

15 Nussbaum

Martha Nussbaum: Capabilities and Human Flourishing

(Exam-oriented, focused on the specified topics)

1. Central Human Capabilities: Key Examples

Nussbaum's central question:

> What is this person actually able to do and to be?

A person flourishes when they have real opportunities ("capabilities") to engage in certain central kinds of functioning. Blocking these is a violation of human dignity and is a tragedy.

You should know at least three of these central capabilities and be able to explain them:

1. Bodily Health (including reproductive health)

- Content: Being adequately nourished, having good health, including reproductive health, and adequate shelter.
- Why central:
 - A basic mark of a human life going well is that one is not constantly sick, starving, or unable to bear children safely if one chooses.
 - Without bodily health, other pursuits (education, work, relationships) become impossible or severely limited.

2. Emotions

- Content: The ability to love, to form attachments, to feel grief at loss, to experience longing, gratitude, justified anger, etc.; and not having emotional life crushed by terror, abuse, or neglect.
- Why central:
 - Emotions are part of what makes our way of living distinctly human (not "merely animal").
 - Nussbaum rejects the Stoic idea that emotions are irrational and to be eliminated. She thinks they can be rational, value-laden responses that are themselves part of flourishing.

3. Affiliation

- Content:
 - Living with and toward others, recognizing other people as fellow beings with worth, participating in social life, having compassion, friendship, and a sense of justice.
 - Being treated with respect, not humiliation; having the social basis for self-respect; no discrimination based on sex, race, caste, etc.
- Why central:
 - Humans are social; a life in which one is isolated, despised, or systematically subordinated fails to live up to human dignity.
 - Affiliation shapes other capabilities – e.g., work becomes fully human when it involves mutual recognition and cooperation with others.

4. Play

- Content: The ability to laugh, play, and enjoy recreational activities.
- Why central:
 - Signals that a person is not reduced to mere survival or labor.
 - Part of a genuinely human life includes leisure, joy, and spontaneous activity.

5. (Optional extra examples you can mention)

- Practical Reason: Forming a conception of the good and reflecting critically on one's life plan. Essential for autonomy and dignity.
 - Control over One's Environment:
 - Political: Participating in political decisions, free speech, association.
 - Material: Owning property, seeking employment, being secure against arbitrary interference.
 - Emphasizing these shows how broad and multi-dimensional flourishing is on her view.
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2. Criteria for What Counts as a Central Human Capability

Nussbaum is not listing all good things; she is picking a subset that are central. What makes something count as a central human capability?

Key criteria:

1. Truly human, not “merely animal” functioning
 - Central capabilities are functions whose presence/absence is typically taken to mark a life as distinctively human.
 - Example: Enjoying play, engaging in reasoning and social interaction, having emotional attachments.
2. Connected to human dignity

- A life without these capabilities is often described as “beneath human dignity” – like living “more or less like an animal.”
 - Denying people the opportunity to develop them is not just unfortunate; it is a moral wrong.
3. Have value in themselves, not only as means
 - Central capabilities are not just useful tools for something else; they are part of what makes a human life go well in and of themselves.
 - For example, affiliation is valuable even if it doesn’t lead to more income.
 4. Pervasive role in any reasonable life plan
 - Whatever else a person values (religion, career, art, etc.), they will need these capabilities as a background for pursuing it.
 - This makes them suitable as the basis for political guarantees in a pluralistic society.
 5. Cross-cultural resonance, often revealed through shared sense of tragedy
 - People from very different cultures can recognize certain deprivations as tragic: e.g., a child dying young, a woman denied any education, a person living under constant terror.
 - That shared reaction supports treating those areas as central.
 6. Ethical evaluation, not just any capacity
 - Not every human capacity goes on the list (e.g., the capacity for cruelty).
 - Only abilities judged ethically valuable are central; the list is guided by moral reflection.
 7. Capabilities, not just resources or actual functionings
 - What matters is what a person is really able to do and be (their opportunities), not:
 - how satisfied they feel, or
 - the mere presence of resources, or
 - whether they actually exercise the function.
 - Example: Freedom of religion is having the real opportunity, whether or not one uses it.
 8. Threshold for each person
 - There should be at least a basic minimum level of each central capability guaranteed to every person.
 - Falling below the threshold in any one central area is both unjust and tragic.
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3. Incommensurability of the Capabilities

Claim: The central capabilities are incommensurable.

