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Creating Capabilities



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THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM

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Synopsis

This is a primer on the Capabilities Approach, Martha Nussbaum's innovative model for assessing human progress. She argues that much humanitarian policy today violates basic human values; instead, she offers a unique means of redirecting government and development policy toward helping each of us lead a full and creative life.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Creating Capabilities is a significant achievement. Nussbaum has managed to accomplish four major tasks with her book, any of which would have made this a good book: write an accessible version of the Capabilities Approach; clearly differentiate her view from Amartya Sen's, who stands as the standard bearer of the approach; address some common criticisms of the Capabilities Approach that have arisen over the past decade; and to synthesize a large portion of her work over the past 15 or so years into a coherent whole. The territory she covers is very familiar to those who know the Capabilities Approach. Capabilities are "substantive freedoms" - "a set of (usually interrelated) opportunities to choose and act" in one's life. They involve a choice between a set of

activities for one's life, which are also known as functionings. So functionings are the active usage of one of your capabilities (e.g. voting (functioning) to participate effectively in political decisions (capability)). She also maintains the view that there are ten Central Capabilities, all of which must be grounded in a commonsense understanding of what a just society must have: human dignity. One new feature of Nussbaum's approach is to split capabilities into two types: internal and combined. Internal capabilities are the general characteristics of a person (physical/mental/emotional) that are developed through interaction with external features of society. Combined capabilities are the "totality of opportunities [one] has for choice and action in [one's] specific political, social, and economic situation," which are the result of nurtured internal capabilities. As such, the two types of capabilities are interrelated, and cannot be separated within a society.

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