Playing for social equality

Nielsen, Lasse

Published in:
Politics, Philosophy & Economics

DOI:
10.1177/1470594X18762255

Publication date:
2018

Document version
Accepted manuscript

Document license
Other

Citation for published version (APA):
PLAYING FOR SOCIAL EQUALITY

Abstract

This paper claims that the protection of children’s capability for play is a central social-political goal. It provides the following three-premise argument in defence of this claim: (i) we have strong and wide-ranging normative reasons to be concerned with clusters of social deficiency; (ii) particular fertile functionings play a key role for tackling clusters of social deficiency; and finally (iii) the capability for childhood play is a crucial, ontogenetic prerequisite for the development of those particular fertile functionings. Thus, in so far as we consider it a central political goal to tackle social deficiency, we should be concerned with protection of childhood play capability. This conclusion raises new insights on the importance—for global development policy as well as for welfare states’ aim to secure social justice—of protecting children’s capability to engage in playful activities.

Key Words: Play; Childhood; Social Inequality; Capability; Social Policy.

Why does the baby crow with pleasure? Why does the gambler lose himself in his passion? Why is a huge crowd roused to frenzy by a football match? This intensity of, and absorption in, play finds no explanation in biological analysis. Yet in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening, lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play. Nature, so our reasoning mind tells us, could just as easily have given her children all those useful functions of discharging superabundant energy, of relaxing after exertion, of training for the demands of life, of compensating for unfulfilled longings, etc., in the form of purely mechanical exercises and reactions. But no, she gave us play, with its tension, its mirth, and its fun (Huizinga, 1949: 2-3).

Johan Huizinga

In this article1, I shall defend the central political importance of the protection of the capability for play in childhood. While many philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists have studied the phenomenon of child play, its different forms, and its value, only few have investigated its status as a political and social good. Most notably, the capability for play is included by Martha Nussbaum in her well-known list of central human capabilities (2000: 78-80; 2011: 33-34). But in a political-philosophical context, the play-item on Nussbaum’s list has been much criticized either for being less important and hence less defendable than the other listed items, or for

---

1 The argument in this paper has evolved over many years and has improved from very many comments and suggestions. I owe thanks to Serena Olsaretti, Paula Casal, Juliana Bidadanure, Andrew Walton, Anca Gheaus, David Axelsen, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, Siba Harb, Isa Trifan, Tim Meijers, Andreas Albertsen, André-Anne Cormier, Nicolás Brando, Søren Midtgård, Jens Thaysen, and Mathilde Cecchini. I am especially grateful to two anonymous reviewers for great comments that has really improved the general argument. A special thanks to Jonathan Wolff and Andrew Williams for helping me understand the complexity of the issue in question.
being a clear expression of Nussbaum’s perfectionism (Claassen and Düwell, 2013; Claassen, 2011; 2017; Nelson, 2008; Den Uyl and Rasmussen, 2009).

Here I defend the central importance play has as a political and social good. My central claim is that the capability for childhood play has ontogenetic importance for the development of other capabilities that are essentially necessary for enabling people to cope with social deficiencies. Much political theory has in recent years increasingly paid attention to the importance of targeting clusters of disadvantage or deficiencies, not least due to the heavily growing empirical evidence that social disadvantages—such as ill health; unemployment; low income; social exclusion—are intertwined (Marmot, 2004; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010; Wolff and de- Shalit, 2007). Thus, the question of how to target deficiencies has taken on crucial political importance. Despite the increasing interest in how to target the clustering of disadvantage, very few theorists have given much thought to the capability for childhood play. This is surprising since numerous studies within child psychology and pediatrics support the intuition that childhood play could be a key player as a development tool for providing individuals with the necessary skills to cope with social disadvantages. At this point, however, this argument is yet to be unfolded. This is my modest purpose in this article.

My argument is quite simple. It involves three premises. (i) The normative case for tackling clusters of deficiencies premise claims that we have strong and wide-ranging normative reasons to be concerned with instances of clusters of deficiency—that is, where people are worse off than they should be on several separate but interrelated social dimensions. There are two strands of justice theory that ground this premise. The first one is a pluralist sufficientarian strand. It holds that there exists several functionings that are of central importance to justice such that any deficiency in any of these is necessarily unjust. For this reason, we should be especially concerned with instances of clusters of such deficiency. Within this strand of theory, I shall take my cue from Martha Nussbaum’s well-known list of central human capabilities although, importantly, one need not agree with Nussbaum to accept my argument. The second strand is social-egalitarian. It holds that one primary focus of social justice should be on cases in which deficiencies cluster, because clusters of deficiency—such as the clustering of inadequate health; lack of education; unemployment; low societal status—systematically creates and upholds social inequality. On this account, and contrary to the pluralist sufficientarian strand, justice need not be disturbed by singular instances of deficiency, if for example instances of deficiencies are more or less equally

---

2 I am here setting aside subjectivist-based egalitarian reasoning, such as for example the widely shared equal opportunity for welfare view following Richard Arneson’s influential writings (Arneson, 1989). I do this because that I think the political argument I want to make is most strongly formulated upon objectivist grounds. However, the normative case for tackling clusters of deficiency could also be justified upon subjectivist reasoning. While this might give rise to a philosophical debate about whether subjectivist or objectivist views are the most theoretically plausible grounds for theories of justice, the fact that both lines of reasoning supports this first premise simply strengthens the political argument I wish to make here.
distributed, but clusters of deficiency inevitably represent injustices, as their presence signify the stark and complex vulnerability of the worse off in society. Thus, egalitarians say, we should be concerned with clusters of deficiency.

