

# MARTHA NUSSBAUM'S NON-ANTHROPOCENTRIC PHILOSOPHY?

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## **ABSTRACT**

Martha Nussbaum's recent engagement with ecological issues and her project of creating the list of animal capabilities attests to her growing interest in developing a non-anthropocentric philosophy. In her recent article "What Does it mean to be Human - Don't Ask",<sup>1</sup> published in NY Times (August 2018), she raises the problematic of anthropocentric thought. According to her, the question itself is a problem and it exposes human being's profound narcissism. She thus calls to cease such questioning. This paper, while recognizing Nussbaum's contribution in exposing that the way we ask the question about the human being already discloses our understanding of being a human being, attempts at analyzing the problematic in Nussbaum's call. More specifically, the thesis guiding this article is that the reflection on ecological, social, and political issues cannot exist without the reflection on the human being and his/her place in the world.

## **KEYWORDS**

Nussbaum, Humanism, Humanities, Narcissism, Capabilities.

One of the central problems in contemporary philosophy is the question of the subject. Indeed, in the time of fast-developing technologies of human enhancement, as well as progressing research in biology and genetics, the question "what is it to be human" seems urgent. At the same time, the majority of thinkers in the field recognize the problematic of the traditional anthropocentric approach to philosophy, whereby the human being was understood as a master of all creation - free to dispose of it at will. After the XX century philosophy's turn against human being's privileged place in the world, today more and more work is dedicated to the development of a non-anthropocentric view of reality.

<sup>1</sup> Martha Nussbaum, 'What Does It Mean to Be Human? Don't Ask', *The New York Times* (20 August, 2018).

Martha Nussbaum's recent engagement with ecological issues and her project of creating the list of animal capabilities attests to her growing interest in fostering a non-anthropocentric philosophy. In her recent article "What Does it mean to be Human - Don't Ask"<sup>2</sup> she raises the problematic of anthropocentric thought. She claims that the question itself is a problem and that it exposes human being's profound narcissism. She thus calls to cease such questioning. This call might come as a surprise, given that Nussbaum has been long recognized as one of the most important propagators of humanism and the humanities.<sup>3</sup> There appears to emerge a tension between Nussbaum's recent criticism of humanism and the humanism of her previous thinking.

This paper, while recognizing Nussbaum's contribution in exposing that the way we ask the question about the human being already discloses our understanding of being a human being, attempts at analyzing the problematic in Nussbaum's call. More specifically, the thesis guiding this article is that reflection on ecological, social, and political issues cannot exist without the reflection on the human being and his/her place in the world.

In order to inquire into this topic, the first part of the paper presents the claims of Nussbaum's recent article with relation to the psychological definition of narcissism. The second part, drawing on Nussbaum's previous publications - particularly *Cultivating Humanity* and work on the Capabilities Approach - argues that asking what it is to be human is central for Nussbaum's ideas of Socratic examination, dignity, and narrative imagination. Finally, it is proposed that human strive for self-understanding is essential for the furthering of the sense of wonder and responsibility towards nature and others. By the same token, ecology cannot exist without thinking about the place of the human being in the world.

## 1. HUMAN NARCISSISM?

Martha Nussbaum's engagement with animal issues can be traced back to her well-known *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. In the book, Nussbaum provides a criticism of Rawls' theory of social contract and

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Charles Taylor, in his review of *The Fragility of Goodness* appreciated Nussbaum for the "all-inclusive humanism" of her proposal. See Charles Taylor, 'The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy [Book Review]', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 18 (1988).

argues for an alternative view of social justice – the capabilities approach.<sup>4</sup> In a chapter entitled “Beyond Compassion and Humanity,” she also provides a provisory list of animal capabilities, and points to our duty to provide animals with their basic entitlements. In her recent article, Nussbaum announces that in her further writings, she will develop the topic of animal issues, and work towards framing a distinct list of capabilities for different species.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, she seems to take her previous considerations in a somewhat new direction and points that such work is often impeded by human interest with her/himself. She thus takes a critical stance against the question ‘what does it mean to be human?’ and indicates the dangers implied in such questioning. By doing so, she implicitly criticizes the idea of humanism. In the opening lines of the article, Nussbaum writes:

Over time, the idea of ‘being human’ has surely meant – and will continue to mean – many things. There is and has never been just one answer. But surely one thing it ought to involve today is the ability to recognize that the question itself is a problem. We humans are very self-focused. We tend to think that being human is somehow very special and important, so we ask about that, instead of asking what it means to be an elephant, or a pig, or a bird. This failure of curiosity is part of a large ethical problem. The question, ‘What is it to be human?’ is not just narcissistic, it involves a culpable obtuseness. It is rather like asking, ‘What is it to be white?’ It connotes unearned privileges that have been used to dominate and exploit. But we usually don’t recognize this because our narcissism is so complete...<sup>6</sup>

