

On Capability and the Good Life: Theoretical Debates and their Practical Implications

Mozaffar Qizilbash

The capability approach was first developed by Amartya Sen in his Tanner Lecture “Equality of What?” (Sen 1980). Canonical statements of the approach were published in the 1980s (for example, Sen 1985). Slightly modified statements were subsequently published in the early 1990s (for example, Sen 1993), with more “mature” versions published in Sen’s *Development as Freedom* and *The Idea of Justice* (Sen 1999; 2009). Over the years, variations of the approach have emerged. In particular, Martha Nussbaum’s version of the approach, which is distinguished by a different title – the “capabilities approach” – has emerged as a distinct view in moral and political theory.

The capability approach is often seen as advancing a distinct view of human well-being. But at the same time it also supports Sen’s claims that welfare is not the exclusive object of value in moral evaluation and that freedom has a value independent of welfare. The freedom to live a life we value and have reason to value – or the opportunity we have to lead a valuable or good life – is, very roughly, our capability. Those interested in alternative views of well-being or of the good life will ask: does this approach provide a distinctive account of what makes a life go well or better, or of human flourishing? If it does, does this view of the good life provide any new insights into public policies and about what governments and others should, or should not, promote? I argue in this paper that even if Sen does not advance a substantive view of the good life in developing his

capability perspective, his theoretical commitments lead him to quite specific policy views. These strongly contrast with those adopted by one contemporary utilitarian: Richard Layard. Although Sen’s views about policy typically overlap with those of others – like Nussbaum – who favor a version of the capability perspective, sometimes variations of the approach can diverge in their policy applications because of theoretical differences.

The Capability Perspective

The capability perspective emerged from an engagement with a variety of different theoretical approaches within philosophy and welfare economics. In both areas it started from a critical attitude to specific notions of welfare in utilitarian thinking, those that see welfare or “utility” in terms of the satisfaction of desires, pleasure, or happiness. In each case, the approach suggests that the metric of “utility” might be distorted in some way. The overworked indentured servant and the undernourished peasant may cut their desires, learn to find pleasure in small mercies, or learn to be happy with their lot. Nonetheless, they suffer from significant deprivations and may be short on opportunities to live lives that are valuable. This “adaptation” (or “small mercies”) objection to “utility”-based analysis suggests that we should be concerned, in evaluating the quality of people’s lives, with the opportunities they have and with what they are able to do or be. And it cautions us

against focusing exclusively on people's level of "utility" understood in certain ways.

Sen's capability approach asks us to include information on capability and functioning in the evaluation of the quality of life and social states more generally. Functioning here refers to states of the person, the various things a person can do and be. Indeed, on this approach lives can be understood as made up of functionings, and well-being is understood as an evaluation of functionings. The capability approach also asks us to consider the capability people have – where this is understood in terms of the collections or n-tuples of functionings from which a person can choose (see, for example, Sen 1993, 31). It asks us to consider the opportunities or range of lives that are open to each of us. If we return to the overworked indentured servant or the undernourished peasant, we need to evaluate their lives understood in terms of functionings and the range of lives open to them. Their desires or pleasures or happiness may enter as considerations – at the level of functionings – but they would only be some of the objects being considered.

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Although the capability approach emerged from a critique of some utilitarian views of well-being, it also responded to other approaches in philosophy and welfare economics. The most important of these focused on the means to lead a good life. In philosophy, the relevant perspectives focused on either what John Rawls termed "social primary goods" (Rawls 1971) – which are all-purpose means such as income and wealth and the social bases of self-respect – or on resources in the context of the currency of egalitarian justice; in economics the strategies related to evaluations of progress in terms of national income; and in development economics, specifically, they also related to a focus on basic needs. The capability perspective argued that what mattered was the ability to lead good lives. Income,

social primary goods, and the satisfaction of basic needs were necessary for one's ability to do or be, or to achieve various things, but not ends in themselves. In particular, given the different rates at which people transform income or social primary goods into the stuff of good lives or opportunities, the capability perspective asks us to consider these transformation rates in making interpersonal comparisons of well-being and the quality of life.

