



Interview with Martha Nussbaum

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Ethics and Economics: *A number of your works are inspired by the concept of capability as presented by Amartya. Sen. Numerous researchers have conducted comparative analyses between your work and his. How would you describe your work in relation to his ?*

Martha C. Nussbaum: First of all, let me point out that the concept is actually far older than Sen. I trace it back to Aristotle, and there is a long left-wing Aristotelian tradition that has influenced both Sen and me. This tradition includes the humanistic early works of Marx and the works of British socialists T. H. Green and Ernest Barker. I began working on these ideas before I knew Sen's work, talking about Aristotle's political thought. So while it is correct that Sen introduced the concept into economic thought, he was not the first who introduced it into philosophy. There was already an interesting political use made of it by Green and other left-wing British liberals, who disputed the idea that freedom means letting parents contract freely for the labor of their children. They took a stand that split the British liberal party: favoring compulsory public education, they insisted that true freedom is a function of a person's capabilities, what they are actually able to do and to be. It is ridiculous to say that children are free if, due to lack of education, they are not able to have any real choices in life. This point was actually made already by Adam Smith: in *The Wealth of Nations* he praises the Scottish custom of universal education and attacks England, saying that the failure to educate working class children meant that their human powers are "withered and deformed." That is the key idea of the capabilities approach. Green and Barker then gave the idea of human development an Aristotelian flavor and connected it to the language of capability and human flourishing.

I give a lengthy account of the relationship between my work and Sen's in two places: in the introduction of my book *Women and Human Development* (2001), and in a recent article in the journal *Feminist Economics*, the special issue on Sen, vol. 9 (2003), 33-59, entitled "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice." To focus on the most important differences only: I use the idea of capabilities as the basis for a minimal theory of social justice. Mapping out an account of the Central Human Capabilities, I argue that a society that fails to secure these to people at some appropriate threshold level falls short of justice,

whatever other good things it contains. I argue that the ten capabilities on my list are inherent in the notion of human dignity, and a life in accordance with human dignity. I connect capabilities with the use of a political conception of the person that is Aristotelian rather than Kantian in spirit, focusing on need and sociability as well as rationality, and seeing rationality and bodily need as thoroughly intertwined. None of this is in Sen. He uses capabilities only for comparative purposes, and he has never pronounced on the level of capability that a society has to have in order to be just. I argue in the article I mentioned that if he ever does face this task he will have to enumerate the most central capabilities, something that so far he has done by example only. I think that our approaches are for the most part compatible, but I am interested in getting a definite account that can be used for the purposes of constitution-making, for example, whereas Sen is mainly interested in shifting the ground on which nations are compared with one another.

E&E: *It is common practice in economics to use the terms individual, economic agent and person without any particular distinction between them. You refer to the capability of a person. How would you define the concept of a person ?*

M.N.: I do not distinguish between "person" and "human being" as some philosophers, particularly in the Kantian tradition, do. I think all human beings, including those with severe mental disabilities, are persons with human dignity, worthy of inclusion, respect, and citizenship. I also think that nonhuman animals are worthy of respect, but I don't call them persons, because that would sound odd.

E&E: *You seem to reject the theory of a social contract as defined by Rawls. What are your reflections on his book *A theory of justice*, especially regarding his references to Kant which he developed in the 1980s ?*

E&E: I think that the theory of the social contract has made enormous contributions to political philosophy. So if I now am writing a book in which I engage critically with Rawls's version of it, it is only because I think so well of such theories, and particularly of Rawls's great theory. The differences that I map out are subtle, and it takes me 300 pages to say what they are, so it is very difficult to do that here. There are three problems that, following Rawls himself, I hold to be very difficult ones for a contractarian theory like his to solve: justice to people with disabilities, justice across national boundaries, and justice to non-human animals. He himself recognized that for various reasons these are problems, to quote him, on which "justice as fairness may fail." That means that they are also very revealing ones for the structure of the whole theory, and important problems in their own right. That is what my book in progress is about. Three areas of Rawls's theory are singled out for criticism: (1) his use of wealth and income (rather than capabilities) to rank relative social positions; (2) his use of a Kantian political conception of the person, in which moral rationality is the central attribute of persons; and (3) his acceptance of David Hume's account of "the circumstances of justice," in which a rough equality of power and ability is a necessary feature of parties in the original contract situation. All three of these features of the theory give us difficulties

when we deal with the claims of citizens with mental disabilities and the claims of non-human animals. The first and third cause grave problems for people with physical disabilities as well, and for thinking about justice across national boundaries.

