

THE CAPABILITY APPROACH AS A HUMAN DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM AND ITS CRITIQUES

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Summary

In the capability approach, advanced by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, human well-being is evaluated in terms of *capabilities* and *functionings*. This approach moves beyond perspectives that analyze well-being in terms of *primary goods*, *resources* or *utility*. The capability approach has been used to address the topic of human development, while providing an alternative framework to others in political philosophy and welfare economics. This article will describe the capability approach, as a human development paradigm, and contrast it with alternative frameworks within welfare economics and political philosophy, which have been adopted by authors who are critical of the capability approach.

1. Introduction

Amartya Sen (1992) argues that theories of justice can be seen in terms of: a “criterion” (or “social notion”, or “a rule of social judgment”) of justice; and a “space” (or “variable”) to which this criterion is applied. The use of a criterion to assess spaces has been one of the main features of much political philosophy. Some examples of spaces to which criteria are applied are the space of “primary goods” in John Rawls’s difference principle (to which the maximin criterion is applied), or the space of utilities in utilitarianism (with which maximizing criteria are afterwards combined).

The capability approach can be characterized as an approach aimed at providing not a criterion, but a space for evaluating equality, the space of capabilities (instead of utility,

or primary goods). This means that the capability approach is not a complete theory of justice, for it does not address one of the two elements that a theory of justice must address, namely, a criterion, or a rule of social judgment, that enables us to go from the information on the individual, to an assessment of the social welfare of all individuals.

Often, there are two different motivations for obtaining a rule of social judgment that enables aggregating individual welfare: (a) a concern with social justice *regardless of pragmatic* concerns with obtaining a complete ordering of social outcomes and a simple measure of the latter, and (b) a concern with social justice *combined with pragmatic* concerns about obtaining a complete ordering of social outcomes and a simple measure of the latter. While capability theorists have been concerned with both cases, the Human Development Programme in particular has followed the latter perspective, attempting to reach a complete ordering of countries in terms of their level of human development.

The criticisms of the capability approach as a human development paradigm have been made from essentially those two perspectives. On the one hand, we have criticisms of those concerned with social justice *regardless of pragmatic* concerns with obtaining a complete ordering of social outcomes. These criticisms arise especially within the domain of political philosophy. On the other hand, we have the criticisms of those who are concerned with concrete measurement, and with obtaining a complete ordering of social outcomes. These criticisms arise especially within the domain of welfare economics. Both these criticisms, arising within political philosophy, and within welfare economics, will be addressed here. But before doing so, it is now necessary to explain in more detail the capability approach as a human development paradigm.

2. The Capability Approach

The capability approach was first proposed in 1979 by Amartya Sen in a lecture titled “Equality of What?”, reprinted in Sen (1982). However, a similar perspective had already been proposed by Sen in 1978 (in an article reprinted in Sen, 1984, titled “Ethical Issues in Income Distribution: National and International”, chapter 12 of the 1984 collection), where Sen uses the term “primary powers” instead of “capabilities”. The term “primary powers” shows the motivation behind the capability approach, in which Sen tries to go beyond John Rawls’s (1971) theory of justice, and its use of “primary goods” as the relevant space in which to assess inequality.

Sen disagrees with the use of the space of primary goods, proposed by Rawls (1971), as the appropriate space for assessing inequality. The reasons for this is that primary goods are only means to well-being, not the end we are seeking, and that different human beings will obtain different levels of well-being when endowed with the same level of primary goods. Sen (1982) uses the example that a disabled person is disadvantaged relatively to others, and hence equality of primary goods would deliver inequality of well-being in this case.

Hence, because of the diversity between human beings, equality of primary goods leads to inequality of well-being. This critique of Rawlsian primary goods as the space to judge well-being can be extended to other approaches that focus on goods, resources,

commodities or material conditions as the space for assessing inequality – see also Ronald Dworkin (1981a, 1981b) on the equality of resources.

Sen (1982) notes how the utilitarian approach takes into account differences between human beings, for different human beings might have different utility functions. However, utilities reflect the person's mental metric, not underlying needs that are essential given the nature of human beings. Sen uses the example that a person who is "hard to please" should not be entitled to a higher level of goods due to having such a demanding taste.

