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URSZULA LISOWSKA
UNIVERSITY OF WROCŁAW

VULNERABILITY AS A PERCEPTUAL CATEGORY – MARTHA NUSSBAUM'S CAPABILITIES APPROACH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF POLITICAL AESTHETICS[1]

Introduction

The origins of political aesthetics as a trend in political philosophy can be traced as far back as to the Antiquity with its celebrated notion of *kalokagathos*. The concept of the unity of beauty and good implied the possibility of regarding good deeds as beautiful (and vice versa), thereby pointing to the relevance of beauty for ethical considerations. This ancient idea took on a new form upon the development of the modern term "aesthetics", which evolved as the British empiricists suggested to regard the cognition of beauty more in terms of sensual perception (the Greek term being *aesthesis*) than deductive reasoning. At the same time, this tradition yielded the notion of the moral sense (or the moral taste), which rested on the assumed similarities between ethical and aesthetic judgments (Shelley 2013, 246-249) [2].

Political aesthetics, as it shall be understood in this paper, combines these two motifs. That is, it explores the ethical significance of beauty (as expressed by the notion of *kalokagathos*) by studying the role of perception in our ethical judgments. What makes it political, is its attempt at drawing political consequences from such perception-based account of practical rationality. Thus, political aesthetics starts from the observation of the affinity between ethical and aesthetic judgments, which paves the way for the inquiry into the political relevance of beauty and its realm – the arts.

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[2] Although the British philosophers did not use the very term „aesthetic " yet (which itself is a slightly later German – most prominently: Kant's – development), the etymological reason mentioned justifies its application to this tradition (Shelley 2013, 427).

This approach would most naturally be associated with such authors as Jacques Rancière, Crispin Sartwell or Frank R. Ankersmit, who explicitly recalled politico-aesthetic themes in their works. Martha Nussbaum's, however, is decidedly not among the names usually evoked by the concept. Instead, as the title of the paper suggests, her project is labeled as a variety of capabilities approach – a highly influential paradigm in development economics, pioneered by Amartya Sen. Yet Nussbaum's conception is a multidimensional one, embedding Sen's economic intuitions in an extensive philosophical project. She uses the notion of capabilities to construe a potentially shareable account of the human good, which consequently can become the basis of a theory of justice. As we shall see, what emerges as an inextricable aspect of human well-being defined in the language of capabilities is vulnerability. The human good, as conceived in terms of capabilities, is fragile and prone to reversal.

The point of convergence between Nussbaum's philosophy and political aesthetics is Nussbaum's suggestion that as vulnerable, we are at the same time perceiving beings. That is, perception is the type of reasoning compatible with the state of vulnerability which characterises our condition. Vulnerability, so to speak, stimulates perception. The relationship is, however, reciprocal since vulnerability is also the object of perception. To perceive other people as vulnerable means to recognise them as capable in Nussbaum's sense of the term. In this manner, perception emerges as a method of public reasoning, thereby endowing Nussbaum's conception with the politico-aesthetic dimension.

This variety of political aesthetics comes closest to Ankersmit's approach, which it, however, quite unexpectedly combines with Rawls's theory. Ankersmit called for the revision of political philosophy by providing it with a new aesthetic basis. According to the Dutch philosopher, this type of reflection should rest on the insightful, immediate perception of the situation in hand and not on moral assumptions, as it does in Rawls. The moral scaffolding, argues Ankersmit, makes political philosophy inert and unable to react to the dynamics of its subject matter (Ankersmit 1996, 2-13). As we shall see towards the end of the paper, Nussbaum's conception is in between the two poles differentiated by Ankersmit. For, although she shares his belief that political philosophy should be made more flexible, she also embraces Rawls's insistence on its moral underpinnings. As a result, she employs the notion of perception to work out a new account of ethics, capable of serving as the foundation of the more sensitive political philosophy.

The objective of this paper will be to analyse the relevance of the notion of vulnerability to this enterprise. Since perception is both vulnerability-motivated and vulnerability-directed, we could say that vulnerability determines the specificity of our rationality and influences its exercise towards other individuals. I am going to argue that, on Nussbaum's account, the idea of vulnerability defines our manner of ethical reasoning, endowing it with aesthetic character. As such, this model of practical rationality provides the background for a politico-aesthetic project.

A political conception of the human good

The very possibility of drawing socio-political consequences from certain assumptions concerning human condition stems from the special status of the basic notion of Nussbaum's project, *i.e.* the category of capabilities. As I have mentioned, the career of this concept began with Amartya Sen's research. His main idea was that real life opportunities (which he called capabilities) of people are the criteria of justice of a given social order and, consequently, should be supported to secure human development (Sen 1979, 1992, 2009). On meeting Sen during her work at the World Institute for Development Economics Research, Nussbaum discovered the affinity between his studies and her inquires into Aristotelian political philosophy and anthropology (Nussbaum 2001, 11). From then on, she has been developing a project which combines these two strains of reflection, 'the metaprinciple' of the merger being the Rawlsian idea of a political conception of the person. That is to say, the philosopher renounces any attempts at discovering the metaphysical foundations of human well-being, shunning what Rawls would call comprehensive doctrines and trying, instead, to provide an understanding of a good human life which could become an object of reasonable consensus (Rawls 1987, Nussbaum 2001, 5, 76, Nussbaum 2011, 19, Nussbaum 2008, 401-402). In this manner, capabilities constitute an account of the human good which, being potentially acceptable to all members of a political community, can define their mutual relations.

