with the fact that Nussbaum values history, tradition, and religion; she wants to allow nations to make decisions that take into account their particular cultural and religious traditions, though she makes no explicit argument for their inherent value. From the point of view of the capabilities approach, it seems that these should only be valuable if they ensure the protection of people’s central capabilities. Nussbaum seems to worry that it would be “dictatorial” (42) to set the same threshold for all countries, but I remain unconvinced that it is just for some nations to set the threshold much lower than other nations. Investing nations with the power to set their own threshold displaces rather than resolves the power of a “dictatorial” decision. I am especially concerned since, as Nussbaum points out, “the tradition of a place is simply the view of the most powerful members of the culture” (107). Nussbaum herself argues, “once we understand this point, it is very difficult to think of traditional values as having any normative force at all” (107). Despite this difficulty, she continues to give a lot of weight to tradition and culture. She does argue that we need to find out what minorities, women, rural people and other oppressed groups think. But groups in power rarely seek out these groups, especially in countries with serious social inequities. How can we defer to them then and grant them the power to decide the threshold for each capability? And even if we search the views of oppressed groups, their words may not be reliable if they might suffer from adaptive preferences.

Nussbaum claims that even sophisticated utilitarian theories are unable to “correct the problem of adaptation, because it involves people’s entire upbringing in a society” (83). Yet, she says that we need to respect people’s choices (107). It seems that the CA may suffer—at least to some extent—from the same problem that she attributes to the sophisticated utilitarian theories she criticizes. This is not a unique fault of the CA, however, since the problem of adaptive preferences remains unresolved in other current theories as well.

Chapter 6 focuses on the requirements of global justice. Here, Nussbaum rightly points out that there are large inequities among nations, and they are increasing. Many people live below the threshold required by the CA from the very beginning of their lives. Nussbaum shows that rich nations are partially responsible for these inequities and some redistribution is needed. While I disagree with her rejection of Peter Singer’s and Peter Unger’s call for an increase in personal philanthropy, I agree with her that we need to (also) focus on the obligations of governments and institutions.

Chapter 7, which is dedicated to the philosophical influences of the CA, has similar virtues and problems as those in chapter 4. Nussbaum draws on very different thinkers and ideas here to support her theory and show its philosophical roots. Some philosophers will find these discussions thought provoking and intriguing. Others are likely to be irritated by them, finding the discussion too rushed and unfulfilling. Meanwhile, many non-philosophers may be confused or uninterested in what CA might have in common with Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, Adam Smith, natural law, or utilitarianism.

Chapter 8, titled “Capabilities and Contemporary Issues,” deals with poverty, gender, disability and aging, education, animal entitlements, environmental quality, constitutional law, and human psychology. This chapter is extremely accessible and clear, offering a nice summary of some of the issues discussed at more length in Nussbaum’s other books, especially *Women and Human Development* and *Frontiers of Justice*. However, the chapter also offers new insights, as well as some slight revisions of earlier positions taken by Nussbaum. For example, in spite of dedicating over eighty pages to showing that animals have similar entitlements to humans in *Frontiers of Justice*, never mentions factory farming there. In *Creating Capabilities*, I was pleased to see her say that factory farming “inflicts great injustices and should be ended” (163).

I commend Nussbaum for showing that non-human animals have similar capabilities to humans and are entitled to similar protections. I am also happy to see her taking a stronger stance against animal exploitation in this book. However, I worry that what she wants to say about animals in this chapter might not fit very well with the rest of the book. As she presents so much of her theoretical framework in terms of *human* dignity and *human* flourishing, it may not apply to animals as well as she hopes. And how does her argument that affiliation and practical reason play architectonic roles extend to solitary

animals or to animals might not have the capacity for practical reason? I suggested earlier that life and health might be better capabilities to emphasize as being foundational. That would work better with her desire to argue that non-human animals deserve protection and support.

Because it is so clear, accessible, and engaging, this book would make an excellent textbook for an upper level or graduate class in social and political philosophy. Since it is short and inexpensive, it would be easy to add this to the list of required texts for a class. Another option is to assign the first chapter or the first two chapters; I plan to do this in my introductory ethics class next semester. I think the book as a whole, and the first two chapters in particular, are very readable and appealing to students and non-academic audiences.

Academic philosophers may be struck by how often Nussbaum says an issue needs further investigation and how often she draws attention to different ways of interpreting or applying the CA. They might see these tactics as an encouragement to read *Women and Human Development* and *Frontiers of Justice*, both of which are really excellent books that I would highly recommend. But they might also think that Nussbaum is trying to encourage her audience to engage with the CA more by reading and writing about it. They would be right; at the very end of the book's conclusion, Nussbaum notes that the readers of this book are the "authors of the next chapter in this story of human development" (187). In the postscript, she points out that there are many opportunities for networking among people interested in this work. The Human Development and Capability Association has over 700 members from 80 countries. Annual international conferences offer the opportunity for intellectual exchanges and discussions, as does the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*. Like Nussbaum, I hope that philosophers, as well as other academics, will do more work on the CA. This theory is relatively new and exciting, offering much opportunity for rigorous and stimulating work. Furthermore, because of the attention that it has received from the UN and various governments, the CA has the potential to make a meaningful difference in American and international public policy.