What this means

- They are separate components of a good human life.

- You cannot compensate for the lack of one capability by providing “more” of another.
- There is no single scale on which health, political liberty, emotional life, etc. can be measured and traded off against each other like money.

Why Nussbaum thinks this

1. Distinct kinds of value
 - Health, practical reason, emotions, affiliation, political participation, play, etc., are each good in their own way and involve different aspects of humanity.
 - Losing political freedom, for instance, is not the same kind of loss as losing recreational opportunities.
2. Each is centrally important for dignity
 - Since each marks a dimension of living with human dignity, dropping below the threshold in any one is a serious moral problem.
3. Tragic trade-offs
 - Any political choice that pushes people below the threshold in any central capability introduces a tragic element — something irreducibly bad happens that cannot be “made up for” by gains elsewhere.

Example of incommensurability

- Suppose a government says:
“We will deny people freedom of speech and political participation, but in exchange we will give them excellent health care and high income.”
- On Nussbaum’s view:
 - This is not acceptable.
 - Political participation is a distinct central capability; its absence cannot be compensated by better health or wealth.
 - The people’s lives are deficient in a specifically political dimension of human flourishing.

Exam point: Be able to say:

> For Nussbaum, each central capability is incommensurable with the others; you can’t justify depriving someone of one central capability on the grounds that they have “more” of another.

4. Objection to Life Satisfaction Theories: Adaptive Preferences

Life satisfaction theories

- These theories say that a person’s well-being or quality of life is determined by:
 - how satisfied they feel with their life,
 - or how much their desires/preferences are fulfilled.
- Example: If a woman reports that she is “very satisfied” with her life, the theory counts her as flourishing, regardless of her actual situation.

Nussbaum's objection: Adaptive preferences

Adaptive preferences occur when: - People adjust their desires and expectations downward to fit an unjust, oppressive, or deprived situation. - Over time, they may sincerely report being "satisfied" with lives that are in fact severely constrained.

Examples (you can adapt these on the exam): - A woman in a patriarchal society: - Denied education, political participation, or the right to work outside the home. - Taught from childhood that a "good woman" is obedient and expects little. - She may report being "satisfied" and not wanting more, because she has learned not to expect or even imagine alternatives. - A chronically poor person: - May say they are satisfied simply because their aspirations have shrunk to what is minimally possible in their environment.

Why this is a problem for life satisfaction theories 1. They misclassify unjust lives as flourishing
- Because they focus on feelings of satisfaction, they ignore the fact that the person is objectively deprived of central human capabilities.

2. Preferences can reflect oppression, not genuine flourishing
 - If someone has internalized subordination, their "satisfaction" is evidence of successful oppression, not of well-being.
3. They do not ask Nussbaum's key question
 - Life satisfaction theories ask, "Is this person content?"
 - Nussbaum insists we must ask, "What is this person actually able to do and to be?"
 - Capabilities give a more objective standard that can criticize adaptive preferences, rather than simply mirror them.

Exam takeaway:

> Nussbaum argues that because people's preferences and reported satisfaction can adapt to severe deprivation, life satisfaction theories can declare oppressed people "well-off." Her capabilities approach avoids this by focusing on objective opportunities for central human functionings, not just on how content people feel.

5. Objection to Hedonistic Theories: Good Pains and Bad Pleasures

Hedonistic theories

- Say that well-being or happiness consists in:
 - pleasure (or enjoyment), and
 - the absence or minimization of pain.
- On a simple hedonistic view:
 - Any pleasure is good (for the person),
 - Any pain is bad (for the person).

Nussbaum's criticism: There are good pains and bad pleasures

Underlying idea: - Emotions and feelings are not just sensations; they embody judgments about what matters.

- Therefore, whether a feeling contributes to flourishing depends on its object and rationality, not just on how it feels.