The avoidance of metaphysical justifications and the willingness to provide a conception which could constitute a political consensus result in Nussbaum's preference for what she calls internal essentialism over external essentialism. That is to say, she includes in her account the elements which people themselves are likely to deem important instead of seeking an objective – *i.e.* independent of our own interpretations – *eidos* of humanity (Nussbaum 1992(1), 205-214)[3]. On her account, an idea of human well-being is to include the items which appear to us as indispensable for living a truly human life. In this manner, it can become the basis of social coexistence. It represents a set of fundamental human values agreed upon by the members of society, which they consequently respect and enjoy the respect of in their mutual relations.

This suggests the priority of the value of dignity. The very idea of the search for an interpretation of the human good which could generate consensus and guide human interaction rests on the assumption that each person is worthy of being treated in accordance with certain standards, in the defining of which she has the right to participate. Such narrow understanding of dignity is in the background of Nussbaum's conception of human good, which therefore expresses the vision of a life compatible with human dignity (Nussbaum 2011, 29-31, Nussbaum 2000, 73).

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[3] The procedure which she suggests should be followed has Aristotelian origins. Aristotle postulated that any inquiry ought to start from the analysis of *phainomena*, which Nussbaum interprets as "appearances". These are certain experiences shared by all people – the ways in which the world *appears* to us. Thus, rather than pure facts, *phainomena* denote their common sense interpretations (Nussbaum 2009(1), 243-251). In the case of the reflection on human nature, we begin with the elements of human condition which we experience as the most basic ("the shape of the human form of life"). Then we arrive at the idea of their desirable development ("central capabilities") (Nussbaum 1992(1), 216, 221-222).

Capabilities – humans as vulnerable dignified beings

Having chosen to articulate this vision in the language of capabilities, Nussbaum could not but come up with the diagnosis of human vulnerability. This seems to be implied by the idea of capabilities itself. Following Sen, she interprets the category as "opportunities for functioning" (Nussbaum 2008, 416), possibilities of acting. Thus, the philosopher situates the tendency to develop oneself in the centre of the human condition. Such teleological approach, rooted in Aristotelian thought (Nussbaum 1992(1), Nussbaum 1988), suggests that we are not "readymade" creatures, who come to the world fully equipped and self-sufficient. On the contrary, we need not only time but also support to evolve to the level of flourishing. For, if capabilities are our actual life opportunities, they comprise not only internal dispositions of an individual but also external conditions requisite to exercise them. The range of my real possibilities is determined by both my abilities and the circumstances in which I am located[4].

Therefore, the notion of capabilities suggests our reliance on external help. This is evident for both Sen and Nussbaum, the latter, however, builds the idea of neediness and struggling against one's limitations into the very notion of capabilities (Crocker 2007, 173). In her search for a political conception of the person, Nussbaum then connects the state of neediness with animality, which, in general, connotes weakness, mortality and transience. More specifically, human animality, due to the character of our bodily constitution (the long period of infancy, the lack of innate equipment such as fangs, paws etc.), is the condition of an acute lack of sufficiency (Nussbaum 2008, 181, Nussbaum 1992(1), 217-219). As animals, we depend on external support for our well-being. Consequently, we face the potential harm in case such help should fail. In other words, we are *vulnerable* to the loss of what we deem most important, these items being external and independent of us (Nussbaum 2008, 42-43).Thus, vulnerability emerges as the fundamental aspect of the human condition. It is the state of the exposure to the influence of uncontrolled happenings which can affect our well-being. As such, it cannot be ignored in an account of human good, which is why Nussbaum phrases it in the language of capabilities. The idea of capabilities expresses this relevance of harm-proneness to our understanding of human flourishing. Vulnerability, we might say, defines the status of our good with its fragility and reliance on external support.

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[4] Nussbaum differentiates between basic capabilities (inborn equipment, such as sensual organs), internal capabilities (the basic ones in their mature form) and combined capabilities (internal capabilities plus external condition necessary to their exercise). The latter are of main focus for her, being capabilities par excellence, so to speak). They constitute the political conception of the human good and are included on the list of central capabilities (Nussbaum 2001, 78-80, Nussbaum 2008, 416-418).

Including this feature into her political conception of the human good Nussbaum suggests a revision of our understanding of dignity, this value, as we have said, providing the framework for her considerations. If vulnerability is to be allowed for in an account of a dignified human life, then animality, from which it results, is not placed in the opposition to dignity. On the contrary, Nussbaum attempts to reconcile dignity with bodiliness, thereby breaking with the Kantian tradition. We are endowed with dignity *as* animals, not *in spite of* our animality (Nussbaum 2007, 159-160, Nussbaum 2001, 73). This is not to deny that there is something distinct about human lives as compared to the lives of other animals. Any such difference should, however, be understood as a specifically human type of animal dignity and not the exemption from our bodiliness.