(ii) The fertile-functioning premise says that some human functionings have a special fertile impact on the capability to achieve other central human functionings and, consequently, these functionings play a key role for tackling clusters of deficiencies. (iii) The ontogenetic value of “play” premise claims that not only is “play” a fertile functioning, it is a crucial prerequisite for the development of other fertile functionings due to its importance for successful development of central cognitive and social abilities. It follows from accepting these three premises that the protection of the capability for childhood play is of core value and should be considered a central political goal. This conclusion raises new insights on the importance—for global development policy as well as for welfare states’ aim to secure social justice—of protecting children’s capability to engage in playful activities. These insights inform us how to design political arrangements and public institutions such as the health system and the educational institutions.

The pluralist sufficientarian strand: Nussbaum’s central human capabilities

Through her many highly esteemed and comprehensive writings, Martha Nussbaum has provided and defended, almost unchangeably, the same list of central human capabilities as an index of universal human entitlements. Although Nussbaum’s list is fleshed out within Sen’s framework of the capability approach, and hence the language of capabilities and functionings is key to understanding the content of the listed items, she insists on describing them as human entitlements (Nussbaum 2000: 81-82). This is important, because the listed capabilities are what all individual persons’ can reasonably demand from others in the name of justice. The list contains ten items: (1) Life; (2) Bodily Health; (3) Bodily Integrity; (4) Senses, Imagination and Thought; (5) Emotions; (6) Practical Reason; (7) Affiliation (A: other-regarding; B: self-regarding); (8) Other Species; (9) Play; and (10) Control over One’s Environment (A: political; B: material) (Nussbaum, 1992; 2000: 78-80; 2001: 416-418; 2006: 76-78; 2007: 21-24; 2011: 33-34). The listed items are in the form of functionings—thus, achievements of well-being function—but importantly, the entitlements in regard to the elements are in terms of capabilities understood as the effective freedom or real opportunity to achieve these functionings. This distinction is fundamental in the writings of any capability theorist and is of central moral and political importance because it implies that we need to seriously consider people’s individual freedom, agency and personal choice; not only the enhancement of their well-being. For example, the functioning of my bodily health might very well be worsened through my choice not to take my daily doses of medicine or my choice to enjoy a fatty high-carb breakfast instead of my regular oatmeal with fresh fruit. But importantly, my capability to achieve bodily health is the same, assuming that the choice is effectively mine.
Building a theory of entitlements on capabilities rather than functioning achievements is crucial in order to take proper stock of individual choice and responsibility and to appropriately accommodate the threat of state-paternalism. This point may well be taken as “the standard move” for capability theorists, which Rutger Claassen rightfully argues will not make the theory immune to paternalism altogether (Claassen 2014: 57-73). This point aside, if entitlements are in the form of “freedom to choose” instead of “no choice at all,” the standard move does seem to take the edge of the paternalist fear.

The foundation of Nussbaum’s list is grounded in the normative belief that the listed items are constitutive of the good or dignified human life. That is, any state of being is essentially not to be counted as a human life in dignity without these central capabilities. This is, no doubt, a controversial claim. And Nussbaum is carefully explicit about the list not being a conclusive, full-fledged account of human nature and also not a complete theory of justice. Rather, the list is meant as a deliberative point of reference from which theoretical, public and practical elaboration may take off.

There are a number of issues one could raise against having such a list, but many of them becomes much less worrisome if we consider three central aspects of Nussbaum’s list. Firstly, the list is evaluative because it states value-judgments about human life—i.e. what a human person needs, constitutively, in order to lead a dignified human life. This does not mean that a person should not have the freedom to choose not the make use of the listed capabilities, because it is a list of capabilities, not functioning. Nor does it imply that having all these capabilities necessarily makes your life good or dignified, since it is a list of necessary, not sufficient, conditions for a dignified human life. What the list states, evaluatively, is that a human life cannot be dignified if any of these central human capabilities are absent. Since this is a normative point, it implies, of course, that you are allowed to disagree, but it follows that in doing so you must accept that the items on Nussbaum’s list do not have this constitutive role. Many would agree that they do.

Second, the list is historical because it builds upon shared human experiences about the distinctive characteristics of humanity. This implies that the list is not derived from a metaphysical or physiological definition of humanity but relies on an internal-essential assessment of the characteristics of human life from the perspective of human beings (Nussbaum, 1992). In her later writings, Nussbaum emphasizes that this internal essentialism is compatible with Rawls’ political liberalism (Nussbaum, 2011). However, importantly, this does nothing to change the fact that the list is a historical standard of what a human life entails.

Third and finally, the list is generic because it is meant to serve as a reference point for social and cultural interpretation and social deliberation and as such is open for some culture-contextual interpretation and for further revisions based on sound argumentation and important new information. Though this aspect of the list is often notices by discussants, it is not always taken seriously. Way too often, Nussbaum’s list is interpreted as a “take it or leave
it” view, which in my view makes it much more controversial than it actually is. We should instead understand it as a suggestive point of reference to encourage further discussion about which deficiencies are most threatening to the dignity of human lives.

