

Rupasri Sarkar Nayak

Nabagram Hiralal Paul College

Counteracting Benedict's Cultural Relativism with Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach

In a world of increasing diversity, the debate over the objectivity or non-objectivity of values assumes great importance. This in turn has an impact on the discourse of human rights; for, it is values or norms that constitute or back up human rights. This paper is divided into three sections. Section I gives a very brief overview of the nature of Relativism. Section II discusses Relativism from the anthropological perspective of Ruth Benedict. I have linked Benedict's relativistic standpoint to the concept of human rights to assess how the scope of human rights gets configured in the light of relative values. In Section III Martha C. Nussbaum's capabilities approach has been suggested as an antidote to possible repugnant consequences of relativism.

SECTION I

Relativism can be defined either negatively or positively. To define Relativism negatively we need to see what the theses it denies are. Relativism denies:

- a) The thesis of universalism or the position that there could be a consensus on matters of truth, goodness, beauty, meaningfulness, etc.
- b) The basis of objectivism or the position that cognitive, ethical and aesthetic values such as truth, goodness and beauty is a priori and ahistorical—not related to the point of view of any particular human being.

- c) The thesis of absolutism or the view that truth, goodness, beauty, etc. are eternal values, immutable and unchanging.
- d) Monism or the view that on any issue there can be only one valid opinion or judgement or a single guiding standard.

To define Relativism positively we need to highlight the claim that when predicates like 'is true', 'is rational', 'is ethical' etc. are ascribed to objects, the ascriptions are not wholly determined by the nature of the objects. Rather, factors like social and cultural norms, cognitive frameworks, etc. influence our perceptions, and thereby the ascriptions we make. Further it is assumed that it is impossible to pronounce judgements as either true or false, or to rank values hierarchically for according to Relativists, all culture and thereby their values and judgements are equally valid.

SECTION II

Ruth Benedict takes a relativistic stand on human rights from an anthropological perspective. A great contribution has been made by Anthropologists to the increasing body of knowledge of differences in belief systems and values among societies. This in turn has important implications for the discourse of human rights and linked power structures. Benedict bases her views concerning cultural relativism on her anthropological study of three primitive societies, namely, the Zuni of the southwestern United States, the Kwakiutl of Western Canada, and the Dobuans of Melanesia. Benedict writes about the three societies she surveys that they are differently oriented, with divergent ends and means. Benedict stresses the role of culture in shaping the beliefs, morals, and practices of a people. In stressing the relatively of cultural

habits, Benedict writes—“To the anthropologist, our customs and those of a New Guinea tribe are two possible social schemes for dealing with a common problem, and in so far as he remains an anthropologist he is bound to avoid any weighting of one in favour of the other” (Benedict 1).

The divergence of cultures and morals awakens in us according to Benedict a sense of humility. We become aware that our beliefs and practices are not necessarily acceptable in all other cultures; this awareness restrains us from being judgemental about other cultures. No culture then suffers from a delusion of grandeur, or a false sense of superiority. In the words of Benedict—“ We shall arrive at a more realistic social faith, accepting as grounds of hope and as new bases for tolerance the co-existing and equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw material of existence(Benedict201).

Benedict collected empirical data about how different cultures vary widely in terms of moral values, customs, beliefs, behaviours etc. The customs and traditions of every culture have a special significance for its members—its own way of living; also every culture evolves its own ethical code. Hence it is not possible to judge a culture from the perspective of some other culture. Benedict maintained that the morality of a society stemmed from its cultural traditions, the habits of its people, and from their sense of right and wrong. In fact, cultures differ to such an extent that what is considered to be perfectly normal conduct in one culture, may be envisaged as grossly abnormal in some other culture. Thus culture determines the parameters of what is normal and what is abnormal. Benedict proposes a connection between her discussion of normality and the concept of morality. That which is approved by society and hence looked upon as normal in a society is collated with what is good