The distinctive features of human dignity can be most succinctly expressed by what Nussbaum calls "*architectonic* capabilities" (Nussbaum 2011, 39), of which there are two. Sociability (or affiliation), to begin with, is "architectonic" insofar as it is both one of the capabilities and the manner in which we pursue our opportunities. We are capable of forming interpersonal relationships, which appear to us as necessary elements of a good life. Consequently, it is in the cooperation with others that we seek the completion of our deficiencies. We count on other people to help us when we cannot manage on our own. Our opportunities are, then, to a large extent determined by social environment, which can either facilitate or impede our development. By trusting other people, we make ourselves vulnerable to harm in case they should disappoint us or in case that, given their own vulnerability, we should lose them. Still, Nussbaum argues, interpersonal relationships are an inalienable part of our ideas of a valuable existence (Nussbaum 2001, 71-72, Nussbaum 2007, 160, Nussbaum 2011, 39-40).

The process of forming such conceptions involves the exercise of the second of the specifically human features of animal dignity. Practical rationality – the capability to pursue the reflection on an idea of a good life (Nussbaum 1992(1), 219, Nussbaum 2008, 417, Nussbaum 2011, 39) – has the status similar to that of sociability in that it is not only one of the human possibilities of functioning but also the manner of their actualising. It represents the exclusively human ability to decide which opportunities are requisite to live a good life and to determine the means of their realization. Thus, the search for a political conception of the human good is one of the possible expressions of this capability[5]. And since such inquiry has revealed human vulnerability, the notion of vulnerability appears to be of crucial importance for practical reasoning. As we have seen, it defines the status of human well-being and cannot be abstracted from in the reflection on a good life. To be practically rational means to be able to allow for all the vulnerabilities involved in human existence. In other words, we reason from the position of harm-prone beings (Nussbaum 2007, 159). This significantly influences the manner in which we pursue practical considerations, which is reflected in the operations of two faculties – emotions and imagination. To these capabilities I shall presently turn.

Emotions and imagination

Emotions and imagination are, then, the faculties which enable us to allow for our vulnerability in practical considerations. To begin with, the former are, we could say, the capacities responsible for the translation of the experience of vulnerability into practical reasoning. Nussbaum subscribes, thus, to a cognitive account of emotions. This she derives chiefly from Stoic philosophy with its idea of emotions as judgments of eudaimonistic value of external goods. Nussbaum follows Stoics in their radical identification of emotions with judgments, claiming that emotions are indeed acts of cognition and not only reactions to the operations of some distinct faculty, let alone purely irrational "blind forces". Rather than by the opposition to rationality, the nature of emotions as judgments is determined by their specifically evaluative character (Nussbaum 2008, 19-88, Nussbaum 2009(2), 371-386). To wit, an emotion is a recognition that a certain good has an inherent value and *as such* is crucial to an individual's well-being. Now, due to human lack of self-sufficiency, many of such goods are independent of our control. Therefore, emotions, as judgments of value, are most often "acknowledgments of neediness" (Nussbaum 2008, 22), which "record the sense of vulnerability and imperfect control" (Nussbaum 2008, 43). To employ emotions in practical reasoning, then, means to assess the world from the perspective of a eudaimonistic project and be ready to accept one's vulnerability in case worthy elements turn out to be prone to reversal.

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[5] The political conception of the person is the outcome of this human capability, whose protection it at the same time guarantees. This means that, on the one hand, the search for a common understanding of the human good involves the exercise of our ability to reflect on a desirable life. On the other hand, Nussbaum suggests that the resulting consensus should include the recognition of this capability. That is, since the political conception is the product of our capacity to define human life on our own, it should grant each individual the possibility of pursuing their eudaimonistic projects. The capabilities list provides only the basic framework necessary to live a good, decent life. It is not, however, a full account of a valuable existence. This is to be specified by each person individually, by means of the capability of practical rationality. The political conception can only guarantee the exercise of this capability and not determine its operations.

The insistence on the ethical value of emotions marks the basic difference between Nussbaum and Stoics, for whom morality involved the combating of human vulnerability and, consequently, emotions (Nussbaum 2009(2), 389-401)[6]. In her embracement of emotions Nussbaum looks further back to Aristotle, who, having recognised the vulnerability of human animals, included emotions in his account of practical rationality (even though his stance on their cognitive character was more modest than that of the Stoics[7]). Significantly, he associated their operations with another faculty, which he called *phantasia*. Imagination – as it is usually translated – is the general ability to see a thing as a value to be pursued, that is – to interpret reality from the perspective of one's idea of a good life. Emotions, then, work in tandem with imagination as any judgment expressed by them presupposes the act of imagining an object to be such and such (Nussbaum 2009(2), 83-86, Nussbaum 2008, 37-39).

