

On the Concept of Dignity in the Capability Approach

Asya Asenova Markova, New Bulgarian University, Bulgaria; asyarkova@gmail.com

The central task of my doctoral research project is to develop a distinctive account on the philosophical uses of the concept of dignity, which is a key-concept in Martha Nussbaum's philosophical version of the capability approach. With regard to the role of this concept as foundational point of reference for all central claims, I think that we should not neglect the lack of a systematical and exhaustible account on what human dignity exactly means .

Due to the central role of that concept in the capability approach, I disagree with Nussbaum who seems to assume that it is enough to have only an intuitive understanding of that concept.

Reconstructing the Concept of Dignity

Of course, in my work I going first to systematize the implicit and explicit uses of the concept in the framework of the Capability Approach. However, in order to elaborate on that concept I going to focus on how that concept has been developed within the philosophical tradition of the Personalism, where "dignity" is a central and constant theme. Here I will refer for example to Gabriel Marcel's "Willi Jes's Lectures", published under the title "The existential background of human dignity". It seems to me that these lectures can contribute very much to the clarification of the concept of human dignity, because they put it in different theoretical contexts. I find for example very fruitful the personalist defending of human dignity against those philosophical movements, which subordinate the individual upon anonymous collective forces, and which thereby function as forms of dehumanization. Gabriel Marcel uses the term as a result of what he

nes “the spirit of abstraction”. By this he means “the inability to treat human being as human being and for this human being the substituting of a certain idea, a certain abstract designation”. It seems that the figure of dehumanization is common place for attacks of all of personalist. They all criticize these figures insisting on the idea of absolute human dignity and the inter-relational kernel of the human personality. Regarding the critique on the economic utilitarianism in the capability approach I think that it could be very instructive to see how personalists use the figure of dehumanization to criticize both the radical forms of collectivism and individualism. According to the personalists both collectivism and individualism do not grasp the dual nature of human beings as having inviolable dignity as separate persons and in the same time as having an essential social relationality. According to the tradition of personalism, humanity is characterized on the one hand by terms like uniqueness, freedom, self-consciousness, inner life, transcendence, the ability of self-determination, and creativity, and by the principle of essential relationality on the other, expressed in terms like solidarity and fraternity. Here the Other appears as a gift, as “the other of myself”. This core dimension of human inert-personality, as basic condition of dignity cannot be grasped by the utilitarian approach.

In my work I will carry out systematic conceptual analyses on the various links between the concept of dignity and several motives and arguments in the personalism I only sketched here. However, I also realize that the personalism is in fact very pluralistic and sometimes eclectic, so it would be difficult to reconstruct coherent lines of using the concept of dignity. Nevertheless I think that it is important to investigate that alternative context of use of the concept, in order to develop different perspectives on it. I believe that despite the more or less fragmentary definitions of the concept in this tradition, we could achieve a coherent reconstruction of it by using some insights from the Analytical philosophy originating in Wittgenstein’s late work. I thinking here in first instance about the idea that philosophy as conceptual analysis is on its right place in situations of misunderstanding, disagreement and language disorientation. This notion of philosophy has its origin in the understanding of Wittgenstein that the meanings of word are in given in its uses, and that our conflicts and disagreements usually depend from our inability to understand these uses in their differences and similarities. I rely especially on Wittgenstein’s conception of family resemblances, according to which it is important to identify the distinct uses of the concept of dignity in the research fields. Then we must put the question, which of these uses could claim universal validity, and which of them could serve as a ground for common agreement.

After achieving a clearer notion of the concept I should elaborate on the question, how this semantic content is inter-related to the other dimensions of the capability approach.

Research Desiderata: On the ground of a systematically reconstructed concept of dignity I should reexamine the main claims of Nussbaum’s philosophical version of capability approach and I should also confront them with some questions, which are crucial for the whole approach:

1. Could we have strong arguments to insist that 10 capabilities are in equal degree connected with what respect and self-respect of every one as human being requires? Or, as Amartya Sen insists, what is valuable according to her human flourishing is a question of particular practical reasons, according to her particular needs?
2. Could we justify an universalistic anthropological claim about the political nature of human animals? Or, are there also non-political forms of human dignity and of humanity in general?
3. Is the fixation of a list of capabilities a limitation of possibilities for innovative practices and for plural values linked with plural notions of human dignity?

Although I emphasize some open questions, my aim is not to criticize the universal dimension of capability approach. On the contrary, with regard to Nussbaum’s discussion on the three unsolved problems of justice, it seems to me much more promising to solve them in the field of a philosophical anthropology and a theory of justice based on human dignity, then in the logic on a disembodied rationality or on the ground of the ability of language, with not all human beings share in the same degree.