Nussbaum’s List

Main ideas

1. Some functions are necessary for a “fully human” life. “Fully human” means ‘worthy of a human being’ or ‘dignified,’ I think. It is contrasted with the merely animal.

2. Public policy should provide the "social basis" for the capabilities to perform these functions.

3. Grounding. The list of capabilities is a “political” one, meaning it is acceptable to a wide variety of philosophies for the purposes of guiding public policy. Contrast: a 'non-political' theory is derived from premises about the ultimate good and/or applies to private as well as public life.¹


5. Since it’s just capabilities, rather than the exercise of those capabilities (“functioning” in the jargon used here), there's no objectionable coercion.

Contrast with …

1. GNP. Insensitive to distribution.

2. Utility (subjective welfare). Overly sensitive to adaptation (pp. 62–3).

3. Rawls (resources, stuff). Insensitive to different needs in different conditions: children vs. adults, pregnant vs. non-pregnant, paralyzed vs. able-bodied (p. 68).

¹ The source for these ideas is John Rawls, Political Liberalism (Columbia University Press, 1993). In earlier articles, Nussbaum derived her list from some doctrines found in Aristotelian philosophy. See Nussbaum, “Human functioning and social justice: In defense of Aristotelian essentialism” Political Theory (2002) 20(3):202–246. When presented that way, the list was not political, in the specialized sense under discussion here.