Every culture has its own distinctive socio-cultural environment. What is envisaged as normal behavior in one culture may be condemned as abnormal in another culture. To illustrate this Benedict uses the example of the people of an island of Northwest Melanesia, where people believe that everyone else is trying to poison them through the use of black magic. Benedict observes that no woman ever leaves her cooking pot unattended even for a moment for fear of being poisoned. It is a society where people are suspicious of and untrusting towards each other. In this society, Benedict reports, there existed a man who was an exception to his culture, that is, he did not go about killing people. On the contrary, this man liked to work and be helpful to people; also, he did not try to conceal his true personality and conform to the expectations and norms of his cultures. The people of his culture would sneer at him, and dismiss him as crazy. If this man were to be transported to some other country, he would be considered to be perfectly normal; whereas, in his native land he is looked upon as abnormal.

Benedict cites the example of the Kwakiutl, living on the Northwest Coast of Canada, whose conduct would strike any westerner as grossly immoral. There it was customary to respond to the death of one person, by killing another person. Benedict observes that another killing would have to take place irrespective of whether the relative had died of a disease or had been killed by an enemy. Benedict cites a case where a chief with the help of a war party, responded to the death of his sister and her daughter by killing seven men and two children in their sleep, also, it was not considered immoral that those invalid in the war party felt good on completion of the killing. However, to any liberal westerner, this action of killing would be reprehensible. Through these illustrations, Benedict addresses the question whether the categories of normal and abnormal and the concepts of right and wrong are culturally bound, or are absolute, Benedict is inclined to tip the balance in favour of cultural relativism, through

examples from Anthropology which show that what in one culture is considered normal, is considered abnormal in another.

Cultures are so divergent, according to Benedict, which they adhere to only basic universal moral codes and ideas that are required for survival. It is possible for the members of cultures to share these basic universal moral ideas and to be guided by them only for the cause of sheer survival—and this allegiance to the ideas/codes can be attributed to the fact that members of different cultural communities, after all, prior to everything else belong to one and the same category, namely, the category of human beings; beyond this point Benedict would insist that cultures vary widely. In the words of Benedict—“As we become increasingly culture-conscious, we shall be able to isolate the tiny core that is generic in a situation and the vast accretions that are local and cultural and man-made”(Benedict 176). Benedict maintains that the morals, beliefs, cultural practices are relative. In line with her ideas concerning cultural relativism, Benedict considers human rights to be not universal, but culturally defined. Highlighting the uniqueness of cultures, and how they create personalities—that differ from culture to culture, Benedict writes—“No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking.....From the moment of his birth the customs into which he is born shape his experience and behavior. By the time he can talk, he is the little creature of his culture, and by the time he is grown and able to take part in its activities, its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities his impossibilities”(Benedict 2).

Benedict reinforces her thesis about Cultural Relativism through her study of Japanese prisoners of war. Their behaviors patterns, attitudes and sense of right and wrong differed markedly from that of their American counter-parts. As an anthropologist, through her study of Japanese society and culture, Benedict assisted the United States and its allies in World War II.

This study was included in her work entitled *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. Benedict noticed that American prisoners of war wanted their families to receive news of their being alive, and were reluctant to disclose information about activities of the American troop. Whereas the Japanese prisoners of war refrained from means of contacting their families, and were open about information, when interrogated. The thoughts and actions of the prisoners of American culture and of Japanese culture clearly differed. By analyzing the words and actions of enemy cultures, Benedict joined the efforts of the United States to put down their enemies.

Benedict's teacher and mentor Franz Boas passed on to her the legacy of passionate humanism. The idea of moral relativism greatly appealed to Benedict as it allowed plurality of values and fostered tolerance of other cultures. But if the truth or falsity of moral judgements, or their justification is not absolute, but is relative to the beliefs and traditions of particular cultures, then repugnant consequences may follow. If we agree with Benedict and accept that there are no trans-cultural overarching values, and that morals are culture-specific and hence relative, then we are theoretically and practically compelled to pursue inhuman, immoral actions within other cultures like the Kwakiutls slaughter of innocent people. Moral relativism could make way for serious deprivation and violation of human rights through phenomena like dowry system, female infanticide, child labour, slavery, caste-discrimination and such others.