If you agree with Nussbaum that there exist objective values that ground universal entitlements, and if you agree that these entitlements are important in their own right because of the objectivity of the value they carry, you should find it important to consider which of these entitlements have priority over the others. One prima facie answer to that question is that none of the capabilities have priority. This is an expected answer because it follows from the conclusion that the capabilities are objectively important in their own right that no theoretical priority can be given to any of the items on the list. That is Nussbaum’s initial response which she expresses in the statement that there is a “tragic aspect to any choice in which citizens are pushed below the threshold in one of the central areas” (Nussbaum, 2000: 81). However, although this statement emphasizes the important element of incommensurability entailed in a pluralist standard of human life—which is immanent in a capability theory such as Nussbaum’s—it does not imply that this standard is necessarily unable to give any political, prioritized guidance on how to target social deficiencies. I shall return to this point when I address fertile functionings. Here, it suffices to capture Nussbaum’s reason for being concerned with clusters of deficiency. If the central capabilities are incommensurable, in the way that Nussbaum believes them to be, so that no surplus in one area can make up for a deficit in another, yet if on the other hand deficiencies often come in clusters, then it becomes important how we can tackle such clusters of disadvantage. Thus, what Nussbaum offers is a thick conception of the content of pluralist-sufficentarian reasons for being concerned with clusters of deficiency.

The social-egalitarian strand: the manifest-injustice thesis

Nussbaum’s contribution has been met with much appreciation as well as critique. Many political theorists have taken her list to be excessively perfectionist or paternalist (Claassen, 2014; Den Uyl and Rasmussen, 2009). Others have found it too rigid to insist on a universal list of capabilities because it leaves little space for individual influence over the process of choosing valuable functionings (Sen, 2005; Robeyns, 2005; 2011). However, her list of capabilities is still a central focal point in political philosophy as well as other disciplines of the social sciences—such as development studies; educational studies; feminism and social justice; and priority setting in health care. Although I am generally sympathetic to Nussbaum’s political theory even at the abstract philosophical level, I shall here restrict myself

---

3 Here, some would object that clearly the more basic capabilities such as Life and Health must take priority over more complex capabilities such as Affiliation or Practical Reason in a way similar to Maslow’s well-known hierarchy of necessities (Maslow 1943). While this is of course true, and Nussbaum acknowledges this, she maintains that the value of the separate capabilities are non-commensurable and hence cannot be ranged on any singular scale (Nussbaum 2000: 81).
to using her list of central human capabilities as it was originally meant to be used—as a theoretical cue for further deliberation and discussion—not as a full-fledged theory of justice or a universal philosophy of the good life. Thus, one need not accept Nussbaum’s view in general to accept my argument here. In fact, one may even reject the whole idea of an objective universal list of capabilities and still accept my argument. To see this, consider an alternative social-egalitarian type of reasoning for accepting the first premise of my argument.

In his book, The Idea of Justice, Amartya Sen suggests an alternative approach to thinking about justice—alternative, that is, to the most commonly used approach within contemporary political philosophy, which he calls “transcendental institutionalism.” His alternative is to make “realization-based comparisons” of justice, which involves changing the core research question from “what would be perfectly just institutions?”, which is the paramount focus for philosophers such as John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin, to “how can justice be advanced?” (Sen, 2009: 9). At the heart of this approach to justice lies the core idea that we do not need a full-fledged theory of justice—nor do we need a complete technical definition of justice—in order to identify clear cases of injustice. Thus, we need not agree about what a distribution of relevant perfect equality is in order to see grave instances of inequality. Nor do we need a thick account of a sufficiency threshold, such as Nussbaum’s, in order to identify significant deficiencies. This sits nicely with Sen’s earlier work on the relevant understanding of “inequality”—in relation to his use of dominant and partial rankings for making interpersonal comparisons—within the capability approach (Sen, 1992).

The same idea has more recently been proposed and formulated by Jonathan Wolff as “the manifest injustice thesis”, which claims that relevant injustices can be identified without reference to any positive theory of justice (Wolff, 2015). Wolff’s point emphasizes the methodological critique, which is implicit in Sen’s point, that political philosophers ought to be more concerned with such manifest injustices rather than with creative hypothetical injustices. This lays out an alternative normative reason to be concerned with clusters of deficiency than the sufficientarian one suggested by Nussbaum above. When deficiencies come in clusters, they are obvious examples of such manifest injustices, which are problematic on egalitarian grounds, even across disagreements on specific theories of justice. That is, these clusters create separate social classes and uphold grave systematic inequality between these classes. Thus, as I have argued so far, we have strong both pluralist sufficientarian and social-egalitarian reasons to accept the first part of my argument, the normative case for the tackling clusters of deficiencies premise.

The importance of fertile functionings
What we know today from studies of social inequality is that deficiencies tend to cluster (Marmot, 2004; Wilkinson and Picket, 2010). This clustering is made up of a wide range of rather complex, intertwined relations between deficits in different social spheres, and it is difficult to get an overview. However, the basic idea is rather simple and intuitive. Let us take
one of the many possible pathways into a cluster of disadvantage. Imagine that you lose your current job. If you are unable to get a new job, you will have lower income. Low income and unemployment affect your societal status (Wilkinson and Picket, 2010). Societal status coincides with your level of health (Marmot, 2004). Health has a significant impact on your control over your environment, your job opportunities, and your opportunities to pursue valuable life plans in general (Daniels, 2008; Venkatapuram, 2011).

Consequently, if we can tackle such clusters of disadvantage, we can enhance the capabilities and well-being for the worse off in society. As I have argued so far, we have not only pragmatic political but also strong and wide-ranging normative reasons to do that. Here Wolff and de-Shalit have introduced the very useful couple of conceptions, corrosive disadvantages and fertile functionings in an attempt to capture where we should target our efforts in social policy (Wolff and de-Shalit, 2007; 2013). A disadvantage is corrosive if it is likely to lead to further disadvantage. Inadequate health is a disadvantage, and in many cases likely a corrosive disadvantage (Nielsen, 2015). Suffering from ill health critically limits your opportunities in other areas of life. It makes you less able to get a good education; it makes you less suited for the job market (Daniels, 2008: 58-59). Moreover, it may significantly decrease your level of security and control over your life and over your social and political environment (Wolff, 2009). So, in many cases health disadvantages are corrosive.