5.1 Good Pains

Definition:

Pains that are part of a good, fully human emotional life because they are an appropriate response to something that genuinely matters.

Example: Grief

- When someone we love dies, it is appropriate and even good to feel grief:
 - It expresses our love and the value we placed on that person.
 - A person who felt no grief at the loss of a beloved friend or child would seem emotionally stunted or lacking in attachment.
- Thus:
 - Grief is painful, but it is a good pain—a sign of deep human relationships and appropriate emotional response.
 - A hedonistic theory that says “less grief = more well-being” misses the value of emotionally rich attachments.

Example: Fear

- Some fears are irrational and harmful, but appropriate fear can be a good pain:
 - Fear in response to genuine danger (e.g., fear when a child runs into a busy street) can:
 - * Focus our attention,
 - * Prompt protective action,
 - * Reflect our recognition of what is at stake.
- A person who never feels fear, even in genuinely dangerous situations, may be failing to register important risks and values.
- So again, some fear is a good pain, integral to a well-functioning emotional life.

Conclusion about good pains:

Not all pain should be minimized; some pains are required for flourishing because they are the right way to care about what really matters.

5.2 Bad Pleasures

Definition:

Pleasures that do not contribute to flourishing because they are based on distorted values or morally bad attitudes.

Example: Pleasure in harming others (the sadist)

- Imagine someone who sincerely enjoys:

- Inflicting pain on others,
 - Humiliating them,
 - Exercising cruel power.
- This person may feel intense pleasure, but:
 - Their enjoyment reflects a failure of the capability of affiliation: they do not see others as beings with equal dignity.
 - Their emotional life is morally corrupt, even if they are personally satisfied.
- Nussbaum's point:
 - Such pleasure does not improve the person's well-being in any worthwhile sense.
 - It shows a damaged character and an inability to live with others in a fully human way.

Conclusion about bad pleasures:

Some pleasures are not good for us, because they make us worse as human beings; they do not belong in a theory of genuine flourishing.

5.3 Why this refutes simple hedonism

1. Pleasure is not always good
 - The sadist's pleasure is morally bad and signals a flawed emotional life.
2. Pain is not always bad
 - Grief and appropriate fear, though painful, are integral to loving relationships and rational concern.
3. Flourishing depends on the reasons and objects of feelings
 - A theory of well-being must evaluate feelings by:
 - what they are about,
 - whether they express appropriate concern and respect,
 - whether they fit into a life that realizes central capabilities (especially emotions and affiliation).
 - It cannot simply “add up” pleasures and subtract pains.

Exam formulation:

> According to Nussbaum, there are good pains (e.g., grief and appropriate fear) and bad pleasures (e.g., the sadist's enjoyment of cruelty). Because hedonistic theories treat all pleasure as good and all pain as bad, they cannot explain why some pains are central to flourishing and some pleasures reveal a damaged character.

6. Nussbaum vs. the Stoics on Emotions (relevant link)

- Stoic view (simplified):
 - Emotions are irrational judgments and disturbances.
 - The ideal is to eliminate them (or greatly minimize them) to achieve tranquility.
- Nussbaum's view:

- Emotions like love, grief, fear, gratitude, and just anger are:
 - * Rational in the sense that they are based on judgments about what is important.
 - * Part of a rich, deep, and fully human life.
 - She therefore includes Emotions as a central human capability.
 - Her discussion of good pains (grief, fear) underscores this disagreement: removing such emotions would impoverish, not perfect, human life.
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Final Exam Tips

Be ready to:

- Name and briefly explain at least three central human capabilities (e.g., bodily health, emotions, affiliation, play, practical reason, control over one's environment).
- State Nussbaum's criteria for central capabilities (human dignity, truly human functioning, value in themselves, cross-cultural resonance, ethical evaluation, capabilities not just resources, threshold for each person).
- Explain incommensurability: why one capability can't just be traded off for another.
- Explain adaptive preferences and how they undermine life satisfaction theories of well-being.
- Explain why there are good pains and bad pleasures, using:
 - Grief,
 - Fear,
 - Pleasure in harming others (sadist), and show how this challenges hedonistic theories of happiness.