Benedict in her crusade for cultural relativism says that we should not trivialize any culture, and should be tolerant and allow space for the beliefs, practices and moral norms of all cultures. Here Benedict contradicts herself, for if morality is relative to culture, then there is no justification in asserting that all cultures should be tolerant. For while on the one hand Benedict stresses the uniqueness of every culture as a firm ground for her relativistic stand, she seems to

be upholding tolerance as a universal, trans-cultural moral principle. This inconsistency is highlighted by Louis Pojman's remark that as far as being either tolerant or intolerant is considered, from a relativistic point of view there are no compelling reasons for either side; also neither stand is morally superior to the other.

Pojman in his critique of Relativism further argues that though there is a great diversity among cultures, they share some common moral guidelines. Thus any culture that dishonours these guidelines may be considered as being simply wrong or aberrant. Also, he argues, a person may at the same time belong to many cultures and subcultures, which have different ways of perceiving what is right and wrong. This has the consequence that any one of his actions, from the perspective of one culture may be right and from the perspective of another culture may be wrong at one and the same time.

Values form the basis of right. If values are culture-specific, then rights also become culturally determined, that is, rights do not remain absolute but become relative. This can be dangerous for the stability of a society.

SECTION III

Martha C. Nussbaum links the idea of capabilities with the idea of human rights. During the 1980s, economist Amartya Sen and Nussbaum collaborated over issues of development and ethics. In 2003, Sen, Nussbaum and a group of young scholars conjointly founded the Human Development and Capability Association. Nussbaum's capabilities approach argues that

capabilities are a constitutive part of development, and that persons can live with ‘human dignity only if a number of central capacities are available to them.

Nussbaum points out two important reasons for stressing the importance of capability. First, it is based on the conviction that every person is an end, is valuable and worthy of respect. Second, Nussbaum’s advocacy of a thesis of universal human capabilities can impose a restraint on the evil, irrational beliefs and practices of some primitive cultures, which place greater importance on tradition rather than on the well-being and freedom of individuals. Nussbaum points out in *Sex and Social Justice* that her approach is infused with the idea of the citizen as a free and dignified human being. Nussbaum’s view is based on Aristotle’s notion of human flourishing and ‘the good life’. She draws heavily on Aristotle’s conceptions of human nature and human experience. Her approach provides the opportunity for human beings to use their potentials and lead a flourishing life.

Nussbaum maintains that there are commonalities that we share with all other human beings. We must recognize these commonalities if we are to acknowledge that a given life is human. The capabilities approach is Universalist—it draws on the Aristotelian notion of ‘function’ and of being able to live a good life, and the Kantian notion of the fundamental dignity of all human beings. Nevertheless, Nussbaum is not a metaphysical realist, and does not maintain that like the earth, stars and trees, human nature is an objective fact that can in principle be seen and studied independently of human experience and history. She thus remarks—“The Capabilities Approach is not a theory of what human nature is, and it does not read norms off from innate human nature. Instead, it is evaluative and ethical from the start: it asks, among the many things that human beings might develop the capacity to do, which ones are the really valuable ones, which are the ones that a minimally just society will endeavour to nurture and

support?” (Nussbaum28). On the contrary, Nussbaum firmly affirms that the universal conception of the human being is derived from experience of human life and human history. Universal ideas of the human are not ahistorical, apriori truths. We find that the Kantian notion of autonomy which bears no reference to the agent’s needs or interests is understood by Nussbaum differently. According to Kant, to attribute autonomy to an agent is to attribute to him the capacity to will to be determined by moral practical reason. Nussbaum is inclined to regard autonomy as an essential element of well-being. Nussbaum maintains that for autonomous functioning and well-being, every agent must be enabled to enjoy some central capabilities.

Nussbaum in her capability approach gives us a list of ten core entitlements which are central capacities that must be universally available to enable peoples to fulfill a life of human dignity. She insists that there are some functions and capabilities that are cross-culturally acknowledged as indispensable features of humanness—this overlap allows discourse on common problems and prospects. Nussbaum in her Capabilities Approach catalogues ten core entitlements which cannot be traded off for any cultural need or claim.