A functioning is fertile, on the other hand, if it is likely to have positive effects on other functionings. Again, like inadequate health is likely a corrosive disadvantage, good health is very likely a fertile functioning due to its widespread, good consequences. In this general sense, corrosive disadvantages and fertile functionings may refer to the same phenomenon of intertwinement and thus simply be two sides of the same coin. However, there is an important point to distinguishing between the two. In more particular cases, the absence of a corrosive disadvantage does not necessarily translate nicely into a fertile functioning. Very often we cannot simply target corrosive disadvantages by removing the causes. That is, although ill health is corrosive and good health is fertile, simply getting rid of the causes of ill health is not necessarily the strategy that enhances functionings. As Wolff depicts, “smoking is corrosive—almost literally—but the absence of smoking is not fertile, in that it does not spread good effects elsewhere” (Wolff, 2009: 222). So, although we might treat fertile functionings as the opposite of corrosive disadvantages in a very general theoretical sense, it is important to the way we make policy to obtain a clear distinction between the two.

Fertile functionings and corrosive disadvantages are technical terms purposed for theory development within the broad framework of the capability approach. More empirically founded readers might find an interesting parallel here to the measures of UK Indices of Multiple Deprivation (see Payne and Abel 2012). This is a fair comparison, but as my contribution here is theoretical, rather than empirical, it would be misplaced to employ a statistical terminology, since the theoretical applicability of the terms are broader than to this particular translation, and it would be especially misplaced when the theoretical terminology, as in this case, is accurate.
The conception of fertile functioning helps to prioritize between the functionings on Nussbaum’s list. Not because any of them are theoretically more important than others—as the incommensurability of different capabilities makes that conclusion impossible—but because it provides guidance to where social policy efforts can do the most good to enhance overall human capability. Nussbaum recognizes something similar in her discussion of some of the capabilities on the list. Specifically she mentions the architectonic role of affiliation and practical reason as these capabilities are important for organizing and pervading the others (Nussbaum, 2000: 82). In her later writings, she explicitly endorses and adopts Wolff and de-Shalit’s conceptions of corrosive disadvantages and fertile functionings as a useful way to give priority within the list and thus serve as political guidance for social policy initiatives (Nussbaum, 2011: 45).

In a similar vein, fertile functionings offer social egalitarians a straightforward way to oppose manifest injustices as a necessary tool for tackling systematic social inequality because of their potential for enhancing people’s opportunities for coping with deficiency clusters. Thus again, we have normative reasons from both strands of justice reasoning to care for the importance of fertile functionings.

Like Nussbaum, Wolff and de-Shalit consider affiliation a central fertile functioning. “It serves”, they write, “as a sort of immunization in the sense that people who experience a high sense of affiliation are better equipped to cope with threats and risks to their functionings” (Wolff and de-Shalit, 2007: 139). Their review of empirical studies suggests that affiliation is among the most fertile functionings and thus that our political efforts to target clusters of disadvantage should center on this specific capability. Other empirical studies provide further evidence to strengthen this conclusion. To name just of few of the numerous examples, Kia-Keating and Ellis show in their study of refugee children’s ability to adjust to and succeed in new social contexts that affiliation in terms of school belonging had a significant positive impact on the children’s mental health and self-efficacy and therefore improves their ability to do well (Kia-Keating and Ellis, 2007). Likewise, Nuttman-Shwartz and Dekel found that affiliation in the sense of belonging to a community was positively associated with a lower level of distress caused by the presence of threats and thus very likely fertile for a stronger ability to cope with threats (Nuttman-Shwartz and Dekel, 2009).

Numerous other studies confirm the conclusion that affiliation has a wide range of good effects for people’s social capabilities, their self-perception, and their mental health in general (Anderman, 2002; Hagborg, 1998). Thus, the empirical evidence that affiliation is a fertile functioning—and that its absence should be considered a corrosive disadvantage—is convincingly strong.

Wolff and de-Shalit also shed light on the fertility of the functionings of sense, imagination, and thought as well as control over one’s environment. In relation to the former, they argue that education, which is basically their (very reasonable) operationalization of this capability, is seemingly fertile for other valuable capabilities, especially health and
employment. Based on empirical evidence of the positive effects of education, they conclude that although it may be too strong to assume that education is necessarily a fertile functioning, a deficiency of sense, imagination, and thought through lack of education is evidently a corrosive disadvantage (Wolff and de-Shalit, 2007: 144). In regard to latter, they argue that having control over one’s environment entails a number of different capabilities such as “soft skills”—which is a social capital version of street-smarts; a way of knowing your way around the social system—but also worker control and autonomy in the workplace. These entailed functionings have great fertile effects on other capabilities, yet, most importantly, the absence of having control over one’s environment seems clearly associated with further disadvantages and thus may reasonably be taken as a corrosive disadvantage (Wolff and de-Shalit, 2007: 147-148).

Summing up, if social deficiencies cluster, this gives us normative reason—lending from both pluralist sufficientarian and social egalitarian strands of reasoning—to focus our aim of social policy on tackling these clusters. The best way to do that is to target our effort on preventing corrosive disadvantages and enhancing fertile functionings. Although the debate must go on about what the most suitable areas of deficiencies to target politically are, we have strong empirical support for concluding that affiliation plays a key role as a fertile social functioning; and that absence of sense, imagination, and thought as well as control over one’s environment are instances of corrosive social disadvantages. In what follows, I shall argue that these conclusions give us reasons to give priority to protect the capability for play for young children.

