

Human Nature and Moral Principles¹

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Abstract

In broad general terms human nature matters to which moral principles we should endorse. Moral and political principles exist for the good of human persons. There is a link between our basic abilities as humans and the moral and political principles we endorse. Our basic abilities to live, love and choose should inform our judgments for preserving and fostering life, love and liberty.

Keywords: human nature, ethics, moral principles, abilities

Introduction

I argue in this essay that in broad general terms human nature matters to which moral/political principles we should endorse. Moral and political principles exist for the good of human persons. There is a link between our basic abilities as humans and the moral and political

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principles we endorse. Our basic abilities to live, love and choose should inform our judgments for preserving and fostering life, love and liberty.

The argument of this essay is developed in three major steps: 1) an overview of the debate between Antony and Nussbaum for seeing the difficulties and the possible breakthroughs in this area of thought, 2) an inquiry into our basic abilities for grasping a foundation for ethics, and 3) the link between this human foundation and our ethical judgments.

Antony and Nussbaum: Talking to Echoes and Responding to Shadows

The debate between these two scholars is unusual for overlooked historical reasons. Nussbaum published her major article on Human Functioning and Social Justice in 1992 and since then she published on this subject in several other essays and books.² Her position evolved and this is not reflected in Antony's critique, that is why, she feels disadvantaged because her continuous work is not taken into account as such. So, Antony talks to someone who is no longer there as such, but to an echo of the past. And when Nussbaum responds she talks, not based strictly on her stage at the level of 1992 but, as she understands the subject now; she talks to Antony that criticizes her views from which she shifted years ago. This memorable situation has to function as a waking call for anyone analyzing us, humans. We are not static but evolving, and we

² See the details in Martha C. Nussbaum, "Aristotle, Politics, and Human Capabilities: A Response to Antony, Arneson, Charlesworth, and Mulgan," *Ethics* Vol. 111, No. 1, (2000). 102-103.

should care about this when we try to understand each other. I see Antony as a scholar being in an unfortunate situation of not integrating Nussbaum's continued interest in the subject. Another unexpected fact is Nussbaum's confession of moving from Aristotelian position towards a Rawlsian position, and of the fact that her interest in Aristotle was mediated through Marx. Sayings like these are rare and very much appreciated.

Nussbaum's line of the argument, at the level of 1992, goes like this. There is a link between the way we function as humans and social justice. Her understanding of human nature is in essential aristotelian terms; by 'essentialism' she understands the fact that 'human life has certain defining features.'³ Her overall argument went like this: 1) even when essentialism is criticized there is a type of it that has to stay because is able to answer the objections, 2) this essentialism constitute the basis for social justice, and 3) compassion and respect are not possible without this type of essentialism.⁴ Human nature is seen at two levels by Nussbaum. The Level One is presented as a story that seems to be part of every human life. We find in every life the aspects of mortality, human body (hunger, thirst, need for shelter, sexual desire, mobility), capacity for pleasure and pain, cognitive capability (perceiving, imaging, thinking), early infant development, practical reason, affiliation with other human beings, relatedness to other species and to nature, humor and play, separateness.⁵ There are two sorts of items that give architec-

³. Martha Nussbaum, "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism," *Political Theory* Vol. 20, No. 2, (May, 1992). 205.

⁴. Martha Nussbaum, "Human Functioning". 205.

⁵. See Martha Nussbaum, "Human Functioning". 216-220.

ture of this list: limits and capabilities.⁶ The Level Two is presented as the aim for which a society should go as their citizens are concerned; it is about basic human functional capabilities.⁷ This list is kept together by practical reasoning and relationship to others; these two are used by us to prepare for the future. Our development is enhanced if we have these functional capabilities.⁸

I will not go into deeper details, at this stage of Nussbaum thinking, as I will continue to present Nussbaum's position as seen eight years latter in dialogue with Antony.

Antony criticizes Nussbaum at three major points: 1) because Nussbaum appeals to the 'audience's own values' her argument is internalist not externalist,⁹ 2) the second job Nussbaum wants her essentialism to do is not possible,¹⁰ and 3) the task of determining the extent of the moral community.¹¹

The first major point of Antony against Nussbaum is about the appeal made by Nussbaum to the values of her audience. This change from human nature to values tells us that her argument is not able to offer the purpose it was intended,¹² and the list of the human functions has

^{6.} Martha Nussbaum, "Human Functioning". 220.