1. Life: Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length.
2. Bodily health, which includes reproductive health, nourishment, etc.
3. Bodily integrity: Freedom to move from place to place. Security against violent or sexual assault, etc.
4. Senses, imagination, thought: Being able to use the senses, imagination, thought and reasoning power.
5. Emotions: Being able to have attachments to things and persons outside ourselves.

6. Practical reason: To have conception of the good, and to critically think about one's life-plan.
7. Affiliation: To have concern for others, to engage in various form of social interaction.
8. Other species: To live with concern for animals, plants and nature.
9. Play: To be able to enjoy recreational activities.
10. Control over one's environment: (A) Political-- capable of making political choices. (B) Material—being able to hold property, seeks employment on an equal basis with others, etc.

Nussbaum classifies capabilities into three types—(a) basic capabilities, (b) internal capabilities, and (c) combined capabilities. Basic capabilities are the rudimentary powers that human infants are born with. These innate equipments like the capacity for speech and language, for practical reason and imagination, however, can be used only with development and education. The basic capabilities by processes such as exercise, education and training, can be strengthened. When sufficient conditions are provided, the basic capabilities can grow to more developed powers, which are the internal capacities. Some internal capacities, like, the ability to speak a language, the ability of analytic thinking, the ability to use one's imagination require more support to develop, as compared to abilities like eating or moving from place to place etc. Combined capabilities refer to the internal capabilities combined with appropriate external conditions, which make the exercise of human functions possible. The central capabilities are an optional combination of the basic, internal and combined capabilities. Nussbaum maintains that public policy and government actions must support a diverse set of central capabilities.

Nussbaum's capabilities theory makes the human rights tradition more wholesome, for the latter is concerned chiefly with resources, while one of the central tenets of the capabilities approach is that, conditions must be congenial to enable individuals to use the available resources and fulfill their functions. Nussbaum says that she uses the idea of capabilities as ".....a foundation for basic political principles that should underwrite constitutional guarantees" (Nussbaum 70-1). Nussbaum's capabilities approach enhances the human rights discourse by furthering the case for the second and third generation of human rights, namely, socio-economic rights and group rights. The capabilities approach increases awareness of and sensitivity to women's human rights, rights of the poor, and the rights of people with disabilities. The capabilities approach also has an indirect effect on environmental ethics; for environment plays an important role in human flourishing, which is the central concern of the capabilities approach. The capabilities approach also holds great potential for framing the way we should approach the protection of animals and their habitat.

The capabilities approach gives protection to people during times of misfortune, which can be caused by different factors like illness, natural calamities, war, political upsurge, communal riots, etc. The capabilities approach provides certain minimum entitlements which acts as buffers in such times, helping to minimize the impact of disasters.

The capability approach is a kind of human rights approach—it lists ten inviolable central capacities of anyone born of two human parents. It is Universalist and is indebted to ethical theories such as virtue ethics and deontology. Nussbaum speaks of "universal values" which are embodied according to her in the ten capabilities she proposes. The Aristotelian notion of individuals being able to live a good life, and the Kantian notion of the fundamental dignity of human beings.

Nussbaum formulates the capabilities framework as applicable to every human being, which enable him to achieve his function. But we cannot say that her approach is radically universalistic, because she does not compel the individuals into function: once the resources and the means of using the resources are at hand, it is the choice of each individual whether he or she will make use of any capability. Further, the capabilities approach is flexible enough to allow different countries and traditions to specify and interpret capabilities somewhat differently. Thus the Universalist ethic of Nussbaum's capabilities approach is sensitive to cultural divergences and local contexts. She describes six ways through which she has achieved this. First, she looks upon the list as open-ended and flexible to alternations. New capabilities could be added while existing ones may be either dropped or reformed to suit specific needs. Second, the items on the list have been formulated in a general way, so as to allow provision for local interpretation and accommodation of local particularities. Third, the list is viewed as a 'partial moral conception'. Instead of being grounded on any metaphysical world-view which may create chasm among cultures, the capabilities approach lists a set of entitlements which every society would want its members to enjoy. Thus with a cross-cultural agreement regarding the entitlements, the capabilities approach can serve as a theory of socio-political justice. Fourth, Nussbaum is uncompromising about capabilities, but leaves functioning to the choice of each individual. Since only the capabilities are specified, and not the functioning, there is room for diversity and freedom of choice. Fifth, Nussbaum argues that those liberties (like the freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom of conscience), which uphold pluralism, are included in the capabilities list. Finally, Nussbaum holds the list as a basis for persuasion. Nussbaum keeps the list deliberately "vague", so that it allows room for different specifications in accordance to local needs and experiences. Nussbaum lists in a very general way some fundamental components