The capability approach – in Sen's hands – goes further and distinguishes between those goals that are self-interested and those that go beyond self-interest; agency goals encompass both. It distinguishes between the freedom to achieve well-being (well-being freedom) and well-being achievement; and it distinguishes between agency achievement and the freedom to achieve agency goals (agency freedom). So the capability approach is not simply concerned with the achievement of well-being or even the ability or freedom to achieve it. This aspect of Sen's vocabulary has attracted criticism from one of the adherents of the approach: Martha Nussbaum has been critical of these distinctions and does not use them in developing her own views (Nussbaum 2011, 197–201). But the vocabulary of capability and functionings and the desire to avoid the pitfalls of other approaches is common to both Sen and Nussbaum. The area of overlap between their views can be seen as a core of the approach, which is advanced by its diverse advocates.

Commitments and Uses of the Capability Approach

If the capability approach is understood as merely advancing arguments that suggest that one should look at the beings and doings that constitute (valuable) human lives and people's ability or opportunity to lead good lives, it lacks content. Put another way, it provides us with no answer to the question of what the good life consists in. Sen's desire not to offer much by way of an answer to this question was the subject of criticism in early discussions of his work on the capability approach (for example, Nussbaum 1988). In statements of the approach in the 1990s (for example, Sen 1992 and 1993), he continued to avoid further filling out a picture of what a good life might consist in. However, there are other commitments in his

canonical statements of the capability approach. Furthermore, it is important to understand why he hesitates and stops short of providing a fuller account of well-being.

Before proceeding further it is helpful to adopt a crude if influential categorization of accounts of the good life. Consider Derek Parfit's categorization in Appendix I of *Reasons and Persons*. Accounts of "what makes a life go best" are there split into: hedonistic theories according to which "what is best for someone is what would make his life happiest"; desire fulfillment theories according to which "what is best for someone is what, throughout his life, would best fulfill his desires"; and objective-list theories according to which "certain things are good or bad for us, whether we want to have the good things, or to avoid the bad things" (Parfit 1984, 493). Among desire-fulfillment - or desire - theories, one can distinguish those that focus on our actual desires from those that are concerned with desires that are in some way informed or rational.

In Sen's writings there are hints that suggest that his view is best understood as either an objective-list, or an informed-desire, theory. First, in his discussions of which functionings are relevant in particular contexts he argues that there might be considerable agreement on some set of functionings that are particularly important (see, for example, Sen 1993, 31 and 43-48). These relate to what he calls "basic capability": the ability to achieve certain crucially important functionings up to some minimally adequate level. He usually lists some of these: the ability to avoid starvation, be minimally adequately nourished, sheltered, healthy, and so on. His reasons for not going much further in filling out a view of the good life are illuminating. Different people have distinct views of the good life, so that they will have different views of which functionings are valuable. At the same time, the approach can be used by different people in different contexts, and he does not wish to restrict those who use it. The first of these considerations is an argument from pluralism about the good life. The second can be understood as a methodological argument about pluralism of the context of application. Neither argument militates against the use of particular accounts of well-being such as an informed-desire view, which lists those things that make a distinctively human life go well or better (for example, Griffin 1986; 1996) or a version of the

objective-list theory (for example, Finnis 1980).

Strategically, the goal is to keep the approach open to people who have different conceptions of the good life, and to people who are interested in applying it in different contexts and times. Both arguments emerge in Sen's explanation (see Sen 1993, 46-49) of his decision not to endorse some particular (substantive) view of the good life - in the way that Nussbaum did in her early statements of the capabilities approach, which articulate a list based on an Aristotelian view of it (Nussbaum 1988; 1990; 1992; 1995a; and 1995b). And that decision opens him up to criticism, since in the absence of some account of valuation, Sen's view is vulnerable to a version of the adaptation objection. In particular, Nussbaum argued that if Sen allows people to advance their own lists, this leaves the process of valuation open to distortion through the influence of local culture and the status quo (Nussbaum 1988). Nussbaum argued that people's values were as corruptible as their desires.