^{7.} A list of 10 capabilities, Martha Nussbaum, "Human Functioning". 222.

^{8.} Martha Nussbaum, "Human Functioning". 222.

^{9.} Louise Antony, "Natures and Norms," *Ethics* Vol. 111, No. 1, (2000). 29.

^{10.} Louise Antony, "Natures and Norms". 31.

^{11.} Louise Antony, "Natures and Norms". 32.

^{12.} Louise Antony, "Natures and Norms". 29.

a questionable value and perhaps societies will not facilitate their exercise.¹³ The supposed need for essentialism was that it would lead us to have some 'kind of hard restraints on what counts as harm to human being.'¹⁴ Antony dismisses this type of argument because the notions of 'good' and 'good for' can go multiple ways. A bomb is good if it does the job for which was build or is bad because when goes off it brings destruction? It is both. If someone is willing to endure pain to achieve a greater good it is in the same time harmful and beneficial. So, Nussbaum's externalist account needs an internalist account too. Something counts as harm when it is explained by making reference to our own judgment and to others's judgments. But this understanding of others does not help us in the long run either, because what others say does not necessarily makes something morally wrong or good. What is needed is that we 'antecedently grant a thoroughly normative premise about the value of the producing consequences of a given kind.'¹⁵

The second major point of Antony against Nussbaum is about the fact that her essentialism is not able to do what she expects from it, namely to lead to moral judgments. Is it there a link between human functions and moral justice? Antony says that this link is missing from Nussbaum's argument. The example with the indian widows who seem to do not mind of being 'chronically undernourished' and cheated by 'their own lights'¹⁶ is telling. It can be seen that the desire for survival

^{13.} Louise Antony, "Natures and Norms". 29.

^{14.} Louise Antony, "Natures and Norms". 29.

^{15.} Louise Antony, "Natures and Norms". 31.

^{16.} Louise Antony, "Natures and Norms". 31.

has the power to overrun the injustice of being 'chronically undernourished'. Following the 'externalist' route we will not arrive at a 'basis for making normative distinctions among values.'¹⁷

The third major point of Antony against Nussbaum is about the task of determining the extent of the moral community. Antony says that this is 'the most vital of the three and the trickiest.'¹⁸ Because the externalist account of human nature is not able to deliver what it promises (the missing link between human functioning and ethical judgments) the moral community does not coincide with membership in the species of *Homo sapiens*.¹⁹ There is a gap between 'natural facts about human commonalities and properties that are morally valuable in order to derive anything about the normative community.'²⁰ This gap is there to stay because Nussbaum does not explain the link between my values about my life and 'the biological category that will classify me together with many others.'²¹ We do not live similar lives and this is based on our choices according which many kinds of lives are 'appropriate and desirable.'²² 'All nature can tell us is where we'll get the generalizations - the rest is up to us.'²³

^{17.} Louise Antony, "Natures and Norms". 32.

^{18.} Louise Antony, "Natures and Norms". 32.

^{19.} Louise Antony, "Natures and Norms". 32.

^{20.} Louise Antony, "Natures and Norms". 32.

^{21.} Louise Antony, "Natures and Norms". 34.

^{22.} Louise Antony, "Natures and Norms". 34.

^{23.} Louise Antony, "Natures and Norms". 35.

To these critique Nussbaum answers from the point of view she holds now. So, some shifts, development and refinement are in place in her answer. It is instructive to read the interpretation of an author done by that same author. Nussbaum's main points of departure will be those in the Rawlsian tradition of 'provisional fixed points,' and 'reflective equilibrium.'

To the critique that her account is inconsistent by sliding between 'internal' and 'external,' Nussbaum observes that Antony herself at the end of her article goes the same route of having them together 'if distinguished from one another and combined in the right way.'²⁴ Nussbaum's answer is that the reader has to see the difference in her method between what is internal in the thin sense (human beliefs and practices) and what is internal in the stronger sense (evaluative and ethical judgments); this is 'absolutely central to the holistic task.'²⁵ So, Nussbaum sees the evaluative ethical judgments as being on the same side as human beliefs and practices. Is this a misreading by Antony? Yes, because these two 'thin and strong' internal accounts are organically linked: one is streaming into another. Nussbaum says that she never claimed 'to be deriving ethical conclusions form nonethical premises.'²⁶ Her main point is that 'the concept of the human being is a thoroughly evaluative concept.'²⁷

^{24.} Martha C. Nussbaum, "Human Capabilities". 116.

