

Martha Nussbaum. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. pp237, ISBN 978-0674050549

The issue of inequality and justice in the world can be approached from various angles and disciplines. If poverty has often been the favourite ground of economic sciences up until the last two decades, other disciplines such as philosophy started having their say on it. This turn can only be positively appreciated since the complexity of such topic requires a solid interdisciplinarity. In *Creating Capabilities* Nussbaum rightly argues for an interdisciplinary approach and against various kinds of separations between disciplines, between theory and practice, between older and younger, and among regions and nations (189).

Martha Nussbaum, for whom the practical usefulness of philosophy is no novelty—think of her works on education, democracy, and justice—proposes to reflect on poverty and inequality with a theoretical and ground-breaking paradigm which is known as the “human development” or “Capability Approach” or also “Capabilities Approach”. In *Creating Capabilities*, Nussbaum’s first agenda is to fill a gap by producing a “more accessible book” (xi) on the topic about poverty and human development.

Chapter 1 starts with a diagnosis that points at a discrepancy between what leaders of countries achieve by focusing only on national economic growth, and the realities lived by real people. The need for a change of paradigm in development economics is enounced. Instead of focusing on numbers and figures, Nussbaum uses the normal life of a concrete human being, Vasanti—a small woman in her early thirties living in Ahmedabad, in India (2) and struggling with poverty—to prepare the ground for her theory of social justice, the Capabilities Approach. Chapter 2 expounds on the central capabilities which are cornerstones to the Capabilities Approach which rests on three main principles: it takes each person as an end; it focuses on choice and freedom; and it is concerned with entrenched social injustice and inequality. The need for a new approach is evoked in Chapter 3 with the evocation of the failure of classical and questionable approaches within development economics: GDP, utilitarian approaches, etc. In Chapter 4 Nussbaum’s approach is elaborated further against the background of significant ethical concepts and political theories. Since the Capabilities Approach is meant to apply to all nations, Chapter 5 is an attempt to meet the challenges of diversity brought about by the globalised world. In Chapter 6, Nussbaum brings the approach from a national to a global level with the idea that the implementation of justice needs a broader perspective. The origins, influences, and inspirations of the Capabilities Approach, ranging from Aristotle and the Stoics to John Stuart Mill are laid down in Chapter 7, whereas its relevance to contemporary

issues such as gender, environment, education, are tackled in Chapter 8. The book contains two appendixes on James Heckman's work on Capabilities and Amartya Sen's on well-being and agency.

Even if she does not use the following terms, Martha Nussbaum is up to breaking the ground between real economics and financial economics. The Capabilities Approach she proposes has to "begin close to the ground, looking at life stories and the human meaning of policy changes for real people" (14). In Nussbaum's mind, one cannot solely talk about figures and charts; it's through stories of concrete normal individuals such as Vasanti that the problems can be approached and sustainable and efficient solutions be found. Sophisticated and figure-laden talks about GDP per capita do not reach the normal people, nor do they help alleviate their situation of poverty. The paradigm has, therefore, to be close to realities of concrete lives lived by concrete individuals whose stories yield the most significant elements to understand poverty and inequality. The Capabilities Approach understands itself clearly as an alternative approach that can be assessed against its rivals.

GDP approaches have failed because, so Nussbaum, they can "give marks to nations that contain enormous inequalities, suggesting that such nations are on the right track" (49). Martha Nussbaum gives the example of South Africa under Apartheid, which, although scoring well on the GDP scheme, contained tremendously horrendous inequalities that are serious threats for the well-being of the society at large. This rightly suggests that alleviating poverty requires an uncompromised understanding of the principle of justice which demands equality. The failure of the GDP approach rests also in its oversight of the group of poor people suffering from huge inequalities.

