

The 465th Convocation

Address: "Political Animals: Luck, Need, and Dignity"

By Martha C. Nussbaum

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On this happy day, when many of you are embarking on a new phase of life and a new time of independence, in the presence of the families and friends who have supported and cared for you in so many ways, I want to address the topic of care and dependency: our need, as human beings, for the care of others. Let me start with three examples.

Kristie's mother is in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. She shows increasing cognitive impairment, and her personality has greatly changed. Because she can no longer live on her own, she has moved in with Kristie and her family. Most of the burden of caring for her falls on Kristie, who also has a full-time job.

Karen can't walk. A professor at a state university, she has been in a wheelchair since early childhood. She is often in pain, and whenever she goes anywhere she needs to inquire about wheelchair accessibility. Things are better than they used to be, with Internet shopping and most buildings being wheelchair accessible. Still, her life is very complicated, and she encounters every day the subtle stigma attached to disability in an America so admiring of competence.

Jamie loves the Beatles. He can imitate a waiter bringing his favorite foods, and he has a joyful sense of humor. Born with Down syndrome, Jamie has been cared for by a wide range of doctors and therapists, not to mention the non-stop care of his parents. Now three, he is also going to school, in a regular classroom. His family, classmates, and teachers try hard to create a world in which he is not seen simply as "a child with Down syndrome," far less as "a mongoloid idiot," but as Jamie, a particular child.

Although today we are celebrating many types of success and independence, we should never forget that we human beings are needy animals. Born into a world we do not control, we try hard to live in that world with some measure of dignity and independence. But we are never able to be

all we hope to be, physically or mentally. Our very life cycle itself brings with it periods of acute dependency. We typically move from the helplessness of infancy to the partial independence of adulthood (in which we still rely greatly on others and on the institutions of our society) to the physical and mental disabilities of old age. During the prime of life we often encounter periods of unusual need, for example during an illness or a time of depression or bereavement. And then there are many of us who, like Jamie, are acutely dependent on others all through our lives because of disabilities, mental or physical, that are more severe than those of others.

These dependencies raise urgent social problems, problems of justice. First, there is the problem of how a just society will meet the needs of those who are more than usually disabled, either temporarily or permanently, and provide them with chances to lead flourishing and dignified human lives in whatever way they can. Second, there is the problem of how a just society will protect care givers from exploitation. The work involved in caring for the needs of another human being is very taxing, both physically and emotionally. And yet, very often it is not even recognized as work; when it is, it is usually poorly paid and little respected. The vast majority of this work is currently done by women, who are thereby often impeded in their own pursuit of a flourishing life.

I raise these questions both as a person facing these issues in my own life, as we all do, and also as a political philosopher. I want to suggest that political theory has been part of the problem, obscuring these problems of justice, but that new and better theorizing can also be part of their solution.

Now in one way, problems of human need and dependency have always been prominent in the Western tradition of political thought. Aristotle remarked that it would be absurd to imagine the gods forming a society around principles of justice. Because gods are immortal and invulnerable, he said, they would have no need for institutions such as laws and contracts. We, on the other hand, need justice because we are not godlike.

But although in this way need is a perennial topic of political philosophy, philosophers have not dealt well with the messier facts of human dependency, facts such as senility and lifelong

disability. Political philosophy has usually been written by males who had few responsibilities for child care or care of the elderly. So it's not too surprising that classic works have glossed over these facts about our lives when thinking about what basic social institutions should look like. This omission has had a big and, I think, pernicious influence on the ways in which we imagine citizenship.

In particular, there's an image that philosophers and many others use when they talk about justice that has had a huge influence on popular thought and public policy, especially in the United States: the image of society as a contract for mutual advantage. Social contract theories, which so greatly influenced the American Founding, all imagine society as beginning in a fictional situation in which a group of people make a deal with one another for basic social principles that will be advantageous to them all. Typically, these people are imagined as all competent adults, roughly equal to each other in capacity. John Locke called the parties to the social contract "free, equal, and independent." Similarly, in our own era, John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* describes his contracting parties as "fully cooperating members of society over a complete life." Think about that idea, and you'll see that it is not just fictional but deeply false: no human being is a fully cooperating member of society over a complete life. Rawls's hypothetical starting point effaces things like infancy, senility, and mental disability. When such fictional humans make a bargain for mutual advantage, it is no big surprise that provisions for the elderly and the disabled are an afterthought. Rawls says these problems have to be taken up later, after basic principles of justice are already chosen.