In the quotation above, Nussbaum highlights a number of consequences that stem from human being’s self-focus. First of all, she points out the problems of the anthropocentric view of reality. The idea that human beings are at the center of the universe, or that their needs and concerns have priority over those of other organisms, can serve, according to her, as a justification of man’s irresponsible exploitation of nature. Secondly, she points out that an overly rationalistic view of reality results in the incapacity for the sympathetic and respectful understanding of

<sup>4</sup> See Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> As of May 2019, Nussbaum appears to be pursuing her project. In a recent article in a Brown University newspaper, one of the student reports Nussbaum’s recent lecture, entitled “Creatures and Capabilities: A New Approach to Animal Ethics and Law,” where Nussbaum “argued that the capabilities approach could be used to develop a life-quality standard for animals based on generic categories such as bodily integrity and health, which emphasize personal autonomy. This framework could then be turned into policies that protect animal rights, which would be species-specific. Clara Gutman Argemi, ‘Renowned Philosopher Martha Nussbaum Addresses Animal Ethics’, in *The Brown Daily Herald*, (Providence, R.I., 2019), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Nussbaum.

other living beings. She contrasts this attitude with that of Aristotle,<sup>7</sup> whose works were accompanied by a unique sense of wonder, which enabled him to take an interest in all forms of biological life. The deterioration of wonder, which Nussbaum sees a central feature of our humanity, is the reason why today we fail to recognize the common attitudes of human and non-human animals, such as communal devotion, compassion, grief, and more. This lack of recognition, on the other hand, leads to animal cruelty. Nussbaum thus proposes to extend our sense of wonder and curiosity by reorienting the question that leads our reflection, from ‘what is it to be a human’ to ‘what is it to be a whale?’ Finally, Nussbaum links the two problems mentioned above – anthropocentrism and overly rationalistic view of reality – with human ‘narcissistic’ self-interest. She closes the article by re-affirming that human interest with her/himself interferes with his/her capacity to engage with large-scale ethical issues:

New issues arise constantly. The world needs an ethical revolution, a consciousness-raising movement of truly international proportions. But this revolution is impeded by the navel-gazing that is typically involved in asking, ‘What is it to be human?’<sup>8</sup>

Nussbaum thus criticizes human interest with him/herself as a means to justify human anthropocentrism and domination of nature, as well as arrogant exaltation of the possibilities of human reason. By doing so, she inscribes herself in a long tradition of critiques of the idea of humanism.<sup>9</sup> Her proposal is, beyond doubt, praiseworthy in its attempt to signal human beings’ increasing lack of empathy towards the world of nature and the tragic consequences of our selfish exploitation of our planet and its various inhabitants. However, is Nussbaum right in pointing

<sup>7</sup> Nussbaum wrote her doctoral dissertation on Aristotle’s *De Motu Animalium*. She developed her analysis of his observations of the biological world in *The Fragility of Goodness*. Although she gradually became more critical of certain aspects of his social thought (for example, his inability to recognize the full humanity of women or slaves), he remained one of her biggest inspiration on the topic of human as a rational *animal*. See Aristotle and Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Aristotle’s De Motu Animalium: Text with Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive Essays*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Nussbaum.

<sup>9</sup> Over the last centuries, many well-known thinkers have criticized the idea of humanism as anthropocentric, metaphysical, or overly rationalistic. Most well-known critics on this topic include to name but a few, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault. See Friedrich Nietzsche, M. Clark, and A.J. Swensen, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Indianapolis Hackett Publishing Company, 1998)., Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism”, in *Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (New York Harper & Row, 1977)., Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York Vintage Books 1973).

that the reason behind the majority of those problems is the human being's narcissistic question 'what it is to be human?'

In order to consider this question, it seems necessary to clarify what do we mean when we talk about narcissism. Narcissistic personality disorder, according to the American Psychiatric Association,<sup>10</sup> is characterized by 1) impairments in self-functioning in identity (an excessive reference to others for self-definition and self-esteem regulation) and/or self-direction, 2) impairments in interpersonal functioning in empathy and intimacy, and 3) it is accompanied by pathological personality traits, primarily grandiosity. Tendentially, narcissists' lack of self-definition, tied to lack of self-knowledge and self-acceptance, leads them to exploit others in order to affirm and sustain their idealistic self-image. So understood, narcissism has been long identified as one of the central problems in contemporary societies. Christopher Lasch went as far as to argue that the narcissistic personality disorder, after the political and spiritual changes in the post-II World War America, became a dominating *forma mentis* of an entire society – and he called ours a 'Culture of Narcissism.'<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, logically, opposite of a narcissist is a person with a developed personal identity and sane self-esteem, capable of empathy and humbleness.