Martha Nussbaum defines the Capabilities Approach as "an approach to comparative quality-of-life assessment and to theorizing about basic social justice. It holds that the key question to ask, when comparing societies and assessing them for their basic decency or justice, is, "What is each person able to do and to be?" In other words, the approach takes each person as an end, asking not just about the total or average well-being but about the opportunities available to each person" (18). This approach promotes a conception of the human person as a being that is not only inherently talented, but also substantially valuable—as having a human dignity. In contradistinction to theories that objectify or "mechanize" the human person and reduces her to a mere "human resource", Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach proposes to return to the basics of human life to explore the ways in which human flourishing would be possible.

Nussbaum is not alone in this approach. She teams often with another defender of the Capabilities Approach, Amartya Sen. Nussbaum's analysis of the problem of poverty takes on an important aspect with the crucial distinction she makes—

borrowing it from Sen—between a person who is starving and a person who is fasting (25). She shows that human agency as well as human choice are keys to understand the phenomenon of poverty. For it goes without saying that, although those two persons have the same type of functioning where nutrition is concerned, they do not have the same capability. The one fasting has freely decided to do so and can end this state wherever he wants, whereas the starving person has no choice and needs the help of the others to change his state. What this example also shows is that poverty is no destiny. The fatality of poverty can be overcome when its victims are given the conditions which enable them to express their talents and capabilities. Again Nussbaum starts from the presupposition that all people are endowed with capabilities the usage of which can guarantee a dignified life. This helps bring to the fore an innovative and appropriate conception of poverty which Nussbaum shares also with Sen, namely as a “capability failure, not just as shortage of commodities or even of income and wealth” (143).

Martha Nussbaum has an interesting understanding of human dignity. She does not conceive of it as merely a theoretical concept, but rather as a criterion to be fulfilled by humans to be able to live a genuine human life. Dignity, if only theorized, is unable to serve humans. It has to be filled up with a substantial content and translated into real life of concrete human beings. A life worthy of human dignity would, then, require many things which Nussbaum identifies as the “ten central capabilities” which are: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses (imagination and thought), emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play, control over one’s environment (33-34). The Capabilities Approach tries to meet the demands of some, if not all these ten central capabilities. And any policy that aims at putting an end to poverty, injustice, and inequalities must fulfil the requirements of these ten central capabilities.

The Capabilities Approach is not based on mere intentions. It seeks the implementation of the ten capabilities in all societies, mostly in those poverty-stricken and non-democratic nations. And since the dignity of the people represents a forceful reminder in a true approach of justice, the Capabilities Approach will not avoid intervention in the home which is justified “whenever the rights of its members are violated” (66-67). Talking about intervention—or interventionism—is enough to raise the suspicion of imperialism (by the way, imperialism is understood here as a “Western imperialism”). Nussbaum defends her theory against this criticism first by arguing that the human rights approach is not exclusively Western—the Capabilities Approach has its primary origin in India—and then by emphasizing that “military and economic sanctions are justified only in certain grave circumstances involving traditionally recognized crimes against humanity, such as genocide” (111-112).

Nussbaum is very cautious about intervention—especially military intervention—because of the damages it can cause both at the conceptual and practical levels.

In order to provide solid foundations to her Capabilities Approach, Martha Nussbaum needs to work out a firm and compelling conception of human dignity. That is, from a descriptive approach that points at the vulnerability of humans or the fragility of human dignity, it is crucial to move to a normative approach that makes of human dignity a value. In order to make this idea clearer, it would have been good to take the notion of dignity further through a broader analysis of the phenomenon, an undertaking which, unfortunately, is absent in the book. It is, nevertheless, a huge merit of the Capabilities Approach to go back to the ultimate datum of the human person—her dignity—and concrete individual lives and seek therein incentives, rationales, and especially overwhelming reasons and arguments to fight for justice, equality, and human flourishing. This book is by all means a ground-breaking piece of work that should inspire not only philosophers working on issues about social justice and political systems, but also economists working on international development who so often tend to downplay, if not completely overlook, the anthropological and ethical sources of human life.

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