The ontogenetic importance of play
The literature on capabilities and social disadvantage has not paid much attention to the capability for play. In some cases, theorists even take this particular capability as an example of what should not be on the list. Rutger Claassen and Marcus Düwell argue that the choice of including the capability for play on the list is conveniently arbitrary, which they show by their case of the humorless warrior, who never laughs or has fun and is also really aggressive. Both aggression and humor are natural human capacities, but “nonetheless”, they say, “the capability to laugh is on Nussbaum’s list while the capability to fight is not” (Claassen and Düwell, 2013). In this section I want to defend the special importance of the capability for play.

In her original outline of the list, Nussbaum justifies the choice to include play in the rather generic statement that, “inability to laugh is taken, correctly, as a sign of deep disturbance in an individual child; if it proves permanent, we will doubt whether the child is capable of leading a fully human life” (Nussbaum, 1992: 220). What Nussbaum is trying to establish here is that there is surely something constitutive for humanity about humor and the ability to laugh and to play. Historically, that is, our understanding of what a human life consists of must entail some version of this capability. In her later works, she emphasizes the importance of enjoying playful activities as a central part of a dignified childhood, which
unfortunately many girls living in poverty are derived off (Nussbaum, 2000: 90-91). Again, this rightfully stresses the constitutive role of the capability for play. I shall not object to this generic line of argument. It is as intuitively plausible as it is theoretically grounded. However, admittedly there is something peculiar about the way this reasoning works. Surely, that something is a sign of deep disturbance is not something we applaud, but neither does it seem to be the kind of reasoning that grounds a constitutive element of a fully or dignified human life. Having yellow-colored skin is a sign of a malfunctioning liver, which is of course critical, but that does not mean that having normal-colored skin is constitutive of a dignified human life. Clearly we need more than that inability to laugh is a symptom of disadvantage in order to ground the importance of the capability to play.

Here the mechanisms of fertile functionings and corrosive disadvantages can provide insights. As argued above we have evidence supporting our conclusion that affiliation works as a fertile functioning and thus takes a central place in our political efforts to target social deficiencies. Furthermore, we have established that the absence of sense, imagination, and thought as well as control over one’s environment are likely to be corrosive disadvantages. Now, I shall add, these three capabilities—affiliation; sense, imagination, and thought; control over one’s environment—are all to a significant degree developed in childhood through the practice of childhood play. Therefore, not only should we consider childhood play a fertile functioning and the absence of the capability to play for children a corrosive disadvantage, we should acknowledge that the fertility of this early stage capability directly conditions other social capabilities that are already recognized as having fertile characteristics.

I shall provide evidence in support of this claim below. But before doing so, it will be worthwhile to reflect on one immediate limitation of the argument. Namely, that even if you accept what I argue about the early importance of play for childhood development, it does not follow that enhancing play is the only way to ensure this development. Imagine we have strong evidence that children raised by violent and abusive parents will turn out much more tough-skinned, robust and thus less vulnerable than children raised by caring parents. Certainly, although being robust might be a good thing, this would not justify that we allow violent parenthood. But play is different from violence in that it is a natural and necessary part of any childhood and a practice to which we attach value (Huizinga 1949). And even without this assumption about play’s non-instrumental value, there are certainly deontic constraints on how we can treat children that speaks in favor of the play-route (and against the violence-route) to this development. Hence, if play has significant instrumental importance for certain necessary developmental processes, then it seems straightforwardly a better candidate than less valuable practices. Thus, upon the argument I lay out below, I shall consider play a pro tanto necessary condition for the development of skills useful for tackling social deficiencies.  

5 I am grateful to Andrée-Anne Cormier and Nicolás Brando for helping me understand the complexity and the richness of the issue of children’s right.
One might further object that this depiction of the role of play is simplistically overstated in that it is insensitive to the fact that children’s capability for play, even in very early age, also presupposes some basic capabilities—such as the capability for adequate cognitive functioning and the capability for the development of social skills. Thus, it may be objected, although healthy play functioning is likely an essential part of the development of social and cognitive capabilities, these capabilities must, at least to some minimal degree, also be a precondition for engaging in healthy playful activities in the first place.

This objection is important in many ways. Not least because it reminds us that the capability for childhood play is not “the Big Bang” of human development. Some basic prerequisites must be in place even before the engagement in childhood playful activities. For example, we cannot just ensure children with severe mental disabilities the capability for play and then expect them to develop themselves to cope well with their impairment in a given social setting. In other words, my argument here for the ontogenetic importance of play does not assess “play” as a sufficient but merely as a pro tanto necessary condition for the development of skills useful for tackling social deficiencies.

With these qualifications in mind, let me turn to the empirical evidence that grounds my conclusion that childhood play has status as an ontogenetically important fertile functioning, which informs us that the protection of the capability for play should be a central political goal in our efforts to target clusters of social deficiencies.

**Play for affiliation**

The interaction with other children through the practice of playing has a major impact on the individual child’s development of the capability to participate in social life later in life. Studies within child-psychology and pediatrics provide evidence that playful activities provide for children the opportunity to acquire empathetic emotional skills; perspective taking skills; they learn how to cooperate and share; to form groups and identify instances of unfairness (McElwain and Volling, 2005; Pellegrini and Smith, 1998; Hurwitz, 2002; Ginsburg, 2007). These skills are crucial for being able to understand social norms in a communal context and therefore for a person’s capability for belonging.

