Balance Of Power Essay, Research Paper

The Balance of Power

Throughout the semester, a theme that has guided our thoughts has been the idea that the self is the capacity to have capacities. Through what we have read, written about, and discussed, we have been trying to come up with our own answers to the questions about the self; what a capacity is, how we find them, which ones are essential to human flourishing, what we do with them once they are found? Yet all of these questions lead us to answer that final and defining question of “what is the ‘truth’?”

A capacity is a capability or a realized power in a person. Some of the authors that we read throughout the semester believed that these capacities must be implanted into us, and then nurtured and trained. C.S. Lewis says that, “The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles, but to irrigate deserts.”(1-p.27) However, in this statement he contradicts his own belief. In order for irrigation to work and make things grow, there must be something there beneath the surface to begin with. This is exactly my belief. I agree with Lewis that our capacities must be trained and educated, but those that are essential to human flourishing are inside our hearts waiting to be uncovered.

But how then, do we go about uncovering these capacities? The answer is so simple, and yet far to complex to completely explain in one paper. It takes thought. In fact, thought is the best example of a capacity. No one can teach thought. It is an innate quality of all human beings. However, thought is not complete in its original state. We must train and educate our ability to think. We can train it to be analytical, critical, evidential, logical, careful, clear, subjective, objective, etc. The list could go on and on. We can ‘irrigate’ it and watch it grow. But that is assuming that it is there in the first place. Kierkegaard was on the right track to uncovering what is inside of us. He believed that it would take subjective thought about ourselves, not being detached from our feelings, but letting our emotions be our guide to what we truly believe.

However, subjective thinking alone cannot decipher what capacities are essential to our lives. It gives us a place to start from with what really matters to us in our hearts, but it is clouded by our biases and prejudgements. We must sift through our conclusions from subjective thinking with our capability to think objectively. Martha Nussbaum, in her lecture on “Liberal Education and the Cultivation of Humanity”, spoke of three things that are essential to being human. One of them was the “capacity for critical examination of oneself.” She says that we need to “question all beliefs and reason logically”, taking “responsibilty for our own reasoning.” It is necessary to take what we have come to believe through our subjective thinking and question that through reasoning and examination of why we believe these things.

One example of this is in our capacity for religion. One theme that has been common throughout several of the writers we have engaged this semester, is the importance of religion to human flourishing. Kierkegaard says that “man’s only salvation lies in the reality of religion for each individual.”(2-p.56) Evelyn Underhill also states that, “we are not happy, we are not secure, we are not fully alive until our life has an inside as well as an outside.”(3-p.96, italics me) Our humanity hinges on the gift we are given which is the human soul. If we lose touch with that we have no meaning to life, no direction, no answers to the unending questions that plague our minds, no depth, no truth. We therefore need that capacity for spiritual life to be able to flourish. Underhill also says, we need the outside as well. “We all begin as tadpoles; but we ought to end as frogs- equally at home in both worlds (meaning spiritual and intellectual), both elements.”(3-p.98) We need to find a way to combine both of these ‘worlds’ so that they can coexist. This is a difficult task because at times they can contradict each other. There is, however, a way to do this. Imagine that there are two planes (see diagram at back). One plane is that of a true believer. The other is of a skeptic observer. If you are raised, as I was, in a Christian home, or of any other faith, you have been brought up in the category of a believer. However, if we start in the plane of a true believer, our faith is naive. We don’t have that connection between our inside and our outside. What me must do, like Nussbaum says, is to jump over to the other plane of the skeptic observer and look at our faith objectively. We must think hard and clear about it, taking a serious look at what our faith actually entails. If we then decide to take the leap back into our faith, we have found a way to bind our inside and outside and we will be more committed to our faith because our intellect is not constantly fighting against it.

Another capacity that is vital to our human flourishing is that of passion. Passion in the sense of our emotions, as well as something that we are passionate about. Passion is not just an emotion, it is what governs all of our other emotions. It intensifies every thing else that we feel. It is a way of living. Kierkegaard is a staunch supporter of passion filled thought and action. Passion is what makes us great human beings because it leads us to action upon those emotions, rather than mulling over the question until it dies. It is not merely the concept of passionate emotion and thought that makes up our capacity for passion, but it includes those things which we are passionate about. Faith, love, art, music, all are things that enrich the human spirit. Both Lewis and Underhill bring up the point that not everything can be a passion. Underhill talks about the inability to have mathematics be a passion. It deals only with the factual things, rather than dealing with the human spirit. Lewis’ example of the waterfall explains it best. “The man who called the cataract sublime was not intending simply to describe his own emotions about it: he was also claiming that the object was one which merited those emotions.”(1-p.28) These are things which ‘merit’ being passionate about, because they consume the heart and involve the human spirit. They involve the subjective thinking that engage our emotions and help us to uncover what makes us tick. They help us to set our spirits free and let them soar to great heights.