With regards to our topic, if we ask "what is it to be a human being" in order to affirm our false superiority over nature and animals and exploit it, then Nussbaum is right at calling to cease such questioning. As she poignantly points out, asking of the question about the human being and the world is showing that the way we ask already discloses our understanding and has significant social, political, and ecological consequences. Asking what is it to be human, according to Nussbaum, exposes an attitude that is narcissistic, and leads to exploiting other forms of life. However, is the question itself always narcissistic? Should we cease to ask what does it mean to be a human being? Alternatively, perhaps we should consider a second possibility: that narcissism of human animals lies not in reflecting on what it means to be a human being, but in believing that only the existence of the human animal is a meaningful one and that therefore the human animal has the right to exploit other animals? Certainly, we can – and indeed perhaps we must – ask ourselves what it means to be a whale, but – since human beings are the only animals able to take distance from themselves and to reflect on the meaning of own existence – it would not be as a whale, but as a human being, that we ask this

<sup>10</sup> According to The DSM-5 criteria. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Dsm-5®)*, Fifth edn (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism : American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, (London: London : Abacus, 1982).

question. From that perspective, perhaps reflecting on the constitutive aspects of our humanity (and thus on ‘what does it mean to be human’) can, if asked in a mature, non-dominatory and compassionate manner, prevent us from lack of self-knowledge, lack of empathy, and grandiosity mentioned above as elements of narcissism and help us develop more just ecological and social policies?

## 2. NUSSBAUM’S PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

Nussbaum’s recent article seems to provide a significantly different perspective for answering those questions than her previous writings. Indeed, in her previous scholarship, the reflection on what constitutes our humanity appears to be central. Her numerous publications, such as *The Fragility of Goodness*, *Love’s Knowledge*, *The Therapy of Desire*, and more recently, her work on the Capabilities Approach,<sup>12</sup> are, to a great extent, fruits of her fascination with the humanness of Aristotle’s philosophy. Aristotle’s phenomenology, as opposed to the claim that “no human being is a good measure of anything,”<sup>13</sup> inspired Nussbaum to posit the reflection on “what it is to be a human being?” at the center of the search of the good life (*eudaimonia*) for the individuals and communities on both the personal and the political level. Nussbaum’s 1997 book entitled *Cultivating humanity. A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*,<sup>14</sup> as the title itself suggests, appears particularly useful for the analysis of this topic. In the volume, Nussbaum defends the ideals of humanism as a basis for the development of just societies. She argues in favor of liberal education for building contemporary democracies and presents three areas which she sees as essential for cultivating the humanity of

<sup>12</sup> See Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> This is Nussbaum’s quote of Socrates from the *Republic VI*. In *The Fragility of Goodness*, Nussbaum describes it (in a manner that is far from neutral) as “the cryptic transitional moment in *Republic VI*,” where Socrates claimed, “no imperfect being, *a fortiori* no merely human being, is ever ‘good measure’ of anything. Anthropocentric ‘laziness’ is no good basis for an ethical theory. Socrates had already, in the *Protagoras*, replaced ‘The human being is the measure of all things’ with the uncompromising ‘Knowledge [or: science] is the measure of all things’ (cf. Ch. 4, pp. II5, rzo). Now we learn his considered view about what this requirement comes to: from now on, only the ‘perfect’ (complete, needless) will be ‘good measure’ of value for the ideal city: far only from the undistracted viewpoint of perfection can truth be seen. Having agreed as much, the interlocutors move away from their former content-neutral picture of the good life, which rested on a merely human consensus, and strive towards the pure viewpoint of needlessness. Book IX is the result.” Martha Craven Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness : Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 156.

<sup>14</sup> Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

contemporary men and women: Socratic examination, world citizenship, and narrative imagination. The book was highly controversial and widely commented on, and has received about as many positive, as unequivocally dismissive reviews.<sup>15</sup> In the paragraphs that follow, we shall not analyze the accuracy or the political implications of the claims of the book. We shall, on the other hand, consider to what extent are the ideas contained in it related to the question of what it is to be a human being.

*The idea of the Socratic examination*

Before proceeding with Nussbaum's approach to the idea of Socratic examination, it is essential to note the context in which she coins that idea. When she published her first books in the 1980s and early 1990s, moral philosophy was dominated by theories, (which Nussbaum then called Kantian and Utilitarian<sup>16</sup>) which, according to her, largely overlooked the vulnerable aspects of the human condi-

