

15 Nussbaum

1. Central Human Capabilities

1.1 Central Question and Ideas of Tragedy & Dignity

- Guiding question of Nussbaum's approach:
“What is this person actually able to do and to be?”
 - Human dignity: a truly human life is one where a person can develop and exercise distinctively human powers (reason, sociability, emotion), not merely survive like a well-cared-for animal.
 - Example: well-fed zoo animals live in comfort but lack many human-like capabilities (freedom of movement, choice, rich social bonds). Their lives illustrate loss of dignity.
 - Tragedy: When people lack the conditions to develop central capabilities, their lives are tragically stunted, even if they stay alive and feel “content.”
 - Central idea: certain capabilities “exert a moral claim that they should be developed.” Blocking them is a violation of human dignity.
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1.2 Examples of Central Human Capabilities (know at least three)

Nussbaum offers a list; these are separate, intrinsic components of a flourishing life. Know at least these four:

1. Bodily Health

- Being able to have good physical health, including:
 - Adequate nutrition
 - Basic medical care
 - Reproductive health
 - Shelter
- Without this, a person may survive but in a damaged, undignified way (e.g., constant illness, malnutrition).

2. Emotions

- Being able to:
 - Form attachments to people and things
 - Love and be loved
 - Grieve the loss of loved ones
 - Feel longing, gratitude, justified anger

- Nussbaum disagrees with the Stoics, who aimed to eliminate emotions like grief and fear. She thinks:
 - Rich emotional life is essential to being fully human.
 - Eliminating these emotions would impoverish a life, not perfect it.

3. Affiliation

- Being able to:
 - Live with and toward others
 - Recognize others as fellow human beings
 - Show concern, empathy, and compassion
 - Participate in friendships, family, and community
 - Be treated with respect, without humiliation or discrimination
- In work: being able to relate to others as equals, not as mere tools.

4. Play

- Being able:
 - To laugh
 - To play
 - To enjoy recreational activities
 - A life with no time or opportunity for play is missing an important dimension of human flourishing.
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1.3 Criteria for Being a Central Human Capability

What makes something count as a central human capability, rather than just a preference?

Nussbaum's key criteria:

1. Essential for a “truly human” life, not merely an animal life
 - These capabilities mark the difference between basic survival and a life worthy of human dignity.
 - If lacking them makes a life “more or less like an animal’s,” then they are candidates for central capabilities.
2. Intrinsic value, not merely instrumental
 - They are valuable in themselves, not only as means to other goals.
 - Example: Affiliation is not just useful for economic success; relationships and mutual recognition are part of a good life in their own right.
3. Foundational for pursuing any life plan
 - They are general preconditions for virtually any reasonable conception of the good life.
 - Example: Practical reasoning and basic health are needed to pursue any serious life project.
4. Cross-cultural resonance, tied to tragedy and human dignity
 - When these capabilities are missing, people across cultures typically recognize this as a tragedy.
 - Think of how stories of:

- Enforced isolation
 - Humiliating treatment
 - Starvation
 - Political oppression
- evoke a sense that something deeply human has been violated.
5. Politically justifiable as minimal thresholds
 - The list is designed for political purposes: to specify what a just society must secure at least to a threshold level for each person.
 - Not a full theory of the good life, but a partial one that many worldviews can endorse.
 6. Capabilities, not just resources or actual functionings
 - Focus is on real opportunities (what one is able to do/be), not:
 - Just resources (e.g., money)
 - Or actual choices made.
 - Example: It matters that a woman has the genuine opportunity to work outside the home, even if she chooses not to.
 7. Moral evaluation of abilities
 - Not every human capacity qualifies.
 - Only those judged morally valuable from an ethical point of view.
 - Example: Capacity for cruelty is a real human power but is excluded from the list.
 8. Each person as an end
 - Capabilities must be secured for every individual, not just for the group “on average.”
 - You cannot justify sacrificing one person’s basic capabilities for the sake of overall social gain.
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2. Incommensurability of Capabilities

2.1 What “Incommensurable” Means for Nussbaum

- The capabilities on Nussbaum’s list are separate components of a flourishing life.
- Incommensurable: you cannot compensate for severe lack of one capability by giving more of another.
 - No single scale of value on which all capabilities can be traded off against each other like money.

2.2 Key Claims

1. No substitution across capabilities
 - Missing one central capability is a serious loss that cannot be “made up” by excess in another.
 - Example:
 - High income cannot compensate for lack of political freedom.
 - Excellent health cannot compensate for forced social isolation or lack of emotional attachments.
2. Each capability has its own distinctive value
 - Each answers to a different dimension of what it is to be fully human:
 - Health, emotional life, social relations, play, etc.

- Losing one is not like losing a quantity of the same good; it is losing a different type of good.
3. Limits cost–benefit reasoning
 - Simple cost–benefit analysis encourages trade-offs in one homogeneous “currency” (e.g., money, utility).
 - Nussbaum’s view:
 - Pushing people below the threshold in any central capability is a tragedy.
 - That tragic aspect is not captured by merely summing or averaging benefits in other areas.
 4. Two “architectonic” capabilities
 - Practical reason and affiliation “organize and suffuse” the others:
 - Health, work, and play should be available in ways that allow reason and social interaction.
 - But even these do not reduce the other capabilities to mere means: the others still have their own irreducible worth.
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3. Objection to Life Satisfaction Theories: Adaptive Preferences

3.1 Life Satisfaction Theories

- These theories define well-being, happiness, or quality of life in terms of:
 - How satisfied people say they are with their lives
 - Or how well their preferences are fulfilled.
- Policy consequence: If people report high satisfaction, they are deemed well-off.