Thus, Sen argues that human well-being should be assessed in terms of human functionings, where a human functioning is what a given human being is or does. The notion of human functioning has Aristotelian roots, which have been developed especially by Martha Nussbaum (1988, 1992), but have also been acknowledged by Sen (1999: 289). Furthermore, the capability approach provides a multidimensional perspective on human well-being, since it focuses on various human functionings.

However, Sen (1982, 1999) argues that equality should be assessed taking into account not only achieved functionings, but rather the *potential* to achieve. This means that equality must be evaluated in the space of *potential* functionings, which Sen and Nussbaum (1993) designate as *capabilities*. Thus, capabilities refer to what a human being can be or do. The capability approach, developed by Sen and Nussbaum, has generated a vast literature, developing it in theoretical and practical directions – see, for example, Sabina Alkire (2002), Flávio Comim, Mozaffar Qizilbash and Sabina Alkire (2008), Séverine Deneulin (2009), Wiebke Kuklys (2005), Ingrid Robeyns (2005), or Vivian Walsh (2000, 2003, 2008).

In supporting this view, Sen's arguments against utilitarianism and Rawls's emphasis on primary goods reflect an *ontological* concern with what is *essential* to human beings (and perhaps ultimately rest upon this ontological dimension). Sen's claim that a disabled person is disadvantaged relatively to others, or the claim that a person who is "hard to please" is not entitled to a higher level of welfare on grounds of such a demanding taste, do reflect some notion of what is essential to the *nature* of human beings, and implies an ontological account of human being and human functioning – see also see Nuno Martins (2006, 2007a, 2007b), Matthew Smith and Caroline Seward (2009) and Ilse Oosterlaken (2011) on the ontological aspects concerning the capability approach.

In this sense, the persuasiveness of Sen's argument springs to a great extent from this concern with what is essential to human beings. This conception is in line with an Aristotelian essentialist (and realist) account of human being. In fact, Martha Nussbaum, who together with Sen advanced the capability approach – Nussbaum (2000, 2003) – develops precisely an Aristotelian approach – Nussbaum (1992).

3. Theories of Justice

The capability approach is aimed at providing a framework for analyzing social arrangements from an ethical point of view. This ethical evaluation can be seen as part of some underlying theory of justice, even though it is not a complete theory of justice.

In order to understand the relation between the capability approach and theories of justice, the first issue to be addressed here concerns the various theories of justice that have been proposed. In fact, the criticisms of the capability approach as a human development paradigm within the domains of political philosophy are usually connected to different views of justice. So this topic is essential to help us understand the criticism of the capability approach as a human development paradigm.

Sen (1992) suggests analyzing theories of justice in terms of two elements: a *criterion* or *social notion* to be used in the ethical evaluation of social states; and a *space* or *variable* to which this criterion (or social notion) is applied. A space is some variable (such as resources, goods, commodities, liberties, rights, wealth, income, or capabilities) in terms of which individual welfare can be assessed.

A criterion is a rule of social judgment, which enables us to go from a judgment about individual welfare (made in some space) to a judgment about social welfare, by combining the information on different individuals. In this context, it is important to stress that the capability approach is not (or at least is not yet) a complete theory of justice. For a theory of justice must include: a criterion (or social notion) of justice; and a space to which this criterion is applied. While the space allows an engagement on *distributive* considerations, by seeing how a given space or variable is distributed between different persons, the criterion must allow us to *aggregate* the information in order to obtain a measure of overall welfare.

Sen's original formulation of the capability approach proposes the use of capabilities as the space, but nothing is said concerning the criterion which enables the aggregation of the information concerning capabilities, in order to compare competing situations from the point of view of social welfare and social justice.

Rawls's difference principle, on the other hand, contains both a space – viz., Rawlsian primary goods – and an aggregative criterion to apply to this space – the maximin rule. The capability approach, in Sen's original formulation, suggests capabilities as a space where freedoms and the differences between human beings are accounted for. But the question of which criterion to use is left open. Sen (2009) eventually came to criticize Rawls's overall theory of justice, while providing an alternative view of justice. But that was not the central concern of the capability approach, which is concerned with a description of the space in which equality is to be assessed.