<sup>15</sup> For instance, John Heath argues that "Nussbaum's attempt to "spin multicultural identity politics as Socratic examination and liberal education is a fraud, her argument redolent of the fifth-century Sophists who made the worse argument the better. Unfortunately, Nussbaum is a public intellectual with widespread influence, one whose patina of liberal values makes rampant careerism and intellectual dishonesty, and therefore her career and book represent a phenomenon even more dangerous than that posed by the many obscure theorists cashing in postmodernism for eminence and lucre." John Heath, 'Socrates Redux: Classics in the Multicultural University?', in *Bonfire of the Humanities: Rescuing the Classics in an Impoverished Age*, (New York: New Road Media, 2014). A similarly negative review is that of Bruce S. Thornton, who criticizes Nussbaum's inability to engage critically in the discussions on the concept of multiculturalism, for relying on anecdotal arguments, and for espousing political correctness of the academic elite. Bruce S. Thornton, 'Cultivating Sophistry', *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 6 (1998). On the other hand, Nicholas Burbules is delighted by Nussbaum's stress on the importance of rational thinking and practicing philosophy for all students, although he remains critical of Nussbaum's depiction of Socrates as a defender of democracy. Nicholas Burbules, 'Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education', (Cambridge: Harvard Educational Review, 1999), pp. 456-66. Jeffrey Roth praises Nussbaum for defending the ideals of multiculturalism, Jeffrey Roth, 'Can the Balm of Stoicism Salve the Wound of Multiculturalism? A Review of Martha C. Nussbaum, "Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education" (1997)', *Journal of Thought*, 35 (2000)., while Teresa Phelps underlines the importance of Nussbaum's engaging with the issues of the contemporary curriculum while drawing on classical authors. Teresa Godwin Phelps, 'Review of Martha G. Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, '(1998), p. 185.

<sup>16</sup> In *The Fragility of Goodness*, in a footnote on p. 6, Nussbaum points to: "our Kantian and Utilitarian heritage in moral philosophy."

tion.<sup>17</sup> They operated on anthropology which interpreted human being as a rational being, fully capable of exercising moral judgments, and for whom the domain of moral value was separated from other domains.<sup>18</sup> Nussbaum, having noticed that such account does not do justice to the complexity of human life and emotions, argued for a new anthropological conception of a human being as a vulnerable being. Her account was, to a large extent, inspired by the Aristotelian analysis of a human being as a rational animal: as a being vulnerable to own emotions and bodily appetites, to the events that he/she does not control, to conflicting values and commitments. Her stress on the role of emotions in our judgments about moral issues, as well as on the value of the insights of Greek tragedies for moral theory, has led some critics to define her work as anti-theory, anti-reason, or both.<sup>19</sup>

Writing the preface to the second edition of *The Fragility of Goodness*, Nussbaum has considered it crucial to distance herself from such interpretations of her work.<sup>20</sup> She underlined that her stress on the non-rational components of moral agents was not a matter of arguing against theory and reason, but rather, it was a matter of emphasis. On the other hand, she states that anti-theory and anti-reason claims are deemed to incite relativism, lead to the impossibility of critically assessing moral values and dismiss the possibility of coining a universal account of human nature.<sup>21</sup> Recognizing that accurate anthropology should accommodate both approaches, Nussbaum writes *Cultivating Humanity* – a book whose goal is, again, a change of emphasis. However, this time, it is a book in defense of rational thinking as a basis for humanity.

In the first part of *Cultivating Humanity*, Nussbaum defends the idea of rational thinking by recurring to the Socratic ideal of self-examination. The book begins with a quote from Plato's *Apology* 38A, whereby Socrates famously argues, during his process, that 'the unexamined life is not worth living':

<sup>17</sup> As she points out, "In contemporary moral philosophy, discussions of vulnerability and luck had been surprisingly absent at the time *Fragility* was published, despite their ongoing human importance." Nussbaum (2001), pp. Preface, xv.

<sup>18</sup> See *ibid.* p. Preface.

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.* pp. Preface, xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>20</sup> "In particular, I wish to distance myself from appeals to the Greeks that urge the rejection of systematic theorizing in ethics and of the Enlightenment goal of a social life grounded in reason." *ibid.* pp. Preface, xxvi. And "I have been quite astounded by occasional attempts to find such an anti-reason and anti-theory view in *Fragility*." *Ibid.* pp. Preface, xxvii.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* Nussbaum points out that it is the universal account of human nature that is the basis of her Capabilities Approach.



If I tell you that it is the greatest good for a human being, to engage every day in arguments about virtue and the other things you have heard me talk about, examining both myself and others, and if I tell you that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being, you will be even less likely to believe what I am saying. But that's the way it is, gentlemen, as I claim, though it's not easy to convince you of it.<sup>22</sup>