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If Sen's account seems somewhat lacking in theoretical commitment or content in this context, there is another way of attempting to gauge where he stands. In the literature on well-being, there are those who follow David Hume in supposing that objects are valued because they are desired. They follow the "taste model." For example, James Griffin claims that the taste model is adopted generally in economics and indeed across the social sciences (Griffin 1991, 45-46). But Sen rejects it outright in a canonical philosophical statement of the capability approach. He writes:

Compare the following statements:

(I) I desire x because x is valuable for me.

(II) x is valuable for me because I desire x.

The former statement is intelligible and cogent in a way that the latter is not. Valuing something is a good reason for desiring it, but desiring something is not an obvious reason for valuing it. (Sen 1985, 190)

My reason for highlighting Sen's position here is that, whatever view one takes of the taste model and

questions about the relationship between desire and valuation, it is a strong view to take in the context of views of well-being. It constitutes a significant theoretical commitment. Sen goes on to claim that desire may nonetheless have an important evidential role, since a person's desires give us some idea of what she values.

It is tempting to think that Sen rejects the desire and happiness views. Nonetheless, Sen's approach is close to those desire views that diverge in important ways from the taste model (Griffin 1986 and 1991). In a crude categorization of the sort Parfit offers, nonetheless, it falls closest to an objective-list theory. Relevant valuable functionings would be constitutive of a good life. But there is an element of interpersonal variation allowed in the functionings people value, and in the weights they attach to different functionings. Sen's capability approach sees both functioning and capability as important; it does not specify the weight given to one rather than the other. In all these ways the approach allows for interpersonal variation in the valuation of lives. This interpersonal variation makes the approach flexible enough for it to be consistent with pluralism about the good life, allowing for people with very different views or conceptions of it. According to Wayne Sumner, it introduces an element of "subjectivity" that distinguishes the capability approach from standard objective-list theories (Sumner 1996, 65–66). Since the adaptation objection may be raised in relation to this element of "subjectivity," it is worth noting that in his recent work, Sen stresses the role of public reasoning and debate in the context of social decision-making and its role in filtering out ill-informed or parochial valuations (which might reflect adaptation to the status quo) (Sen 2009, 242). He also links such public reasoning and scrutiny to objectivity in ethics (122). Sen's views on public reasoning and objectivity supplement his capability perspective, but go beyond the core claims that are endorsed by its adherents.

Understood in this way the capability approach can be, and has been, used in a variety of contexts. In the context of moral and political theory, it potentially offers an alternative to an index of "social primary goods" for the purposes of interpersonal comparisons in the form of a "capability index" based on some list of functionings or some measure of opportunity. But,

of course, that is not the only context in which the capability approach is relevant. One of its most influential applications has been to the area of development, where Sen argued that development should be redefined so that it was not seen as an expansion of income or utility per capita, but of capability (Sen 1984; 1999). This view has profoundly influenced the work of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which developed the "human development index" (HDI) as well as multidimensional measures of poverty and inequality that attempt to go beyond a narrow focus on income or wealth especially in the context of international comparisons of development. An important point to note is that any list of functionings one might adopt in this context may be quite different from that used in moral or political theory. First, it is likely to be influenced by institutional factors (of the sort that may constrain the work of the UNDP) and data limitations. Furthermore, whereas early applications of the capability approach – like the HDI – do not treat life satisfaction or subjective happiness as dimensions of development, in other applications (such as poverty measurement) they are sometimes invoked because being "happy" is – on Sen's view (see Sen 1993, 37) – treated as a valuable functioning (see, for example, Klasen 2000).

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On this reading of the capability perspective and the different lists that can be used in its application, Nussbaum's "capabilities approach" emerges as one particular application or development of Sen's original formulation of the approach, which diverges from Sen's position at important levels. The divergence is most obvious in Nussbaum's rejection of the well-being/agency distinction. Her insistence on an open-ended list of capabilities is perhaps less important since clearly Sen's approach is compatible with the use of a variety of lists, and his theoretical commitments suggest that his position is closest – in

the context of philosophical debates – to an objective-list view. As he puts it, his “scepticism is about fixing a cemented list of capabilities that is seen as being absolutely complete ... and totally fixed” (Sen 2005, 158) rather than about the use of a list as such.

