

**CLASSICAL POLITICAL THOUGHT
DEMOCRACY IN ATHENS AND AMERICA
POLITICAL SCIENCE 315
MICRO-ESSAY #2**

Write a 750-900 word essay on the following question. Your essay is the Google doc folder by 4 PM on MONDAY February 19. Be sure to include a title (not on a separate page) and single space your essay. Also, be sure to define your terms carefully, use the concrete case below, and include at least one claim, objection, rejoinder sequence.

Is Nussbaum's approach culturally universal or yet another form of western paternalism?

Nussbaum argues the capabilities approach is culturally universal. It works for 'all nations' included wealthy Western nations like the United States because all are "developing nations, in that they contain problems of human development and struggles for a fully adequate quality of life and for minimal justice" (*Creating Capabilities*, 16).

The capabilities approach is also more universal than the alternatives of liberalism and utilitarianism, Nussbaum argues, because it corrects their cultural myopia and parochialism. For example, it avoids the liberal's narrow preoccupation with "negative liberty," which defines liberty as freedom from state intervention and privileges freedom in the public sphere. Capabilities "corrects this error" (66) and applies to the domestic sphere. Similarly, the utilitarian focus on satisfying preferences is similarly lacking in sensitivity to how culture can blind; it misses the human tendency to adapt to unjust status quos (54). Utilitarianism cares "about people, but doesn't care about them all that deeply" (52); the capabilities approach allows us to discover the whole person. It can recognize that groups like the Bangladeshi women in her example can "realize the good" of literacy though illiterate ("Aristotle's Social Democracy," 83).

Nussbaum uses the story of Vasanti, an Indian Brahmin sewing machine worker and business owner, who reconstructs her life after an abusive marriage, to illustrate the way the capabilities approach can open development theory to culturally universally important aspects of life not captured by liberalism and utilitarianism's reliance on GNP and negative human rights.

But Vasbist sees traces of "western paternalism" (259) in Nussbaum's treatment of Indian women like Vasanti. Let's define paternalism as a philosophy justifying one person telling another person what their supposed best interests are. Using this definition, Vasbist she has a point. Nussbaum's approach is rooted in Aristotle, a 5th century BCE Greek who grounded marriage in a partnership existing "for the sake of reproduction" (30). Further, Nussbaum herself cannot deny that capabilities are culturally construed and experienced in context of societal cultures. Thus, she concedes that Vasanti "adjusted to a life" that did not value literacy (*Capabilities*, 55). In addition, Nussbaum recognizes that western critics like Dworkin see her approach as one "telling distant people what is wisdom" ("Aristotle's Social Democracy," 83). Is she celebrating as universal a tool which simply makes sense in western, modernized contexts and thus covertly tells women in the global south that what their supposed best interests and selves should be?