Teaching note for
Philosophical Ethics or Moral Philosophy Class

Discussing Martha Nussbaum’s Theory of Human Capabilities in Relationship to Virtue Ethics

Gregory Beabout
St. Louis University
Email: beabout@slu.edu

and

Patricia Johnson
University of Dayton
Email: Patricia.Johnson@notes.udayton.edu

I assign students a four-page version of Nussbaum’s work from the Harvard Human Rights Journal. Her basic formulation is available in a number of places. Instructors may find other versions more appropriate depending on how the discussion fits into the context of the course. Nussbaum is a legal scholar and political philosopher who makes human flourishing central in all of her reflection. Incorporating her work into a discussion of virtue ethics can help students address the issue of cosmopolitanism in relationship to virtue ethics. (This can be returned to when students read Kant.) Virtues must be formed in communities of practice. Yet, virtues are political and not simply personal. Nussbaum’s approach is compatible with much in Christian ethics and can be especially helpful in getting business students to think about how to measure human flourishing and who counts in the discussion.

In preparation for the class, have students complete the following reading guide:

Reading and discussion questions for Martha Nussbaum’s “Human Rights and Human Capabilities”

1. In your own words, explain The Capabilities Approach.

2. Why do capabilities require material and institutional support?

3. How does The Capabilities Approach address inequalities between nations?

4. What is the implication of The Capabilities Approach for non-human animals?

5. Reflect on each of the ten capabilities that Nussbaum identifies. Why is each important, according to Nussbaum.
6. Reflect on your own life and experience. Would you remove anything from her list? If so, why? Would you add anything? If so, why? If you would neither remove nor add anything, why do you think that her list is complete?

Positioning a discussion of Nussbaum after some work on MacIntyre might help students reflect on possibilities of dialogue between expressly Catholic theoretical approaches to virtue ethics and other approaches to virtue ethics. In thinking about how to direct a discussion that will help students connect Nussbaum’s work with Catholic social thought Maureen O’Connell’s work in *Compassion: Loving Our Neighbor in an Age of Globalization* (Maryknoll, 2009) may be helpful. O’Connell emphasizes that a capabilities approach resonates with Christian ethics “particularly as it is articulated by feminists who have consistently argued for the importance of individual dignity and sociality, autonomy and relationality, reason and emotion.” She believes that Nussbaum can be read as echoing John Paul II who understand life as meaningful activities that allow for “relationships with others and God.” She finds resonance in Nussbaum with the preferential option for the poor, and with the importance of empowerment in order to achieve social justice (116).