E&E: *What are your reflections on the contemporary philosophy which focuses on the responsibility of the individual and as presented for example by Emmanuel Lévinas or Ricoeur or Jonas ?*

M.N.: I have never studied any of these figures in depth, with the exception of some parts of Ricoeur's work, in connection with a conference we gave here recently in his honor. (For many years he was a faculty member in my University, but he left before I arrived.) This is my deficiency, but I have to refuse to answer the question on grounds of ignorance!. Although the lamentable division between "continental philosophy" and "analytic philosophy" has lessened in recent years, and although the work of Habermas and Rawls crosses this divide quite easily, I fear that the figures you mention are still not really in conversation with ethical thought in the Anglo-American tradition. The only part of Ricoeur's work I studied in depth was his theory of tragedy, on which I wrote a little paper in a volume edited by John Wall. But that doesn't bear on his account of responsibility.

E&E: *You have also written about gender. Do you believe that we could draw up an exhaustive list of capabilities and that this list would be distinct for men and women ? What would be the base for creating such lists ?*

M.N.: My book *Women and Human Development* and the earlier book *Sex and Social Justice* are all about this question, so again, it is a little hard to give a succinct answer. But since capabilities, as I understand them, are like rights, that is, urgent goals that a society must secure to its citizens if that society is to be a just one, then of course all citizens should have these capabilities on a basis of equality. I emphasize the fact that often we may have to devote special effort or expense to producing capabilities in people or groups who have been persistent victims of discrimination: thus we might need to spend more money on educating women than men, in a country where women have traditionally not been equally educated. I don't think that my list of capabilities is exhaustive: it is not supposed to be. It is supposed to be a list of the most urgent things, without which no society can claim to be just. The basis is my argument that each of these is inherent in the idea of a life with human dignity.

E&E: *More recently, you have insisted on the capabilities of animals and their relations regarding man's well being. Would such a concept not jeopardise the concept of the person ? How could you bring together the capacities of the person and that of animals without decreasing the importance of the former ?*

M.N.: I think that both human beings and non-human animals are worthy of respect. The capabilities that one would protect for each species will vary to some extent with

the species, but there will be a lot of commonality. All sentient beings, for example, are entitled to a life with bodily integrity, health, freedom from unnecessary pain, the opportunity for affiliations with others, and the opportunity to play and enjoy life. I don't see why admitting that other species deserve respect jeopardizes the way we respect human beings. I think it actually helps us see what we are respecting when we respect a human being, namely, a certain type of living animal. We don't think well about ourselves when we cut ourselves off in an arbitrary way from the rest of the animal kingdom. Of course the decision to respect animals politically will give rise to some difficult conflicts. If we judge, for example, that medical research using animals will have to be gravely limited, we will forgo some benefits for human health. It is my hope that increasingly, as science matures, we will find ways of advancing research that do not use animals in ethically heinous ways. Research used to use human subjects (prisoners, for example, or people with mental disabilities) in horrible ways, and we stopped doing that! Right now, computer simulations increasingly offer prospects for ethically sound research that will still bring great insights. Once we recognize that there is an ethical problem in our use of animals, we will begin thinking more creatively about other ways to do the research.

E&E: *Do you believe that the ethics of responsibility could really help safeguard nature ?*

M.N.: I'm not sure what you mean by "the ethics of responsibility," and I'm also not sure what you mean by "safeguard nature," that is, whether you are focusing on animals, as I do, or thinking more of the environment in general. I myself have never taken a position on our duties to the environment more generally. In my view so far, although I hold this view tentatively and without much confidence, sentience is a necessary condition of moral entitlement. Thus insofar as we have duties to plants and the world of nature, I don't think of these as moral or ethical duties. Protecting the environment is very important for animals and human beings, and focusing on their interests gives us ample reason to work hard for environmental protection. But others, of course, believe that environmental protection is an end in itself. I look forward to pondering these arguments, and I might possibly shift my position.

SELECTED WORKS OF MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM

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