Nussbaum’s list emerges in two different contexts or forms. In the first, she advances a form of “Aristotelian Social Democracy” where an Aristotelian view of the good life underpins a view of just distribution. Nussbaum’s works on capability from 1988 to about 1995 take this form. Later they endorse a form of political liberalism (Nussbaum 1998; 1999; 2003; 2006; 2011) – where people with divergent views of the good and various moral and metaphysical views can all endorse the ability to live in various ways. When this second version of her approach is fleshed out, it covers certain constitutional guarantees. In particular, it is concerned with guaranteeing a minimum level of each capability on the list. In either of these forms, Nussbaum’s approach makes further commitments of various sorts – such as rejecting any use of a capability index that treats items on her list as “commensurable” in the sense that they can be traded off against one another – which Sen does not make. Indeed, some of the distinct commitments Nussbaum and Sen make are obscured by the (potentially misleading) debate about whether or not to adopt some particular list in applying the theory.

The Relevance of the Capability Approach to Practical Issues

The capability approach has had a considerable impact on public debate and policy. It is worthwhile nonetheless to distinguish those applications that have flowed from the core of the approach – which is common ground between Sen and others who advocate some version of it – from others in which this is not so (so that different versions of the approach can diverge at the policy level). One set of policy-relevant interventions that falls in the first set of applications is the construction of measures of progress, inequality, and poverty, including the HDI. The HDI has been influential for at least two distinct reasons that relate to Sen’s theoretical writings. The first and important motivational point is that income is only a means, valuable to the degree that it helps or enables people to lead better

lives. All those who argue for the approach share this view. Furthermore, although those who adopt some version of the capability approach – including Sen himself (see Sen 2006) – typically note the limitations of the HDI, they agree on its strategic importance in showing the limitations of income per capita as a measure of progress. Even Nussbaum, who rejects the use of any capability index that “commensurates” different capabilities, underlines the strategic importance of the HDI (see Nussbaum 2011, 59).

The HDI emerged from a debate within development economics – and in particular from the observation that some countries had done well in terms of income growth, but failed to improve the quality of life of their people, especially the lot of the poor. A different but related debate emerged in more affluent nations in the 1970s. Richard Easterlin observed that as income increased, people did not necessarily feel any more satisfied with their lives (Easterlin 1980). A vast new literature – across economics and psychology – on well-being and happiness now looks into this and related issues. At the policy level this literature has reached a large audience through a popular work by Richard Layard (2005). I mention Layard’s work in part because its publication and subsequent impact has pushed forward public debate in this area and indeed has led to some clarification of how Sen’s theoretical writings do, or might, apply in the context of particular public debates. This is particularly so because aside from being concerned with happiness, Layard’s text endorses a strong, modern form of utilitarianism that regards maximization of aggregate happiness as the single guiding moral principle.

This theoretical difference between Nussbaum and Sen may lead to rather distinct policy views.

The first point to note is that adopting the capability approach would lead one to be skeptical about judgments of progress that focus singularly on happiness or life satisfaction. The reasons would be the same as those that led Sen to be skeptical about “utility”-based evaluation, which are prominent in Sen’s discussion of happiness and his

response to Layard's book in his *The Idea of Justice* (see Sen 2009, 273–76). The other point Sen made in his earlier philosophical writings on capability and well-being and that he reiterates in *The Idea of Justice* is that “happiness can also be seen to have some evidential interest and pertinence” (276). The capability approach would nonetheless favor multidimensional measures that might include, but would not exclusively focus on, happiness or life satisfaction indices.