Is there a deeper idea about human nature that underlies this staggering omission? I believe that there is. Often, if we probe more deeply, we find that the underlying thought is that we human beings are basically split beings, part rational and part animal. The animal part is messy and inconvenient, lacking dignity. Fortunately, the rational part can come to its aid, making schemes for mutual support and cooperation. Such ideas have distorted our view of our relationship to the other animals and the world of nature. They have also contributed to disdain for women, since women are so often understood by men as the bearers of the more animal part of human nature, through their connection to pregnancy and birth. And they have clearly contributed to contempt for the disabled, especially the mentally disabled, who are so often seen as not full-fledged

human beings, as utterly lacking in human dignity. In another generation Jamie might not even have been given a name; he would have been called “a mongoloid idiot” and sent to languish in an institution. And of course this same dismissive attitude infects our treatment of elderly people, especially those who have severe cognitive impairments.

In reality, of course, our animality and our rationality are inextricably bound up together. We need to recognize that human dignity, that important but elusive notion, is the dignity of a certain type of animal. It is a dignity that could not be possessed by a being who was not mortal and disabled, just as the beauty of a cherry tree in bloom could not be possessed by a diamond. We need to recognize that our animal functions are a part of our dignity and that they themselves have dignity. We must also recognize that all of our powers are incomplete and vulnerable, subject to the vicissitudes of fortune. This is true of the ability to reason as well as mobility and dexterity. If we think this way, we begin to see commonality between the situation of the “free and equal” adult and the situation of the infant, the demented elderly patient, the child with Down syndrome. All have abilities and strivings, and all are disabled and needy, in varying ways and in varying degrees.

I have given this speech the title “political animals,” a phrase that comes from Aristotle. I now want to suggest that Aristotle’s great image of the human being as a political animal is a valuable corrective to the social contract image, with its emphasis on independence and bargaining power. Aristotle was a great biologist as well as a philosopher, so it’s not surprising that he uses an image for the political life that reminds us of the temporality and neediness of all of our functions. By attaching “animal” to “political,” he suggests that politics is not about making us free from need, but rather about how we can use our cooperative intelligence to support need—including, the image suggests, the asymmetrical need and dependency that come with old age, acute disability, and lifelong extreme disability.

What would a just society do if it substituted Aristotle’s image for that of the independent citizen making a contract? First of all, I think it would build the need for care in times of acute dependency into the very foundation of political principles, using the resources of both the state and the private sector to make sure that people have the care they need together with respect for

their dignity, and making sure that the people who do the caregiving are not thereby disabled from the other functions of life.

Second, it would work hard to de-stigmatize the lives of the mentally and physically disabled, integrating them into schools and societies, and teaching us all to regard them as full, individual human beings.

Third, it would urge young people to devote time to caring for those who are disabled. Youth would be imagined as a time not of carefree independence, cut off from the vulnerabilities of age, but as a time of temporary good fortune, which owes much to those who are now less fortunate. We should encourage more in the way of national service, in which young people spend time providing care to children and the elderly.

In short: We need to move beyond the social contract tradition, with its bleak announcement that only those who are productive deserve to be respected as full citizens. Let us say, instead, that we all deserve respect for what we are, disabled political animals, each one an individual with dignity.

In Aristotle's great work, *On the Parts of Animals*, there is a chapter that has great importance for politics today. Aristotle is trying to convince his students that it is worth spending time on the study of animals. The students, however, would rather study something more sublime. But Aristotle tells them, first, that they should not turn up their noses at the prospect of studying flesh, blood, and guts: for it is of such parts that they themselves are made. Then he says that there is something wonderful in everything that exists in nature. He concludes with a story about an earlier thinker, Heraclitus. Some distinguished visitors came to see him. When they arrived, they found the great man inside, "warming himself before the stove." They hesitated, apparently feeling it would be undignified to enter the kitchen, a place usually reserved for women. But Heraclitus tells them: "Come in: don't be afraid. There are gods here too."

On a day when we are celebrating high achievement, I urge us all to remember that thought—a thought about the dignity and human worth of the weaknesses of the human body and of the acts

of care and concern that support them.

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