Through playful activities children investigate social norms and discover how rules work, when they apply and when they do not. Playful activities at a young age enable children to acquire these necessary social skills (Lindsey and Colwell, 2003). Children are in this way, as Sally Hurwitz puts it, “natural anthropologists who have a need and desire to investigate the world through real experiences and natural environments” (Hurwitz, 2002: 101). And this is what they do in playful activities. They learn how to behave in a social setting, how other people react to the way they behave, what it means to belong to a group and how that matters (Gray, 2011). All these empirical studies provide strong support to the conclusion that the functioning of playing in childhood is of central importance to the development of the capability for affiliation. However, much more needs to be said here, since it is apparent that
not all kinds of play are equally fertile in this way. You might easily imagine types of harmful play that will limit rather than enhance social skills, which informs us that we should be protective of particular kinds of play (McElwain and Volling, 2005; Ginsburg, 2007). However, this does not threaten our general conclusion here that the capability for (some types of) play has ontogenetic importance for the development of the fertile functioning of affiliation.

**Playing to sense, imagine, and think**

One other dimension of the wide-ranging good development effects of childhood play is the development of cognitive capacities. Many scholars of child psychology and mental development link the acquirement of cognitive skills to the activity of playing at a young age. Empirical studies show that childhood play contributes to verbalization (Weisberg, et al., 2015), the ability to focus and to keep concentration, management of and control over impulses, imagination and curiosity (Bedrova and Leong, 2003). These are all necessary and fruitful capacities for educational purposes. This leads interestingly back to the fertility of the capability for sense, imagination, and thought emphasized by Wolff and de-Shalit, as we saw above that they attached especially to the role of education. Now, we can add on the basis of the empirical studies that children’s learning abilities in school are also affected by playful functioning. As several studies conclude, children learn better in a classroom setting when routinely given recess and opportunity to participate in playful activities (Barros, Silver, and Stein, 2009). Thus, importantly, if education is so crucial for accessing other valuable functionings, as argued above—at least in the sense that lack of education represents a corrosive disadvantage—then the evidence of the importance of playful functionings for educational skills gives us further reason to emphasize the ontogenetic importance of play.

**Playing to gain control over one’s environment**

Ability to influence your environment is also highly influenced by skills learned through childhood play. The social street-smarts captured in the conception of “soft skills” that Wolff and de-Shalit emphasize within the category of control over one’s environment are very much developed through childhood interactive practices. Skills such as making decisions, negotiating and seeking compromise, and solving conflicts are practiced repeatedly through playful activities (Mainella, Agate, and Clark, 2011; Ginsburg, 2002: 183). Also the more subtle inherent social abilities such as social intuition and how to appropriately react and respond to other people’s behavior are being developed in the playground. In a nutshell, children are here learning how to play “social chess” (Bailey, 2002). Many of these skills are intertwined with or overlap with the skills I discussed above as fertile for affiliation (empathy, social cooperation skills etc.), but point importantly in another direction. All the social skills highlighted here seem to provide basis for understanding the tactics of social life and are thereby crucial for knowing how to “work the system.” Recall that this was one of the central issues in Wolff and de-Shalit’s account of control over one’s environment. Again, then, there
seems to be strong empirical support to the conclusion that also in regard to the fertility of this functioning, play has ontogenetic status. That is, if the absence of people’s capability to have control over their environment due to a lack in internal capacities works as a corrosive disadvantage, then we have strong reasons to prevent this through enhancing early childhood capabilities for play.

In sum, empirical evidence suggests that the capability for play in childhood has ontogenetic importance for the development of capabilities for fertile functionings such as affiliation; sense, imagination, and thought; as well as control over one’s environment. If we agree with Wolff and de-Shalit’s analysis, as we have good reasons to do, we should target clusters of social deficiencies by designing our social policy to prevent corrosive disadvantages and enhance fertile functioning. The ontogenetic status of the capability for childhood play implies that protecting this capability is a core goal in social policy.

Some considerations
The above section argued that the capability for childhood play has ontogenetic importance for the other fertile capabilities and thus should play a significant role in the social political project of targeting clusters of social deficiencies. This concludes my central argument.

Now, it might be objected the value of childhood play is already widely recognized as non-instrumentally valuable, and therefore we need not bring this requirement under the cap of political and social institutions of the welfare state. But this I think is false. The insights on play’s importance for social capabilities is highly salient even in rich countries, and while the value of play is widely recognized, its development potential is often neglected. Play activities in school have historically been separated from learning activities, although this has changed over the last decade not least thanks to the insights of play’s development contributions (Anderman, 2002; Bedrova and Young, 2003; Barros, Silver, and Stein, 2009). Similarly, in diagnostics and treatment of child diseases, it has traditionally been ignored how important it is for children to engage in playful activities (Singh, 2008). Upon the conclusion of my argument here, we must not take play for granted. We need to take seriously our societal responsibility for the protection of childhood play.

Another possible objection is that the capability for play is not merely important in childhood but also throughout adulthood. In any case, the item of play on Nussbaum’s list is not limited to children, since it entails in very general terms, “being able to laugh, to play, and to enjoy recreational activities” (Nussbaum, 2000: 79; 2011: 34). And although what “play” essentially account for in adulthood is very likely to differ from childlike playful activities, it is plausible that the capability for play, laughter, fun, relaxation in general is similarly important for adults. Having leisure time; room for relaxation; the freedom to take part in social life; to play sports are all important opportunities to be included in a meaningful adult human life. It might even be argued that the opportunity for relaxation and playful activities also in adult life has beneficial effects on other capabilities, and should thus likewise be taken
as a fertile functioning. This consideration suggests that play is important throughout human life and thus emphasizes the objective, non-instrumental as well as instrumental value of play. This, however, does not disturb our conclusion here that there is something critical and special about the protection of childhood play, due to the ontogenetic character of this capability in that it serves to develop, at an earlier stage in life, the capabilities to other fertile functionings. Very likely—though hard to prove—childhood play is also ontogenetically important for the development of the capability for adulthood play.

