

Hobbes, Nussbaum, and All Seven of the Virtues

Deirdre McCloskey (Discussant)

Martha Nussbaum's new book *Frontiers of Justice* (2006) is an attempt to add a bit of love to the strict Hobbesian/Gauthieresque contractarian's 'Prudence Only' or the Lockean/Rawlsian contractarian's 'Prudence-With-A-Bit-of-Justice' (Gauthier, 1986; Hobbes, 1651). I do not wish to parody her views. But as a very brief version I think she will agree that that is what she is doing. Nussbaum says that doing so will preserve the contractarian programme in political philosophy — the masculine 'strength' and parsimony of which she sometimes admires — yet yield a civil society in which the severely handicapped, the old, foreigners in poor countries, and animals will be treated with appropriate dignity. I admire her project and the book.

Throughout the book she defers to John Rawls, whom she evidently admires very much (Rawls, 1971). In criticizing Gauthier's strict, Prudence-Only contractarianism, though, she makes a point that clearly applies also to Rawls: 'I think it implausible to suppose that one can extract justice from a starting point that does not include it in some form, and I believe that the purely prudential starting point is likely to lead in a direction that is simply different from the direction we would take if we focused on ethical norms from the start' (Nussbaum, 2006: 57). That is quite right, and is — as she shows in the book — devastating to the project since 1651 of attempting to pull a just rabbit out of a purely prudential hat. But my point, and hers in effect throughout, in spite of her respectful bows to Rawls, is that her point also applies to Rawls's argument, in which as she notes Prudence is supplemented by the Justice-imitating features of the Veil. That is: it is implausible, as can be shown on a blackboard or in actual societies depending on one's intellectual tastes, to suppose that one can extract full justice to the handicapped, the globally poor, or animals from a starting point that does not include love and full justice in some form.

The technical point is that this Nussbaum Lemma (namely, 'I think it implausible', etc.) applies also to her own project in her book. *You can't stop with Prudence, Justice, and a Bit of Love*. That is, it is implausible to suppose that one can extract Faith, Temperance, Hope, Courage, the fullness of Love, and other qualities constituting human flourishing from a starting point that does not include them in some form, and it seems likely that attempting to

do so will lead in a direction that is simply different from the direction we would take if we focused on ethical norms from the start.

But the larger point that comes out of such a technical, judo-type move (the sort that philosophers love most of all!) is more important, and strange. The virtues we wish for in complete and flourishing human beings are prudence, temperance, justice, courage, love, faith, and hope. I argue — at 600-page length in my book *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce* (McCloskey, 2006a), and more briefly in the Buchanan Lecture (McCloskey, 2006b) — that these seven are a roughly adequate philosophical psychology. But any full description of the human virtues would do as well, such as those Irene van Staveren discusses in her 2001 volume, *The Values of Economics: An Aristotelian Perspective*. Since Martha Nussbaum herself is, like van Staveren and me following her, within an Aristotelian (against the Oneness of Plato) perspective, she agrees with such multiple-valued talk. After all, it is the point of the Sen/Nussbaum capabilities approach(es).

The description has to be full, however. Characterizing humans as Prudent Only, or even as Prudent and Just with a Bit of Love, will not do. People also have identities (faith), and projects (hope), for which they need courage and temperance, those self-disciplining virtues, and they all have some version of transcendent love — for God, as the traditional object, or for science or humanity or the revolution or the environment or art, which have provided modern substitutes.

Suppose you have in mind a fully flourishing human (or living being, if we include the animals and even the trees). I am beginning to think that if this is our intended end, namely, a society consisting of such beings, then our social-scientific means must, as Nussbaum says, ‘focus on ethical norms from the start’. That is, to have a society that shows prudence, justice, love, faith, hope, courage, and temperance we need to arrange to have people who are . . . prudent, just, loving, faithful, hopeful, courageous, and temperate ‘from the start’. The ‘start’ is called ‘childhood’, mostly ignored in Western political philosophy (unlike, by the way, in the Confucian tradition). That is, our political/economic philosophy needs to focus on how we get the people who are prudent, just, loving, etc. This of course is exactly what feminist economics has been saying now for two decades, and what also comes out of development [note the word] economics, and even indirectly and reluctantly out of such unpromising-looking fields as game theory, experimental economics, and the new institutionalism.

You might well say, ‘So what else is new? We need people who are ethical if we are to have an ethical society, and the people learn to be ethical as kids’. I agree. But we need to recognize that our intellectual tradition in economics, or in most political philosophy, does *not* wish to acknowledge all the virtues in a flourishing being. It wants to reduce the virtues to one, ideally Prudence. Economics since Bentham has been the pure theory of prudence, which is why econo-wannabes like political scientists and political theorists get so

excited when economists suggest that *all* you need is Prudence. If it can't get away with that, it will add in Rawlsian style a mechanism to imitate Justice. If it can't get away with that, it will add a Bit of Love, as Martha Nussbaum does.

All this 'if it can't get away with. . .' suggests, just as the Nussbaum Lemma avers, that the project is mistaken. It is *not* a good idea to start with a parsimonious (i.e. Platonic) description of human beings. There is no 'strength' here in Ockam's Razor (*Essentia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*: Essences must not be multiplied more than is necessary — well, all right, not more than is *necessary*; but the Seven Virtues, or some other rich, Aristotelian description of the flourishing life, *are* each necessary).

Looking at the matter this way undermines the Prudence-Only, invisible-hand arguments that have fascinated us since Mandeville. As Smith said in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), the invisible hand will not produce humans if we start where Mandeville starts, with selfish prudence only. Oddly, an older view is reinstated. The wider our list of virtues for flourishing — that is, the wider our list of capabilities — the stronger is the Nussbaum Lemma — that is, the more and more implausible does it become that some 'immensely simple theory' (as Bernard Williams, 1985, put it) will turn out to give a human society. In other words, the civic republican notion that the way to have a good society is to make a bunch of good people — which seems very naive in the light of invisible hand liberalism — turns out to be much more plausible than we liberals thought.

In other words, an economics that takes human flourishing seriously should start — and finish, since by the Nussbaum Lemma they end up pretty much the same — with the virtues. All the necessary virtues: not just Prudence, certainly. But also not, as in Nussbaum, just Prudence, Justice and a Bit of Love.

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