^{25.} Martha C. Nussbaum, "Human Capabilities". 118.

^{26.} Martha C. Nussbaum, "Human Capabilities". 118.

^{27.} Martha C. Nussbaum, "Human Capabilities". 119.

To Antony's second critique about the fact that an internal account of human nature does not lead to ethical and political judgments Nussbaum agrees in one sense; ethical premises lead to ethical arguments.²⁸ But still, Nussbaum thinks that a concept of human nature can lead to 'more modest and realistic goal.' We are not in the ethical situation in which we know all our convictions and we know how to deal with all tensions between them; nobody is in this position.²⁹ That is why we need to work with 'provisional first points' of practical reason and sociability as 'extremely important aspects of an exercise that is truly human, permeating and organizing its many functions'.³⁰ So, to Antony's criticism based on an ideal situation, Nussbaum brings in the point of acting in reality according to which we identify some essential points that we can always revise/replace and test them in life situations.

What about biology? Nussbaum says that there is place for it at two aspects: 1) we are a certain sort of animal with 'dignity and rationality,' and 2) we have some 'innate equipment' that helps us to attain material support and care.³¹ Nussbaum major point of the link between 'basic capabilities' and 'moral concern' is brought to a conclusion.

^{28.} Martha C. Nussbaum, "Human Capabilities". 120.

^{29.} Martha C. Nussbaum, "Human Capabilities". 121.

^{30.} Martha C. Nussbaum, "Human Capabilities". 120.

^{31.} Martha C. Nussbaum, "Human Capabilities". 122.

Basic abilities as roots for ethics

We as human beings operate in a holistic way. Our actions are founded in us. The overall vision of some 'common humanity' and 'common ethics' is not a flawed account if we identify and test the following common elements: life, love and liberty; we have the ability to live, love and choose. From the debate between Antony and Nussbaum I learned about the multiple challenges such a vision faces. In general, a human being wants to live her life, to love and to be loved, and to be able to make her own choices. The elements of life, love, and liberty are both part of us, and also evaluative. And this can be a foundation for moral and political principles.

If I test them against the situation with the Indian widows that accepted to be chronically undernourished, they made that decision based on survival instincts. The desire to live and not to die overruled the injustice of being treated the way they did. Because we have the ability to choose we preserve the fact that we, as humans, consider as appropriate a variety of types of lives, and we move on with life for as long as possible. There is always the limit of death and we instinctively avoid that. Most of the time we have the possibility to choose to live as healthy as possible, to avoid dangers, to accept suffering and injustice for the purpose of survival.

We are social beings in search for establishing and developing relationships. This basic ability of love our neighbor is the interface for many ethical judgments. We are shaped in communion with others and

this is a two way street. We shape others as others shape us. Love is a medium of growth, as hate is a medium that diminishes us.

The ability to choose defines us in a very deep way. We learn in this way by experiencing consequences of our choices. In the same time this makes us responsible for our choices/actions. The ability to choose makes many types of lives possible for us in different circumstances. In a situation of danger we will choose to suffer injustice for the greater purpose of survival; in a situation of peace and prosperity we can choose to help others with our resources or to develop expensive tastes; it is up to us.

These basic abilities can constitute roots for growing ethical judgments. I understand them as follows.

Basic abilities and ethical judgments

Our basic ability to live is the root to our judgment of preserving life at all costs, both for us and for our fellow humans. Instinctively we fight for life. This basic/evaluative ability leads to the ethical judgment of preserving and fostering human life, regardless of the situation.

The ability of being with others and of developing human relationships is the root of ethical judgments of helping and supporting others. We go that far on this road that we establish families and bring others into this world. And then we are there for them in their growth and education and preparing for life. We are open to spend our possessions in supporting and caring for others. This basic ability of love streams into ethical judgments towards others.

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The ability to choose is very cherished. It offers us to live the kind of life we want, to go a certain path and experience the consequences of our choice. The ability to choose has to be limited by the abilities of love and life, that is why, we should not harm others, but support them and foster their lives and not endanger them.

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