
In the realm of international policymaking, the capabilities approach has established itself as a leading perspective on wellbeing and justice. Martha Nussbaum, along with Amartya Sen, has been a premier architect of the approach, and in *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, she makes the approach accessible to a broad audience. The book aims not only to elucidate the central features of capability theory, but also to situate it with respect to its philosophical inspirations and competitors, and illustrate its applicability to various contexts of political concern. Readers who are familiar with Nussbaum’s body of work will recognize that much of it has been synthesized to achieve the aims of the book, and those who are new to the capabilities approach will find the book to be a wide-ranging overview.

Nussbaum’s central position is that as a matter of basic justice, each person ought to be afforded a minimal threshold of capabilities. The view thus involves a commitment both to a particular currency of justice—it is *capabilities* that must be secured as a matter of justice, and not other sorts of opportunities or goods—and to a distributive principle. Capabilities are the freedoms one has to make choices and to act in certain ways: in other words, to achieve certain functionings. Functionings include things like mobility, educating oneself, enjoying recreational activities, and participating in one’s political culture. Because individuals’ lifestyle choices ought to be respected, justice is properly concerned with whether people have the relevant *freedoms* to achieve certain functionings, rather than that they actually achieve those functionings. Citing Sen’s well-known illustration, Nussbaum points to the difference between a person who is fasting and one who is starving (p. 25). Both have the same functionings with respect to nutrition, but while the former has chosen his nutrition status, the latter has not. As this case further illustrates, one’s internal resources and external environment jointly shape what one has the freedom to do and be, so both are relevant to securing citizens’ capabilities in policy and practice.

Nussbaum’s particular brand of capability theory builds upon these basic concepts. To it, she adds her list of ten ‘central capabilities’, which constitute the minimum capability threshold that all governments ought to secure for their citizens. They include: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, the use of the senses, imagination, and thought, exercise of the emotions, practical reason, affiliation, interaction with other species, play, and control over one’s political and material environment. A necessary condition of a society’s being just is that each citizen has each of these capabilities in ample amount (“ample” being determined by each nation, in light of its particular cultural values and histories).

Importantly, the list is not intended to be perfectionist, and Nussbaum takes great care to address the criticism that it is biased toward Western values (in chapter five particularly). She aims to provide a “political” justification of the central capabilities, arguing that the list can achieve support from within various conceptions of the good (i.e., she believes it is capable of securing an overlapping
consensus, in Rawlsian terms). And, in deference to the sovereignty of individual nations, international coercion of a nation to implement the capability approach (whether through military or economic sanctions) is only legitimate in the gravest of circumstances. This is not to say that Nussbaum believes nations are the sole locus of moral concern. On the contrary, all of the world’s citizens are entitled to support. Further, the plight of poor nations can be in part attributed to, and ameliorated by, the activities of richer nations. In chapter six Nussbaum argues that some traditional approaches to global justice (namely those of Kant, Rawls, and Unger) present too thin a conception of international obligation, though her response to the problem of global justice is itself in its inchoate stages, and thus underdeveloped. Nussbaum emphasizes that in practice, she is skeptical of both a world state and international coercive measures, but it is unclear how far she thinks international obligations extend in theory.

In chapter seven Nussbaum explores the intellectual heritage of the approach’s central concepts, in particular the work of Aristotle, the Stoics, and Adam Smith and the American Framers. From Aristotle, Nussbaum draws a conception of human flourishing that is reliant on practical reason, but also sensitive to the varieties of human vulnerability. Human vulnerability introduces a need for governmental organization of sanitation and food supplies, education, and the arts, as well as the other services necessary for citizens to live the lives they deem good for themselves. To these ideas, the Stoics contribute an egalitarian conception of human dignity. Liberal enlightenment thinkers pick up these ideas and consider the purpose of government with respect to providing an environment conducive to human wellbeing. Nussbaum’s discussions of Adam Smith on the importance of education, and on Thomas Paine’s social proposals, illustrate the ways in which these thinkers were not adverse to government concerned with ‘positive liberty’, but rather in favor of it. Nussbaum’s capabilities approach draws on these ideas to formulate a metric for what governments should be seeking to secure for their citizens.

In addition to identifying the capability approach’s philosophical parentage, Nussbaum situates her view in contemporary debates concerning quality of life measurement. Her discussion of GDP and utilitarianism is particularly important, as the book motivates the capabilities approach as a serious challenger to those ways of measuring human development across the globe. GDP has historically been used by nations and non-governmental organizations to indicate their level of development, but Nussbaum argues that even if GDP has practical benefits that recommend it as a metric—it is transparent and easy to measure—it fails to capture what it means for people to have meaningful, dignified lives. Most importantly, along with the utilitarian approach, it obscures distributional inequalities as well as the multi-dimensionality of wellbeing. Instead, the capabilities approach emphasizes the importance of securing each person’s capabilities, and identifies the ways in which education, health, employment, and other areas of life combine to secure the conditions for a dignified human life. Further, unlike utilitarianism, the capabilities approach does not rely on a metric that is subject to malleability by social environment (as preferences and satisfactions can be ‘adaptive’), and rather than merely appreciating the instrumental value of freedom, the capabilities approach emphasizes freedom as an end.