

Grad Colloquium Abstracts

Statelessness, Vulnerability and the Capability Approach

Shannon Buckley

Martha Nussbaum's version of the capability approach provides a moral theory for global ethics; one that outlines a universal, substantive measure of human flourishing and that can, at the same time, accommodate cultural differences. The question the capability approach asks is: what is an individual actually able to do and be? One of the ways Nussbaum's version of the capability approach differs from Sen's is that it argues we need a definite list of the most central capabilities, even a tentative and revisable list, which will provide the framework for "a set of basic entitlements without which no society can lay claim to justice" (Nussbaum, 2003). If the aim of the capability approach is to ensure equality and freedom for all then Nussbaum is right to insist upon a substantive account of the types of capabilities needed for the dignified life.

The only potential drawback I see in the capability approach is that it focuses on what a nation can do for its citizens to lay claim to being a just society. What can the capability approach do for the refugee or stateless person? The stateless person exists in a state of extreme uncertainty and vulnerability. The stateless person is, to use Giorgio Agamben's words, *Homo Sacer*; living the 'bare life', unrecognizable because he is unrepresented and unrepresentable (1998). Effectively the stateless are invisible, existing, both literally and figuratively, on the margins of society. There is surely no greater vulnerability than invisibility in a world where a life of dignity must be one lived in full view of others, since dignity itself calls for recognition and response.

The question I want to raise and explore here is whether Nussbaum's version of the capability approach has the means to address the plight of the stateless. I argue that normatively it does. The difficulty lies in making the invisible visible, and this is a practical question best taken up by development practitioners, grass roots movements and international institutions.

Explanatory Spacetime Geometry not Spacetime Structure

Corey Sawkins

The role that spacetime plays in explanations in physics is a point of contention among philosophers. Harvey Brown (2005) argues that the structure of spacetime cannot play any kind of causal role and therefore is nonexplanatory. Michel Janssen (2008) argues against Brown maintaining that spacetime does play an explanatory role in the special theory of relativity (STR). According to Janssen the explanatory role that spacetime plays in STR is best characterized by what he calls a common origins account of explanation, where relativistic phenomena is traced back to the structure of spacetime. This paper examines Janssen's argument and maintains that the explanatory role that spacetime plays in STR is better understood in terms of geometry not structure. That is, the geometry of spacetime is what is used in the explanation of relativistic phenomena, not the structure of spacetime. By formulating the explanations in terms of geometry, my argument avoids the classical debate concerning the ontological status of spacetime.