What is interesting to note here is that Nussbaum begins her book not with an account of her understanding of humanity, or a human being, but of a life that is good for a human being. A good life for a human being is, as she follows Socrates,<sup>23</sup> a life of examination. She understands this 'examination' as the attitude that questions the authorities, subjects them to the logical reasoning and assesses them according to accuracy. It judges various positions and "accepts only those that survive reason's demand for consistency and for justification."<sup>24</sup> Her focus is, therefore, to re-accentuate the importance of examination in critically assessing values, virtues, and traditions according to which one decides to live. Nussbaum's stress on the capacity of 'thinking for oneself' as the necessary condition of the good life, and her claim that the life of those who refuse the life of examination is "not worthy of the humanity in them, the capacities for thought and moral choice that they all possess,"<sup>25</sup> is a call against thoughtlessness. Nussbaum (perhaps somewhat similarly to Arendt<sup>26</sup>), seems to see the capacity of thinking as a means of not succumbing to ideologies, and therefore - ascribes it political significance. She is, nonetheless, far more eager than Arendt in pointing to one particular system as best suited to accommodate and promote the human capacity for examination - liberal democracy.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, she points to the life in the democratic plurality of values prone to examination as a life 'worthy of a human being'. Consequently, she argues, philosophy - the art of critical, logical examination - is a crucial element of education, since it attempts at forming individuals who "ask themselves what they really stand for, what they are willing to defend as themselves and their own."<sup>28</sup> Philosophy thus becomes a central (albeit not the only) means of helping individuals to live the good life. Therefore, in *Cultivating Humanity*, Nussbaum,

<sup>22</sup> Socrates, in Plato, Apology 38A, quoted in: Nussbaum (1997), p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Her account of Socratic examination, and Socrates as a defender of democracy has been subject to numerous criticisms.

<sup>24</sup> Nussbaum (1997), p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Rev. and enl. edn (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it has been noted (not without criticisms), that Nussbaum's Socrates is a promoter and defender of democracy as the best political system.

<sup>28</sup> Nussbaum (1997), p. 28.

drawing on account of a good life for a human being, coins her idea of a just society, and education necessary to sustain it.

However, how does she precisely coin the idea of a life ‘worthy one’s humanity’? Although she does not develop the basis of her considerations in the book, her previous writings may provide an answer. She bases her account of a flourishing life on what she calls Aristotle’s essentialism – the analysis of human beings’ essential functionings<sup>29</sup> that should allow us to “identify certain features of our common humanity.”<sup>30</sup> Analyzing Aristotle, she notes that

The *Nicomachean* discussion of the good life begins with an account of the specific and characteristic functioning of the human being, and, in effect, restricts its search for *good* functioning for us to a search for the excellent performance of these characteristic functions. (...) This sort of consideration leads us to the confusion that a search for the good life for any being O must begin with an account of the essential ingredients of an O-ish life and O-ish activity - those features without which we will not be willing to count a life as O-ish at all. And if the essential features of lives are not the same across the species, as it looks evident to Aristotle that they are not, then the search for the good life must be a species-relative, rather than a general search. I cannot choose for *myself* the good life of an ant, a lion, a god.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, as Nussbaum reads Aristotle, reflecting on the essential functionings of a human being is a basis of the reflection on the good life. Those considerations later became a basis for Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach. The following excerpt of the introduction to *Women, Culture and Development* – a book where Nussbaum coins the first version of the Capabilities – confirms the extent to which the Aristotelian approach has informed her writing:

<sup>29</sup> She underlines this claim against some philosophical conceptions, which she calls ‘metaphysical realism’, according to which “a human being is essentially and universally part of the independent furniture of the universe, something that can in principle be seen and studied independently of any experience of human life and human history.” She considers those conceptions to be the fruit of Western *episteme*. In opposition to that view, to reflect on the good life she espouses a particular kind of essentialism, inspired by Aristotle – based on the conviction that *phronesis*, not *episteme*, is a more pertinent knowledge to introduce into the realm of human affairs, and that our conception of the human being should stem from the analysis of *phenomena*. Martha Craven Nussbaum, Jonathan Glover, and World Institute for Development Economics Research., *Women, Culture, and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*, (Oxford

New York: Clarendon Press ;

Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 500.

<sup>30</sup> Martha Craven Nussbaum and World Institute for Development Economics Research., *Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach*, (Helsinki, Finland: The Institute, 1987).

<sup>31</sup> Nussbaum (2001), p. 293.

Here, then, is a sketch of the most important functions and capabilities of the human being, in terms of which human life is define. The basic idea is that we ask ourselves “What are the characteristic activities of the human being? What does the human being do, characteristically, as such – and not, say, as a member of particular group, or a particular local community? To put it another way, what are the forms of activity, of doing and being, that constitute the human form of life and distinguish it from other actual or imaginable forms of life, such as the lives of animals and plants, or, on the other hand, of immortal gods as imagined in myths and legends?”<sup>32</sup>

The similarity between the two quotations, written with an almost ten-year time distance, shows the permanence of her conviction that in order to provide an account of the good life for the human being, we need first to consider what is it that humans do that make them distinct from other species. In other words: analysis of human activities provides a basis for her political and ethical considerations.<sup>33</sup> Following those considerations, in her first works on Capabilities Nussbaum differentiates between the two stages of capabilities. The second stage is called “Basic Human Functional Capabilities,” and lists ten different capabilities at which “societies should aim for their citizens, and which quality of life measurements should measure.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the first argument for the reflection on constitutive aspects of our humanity is practical – the knowledge of what characterizes the human kind allows for constructing more accurate social policies.