3.2 Adaptive Preferences

- Adaptive preferences: people often adjust their desires and standards downward to fit what they realistically can get in oppressive or deprived conditions.
 - People learn not to want what they’re systematically prevented from having.
 - They may come to accept humiliation, lack of opportunities, or discrimination as “normal” or even “good.”

Examples:

- A woman in a patriarchal society: - Taught from childhood that obedience and self-sacrifice are virtues.
- Comes to report being “satisfied” with a life with no education, no job, and no say in family decisions.
- The “zoo animal” thought: - Animals may be calm and content in captivity.
- But we still think it tragic that they cannot roam, hunt, or live their natural lives.

3.3 Nussbaum’s Objection Using Adaptive Preferences

1. Subjective satisfaction can mask objective deprivation
 - People who are deeply deprived of central capabilities can sincerely claim to be satisfied, because they have adapted to their circumstances.
 - Life satisfaction measures would therefore misclassify many unjust situations as acceptable or even good.
2. Loss of aspiration is itself part of the harm

- The process of adaptation—learning not to want basic freedoms, education, or respect—is itself a form of damage to human flourishing.
 - Life satisfaction theories take this damage as “evidence of well-being,” which is perverse.
3. Better question: capabilities, not satisfaction
- Instead of asking “How satisfied is this person?” we should ask:
 - “What is this person actually able to do and to be?”
 - The capabilities approach:
 - Can recognize that a woman or poor person may be subjectively content yet objectively deprived of crucial opportunities.

Conclusion:

Because of adaptive preferences, life satisfaction is not a reliable measure of human flourishing. We need a standard (like the capabilities list) that can criticize unjust, dignity-denying conditions even when people have adapted to them psychologically.

4. Objection to Hedonism: Good Pains and Bad Pleasures

4.1 Hedonistic Theories

- Hedonism: Well-being or happiness consists solely in:
 - The presence of pleasure
 - The absence of pain.
- All pleasures are treated as good (or at least good for the person), all pains as bad.

4.2 Nussbaum's Core Claim

- Not all pleasures are good, and not all pains are bad.
 - Emotional life is partly evaluated by its fittingness and moral quality, not just by how it feels.
 - There are:
 - Good pains: painful experiences that are appropriate or integral to a flourishing human life.
 - Bad pleasures: pleasurable experiences that reflect or produce moral failure and damage to flourishing.
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4.3 Good Pains: Grief and (some) Fear

A. Grief

- Grief over the loss of a loved one is:
 - Painful and distressing.
 - But an appropriate emotional response to something deeply valuable.
- It expresses:
 - Love
 - Recognition of the importance of the person lost
 - Depth of attachment and commitment.

- In Nussbaum's framework:
 - Grief is part of the Emotions capability and the Affiliation capability.
 - A person who never grieves may be emotionally stunted or detached, lacking full human connection.
- So:
 - Grief is a good pain—it contributes to a richer, more fully human life, even though it hurts.

B. Fear

- Fear can be:
 - Overwhelming and damaging (e.g., chronic terror that “blights emotional development”).
 - Or appropriate and valuable when proportionate to real danger.
 - Appropriate fear:
 - Protects Life and Bodily Health capabilities.
 - Shows realistic awareness of threats.
 - Motivates prudent action (e.g., leaving a dangerous situation).
 - Thus:
 - Some fear is a good pain, necessary to a rational, realistic grasp of the world and self-preservation.
 - Total absence of fear would be reckless, not ideal.
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4.4 Bad Pleasures: Pleasure in Harming Others

- Consider someone who takes intense pleasure in:
 - Cruelty
 - Humiliating others
 - Inflicting pain (a sadist).
 - From a hedonistic perspective:
 - This person is “happier” because they experience more pleasure.
 - Nussbaum’s view:
 - This is a bad pleasure.
 - It:
 - * Violates the capability of Affiliation (failure to recognize others as equals with dignity).
 - * Damages the agent’s character and emotional life.
 - * Harms victims’ capabilities (bodily integrity, emotions, self-respect).
 - Even if the sadist feels good, we do not judge that their life is going better in any deep sense.
 - This shows:
 - Quality and moral content of pleasure matter.
 - We can and should say: some pleasures make a life worse, not better.
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4.5 Summary: Why Hedonism Fails

1. Hedonism can't distinguish morally good from morally bad enjoyment

- Treats all pleasure as positive for well-being, regardless of its object.
 - Ignores the idea that pleasures can express cruelty, hatred, or contempt.
2. Hedonism can't account for the value of appropriate suffering
 - Views all pain as something to be minimized.
 - Cannot explain why a life without grief or courageously borne fear would be impoverished, not ideal.
 3. Capabilities approach evaluates emotions by their role in a dignified life
 - Emotions are central capabilities themselves.
 - They are assessed by:
 - Whether they fit the world appropriately
 - Whether they support or damage other central capabilities (affiliation, practical reason, etc.).
 - Thus:
 - Good pains (like grief and appropriate fear) are integral to flourishing.
 - Bad pleasures (like sadistic enjoyment) count against flourishing.
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4.6 Link to Nussbaum vs. Stoics

- Stoics: ideal is freedom from disturbing emotions (apatheia); emotions like grief and fear are seen as errors.
- Nussbaum:
 - Emotions are key to Emotions and Affiliation capabilities.
 - They embody judgments about what is valuable.
 - Properly cultivated emotions (with their pains) are part of a flourishing life.
- So:
 - Both against Stoicism and against hedonism, Nussbaum defends the idea that the right emotions—even when painful—are good for us, and the wrong emotions—even when pleasant—are bad for us.