Thus, in his original formulation of the capability approach, Sen does not intend to replace the whole Rawlsian theory, but only a small part of this theory. In fact, Sen does not challenge the Rawlsian liberty principle, which requires that “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others” – Rawls (1971). Sen's concern is related to the difference principle, or more precisely, to the particular way of applying this principle: the use of an index of primary goods when applying the maximin criterion. Sen is mainly preoccupied with the fact that, when using the maximin criterion, one only takes account of the primary goods themselves, and not of how they affect people.

So to go beyond an exclusive focus on primary goods regardless of how they affect people, need not lead to the rejection of the totality of the Rawlsian theory. As Sen

explicitly acknowledges, “[t]he focus on basic capabilities can be seen as a natural extension of Rawls’s concern with primary goods, shifting attention from goods to what goods do to human beings.” (Sen 1982: 368).

In fact, Sen’s capability approach is a perspective which shares some resemblances with Rawls’s, like the stress of the importance of going from the space of achieved welfare (either measured in utilities, resources, income or wealth) to the space of freedoms, opportunities and possibilities that individuals have in a given social arrangement. However, unlike Rawls’s theory, the capability approach looks not only at goods or resources, but also at the way in which they impact on human beings, given the diversity between individuals. The key difference between Rawls and Sen is that while Rawls adopts a prescriptive approach, Sen adopts a descriptive approach, to justice – see also Sen (2009), and the contrast between transcendental theories of justice, and comparative theories of justice.

Criteria, which Sen also terms as “social notions” (Sen 1992:25), “combining formula” (Sen 1992:74), or “rules of social judgment” (Sen 2002:273), include not only Rawls’s *maximin*, which consists in furthering the interests of those who are in a worse position, but also other concepts such as the “leximin”, or the *efficiency* of the social arrangement.

While the “maximin” criterion consists in maximizing the interests of the individual in the worse position, “leximin” (or lexicographic maximin) consists in first maximizing the interests of the individual in the worse position, and then maximize the interests of the second individual in the worse position, and so on. In utilitarianism, on the other hand, the criterion of “efficiency” involves a maximization exercise in the space of overall utility, the latter usually defined as the sum of utilities (notice that when the maximization criterion is applied to sums, such as the sum of utilities, it is usually named as “sum-maximization”).

Another approach within utilitarianism consists in using von Neumann-Morgenstern (1944) expected utility functions, following the perspective advocated by Harsanyi (1975). John Nash (1950) also suggests a solution in the context of a bargaining problem, which has the interesting aspect that such solution is independent of the units in which the variable (for example, utility) is defined. Moreover, Nash (1950) proves that this solution is the only solution with such property.

The Rawlsian “maximin” criterion, on the other hand, is applied to the space of “primary goods” (which include wealth, income, rights, liberties, opportunities and the social bases of self respect). Even though Rawls originally applied the maximin criterion to a space of “primary goods”, this criterion can be applied to any space (for example, in welfare economics this criterion has been applied to the space of utilities) – note also that both the “efficiency” criterion and the “maximin” criterion involve “maximization”, but the former applies such maximization to a variable constructed taking into account the welfare of all individuals, while the latter defines such variable with respect to the “worst-off” individual only.

So while the classical utilitarian theory of justice consists in applying the sum-maximization criterion to the space of utilities, the Rawlsian theory of justice implies

applying the “maximin” criterion to the space of (Rawlsian) primary goods. Note that this is only a part of the second principle of the Rawlsian theory of justice (the “difference principle”). Besides, the Rawlsian theory of justice also has a first principle where the relevant space is liberty. Different combinations of criteria (or social notions) applied to different spaces (or variables) would deliver different informational bases for a theory of justice.

Hence the “maximin” criterion and the efficiency criterion (here defined as “sum-maximization”), the von Neuman-Morgenstern expected utility framework or the Nash solution to bargaining problems, could be applied to spaces other than utility. These spaces could be rights, liberties, opportunities, duties, wealth, income, or any other variable, where the different combinations would deliver different theories of justice.

Within political philosophy, the perspectives of Rawls, and utilitarianism, have been the main opponents of the capability approach. Other alternative perspectives have been proposed as well, such as Ronald Dworkin’s, who advocates equality of resources. Also, G. A. Cohen (1993) has criticized Sen’s capability approach for promoting an “athletic” conception of the human agent, where life is valuable only when agents actively choose something, exercising a functioning. However, it is important to note that the differences between the capability approach and these perspectives concern the space, and not the criterion, to be used.

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Biographical Sketch

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