

Peri Roberts (Cardiff University):

**Martha Nussbaum's political liberalism: cultural variation and the
global capability threshold**

Abstract

Martha Nussbaum has, together with Amartya Sen, been a key player in the development of the Capabilities Approach as a measure of quality of life. Here the central question is 'what are people actually able to do and to be?' and answers to this question make reference to a wide range of capabilities including health, bodily integrity, education and control over environment, amongst others. Importantly, Nussbaum has also identified the Capabilities Approach as the basis for a distinctive engagement with issues of basic social justice, one which she argues makes significant room for cultural diversity at its heart. In her latest book, *Creating Capabilities*, she argues that in order to put the approach to work in constructing a theory of justice she must, in addition to developing a specific list of Central Capabilities, also add other notions, 'those of *human dignity*, the *threshold*, [and] *political liberalism*'. The central aim of any political liberal approach is to respond sensitively to conditions of pluralism and diversity whilst being clear about the principled nature of any political settlement in such circumstances, which must respond to equal human dignity. This paper will examine her contention that the Capabilities Approach can be the basis of a political liberal approach and then go on to concentrate on the notion of a capabilities threshold. Such a threshold is to set the minimal conditions that any state must satisfy. However, Nussbaum argues that the level of this threshold should legitimately vary with differences in history, culture and tradition. This paper raises some simple questions, not about whether the threshold itself is necessary in a capabilities-based theory of justice, but about the impact and appropriateness of cultural variation in that theory of justice. It is not clear that Nussbaum has yet answered these questions.

Dr. Peri Roberts is a Senior Lecturer at Cardiff University. His teaching and research interests are predominantly in contemporary political theory. His focus is on liberal justification in a number of contexts. He is the author of the book *Political Constructivism* in which he defends an account of the objectivity of certain basic liberal commitments. In a major collaborative project (based at Cardiff), Roberts explores contrasting modes of justification invoked in normative argument.

Further, Roberts has published on the justifiable liberal responses to the challenges posed by an increasing recognition of the extent and importance of pluralism and multiculturalism. Together with Bruce Haddock and Peter Sutch, he edited the multi-authored volumes *Principles and Political Order: The Challenge of Diversity* (2006, jointly edited with Bruce Haddock and Peter Sutch) and *Evil in Contemporary Political Theory* (2011, jointly edited with Bruce Haddock and Peter Sutch).