required for living a life worth being called ‘human life’. In that sense it is universal. But we cannot say that Nussbaum’s approach is radically universalistic, for it allows multiple specifications of the components she enlists.

Nussbaum takes a more personal approach by investigating how individuals actually partake of economic prosperity. She studies the life of Indian women, their capabilities and opportunities. For Nussbaum, a nation’s prosperity can be adjudged by the prospects it makes available to its citizens. The yardstick of measuring development is the quality of concrete lives of individuals. Unlike the list of human rights, Nussbaum’s capabilities approach looks after some crucial needs like, bodily integrity, freedom from domestic violence and freedom from sexual-harassment at workplace—all this is necessary for gender equality. Further, positive discrimination for socially backward, disadvantaged groups in society can be justified by the capabilities approach. Nussbaum’s approach addresses the actual lived experience of individuals. Nussbaum firmly maintains that measures like per capita GDP do not reflect the actual well-being of individual persons. Nussbaum’s capabilities approach offers a new way of assessing global development. Nussbaum argues that the prevalent theories of development ignore an individual’s need for dignity and self-respect. The capabilities approach delves into real opportunities—the most important enquiries are made—what each person is actually able to do and to be.

Nussbaum’s capabilities approach has been criticized chiefly on three grounds. **First**, some critics point out that to select some needs and some elements of human life as being more important and fundamental in comparison to others, and thereby to produce a list of “essential properties” is to gloss over the divergent needs and different histories of cultures. To formulate such a list of “essential properties” gives prominence to some cultures at the expense of others.

Secondly, critics maintain that by drawing up a list of what is envisaged as the most important elements in an individual's life, the capabilities approach denies individual the autonomy of deciding what their plan of life is, and what elements they regard as most important.

Thirdly, critics point out the essentialist works with a specific category of people in view. The rest of the people together with their needs, their lives, fall outside his vision. It is highly probable that the powerless, low-profile people are excluded from the conception of 'human being' the essentialist operates with.

Nussbaum respond to the above criticisms by saying that if we deny the possibility of any kind of essentialism, then extreme relativism, or even worse, subjectivism may result. Nussbaum further points out that the anti-essentialists fall short of their claim to be empathetic to the powerless and to the minorities in societies. For, by rejecting an essentialist assessment of the important needs and functions which are common to all human beings, they actually pave the way for some human beings to fall below the minimum threshold of a human existence.

Nussbaum's approach which focuses on capabilities, paves the way to justice for both humans and non-humans. Thus another merit of this approach is that it is not andocentric.

Every system of justice and system of human rights must rest on some inviolable, fundamental values, which are universal and hence pertain to all human beings. Nussbaum constructs universals carefully in her ideas of 'capabilities' and 'function'. These capabilities in Nussbaum's view are cross-culturally agreed, and yet open to interpretation in the light of cross-cultural discourse. Through Nussbaum's approach, the aggressive relativism of Benedict can be tempered down. The staunch commitment to pluralism is clear from Benedict's words—"The recognition of cultural relativity carries with it its own values, which need not be those of the absolutist philosophies" (Benedict 200).

Nussbaum's capabilities approach provides a universal ethics, and yet is accommodative enough to avoid the charges of ethnocentric disrespect and paternalism that are brought against previous forms of thinking. We may envisage Nussbaum's capabilities approach as a corrective to Benedict's radical relativism.

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