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[6] For the Stoics, part of the definition of emotions was the vulnerability of their objects – the restriction which Nussbaum does not preserve (see footnote 7). This made them condemn all emotions (as defined by their own terms), at the same time allowing them to approve of such states as the joy at one's character (which did not fall into the category of emotions) (Nussbaum 2008, 42-43).

[7] As Nussbaum understands him, Aristotle associated emotions with the discernment of external goods necessary to our flourishing. He maintained that beliefs are necessary for them to appear and constitute one of their elements. Unlike Stoics,

What Nussbaum finds particularly inspiring in Aristotle is the idea that *aesthesis* – perception – cannot be separated from *phantasia* (Nussbaum 1985(1), 221-269). Any reception of data involves, therefore, its interpretation through the lenses of one's conception of eudaimonia. Nussbaum follows this intuition to construe an account of practical rationality based on active perceiving. Emotions are essentially acts of viewing a thing as such and such. Their intentionality does not amount to their having an object but also "embodies a way of seeing" (Nussbaum 2008, 27). The common element of all emotions is, as we have said, the perception of the inherent and at the same time eudaimonistic value of a certain good. To this each emotion adds its specific "colour" – uncertainty as to the good/person's well-being (anxiety), recognition of its/her beauty (wonder) or underserved plight (compassion), *etc*. In other words, emotions are acts of seeing an item as worthy and placed in a given condition (of threat, tragedy and so on). They are discriminating faculties which help us assess things which come our way from the perspective of our ideas of a good life (Nussbaum 2008, 24-33).

It is worth adding that Nussbaum completes the Aristotelian-Stoic account of emotions with references to the contemporary object relations theories. From this perspective emotions appear to be crucial forces in the process of the development of an independent self. They help an infant identify valuable items and differentiate between these controlled and these uncontrolled by her, thereby giving her the sense of her boundaries. As object relations theorists claim, such maturation takes place against the background of familiar objects endowed with particular importance. Surrounded by objects, the infant simultaneously discovers her own and their separateness. Trying to

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though, he would not identify emotions with judgments (Nussbaum 2009(2), 371-372).

fathom what is behind these seemingly impenetrable, separate and yet significant items, she learns to exercise her ability to imagine. On this account, then, imagination emerges as the capability to reconstruct (or at least to speculate about) an inner life of objects. As in the case of emotions, Nussbaum embraces this object-relations' idea and couples it with her philosophical intuitions. For her, imagination is first and foremost the ability to perceive an object/a person as an agent. In fact, when we approach objects imaginatively, we cease to see them as mere objects and, instead, recognise subjects in them. Imagining, as a conjecture about another's inner life, enables us to conceive of other perspectives of looking at the world, to put ourselves in somebody else's shoes. Thus, to imagine is to perceive somebody's behavior as the expression of their agency and to try to view reality from their position (Nussbaum 2008, 174-190, 206-109).

Both imagination and emotions are, then, the capabilities of interpretative perception. Furthermore, they both have a very close relationship to vulnerability. Even though not all emotions involve vulnerabilities, the reverse relationship obtains[8]. That is to say, the awareness of one's vulnerability is expressed by the relevant emotions. The recognition of neediness takes the form of emotions directed at external goods necessary to complete one's imperfection. In this sense, emotions are, as it has been suggested, the translations of the experienced vulnerabilities into judgments. As such, they often have to interact with imagination – the faculty necessary to see through appearances and interpret the behavior of people on whom we rely. Thus, imaginative and emotional perception emerges as the essence of practical rationality of humans as vulnerable beings. It is, we could say, a general disposition of the human type of rationality.

The perception of vulnerability

So far, then, we have been able to observe that perception is the mode of reasoning compatible with the experience of one's vulnerability. This suggests the aesthetic character of Nussbaum's philosophy in the most basic, etymological sense. In order to present her conception as politico-aesthetic, we need yet to discover the political relevance of perception along with the role of the category of beauty. It will have been clear by now that perception as described above can be a manner of approaching other people. After all, it is in interpersonal relationships that we seek support, as the assumption of human sociability has suggested. Emotions are, then, often the perceptions of other people's value for an individual's well-being. The faculty of imagination has to be employed precisely in such contexts as it helps us understand the position of another person. Thus, we perceive people around us from the perspective of our ideas of a good life, assessing their worth in emotional judgments and recognising our community as dignified subjects by means of imagination. Thus, the process of perception clearly has political significance.

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[8] Nussbaum is careful not to include vulnerability into the definition of emotions since they might plausibly be directed at items which seem relatively secure (for example, the joy at favourite music is usually not connected with any sense of harm-proneness, Nussbaum 2008, 42-43).