Nonetheless, according to some critics, Nussbaum’s account poses a problem in that it appears to put too much stress on functionings<sup>35</sup> as a basis for ethical theory, and overlooking an account of universal human dignity. This problem becomes visible if we consider that the second stage is dependent of the first stage – which constitutes a list of certain characteristics that human beings must possess in order for their life to be considered ‘human’ (“a story about what seems to be part of any life we will count as human life”<sup>36</sup>) – Mortality, The Human Body, Capacity for Pleasure and Pain, Cognitive capability: Perceiving, Imagining, Thinking, Early Infant Development, Affiliation with Other Human Beings, Relatedness to Other Species and to Nature, Humor and Play, Separateness and Strong Sepa-

<sup>32</sup> Nussbaum, Glover, and World Institute for Development Economics Research. (1995), p. 504.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 515.

<sup>35</sup> Some critics point to the fact that Nussbaum espouses a functional approach to human rationality. They contrast it to a classical account of rationality, whereby rather than capacity, is a *way of being* – i.e., constitutes an essential feature of what it is to be a human being. See f.in Bernardini.

<sup>36</sup> Nussbaum, Glover, and World Institute for Development Economics Research. (1995).

rateness<sup>37</sup>. This list has been criticized for implying that a human being that lacks one of them is not human (for example, an autistic child).

In the later versions of the Capabilities, Nussbaum thus strives to provide a more inclusive, revised list. Nonetheless, as we shall see, her account of dignity remains a complex matter, which could be potentially clarified by a more profound reflection on ‘what is it to be a human being?’.

### *The question of dignity*

The question of dignity is directly related to the second feature that Nussbaum sees as central to Cultivate humanity, that is world citizenship. Nussbaum, who at this stage of her scholarship became critical of Aristotle’s account of human dignity, more specifically – of his inability to ascribe to female human beings, slaves and citizens outside one’s city equal dignity to male citizens of Athens,<sup>38</sup> resorts to another school of thought for guidance on the question of dignity – the Stoics.<sup>39</sup> Nussbaum is fascinated by the Stoic’s ability to recognize, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the common humanity of all human beings on the grounds of their capacity of rationality. On that account, the elite of Athens was granted the same dignity as slaves, women, and foreigners. Quoting Stoics argumentation in favor of female education, “That Women Too Should do Philosophy”, from the first century AD, Nussbaum finds their argument simple yet convincing: since women have the same number of senses, body parts, and can think and reason, they too should have the right to education. The similar argument is attributed to slaves. Finally, the same argument is attributed to fellow human beings inhabiting other places of the world outside the polis. Indeed, stoic philosophy of *Kosmu polites*, according

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. pp. 509-12.

<sup>38</sup> Nussbaum has intuited this problem already in *The Fragility of Goodness*. While she does not condemn Aristotle’s his method – she considers him unable to follow his phenomenology on this manner: “the method [analysis of phenomena] might, in fact, make use of deep beliefs about the importance of choice to criticize the actual social institutions concerning women. That Aristotle does not do this says less about the possibilities of his approach than about his own defects as a collector of appearances.” Nussbaum (2001), p. 531.

<sup>39</sup> Nussbaum has first presented her account of cosmopolitanism with reference to the Stoics in an essay “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism” (Martha Nussbaum, ‘Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism’, *Boston Review* 19 (1994)., which she wrote in response to the famous article by Richard Rorty, ‘The Unpatriotic Academy’, *The New York Times* (1994). Nussbaum’s article has caused provoked much discussion in its attempt to blend cosmopolitan and patriotic allegiances, has sparked the problematic of universalism vs. particularism debate, and the extent to which the ‘cosmopolitan view’ respects the local affiliations. I will not engage with those questions here. For a more extensive argumentation, see Martha Craven Nussbaum, *For Love of Country?*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

to which “the primary citizen allegiance is not to a single state government or temporal power, but rather to a moral community deeply committed to a fundamental respect for humanity”<sup>40</sup> constitute, as Ayaz Naseem and Hyslop-Margison point out, a basis for Nussbaum’s account of humanity as world-citizenship. For her, however, world-citizenship is an account of dignity rooted in the Stoics’ belief in “each person’s capacity of recognizing and respecting the humanity of our fellow human beings, no matter where they are born, no matter what social class they inhabit, and no matter what their gender or ethnic origin,”<sup>41</sup> rather than a political view (indeed she later deeply criticizes an idea of the world state, for instance in *Frontiers of Justice*<sup>42</sup>). Therefore, drawing on the stoic account of rational capacity, Nussbaum coins her account of the equal dignity of all beings.