The capability approach is also relevant to Layard's proposals regarding disability policy. Layard claims that those who are physically impaired tend to adjust quickly to their impairment, and that their level of happiness is not much affected. The empirical evidence supports Layard: Shane Frederick and George Loewenstein show that even those who have serious impairments (for example, have become paraplegic or quadriplegic as the result of some accident) can achieve surprisingly high levels of happiness (Frederick and Loewenstein 1999, 312). Layard notes that those with certain sorts of mental impairment do not adapt in this way (Layard 2005, 121). For this reason, he argues that public policy should focus on, or prioritize, improving the lot of those with mental rather than physical impairments. Unsurprisingly, this is an area where taking a capability perspective leads one to endorse policies that diverge significantly from Layard's utilitarian proposals (see Nussbaum 2006; and Qizilbash 2009; 2011; 2012 *inter alia*). Sen's writings on capability have consistently cited the disabled as a group whose disadvantages may not be well accounted for by either a “utility” or social-primary-goods or resource calculus. The capability perspective would certainly not downplay the importance of physical impairments on the grounds that people can adapt; a claim which is borne out in various applications or developments of the approach, including Nussbaum's discussion of this issue in her *Frontiers of Justice* (Nussbaum 2006).

Another area of policy relevance is sustainable development and the protection of other (nonhuman) species. This is an area where different applications or developments of the capability approach might diverge significantly in their practical implications. In particular, Sen's position diverges from Nussbaum's because it invokes the distinction between well-being and agency. In

discussing various works on sustainability, he mentions a variety of influential views, including that advanced by the World Commission on Environment and Development, which famously defined sustainable development in terms of “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Sen 2004, 10). He argues that these views may not take an “adequately broad view of humanity” because they concentrate on maintaining our living standards – which elsewhere he suggests may be thought of in terms of the achievement of, or freedom to achieve, well-being (Sen 1987, 28–29). But clearly on Sen's view, “sustaining living standards is not the same thing as sustaining people's freedom to have – or to safeguard what they value and to which they have reason to attach importance” (Sen 2004, 10). One example Sen gives of this is “our sense of responsibility towards other species.” In developing his views here he stresses that in thinking about the role citizens can play in environmental policy, we must “think of human beings as agents, not merely as patients” (Sen 2004, 11; and 2009, 248–52). Crucial to Sen's views here are the notions of agency freedom and achievement, whereas much of the application of the capability approach in other contexts is about well-being freedom and achievement. In the previous policy contexts I have discussed, there is no significant difference between Sen and Nussbaum. Because of Nussbaum's rejection of the well-being/agency distinction, their proposals about “other species” are, however, quite different. Unlike Sen, Nussbaum introduces “Other Species” in her list of capabilities (more specifically, she includes “being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature”) (Nussbaum 2011, 34). She develops her own view further in her *Frontiers of Justice*. For Sen, by contrast, our concern to protect other species and the environment can be adequately accommodated in the capability perspective only by allowing agency goals that are not self-regarding, and in that sense part of the broader range of values that enter into the notion of a valuable or good life. Such concerns would not obviously enter into the formulation of a list of functionings or capabilities but rather in a different place in moral and political life. This theoretical difference between Nussbaum and Sen may lead to rather distinct policy views. Although

it remains nonetheless possible that advocates of variations of the capability approach, in spite of their theoretical differences, might all endorse the importance of protecting other species, they may do so for very different reasons and in rather different ways.

Conclusions

The core claims embodied in Amartya Sen's capability perspective constitute an approach that has been developed by Sen himself and others, including Martha Nussbaum. In spite of his unwillingness to commit himself to a single list of valued functionings or capabilities of the sort Nussbaum adopts, Sen does make substantive theoretical commitments in developing his approach, so that in any standard classification of views of well-being it is closest to an objective-list view. These theoretical commitments mean that the capability perspective can lead to very different policy recommendations from those that might follow from a utilitarian view. In particular, I have argued that the capability perspective and Richard Layard's utilitarian view lead to rather different recommendations in the context of disability policy. But Sen's and Nussbaum's developments of the capability approach also make different theoretical commitments, which lead to potentially distinct policy views in other contexts, such as the protection of other (nonhuman) species.

Mozaffar Qizilbash
mozaffar.qizilbash@york.ac.uk

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