Another worry one might have is that the argument here seems to suggest that play is the most central capability on the list, which is unfortunate because it draws attention away from more basic capabilities such as life, bodily health, bodily integrity. Nussbaum’s list was not intended as a tool for assessments of social policy but as a universal list of human entitlements meant to serve as an informational basis for human development studies. Thus, importantly, the list has a global outlook in which the importance of the capability for play fades in comparison to more fundamentally basic entitlements. This is indeed an important consideration. If our aim is to eliminate deficiencies, then we must never neglect or underestimate the importance of very basic capabilities. Whatever else is important, basic capabilities must play first fiddle. But the argument here is not that we ought to focus on the capability for play rather than on life, health, bodily integrity. Surely, some capabilities are so fundamentally important that without them, nothing else matters. The argument here is that once these capabilities are adequately protected—and thus there is a further human life to be developed—the capability for play during childhood carries central political importance due to its ontogenetic status. This is the case in social policy as well as in global development initiatives; yet focusing here on how to target clusters of social deficiencies, the ontogenetic mechanism becomes that much more present, because the deficiencies in question are more likely to concern complex rather than basic capabilities.

**What kind of play?**

If childhood play has ontogenetic importance, then we have strong reasons to protect children’s capability for play. This is as far as my argument here can take us, but we have not hereby reached any conclusion about which social policy initiatives to pursue. One pressing question is what kind of play? Childhood play can take various forms and very likely not all of them are equally beneficial for developing certain personal capabilities (Sutton-Smith, 1997: 3-5). It is reasonable to think of childhood play in general as a family-resemblance construct of different types of playful activities including object-centered play such as playing with building blocks; fantasy-centered play such as pretend games and role-play; physical play such as climbing or dancing; and social play such as sports or rule-centered games (Weisberg, 6 See also footnote 3 for this point.)
Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff, 2013; Pellegrini and Smith, 1998; Hurwitz, 2002: 102). Of course, playful activities often include more than one of these elements. Playing soccer in the park, for example, is both a physical and a social form of play, and may include fantasy elements too, if you (as I did in my childhood) imagine yourself as the World Cup Final game-breaking goal scorer, and the sound of wind blowing through the trees to be excited spectators celebrating the beauty of your play. So, the distinction made here between different types of play is unexclusive and very likely not exhaustive.

The different forms of playful activities all seem to entail important elements of children’s development, although they might have different outcomes in terms of which personal traits they facilitate. Object-centered play enhances ability to focus and concentrate; fantasy-centered activities facilitate imagination and creativity; physical play strengthens children’s self-confidence and understanding of their own limitations; and social play facilitates empathy and understanding of fairness, social rules and regulations. Of course, not all playful activities are constructive in this sense. In fact, you can easily imagine some forms of play through which children may develop unwanted or even vicious personal traits. This has, for instance, been a worry about young boys’ overuse of violent computer games.

Moreover, as some sociologists point out, even given a satisfactory universal definition of play is implausible, because it is a natural part of the playful activity to invent itself in repeatedly new creations, forms and shapes, which is always bound to the very specific context within which the activity is exercised. Hence, as famously pointed out by Sutton-Smith, play activities are often best described as potential forms of being, or models for identity, that are reflections of and created out of the given social and cultural context of the children, rather than as a predefined set of activities (Sutton-Smith, 1977). Upon this, Allison James argues that a useful understanding of what childhood play is, can be achieved only through a social-anthropological analysis of play in actual children’s lives in different social and cultural settings (James, 1998). This understanding of play as a form of being, and trying out identities tied to contextual experience, however, fits nicely the language of the capability approach in which Nussbaum originally fleshed out the importance for justice of securing the capability for play. And thus, while this important sociological insight enables us to see that much more than the philosophical argument given here is needed in order to formulate actual realizable policy-recommendations, it is not a threat to my positive argument. If anything, it serves to confirm that childhood play—vaguely defined as it must be here—is a natural and necessary part of any childhood, regardless of culture, class and circumstances.

And although we cannot reach concrete policy initiatives upon this generic positive argument, it follows from it that if the capability for childhood play is a political and social good that we have objective reasons to secure for everyone in the name of social justice, then the protection of this capability must take high political priority—although of course not

---

7 This vague categorization of play types build upon the taxonomy including 15 types of play, developed by Hughes (2002); see also Meire (2007).
absolute or lexical priority. That will sometimes (and probably often) imply that we can justify enforceable paternalist policies with the aim of protecting childhood play—that is, even if this is against the will of the particular child's family. How controversial such cases will be is a political question. Upon my argument, these policies will be morally justifiable when they serve the purpose of securing the child's flourishing in childhood and protect it against long term social vulnerability.

Another related concern, which arguably might turn out to be much more salient and problematic on a societal scale, is when certain structural social norms about different types of play socialize children into stereotypical categories. This is the argument of Barrie Thorne in *Gender play: Girls and Boys in School* (1994). Here, Thorne emphasizes that children's playful activities are in effect *gendered* so that the type of play that a specific child can practice in a specific social arena such as the playground is already presupposed by preexistent norm-based expectations in that social environment (Thorne, 1994: 157). These norm-based conditions for play heavily influence children's capabilities for different types of play; thereby forcing gender-specific direction upon their social development.