When understood as the form of public reasoning, however, perception offers as much as it endangers. On the one hand, both of the faculties which it involves promise valuable contributions to interpersonal relationships. Firstly, if we allow for emotions in our reasoning, we are likely to recognise the importance of other people for our well-being. Emotions can broaden our ideas of a good life so that they include other individuals. Secondly, imagination prevents us from using people as mere instruments to our goals (Nussbaum 2010, 97-101). It is the requisite completion of emotions directed at persons since we need to imagine them as autonomous subjects in order to grasp their inherent worth, *i.e.* their dignity. On the other hand, though, we can easily conceive of exclusive types of perception. Other people might be seen as threatening, undesirable, contaminated *etc*. – in other words: as somebody to be avoided for the sake of one's well-being. Many emotions are the judgments about such negative relevance of another person for an individual's good. As such, they can both inhibit the functioning of imagination (preventing us from seeing other people as dignified) or be the results of its deficiency (as it is easier to reject somebody not perceived as autonomously valuable). Thus, perception carries the threat of arbitrariness. It does not have any inherent guarantee of fairness which would ensure that imagination be exercised with respect to each person (Nussbaum 2008, 190-206, Nussbaum 2013, 161-198)[9].

Yet, if, as I am arguing, our practical rationality is based on perception, the legitimate type of public reasoning will have to be a form of perception as well. Therefore, we need to ask on what basis perception can develop its positive potential so as to become the inclusive, respectful method of reasoning, in accordance with the first of the two possibilities above. Here, again, the notion of vulnerability appears to be of crucial importance. We have seen that the experience of neediness prompts an individual to open for interpersonal relationships and perceive other people as valuable for her well-being. It would seem, then, that what prevents merely exploitative or exclusive attitude to our fellows is the acknowledgment that they are alike vulnerable. The category of vulnerability refers, as we have said, to the status of our good. To recognise that somebody is vulnerable, then, means both to appreciate their right to follow their idea of a good life and to realize their need for support in the "pursuit of happiness". Vulnerability-based perception becomes an advisable method of public reasoning as long as it involves the perception of others' vulnerability.

Compassion and its aids

Thus, I suggest that we regard vulnerability as a normative notion which determines the model of ethical interpersonal relationships. These should be based on mature interdependence – a category derived from Fairabairn's idea of mature dependence – that is: the awareness of mutual reliance between people. When we perceive ourselves and each other as vulnerable, we are ready to receive and give support. We renounce both the dream of self-sufficiency and the desire to subject others to our will and learn to expect and provide help instead (Nussbaum 2008, 224-229). What are, then, the conditions and types of perception which facilitate such attitude to other people?

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[9] One of the most dangerous types of perception are those enacted in the emotions of shame and disgust. Basing on the studies of a psychologist Paul Rozin, Nussbaum suggests that both of these emotions involve the rejection of human imperfection and its projection onto other people. As such, they can often feed on group anxieties and serve as the source of exclusion of vulnerable minorities (homosexuals, women, Jews). For a more detailed analysis see Nussbaum 2004, Rozin *et. alt.*, 2000, 429-445.

In her considerations about the relevance of emotions for public reasoning Nussbaum devotes a lot of attention to compassion. As a judgment about the undeserved deprivation of crucial goods suffered by another person, compassion is clearly pertinent to public issues. It stems from a shared understanding of the human good, thereby presupposing what Nussbaum would, Rawlswise, call its political conception. Like most emotions, it has a eudaimonistic character – that is: the harmed person is perceived as valuable to the perceiver's well-being. Thus, we could say that compassion expresses our sense of community. We extend this emotion towards people whom we perceive as fellow human beings (worthy of being granted the right to live what we consider a dignified life) important for our own ideas of a good existence. At the same time, since compassion is the judgment about the loss, the sense of common belonging which it reflects is based on the recognition of the vulnerability of the other. Compassion represents, then, the very type of perception which Nussbaum's conception advocates. It requires that we see the people who matter to us as prone to harm in the process of realising certain fundamental entitlements which we share with them (Nussbaum 2008, 304-321, Nussbaum 2013, 137-160).

Therefore, compassion is doubtlessly respectful of another person's worth, whose violation gives rise to this emotion. It is also inclusive insofar as it allows for neediness in our understanding of interpersonal relationships. Instead of projecting the image of social interaction as an exchange of comparable services, it conveys the sense of bond rooted in the acknowledgment of human fragility. All of this suggests that compassion offers a valuable contribution to public reasoning. However, Nussbaum is careful to underline that we cannot rely on this emotion alone since its operations are prone to considerable limitations. We are subject to grave prejudices when it comes to compassion, as its eudaimonistic character suggests. The scope of an idea of a good life determines the scope of compassion, therefore, in spite of an inclusive idea of the human good which it presupposes, this emotion can be exercised in an exclusive manner. It does not guarantee the recognition of the vulnerability of each person, being directed at the people who matter to us (Nussbaum 2010, 37-42, Nussbaum 2008, 418-423).

