

BOOK REVIEW

Nussbaum M. C. (2011). *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

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WORDS: 3487

Section 1: Introduction

Main Theme of the Book

“What are people actually able to do and to be? What real opportunities for activity and choice has society given them?” (p.18) and, “...what do we owe, as a matter of justice, to the people?” (p. 19). These are the questions that inform Martha Nussbaum’s argument throughout her book, “Creating capabilities: The Human Development Approach.” Her approach to human development through capabilities seeks to shift scholars and policy makers’ attention from resource focus (Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and income) to the coalescence of people’s personal capacities and opportunities as availed by political, social and economic environment (personal capabilities, as she terms it). Inspired by the works of Amartya Sen, (a Nobel prize Laureate and economist) and her earlier writings, “Women and Human Development” and “Frontier of Justice” Nussbaum finally presents the capabilities approach to the development of humans with the aim of challenging the prevailing economic models of human development. Her proposition serves as comparative assessment of quality-of-life as well as a social justice theory, introducing the philosophy of morality into the economics of development. The book is ideally an introduction to the theoretical framework of the capabilities approach to human development.

Outline and Idea Path of the Book

Covered within the book’s contents are eight chapters, with a postscript and two appendices, A and B. As usual, Nussbaum introduces the book with an analytical narrative of Vasanti, a poor woman of India, who fights to overcome and escape domestic abuse by her husband. The narration is done in an analytical manner that presents the opportunities for action and choice available in the social, economic and political situation. This is a clear illustration of how the capability approach can be used as an evaluation toll for human development. In chapter two, the author uphold that in the comparison and assessment of a society for development, each member should be considered as an end, considering the available opportunities for each rather than finding the average or total well-being of the society. Substantial freedom as well as the opportunities asset available for exploitation of the individual people within the society must be promoted, in this regard. Here she bases the approach on freedom and choice as she argues that

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of a collection of approaches that suggest equal basic resource allocation but she still argues that the wealth and income are limited proxies to determining the capability of individuals within the society as well as non-humiliation, inclusion and social respect.

Chapter four entitled, “Fundamental entitlements” (p.21) presents the capabilities approach as a type of political liberalism basing on the social justice theory of Rawls John. In this section, Nussbaum argues that it is not worthy that any government takes a position on metaphysical or religious issues since the principles of politics are found on distinct values, such as egalitarian respect to humanity as well as impartiality, which are parts of the comprehensive and reasonable held societal doctrines. There is thus no need for a consensus on the basic principles of politics as the listed on the capabilities approach, though their achievability must be guaranteed. The author also criticizes Rawls’ stance on future generations’ justice, fair treatment of the disable and the non-human animals. The chapter then concludes with the author explaining the relationship between the capability approach and deontologism and consequentialism.

In chapter five, the author presents her approach as an internationally inclusive approach to human rights. Ideally, she rejects the notion that the capabilities approach she posits is a type of the imperialism of the west by arguing that her content includes most fundamental human rights elements pertinent to the Chinese and Indian traditions which are actually without the west. Moreover, she argues that the list of capabilities enlisted in her work is open to critics and is a fruit of the contribution of culturally diverse theorists (p. 24). Furthermore, the contents of the capabilities list are general and abstract, in such a way that under particular parameters, it is apt that any nations globally convert them to policies, taking into account the nations’ special situations and histories.

The author then proceeds to dealing with global and national justice in the following chapter. She holds the stance that it is the moral obligation of the developed countries to assist the developing poor countries by appreciating and upholding their development efforts. According to Nussbaum, global justice is rather an obligation and not an issue of philanthropy that should be

left to the sufficiently charitable nations and organizations. However, it is noted that even with a solution handy the employment of the capability approach may disagree in an enforcement methodology.

Chapter seven then traces the capabilities approach's philosophical background starting from the primordial Rome and Greece. The chapter notes that the philosophers intellectually anteceding Sen and Nussbaum like Smith, Marx, Mill and Kant were particularly inspired by the Stoics and Aristotle. The last chapter of this book is dedicated to a discussion of contemporary issues like aging, gender, environmental questions, disabilities and animal entitlement. The author also includes two appendices, appendix A being a discussion of the stance of economist Heckman J. on human capital and early childhood intervention economics in a subjective manner to the current theory while appendix B puts into perspective, the theory of Amartya Sen on the difference between agency freedom and well being freedom.

Section 2: The Author

Nussbaum was born in New York City to Brave (A lawyer in Philadelphia) and Warren (a home maker and interior designer). She describes her formative years as made of an upbringing that was very elite, sterile and greatly preoccupied by status and money (University of Chicago, n.d.). She attended the Bryn Mawr located Balwin School in her teenage years where she would later founded her impatient towards the philosophers of mandarin due to “my own aristocratic upbringing” (Ingrid, 2005).

Nussbaum then proceeded to New York University where she studied theatre and classics and received her BA in 1969 before moving to Harvard University where she studied philosophy and attained her MA in 1972 and a PhD in 1975 (University of Chicago, n.d.). This is the same period that she married Nussbaum Allan whom she divorced in 1987, converted to Judaism and bore Rachel, a current professor at Evergreen State College. It is also within this period that Nussbaum claims having experienced immense discrimination and prejudice including sexual harassment and poor childcare for Rachel, her daughter. Becoming the first woman with a

Harvard Junior Fellowship even complicated her situation, being denied the chance to be called a “female Fellowes” and instead called “Hetaira” on the grounds that the former was awkward (University of Chicago, n.d.).