Nonetheless, for the Stoics, as Zeno observed “All people embodied the divine spark and all were capable of logos, divine reason,”<sup>43</sup> which therefore constitutes an ontological feature of a human being, whose external manifestations are only secondary.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, Paola Bernardini notices a stark contrast between Nussbaum’s account of reason as a function and the classical account of reason as an ontological feature, and writes that:

Nussbaum, for example, does not conceive of reason as a structural, ontological feature of the human being, as that part of the soul, which exercise thought (in the way Aristotle does). Rather she identifies reason with some of its manifestations: like, for instance, the capacity to form a conception of the good and plan one’s life. A capacity which, in the classical tradition, constitutes only a secondary perfection: deriving its worthiness, like all other capabilities (be they acquired or innate), from the primary perfection, or substance (the soul, or psyche) of which it is a contingent manifestation.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> M. Ayaz Naseem & Henry Hyslop-Margison, ‘Nussbaum’s Concept of Cosmopolitanism: Practical Possibility or Academic Delusion?’, *Paideusis*, 15 (2006), 52.

<sup>41</sup> Nussbaum (1997).

<sup>42</sup> “A world state would be very unlikely to have a decent level of accountability to its citizens. It is just too vast an undertaking ... (it) would also be dangerous. If a nation becomes unjust, pressure from other nations may prevent it from committing heinous crimes (...). If the world state should become unjust, there would be no corresponding recourse; the only hope would be rebellion from within (...). Moreover, even if these problems could be overcome, there is a deep moral problem with the idea of a world state, uniform in its institutions and requirements. National sovereignty (...) has moral importance, as a way people have of asserting their autonomy, their right to give themselves laws of their own making.” Nussbaum (2006), pp. 313-14.

<sup>43</sup> Cohen & Fine, “Four cosmopolitan moments,” quoted in Hyslop-Margison, p. 52.

<sup>44</sup> See Paola Bernardini, ‘Human Dignity and Human Capabilities in Martha C. Nussbaum’, *Iustum Aequum Salutare*, 6 (2010).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p. 49.

What stems from it is a question, to what extent is Nussbaum's account of human dignity inclusive of all human beings? Nussbaum does not seem to have a clear stance on that matter, which is particularly visible in her works on Capabilities. More specifically, it is not clear whether Nussbaum employs the concept of human dignity as preceding the capabilities, or if the capabilities are a constitutive element in human dignity.<sup>46</sup> On this account, dignity would be species-related. On the one hand, Nussbaum claims that dignity is prior to the capabilities and that it is species-related when she claims "We should bear in mind that any child born into a species has the dignity relevant to that species, whether or not it seems to have the basic capabilities' relevant to that species. For that reason, it should also have all the capabilities relevant to that species, either individually or through guardianship."<sup>47</sup> However, on the other, she also claims: "Dignity is not defined prior to and independently of the capabilities, but in a way intertwined with them and their definition."<sup>48</sup> As well as: "It is also argued that dignity is not a value independent of the capabilities, but that the articulation of the political principles involving capability are (partial) articulations of the notion of a life with human dignity."<sup>49</sup> On this second account, dignity is dependent on the capabilities, and it would be therefore possible for a person to lose one's dignity, for example, due to illness, accident, and more. It would also deny dignity to people born with severe mental impairments. Finally, in this second sense, it is not clear whether a very young child, or a senior possesses the same dignity as an adult human being, or even, in some cases, as an adult animal.<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, the idea of dignity, which Nussbaum bases on the Stoic account of rationality, is central to her work on capabilities. Nonetheless, her understanding of dignity is somewhat confusing and inconsistent – once it appears to precede capabilities, and once it appears to result from them. What is the reason behind this confusion? Mary Leukam provides an exciting insight when she points to the problematic of distinguishing between two crucial aspects: "Nussbaum could claim that being a dignified human and having a life worthy of human dignity are separate claims, but it is far from clear what Nussbaum has in mind."<sup>51</sup> According to

<sup>46</sup> For a thorough analysis of this topic, see Mary Leukam, 'Dignified Animals: How "Non-Kantian" Is Nussbaum's Conception of Dignity?', (Georgia State University, 2011).

<sup>47</sup>Nussbaum (2006), p. 347.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 162.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Nussbaum sometimes makes some unfortunate claims such as: "Capacities crisscross and overlap; a chimpanzee may have more capacity for empathy and perspectival thinking than a very young child, or an older autistic child." Ibid. p. 363.

<sup>51</sup>Leukam, p. 34.