Thus, even though compassion represents a model type of perception, it does not by itself promise its equal display towards all individuals worthy of this emotion (*i.e.* towards all human beings). Its operations are all too often limited to the sphere of our most immediate, personal commitments. The basic question that emerges, then, is the one of how to extend the scope of compassionate perception so that it transcends our local sentiments. Nussbaum mentions two mechanisms which can serve this purpose. First, we have to remember that emotions interact with imagination. On the one hand, emotional attachments prompt us to speculate about the inner life of the person at whom they are directed. On the other hand, though, imagination itself – as the ability to recognise a human agent behind externalised behaviour – can inspire emotions. It is probable that we will feel compassion to people whom we consider fellow human beings. Such community can be recognised on various grounds, in the case of compassion this being, as we have seen, harm-proneness with respect to certain crucial goods. The ability to imaginatively grasp the similarity of somebody else's vulnerability aids compassion. We are likely to sympathise with people whose lot appears familiar to us, even if they do not belong to the narrow, personal circle of our concern. Thus, imagination contributes to the broadening of our compassionate perception (Nussbaum 2010, 7, 36, Nussbaum 2008, 421-422).

It seems, however, that, with regard to such purpose, imagination should be completed by yet another element. As it has been mentioned, compassion is eudaimonistic, that is it involves the judgment of its "object's" value for the perceiver's well-being. Is the recognition of common vulnerability, though, a sufficient reason to extend care towards a person otherwise unrelated to us? A link between the judgment of similarities and the judgment of value has to be provided. This points to the emotion of wonder, which occupies a special place in Nussbaum's conception. When we imagine somebody to be subject to the same vulnerabilities as ourselves, we exercise the general ability to perceive other people as agents. Namely, we imagine that in their "pursuit of happiness" they encounter difficulties familiar to us. Thus, imagination presupposes the judgment of their dignity. This, in turn, seems to be expressed by the emotion of wonder. Wonder is "as non-eudaimonistic as an emotion can be" (Nussbaum 2008, 55) in that it involves the recognition of another person's inherent value without reference to one's idea of a good life. When we approach an individual with wonder, we perceive her as autonomously worthy – as an end in herself and not merely as a means to our goals. This does not mean, however, that wonder has no bearing on our conception of eudaimonia. On the contrary, it can inspire care for another person grounded solely in the apprehension of her inner value. She becomes important to us because she appears worthy of care (Nussbaum 2008, 54-55, 237, 321-322).

Therefore, wonder represents the second of the two compassion-aiding mechanisms mentioned by Nussbaum. Working in tandem with imagination, it can broaden the scope of our concern. Whereas imagination enables us to place ourselves in the position of another person and grasp the similarity of our vulnerabilities, wonder motivates care for her. In this manner, these two help us recognise other people's vulnerability and act on its apprehension outside the most immediate circle of concern. They support compassion so that it can operate on a large scale and become a more reliable type of perception (Nussbaum 1995, 36-46).

If, however, wonder and imagination may inspire compassion, it seems reasonable to ask what, in turn, they dependent on. Why should a person imaginatively approach somebody irrelevant to her idea of a good life? What makes an individual appear to her as inherently valuable and therefore worthy of concern? Here one more feature of the emotion of wonder should be mentioned. When we feel wonder, we do not simply apprehend another person's value but we also take delight in it. Or rather, it is through delight that her worth becomes apparent to us. To perceive somebody as wonderful means to perceive her as beautiful (Nussbaum 2008, 54, Nussbaum 2010, 99-100). It is in this context, then, that the traces of the ancient idea of *kalokagatia* in Nussbaum's conception become most visible. The ethical judgment about somebody's dignity coincides with the judgment about their beauty.

This points to the role of art in the shaping of our perception. Art is the means of political representation – the dominating aesthetics influences our judgments about the worth of other people. What is needed if perception is to serve as a legitimate type of public reasoning are the forms of artistic representation which will enable us to appreciate the beauty of each human being. And since beauty is here synonymous with dignity, this value being in turn reconciled with vulnerability, the beauty has to be recognised in, and not in spite of, neediness.

Art and play

Nussbaum believes, then, that art can nourish the desirable type of perception by presenting human vulnerability in a delightful manner. When vulnerability appears as beautiful, the judgment about the dignity of the vulnerable individual is involved as well. Such potential of art can be, at least partly, explained by its continuity with childhood play, as Nussbaum likes to suggest after Winnicott's studies. The object relation theorist believed play to be of crucial importance in the development of the self. Located in what Winnicott called "the potential space" between people, it helps the child to experiment with her vulnerabilities "and the idea of otherness" (Nussbaum 2010, 99). Taking on various roles, she learns to exercise the ability to imagine different perspectives, whereas interaction with other participants of the play teaches her that she does not fully control her surroundings and has to respect the autonomy of her co-players. Yet, as the play takes place in a friendly environment, somewhere halfway through fantasy and reality, the vulnerability connected with the lack of omnipotence and the encounter with novelty, feels delightful and amusing. In this manner, play helps the child to gradually come to terms with her harm-proneness and begin to perceive otherness (Nussbaum 2010, 97-101, Nussbaum 2008, 236-237, Winnicott 1951, 229-242).