She later became a classics and philosophy lecturer between the mid 1970s and early 1980s at Harvard (University of Chicago, n.d.). In 1982, the Classics Department of the university denied her tenure, compelling her to move to Brown University where she settled lecturing till mid 1990s (Ingrid, 2005). It is here where she published her first book, “The Fragility of Goodness” that made her a popular academic figure and Later the “Frontier of Justice” that introduced her to the scholarship of global Justice (Anderson, 2011). Nussbaum is currently a Law and Ethics professor at the University of Chicago (Anderson, 2011).

Nussbaum’s works often revolve around the philosophies of social justice and women development drawing from her experience of prejudice and from the Harvard University (Anderson, 2011). Her scholarly literature on the capabilities approach has often focused on the non-egalitarian opportunities and freedoms of women resulting in the development of an idiosyncratic feminism using the inspiration of the liberal tradition and stressing that at its optimum, liberalism involves a thorough re-conceptualization of family and gender relations. In her book, “Creating capabilities: The Human Development Approach,” Nussbaum adopts an analytic narration as the introducing literary methodology to her work and then continues to using a mixture of theoretical and philosophical argumentation to put the capability approach into perspective. These styles of writing are in a way evident in ideally all her works.

Section 3: Critical Analysis

In this book, Nussbaum posits the central thesis that the most domineering human development theories have focused much on economic growth and overall or average growth leading to the establishment of policies that robe people of their human dignity and self respect. In regard to this she notes “We need a counter-theory to challenge these entrenched but misguided theories, if we want to move policy choice in the right direction.”(p. 21).

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asking not just about the total or average well-being but about the opportunities available for each person (p.18).

It is in this definition that critics have found Nussbaum guilty of limiting the scope of the capabilities theories. Most specifically, Ingrid (2011) points that the capability approach is wide an approach that should be used as an umbrella approach to more than the two versions of social justice and assessment of comparative quality of life including phenomenological conceptualization, ethical theory and efficiency analysis. In fact, this is a theme that runs throughout the book. However, Martins (2006) argues in support of this definition noting that quality-of-life assessment is one way that the capabilities approach covers all aspects of theoretical relation of this approach to other theories and approaches except Nussbaum's theory of social justice. In this regard, it suffices to infer that while Ingrid (2011) claims that Nussbaum's definition is limited, her choices of the two functional aspects of the concept are all encompassing.

It is this capabilities approach that Nussbaum uses to design her theory of social justice. Drawing from her previous works, especially the theory of universally fundamental political privileges, she presents the ten core privileges as aforementioned and argues that social justice impose upon the government, the responsibility to ensure each of the ten core capabilities are implemented in a manner setting the "citizens above the threshold on all ten capabilities" (109). Threshold setting thus proves a pivotal part of the capabilities approach probably because this is the only way, she argues, that human wholesome development can be achieved and assessed in the society. In addition, the author posits her strong belief 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). This approach is also taken, although not as formally as she presents it, by Sen (2009) in addition to the comparative quality-of-life assessment. Martins (2007b) however, argues that although this is an important approach, the way through which Nussbaum emphasizes on the government as the soul implementer of social justice remains limiting and narrowing to the broad effects of the theory available for the theory.

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achievement of this important goal. In lieu of this it would thus make sense that these important contributors to capability are involved.

Section 4: Personal Reflection

I find the book clear, engaging, accessible and informative to both philosophical readers and the non-philosophical reader. This is strength, for it gives the book a wide range of readership thus informing a wide population of the society. It is also commendable how the author marries the capabilities approach with real life scenario as in the narration of Vasanti's story in a manner that reconciles theory, practice and experience simultaneously in a manner that keeps the reader insightfully within the discussion topic. Moreover, Nussbaum's way of bringing out the history of capabilities theories is also intriguing tracing it from Aristotle through to Sen and herself. This is a clear painting of the scholarship involved therein.

However, it is important to note that Nussbaum's arguments entail a great deal of weaknesses. First, her thesis which revolves around social justice and comparative quality of life is limiting to the capabilities approach. As discussed herein, the capability approach is a wide theory that cannot be limited to the confines of the two ends but wider one such as ethical theories and others. While it is agreeable to me that there is need for a counter-theory that can push the fostering of human development forward and that the capabilities theory is this counter theory, I am opposed to the limitation. I argue that the capabilities approach should be viewed as an umbrella of normative theories to enable any objective policy making that defends a capability mix with functionings (achievements), an approach that the author plainly sidelines.

Moreover, the author puts so much naïve faith on the governments as solely accountable for capabilities development and continues to discredit charity and philanthropy as alternative measures of combating poverty. She for instance argues that each rich country is obliged to give 2% of their GDP in aid of the poor ones. Firstly, this is a form of charity and not obligation as she claims it. Moreover, it is practically evident in developing countries that the vitality of NGOs in capabilities development that it cannot be ignored as insignificant.

It is worth noting, Nussbaum's theory is the first one that brings elaborate explanation to social justice. Moreover, this approach to human development, though having limitations such as limited scope and time and cost consuming since every individual member of the society is party, it may prove more helpful in achieving wholesome societal development that the general economic and material based approaches that instead of taking the country together, neglects the lesser and favors the greater. The limitations of this approach including a lack of a clear framework for implementation and a quantifiable lack of measure, may however undermine the implementation of this approach in addition to cost and time consumption. In a nutshell, it is important to commend the author for her contribution to development theory considering that it is here that she clearly introduces the social justice theory. This is an addition to literature and scholarship at large.

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