Thorne's argument leads us to the conclusion that gender plays a significant role as a constrainer on children's opportunity for specific types of play through systemic norm-based expectations. If this analysis is correct, we should take gender into account in our design of the social circumstances under which children play, so that we can limit the effect of gender on play-related development, when this effect is negative. To what degree the effect is in fact negative, and when it is, is beyond the scope of this article. And what more specifically to do about it is a question that requires much more than a theoretical argument—in terms of both scientific and public deliberation.

This reminds us that play is not necessarily always good in itself (Meire 2007). In fact, even benign types of playful activities that are in general very developmental might have the unfortunate side effect of steering children's development into stereotypical categories that in themselves reproduce social inequalities. In such case, we might have strong political reasons to try to work against these effects. But this is no threat to our general conclusion here. As we are interested in enhancing and protecting children's development of central capabilities, it follows that we should target our effort to those playful activities that serve this purpose. The general message here is that social policy should embrace the psychological and sociological knowledge of the fertile outcome of different forms of play and seek to bolster children's development of central capabilities through protecting their capability for participating in all relevant forms of play. This is the central conclusion of my argument about the ontogenetic importance of play.

So, different forms of play might have differential impacts on child development, which is important to keep in mind when designing social policy because we want our children to develop a wide range of capabilities—and especially for *affiliation; sense, imagination, and thought*; and *control over one's environment*. This is a universal conclusion. But there is
another important distinction to make about types of play relating to differences in social background. As Annette Lareau has forcefully shown, children from different social classes experience completely different patterns of play and everyday free-time. Working class children’s play tends to be much more child-driven and spontaneous without much structure and adult guidance. In comparison, middle class children generally have a really well-structured everyday frame and schedule for play and free-time activities (Lareau, 2011). This grounds the more particularistic conclusion that we need to take careful stock of specific children’s social context in which their playful activities are unfolded in order to fully understand how a political initiative can be properly designed to protect their particular need for play-catering development. This does not imply that working class children’s way of playing is necessarily worse or less developing than middle class children’s. In fact, the spontaneous child-driven forms of play are very fruitful for the development of creativity and imagination. But it informs us that the particular context of the child must be taken into account. The central political goal must be that children are experiencing a broad variation of types of play in order to fully develop and enhance the central necessary capabilities for affiliation; sense, imagination, and thought; and control over one’s environment.

The argument restated
This article has provided the following three-premise argument. First, the case for being concerned with clusters of deficiency has been grounded on two separate types of normative reasoning. The pluralist sufficientarian reasoning suggested that there are functionings so central to human life that any deficiency in any such functioning will necessarily be unjust, and that clusters of deficiencies within this list of functionings are therefore immensely problematic from the point of view of justice. Further, the social-egalitarian reasoning said that although singular instances of deficiency might not be that troublesome, justice should be concerned with clusters of deficiency because such clusters create social class structure and uphold systematic inequality between them. Together, these two strands of reasoning give us a strong normative reason to oppose clusters of deficiency. Second, the argument proceeded by showing—on the base of wide-ranging empirical evidence—how social deficiencies tend to cluster and that this makes ground for two important and parallel political strategies: the enhancement of fertile functionings and the prevention of corrosive disadvantages. I then argued alongside Wolff and de-Shalit that affiliation; sense, imagination, and thought; as well as control over one’s environment are fertile functionings and (or) their absence are corrosive disadvantages. I called this middle-part of the argument the fertile-functioning premise. Third and finally, I claimed that childhood play has ontogenetic importance because the successful development of the capability to achieve the other fertile functionings relies on the early childhood capability to engage in healthy and diverse playful activities. This claim was backed by empirical evidence from pediatrics and child psychology and is thus not a freestanding intuition, but a well-known (yet often overlooked in political
science) empirical fact. This *ontogenetic importance of play premise* informs us that the protection of the capability for childhood play is a central political goal, and that although this does not tell us much about what, more specifically, we need to do, it does point out that in so far as we have as a political aim to target clusters of social deficiencies, play shouldn’t be ignored, as it holds a key role in the enhancement of fertile functionings and prevention of corrosive disadvantages.

As a consequence, we need to carefully consult insights from child psychology and pediatrics in our social policy initiatives. Moreover, how to design an appropriate policy on how to secure play is a difficult matter, that requires answers to many political, sociological, and cultural questions. Further studies must explore those questions. They are beyond my purpose here, which was to reach the conclusion that we do have strong political and social reasons to protect children’s capability for play. Lane Kenworthy hints at this in his study of job inequality, as he shows a significantly lower degree of cognitive inequality in the North European countries than in Anglo countries. “While it is conceivable”, he notes, “that the latter group of countries started with more cognitively diverse populations, and that this diversity has simply been passed across generations via genetic transmission, it seems likely that nongenetic factors play a sizable role in the cross-country difference in inequality of cognitive skills. To the extent those factors can be altered, it may be possible for countries to engineer reduced cognitive inequality—whether via public childcare or other means” (Kenworthy, 2008: 204). As my argument here has progressed, and as the empirical evidence from pediatrics and child psychology suggests, we have strong reasons to believe that securing successful child development of central social and fertile capabilities through the protection of childhood play would be one such necessary means.
This is a late draft of a paper later published in Politics, Philosophy and Economics. Published version can be found here: http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1470594X18762255

References
Hughes, B (2002) A Playworker’s Taxonomy of Play Types (2nd Edition), Play Education

Mainella FP, Agate JR and Clark BS (2011) Outdoor-Based Play and Reconnection to Nature: A Neglected Pathway to Positive Youth Development. *New Directions for Youth Development* 130: 89-104.