Art can be understood likewise. Winnicott sees it as an adult equivalent of play, regardless of temporal sequence, however, the comparison of these two human activities may be most instructive. The similarities are evident in the case of the performative types of art based on interaction between individuals, such as dance, theatre and music. In her overview of the theories of education, Nussbaum points that progressive educators (Tagore, Dewey) laid great emphasis on these activities because they require cooperation and mutual reliance, along with the ability to enact different roles and to see one's own and another's body as a beautiful form capable of artistic expression

(Nussbaum 2010, 103-106). Herself, though, Nussbaum seems to focus primarily on the position of a spectator of an artwork. This is probably because such detached perspective can help us perform ethical judgments even in the situations which do not involve us directly, thereby teaching us to broaden the circle of our concern. And so, an encounter with ancient tragedies can become an exercise in compassionate perception. Tragedies present individuals as vulnerable to uncontrolled happenings and, as such, worthy of artistic appraisal. Thus, they can evoke compassion and wonder, *i.e*. the respectful and disinterested concern for people's fragility (Nussbaum 2010, 350-353).

Theatrical plays can be both viewed and read. The latter type of experiencing art is particularly important for Nussbaum, who devotes the most attention to literature. She recognises the ethical significance of tragedies, poetry and, most of all, novels. The philosopher cherishes classic realist novels, such as the works of Charles Dickens and Henry James, populated with concrete individuals, each of which represents different perspective on the narrated affairs. Thus, they can steer imagination, inspiring readers to step into the shoes of characters. They present human beings in their richness, suggesting that we look for the same inner depth in the people whom we meet in the real life. Like ancient tragedies, novels, then, inspire the desirable type of perception. Moreover, by the choice of protagonists, they can question social divisions, teaching us to see the humanity in the excluded social groups (Nussbaum 1995, 4-12, 93-99). Nussbaum's preference for classic realist novels, however, seems to be motivated by yet another reason, which, on her account, differentiates them from other forms of artistic creation.

Literature and the public life

Namely, the very structure of the novels which Nussbaum cherishes most predisposes them to "enact a sort of feeling and imagining" (Nussbaum 1995, 4) which might be called ethical perception. By this term I shall understand the method of forming specific moral judgments based on the perception of one's own and other's vulnerability. As I have been attempting to demonstrate throughout the paper, when based on the awareness of vulnerability, our practical rationality is of perceiving character. The mature type of reasoning requires that the harm-proneness of others is recognised as well. Now, I suggest that ethical perception be understood as the application of this general tendency in the context of concrete decision-making. At the same time, it is here that we can most vividly observe the application of perception in the realm of political philosophy – that is: "the marriage of Ankersmit and Rawls".

The very concept of ethical perception stems from Aristotle's idea of practical rationality, wherein "the discernment rests with perception" (Nussbaum 1985(2), 55, 66). Thus conceived, perception acquires a more specific meaning – it is the ability to grasp a situation in its uniqueness, to interpret a given context, taking all its intricacies into consideration. In this respect, it comes to the perspective advocated by Ankersmit, at the same time baring a strong resemblance to the British-empiricist idea of the aesthetic judgment.

Nussbaum names four pillars of this method, each of them reflecting the sense of one's and other's vulnerability. First of all, we have to recognise the plurality and non-commensurability of values. When we realise that we both need and are needed by other people, we acknowledge the various commitments conditioned by interpersonal relationships. None of them can be trumped by another one; nor can the negligence in one respect by compensated by the diligence in another. All of these claims have to be allowed for in the process of forming an ethical judgments – we have to perceptively grasp the commitments involved in s given situation. Such non-reductionist account of values points to the second principle of ethical perception, that is the priority of the particular. We are embedded in the network of relationships, each of which concerns concrete, unique persons and evolves in time. We make decisions with regard to individual human beings, in a specific context, to which our perception has to be tuned. Thus, ethical perception rests on the assumption that an ethical judgment cannot simply be deduced from general principles. These are, naturally, useful but they function as the Lesbian rule (a form of measurement used on Lesbos), which "»bends to the shape of stone«" (Nussbaum 1985(2), 70). "The bending", thirdly, takes the form of imaginative and emotional responsiveness to the situation. As we have seen, perception is based on emotions and imagination, which are necessary to recognise the value of other people and envisage their perspective. Thus, in order to grasp the commitments involved in a concrete situation, we have to interpret it by means of these capabilities (Nussbaum 1985(2), 56-84, Nussbaum 1992(2), 36-44) .

Classic realist novels are particularly well predisposed to represent ethical perception. As I have said, they attempt to portrait their protagonists in their richness of concrete persons. Therefore, they can capture the perspective of individuals who face the necessity of making an ethical decision in the "here and now" determined by the history of their interpersonal relationships and life plans. The novels with a more psychological focus, such as James's works, enable the vivid picturing of the operations of emotions and imagination in the process of reflection. Moreover, apart from displaying a style of reasoning, novels can also explicitly advocate it. Nussbaum proposes to read Dickens's *Hard Times* in this vein since the novel makes the case for "fancy" (imagination) as opposed to the purely quantitative, utilitarian way of thinking. Such juxtaposition is remarkable because, by presenting imagination as an alternative to the established economic paradigm, it suggests that what Nussbaum calls ethical perception is not only a method of solving "personal" moral dilemmas but also a legitimate type of public reasoning (Nussbaum 1995, 13-52, Nussbaum 1985(2), 97-104).