Leukam, it appears that this confusion stems from not devoting enough attention to the distinction between what it is to be human, and what it is to live a life worthy of a human. The intuition of this distinction is present in Nussbaum's definition of the capabilities approach as "what people are actually able to do and to be, in a way informed by an intuitive idea of *the dignity of the human being*. I identify a list of central human capabilities, arguing that all of them are implicitly in the idea of a *life worthy of human dignity*."<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, it is not developed further, and - as we have seen in the previous paragraph - leads to misunderstandings. Nussbaum's account of dignity in her work on capabilities could benefit from devoting more attention to the distinction between the idea of a human being and the good life for the human being. Here, therefore, is the second argument why it is crucial to ask the question what it means to be a human being - such a reflection is central for the conception of universal human dignity and could contribute to a more accurate account of thereof. On the other hand, this conception is in danger and prone to deviations if we cease to ask this question.

### *Narrative imagination*

Finally, Nussbaum in *Cultivating Humanity* considers the third essential element of her conception of humanism - Narrative Imagination. In the third chapter, she makes valuable and exciting contributions in pointing that narrative imagination is inseparable from the idea of human dignity. Narrative imagination, for Nussbaum, means "The ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of someone different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have."<sup>53</sup> Therefore, she sees it as the capacity to put oneself in the position of another and empathize with them. Without this capacity, as Nussbaum poignantly shows, dignity would remain an abstract notion, converted, at best, into disinterested tolerance towards fellow human beings.

For this reason, the idea of narrative imagination is more than a way to make us more empathetic - it is central to Nussbaum's idea of humanism and the politics of humanism. Asked, in a recent interview, what are, for her, some of the ideals and principles of a politics of humanism, Nussbaum answered:

I think that the two main ingredients of a politics of humanism are equal respect for persons and a careful use of sympathetic imagination. The two have to work together, since we cannot know what it is to give equal respect to per-

<sup>52</sup> Nussbaum (2006), p. 70. My emphasis.

<sup>53</sup> Nussbaum (1997), pp. 10-11.

sons without some understanding of what they are pursuing and what would make their lives flourish.<sup>54</sup>

It is perhaps at this point that she most directly touches upon the problematic of inquiring into ‘what is it to be a human being.’ Only the understanding of what it is to be someone other than myself, and, therefore, understanding humanness from a broader perspective than my own, can allow us to appreciate the humanity of another human being. To read into the other’s story is perhaps not exclusive to, but surely most central to, the humanities – literature and the arts. According to Nussbaum, those disciplines facilitate the understanding of our common humanity, grasping “from our frequently obtuse and blunted imaginations an acknowledgment of those who are other than ourselves, both in concrete circumstances and even in thought and emotion.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, they allow us to overcome our limited perspective by enlarging our understanding of ‘what it is to be a human being.’ In her book, as well as in her later *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*<sup>56</sup>, Nussbaum provides further arguments of how the study of literature and the arts allows us to develop the capacities of wonder, compassion, refusal of retributive anger<sup>57</sup> – the importance of which she has pointed in the NY Times article. On the other hand, refusal of such inquiry would surely limit, if not impede, the understanding of ourselves and, by the same token, the understanding of another. It would, as we may contend based on our previous considerations, lead to further development and expansion of the narcissism that Nussbaum rightly highlights as one of the most burning problems of contemporary humans. As a result, our capability of being in the world, both with other human beings and with animals, would be diminishing.

<sup>54</sup> Rajgopal Saikumar, ‘For a Politics of Humanism’, *The Hindu*, (2016) <<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/for-a-politics-of-humanism/article7032652.ece>> [accessed May 15, 2019].

<sup>55</sup> Nussbaum (1997), pp. 111-12.

<sup>56</sup> See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit : Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Updated edition. edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>57</sup> For further considerations on the topics of anger and fear, see Nussbaum’s recent publications: Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness : Resentment, Generosity, Justice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Martha Craven Nussbaum, *The Monarchy of Fear : A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis*, First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition. edn (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).



### 3. CONCLUSION

Nussbaum's contribution to the asking of the question about the human being and the world shows that the way we ask already discloses our understanding and has significant social, political, and ecological consequences. Nonetheless, Nussbaum's dismissal of the question 'what is it to be human' as narcissistic, and leading to the exploiting of other forms of life, raises certain problems.

Nussbaum's growing sensitivity toward ecological and climate issues demonstrates a significant shift from her previous writings whereby she has brilliantly pointed that the reflection on what it is to be human, and what is the human being's place in the world, constitutes a basis for the reflection on social, political, and ecological issues. Perhaps, by contributing to promoting the sympathetic understanding of other human beings, animals, and the environment, such reflection could open the possibility of the development of a new, non-narcissistic, and non-anthropocentric humanism.

Beyond doubt, this complex matter calls for further scrutiny. For now, it will be interesting to observe the development of Nussbaum's thought. Her reflection on ecological issues might lead to an ecology without the human being.

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