However, if we always take action by what our passion tells us, it can quickly become a weakness. Although passion intensifies our emotions of love and goodness, it also enhances our other emotions of hatred and jealousy. It clouds the mind with unclear thoughts. In one of Shakespeare’s plays, Othello shows the twofold result of passion. He was considered to be a great man and a great leader because his passion led him to action. But it also proved to be his downfall. His passion made him blind with rage because of his jealousy. Passionate thought and emotion alone is not the answer. We also need our capacity for reason to create a system of checks and balances.

As stated in “A Rational Animal”, Reason can be broken up into the two categories of Theoretical Reason and Practical Reason. “Theoretical Reason is our capacity, small or great, to think thoughts, that is, to operate from and with propositions. Practical Reason is our capacity, small or great, to conduct ourselves according to moral principles in the warm world of action, and, therewith, our capacity also to feel the proper feelings towards the inhabitants and the furniture of this world.”(4-p.417) Reasoning is our ability to think objectively about something. To step aside and detach ourselves from it for a moment and look at it through unclouded eyes. Reason is what separates humans from every other living thing in this world. We have been given this capability, and to push it aside would be denying ourselves the opportunity to fully appreciate our humanity. As Nussbaum says, we must “cultivate our humanity” by fully taking advantage of what we have.

The capacity for ‘Practical Reasoning’, as stated above, leads us into another capacity that is essential to our lives. It is our capacity for moral principles. Kierkegaard says that “morality is character”, and that “character is really inwardness.”(2-p.43) What we consider to be our moral principles is really a projection of our ‘inside’ life. Our capacity for morality depends on how much we have let our capacity for religion grow. The two are bound together to create an ethico-religious capacity. This gives us the principles upon which we base our lives and our existence.

These capacities, of thinking, passion, reason, and ethico-religious, are the most important of all capacities. They are those that are essential to human flourishing. All other capacities stem from these. They are connected. They are bound together, because they all come from inside us. However, we cannot expect our humanity to flourish once they are found. These capacities are like infants. They need to be trained, nurtured, and educated in order to reach their full potential.

But what is their full potential? What does it truly mean to reach human flourishing? Throughout the course of describing these capacities, there has been a connection that has surfaced between all of them. Because of this connection, one of these capacities alone cannot bring us to the end which makes us whole. Each one has its strengths, but it also has its weaknesses. One can destroy the other, and the next can destroy that one. Take the connection between our inside and outside world (i.e. faith and knowledge). As Underhill says, “The human mind’s thirst for more and more breadth has obscured the human heart’s craving for more and more depth.”(3-p.97) However, Underhill also says that both are necessary to be whole. “How are we going to reconcile the sort of truth declared in The Mysterious Universe with the sort of truth declared in ‘Hark! the herald angels sing.’ One series belongs to life’s outside – the other series belongs to life’s inside. And to be a complete human being means to be in touch with both those worlds.”(3-p.97) This is true of all of these capacities. The common theme that has shown itself when talking about all of these capacities, is that there needs to be a balance to reach that highest level. One can’t control the other. Instead they need to coexist and find a way to work together to reach that goal. We need to find that balance between passion and reason, between objective and subjective thinking, between man’s need for God and man’s thirst for knowledge. We must be able to form a democracy inside ourselves. We need our capacities to fit the democratic dispositions that Jean Elshtain describes in Democracy on Trial. “Preparedness to work with others different from oneself toward a shared end; a combination of strong conviction with the readiness to compromise in the recognition that one can’t always get what one wants; and a sense of individuality and a commitment to civic goods that are not the possession of one person or of a small group alone.”(4-p.2) Once we find this balance, this democracy, our capacities can begin to grow together and search for the highest level of human flourishing, to find the ‘truth’.

There is a poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson called “Ullyses” that talks about what the truth really is. “Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades forever and forever when I move.” We spend all of our lives obsessing over the question of what really is the ‘truth’. The answer lies in that “untraveled world” that always seems to disappear right when we are about to reach it. So what reason do we have for thinking about these capacities if we can never reach the truth? When we set forth on that journey to find the truth, we realize that it is not the end which we need. The journey’s the thing. The journey is what trains and educates and nurtures these capacities. Each day we struggle to reach the balance which is needed to flourish and to find the ‘truth’. That struggle is what makes us who we are and shows us how to live our lives. The answer to what the truth is? Stop worrying about the question and set forth on you’re own journey to become those things which make us truly human.

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