This is because, as I suggest, the perception of vulnerability, in which ethical perception is anchored, is conceived as such. As the method of applying this attitude, then, ethical perception is intended to operate on the same scale. This claim may seem stunning, given the apparently intimate character of the type of reflection just presented. What is relevant for public reasoning, however, is not the tightness of interpersonal bonds, but locality and context-responsiveness. That is to say, when dealing with a public issue, the specificity of the problem, its history, the needs of the parties involved, *etc.* should be allowed for. Nussbaum likes to present this mechanism by references to judicial reasoning, whose Anglo-American tradition indeed leaves room for what she describes as ethical perception. Ideally, this method would be employed in legislative procedures as well since only laws sensitive to the context can guarantee the citizens real life opportunities (capabilities).

On a yet more general level ethical perception provides the model of deliberation suitable for a democratic society. "Democratic equality", remarks Nussbaum after Winnicott, "brings vulnerability" (Nussbaum 2010, 100). When we renounce the will to control other people and respect their right to political participation, we expose ourselves to their influence. Therefore, democracy needs the type of reasoning which allows for mutual interdependencies and vulnerabilities between individuals, that is – ethical perception. This, then, is the method which democratic citizens should follow in the course of joint efforts to solve public issues. As such, ethical perception constitutes an alternative to Rawls's reflective equilibrium. The author of *A Theory of Justice* suggested that the deliberation should start in the situation of a balance between our considered judgments (beliefs which we want to introduce into the discussion), which meet certain restrictive criteria of rationality (generality, universality, publicity, general ordering, finality and conclusiveness) (Rawls 1999, 18-19, 40-46, 113-117. Nussbaum offers a more flexible and less demanding account of rationality instead. The beliefs which pass its test and constitute "perceptive equilibrium" can be based on emotions and imagination, immersed in particular context and tentative (Nussbaum 1989, 172-176, 182).

In this manner, ethical perception does justice to one of the most acute and yet unmentioned types of human vulnerability – the vulnerability (fragility) of goodness. The plurality of human values and the contextuality of judgments expose us to moral errors. We often find ourselves in a situation in which, due to the happenings uncontrolled by us, we are unable to meet all of our commitments, whose validity we nevertheless recognise in spite of their conflicting character. When choosing one course of action and not the other we become guilty of negligence, into which we were forced by the circumstances (Nussbaum 2009(1), 1-21). Ethical perception leaves room for the imperfection of our moral judgments. And it seems that such modesty is required in the process of democratic deliberation since it increases flexibility and tolerance.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have tried to disentangle the knot of the key notions of Nussbaum's project: capabilities, vulnerability and perception. The main assumption of this study is that, when concentrating on the category of vulnerability, we are able to interpret

Nussbaum's capabilities approach as a variety of political aesthetics. We have seen that the capabilities-based account of the human good leads to the diagnosis of the fundamental vulnerability of our well-being. Its awareness is then reflected in our practical reasoning, which for this reason "rests with perception". We interpret reality by means of emotions and imagination, perceiving it against the background of our expectations and needs. These capabilities, in turn, help us grasp the vulnerability of other people, which motivates care for them. In this manner, perception constitutes a new type of public deliberation, which recognises the relevance of arts and beauty to political practice. As we have seen, wonder – the disinterested delight in another person – can inspire compassion and care. Thus, artistic experience alleviates the negative, arbitrary side to perception, steering it towards a desirable, inclusive form of reasoning. When exercised in a concrete situation of the decision-making, this type of reflection resembles the aesthetic judgment in its sensitivity to details, insightfulness and locality. Moreover, it is in literary works where we can find vivid examples of ethical perception.

Vulnerability makes us perceiving beings. Arts – the objects of perception – help us come to terms with our and each other's vulnerability. Thus, when focusing on the notion of vulnerability, political aesthetics may suggest itself as the perspective from which to interpret Nussbaum's philosophy. As I have attempted to show, this paradigm can help us draw interesting consequences from Nussbaum's capabilities approach.

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ABSTRACT

VULNERABILITY AS A PERCEPTUAL CATEGORY – MARTHA NUSSBAUM'S CAPABILITIES APPROACH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF POLITICAL AESTHETICS

The aim of the paper is to draw politico-aesthetic consequences from Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach. It is argued that this can be achieved by focusing on the notion of vulnerability implied by the idea of capabilities. The recognition of the vulnerability of the human good inspires a new model of practical rationality based on perception. This idea, in turn, explores the aesthetic connotations of perception implied by its etymology (the ancient Greek for perception being *aesthesis*). Thus, political aesthetics is understood as the inquiry into the political consequences of the affinity between ethics and aesthetics, as well as the political relevance of the notion of beauty.

KEYWORDS: capabilities, vulnerability, perception, emotions, imagination, compassion, wonder