



Methodological and Ideological Options

Mindful capability

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ABSTRACT

The capability approach stands among the major development paradigms in the first decades of the 21st century. But the century's challenge is shifting from development as capability expansion to sustainable development. What conception of capability befits sustainable development? The paper sketches contours for a conception of sustainable capability development adequate for the challenges of our time. This integrative framework combines the Buddhist philosophy of non-self and an emerging primal episteme that decentres humanity's place in the ecosphere to form mindful capabilities. These capabilities limit the space of functioning on Buddhist principles of wisdom, virtues, and meditation as well as a non-anthropocentric conception of humanity's place in the ecosphere.

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1. Introduction

Over the years Amartya Sen (1985a,b, 1987a, 2002, 2009) has built up a vigorous critique of the utilitarian foundations of mainstream economics. The majority of Sen's criticism targets these foundations and the restrictive space they provide for development, well-being, and agency evaluation. An important corollary of this critique is that broadening the range of moral views in economics will be to the benefit of the discipline. Though Sen does not commit to a specific ethical theory, one implication of his work is that it is not necessary to "utilitarianise" economics; in fact, there are other moral theories—including deontological and virtue ethics, among others—that one can adopt in economics in a general sense and within welfare economics in particular.

Alongside his criticism of utilitarianism in economics, Sen (1980, 1985a,d, 1992, 1998, 2009) develops the capability approach (CA) as a framework to assess advantage in theories of justice and well-being in developing countries. The CA provides a basis to broaden the ethical and informational space of welfare economics and was articulated as a response to John Rawls's index of primary goods in his work, *Theory of Justice* (1971). The CA maps the abstract notion of equality into a more specific, morally defensible, and potentially applicable concept.

The CA has outgrown its inception in political philosophy and development as its advocates introduced it to the fields of human development, ecological economics, socio-economics, feminist theory, and quality of life studies, among others. As a thick framework that

entangles value and facts, the CA engages moral concerns (well-being, advantage, agency) from no particular disciplinary perspective. Chiappero-Martinetti (2008: 269) explains that the great interest in and support for the CA among scholars from numerous disciplines is related to its rich and unrestricted nature. Because it is employed in so very many disciplines and has adopted a plurality of methods, the CA was described as "post-disciplinary" (Robeyns, 2006).

A considerable literature on the operationalization of the CA has flourished since Sen's initial formulation (Comim et al., 2008). This literature has a "positive" branch that seeks to measure, describe, and explain a person's capability and functioning achievements and an "evaluative" one that seeks to determine the constituents of well-being or to assess well-being by looking at, say, shortfall from a given capability threshold. The two, of course, complement each other and could not exist in isolation. Thus it is not possible to conduct well-being evaluation without psychological, social, or economic theory while the description of capability and functionings relationships is, from inception, an exercise in moral theorizing.

The openness and broadness of the CA means it lacks morally substantive and empirically descriptive content. Sen (2013) prefers to leave it open for democratic processes of social choice to determine which freedoms or capabilities should be sustained for future generations. But in Section 2 I discuss how various capability theorists went beyond Sen and completed its open and broad ethical foundations. The paper follows this literature which aims to complete the foundations with morally substantive and empirically descriptive content. In most instances, including this one, the completion keeps the CA open to additional contextualisation by requiring individual and local participation and decision making especially if it is to be used for public policy

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purposes. Nevertheless, additional moral and empirical content beyond the foundations is needed if the CA is to be used at all.

The Buddhist philosophy of non-self (*anatta*) and the emerging primal episteme identified by Birkin and Polesie (2011, 2013) extend the broad and open foundations of the CA described in Section 2. The outcome is mindful capability, that is capability sets that on one hand liberate individual from suffering to experience Buddhist well-being and on the other hand decentre the individual's place in the ecosphere. With non-self and the primal episteme our substantiation aims to make the CA a suitable framework for the challenges of sustainable development.

The Buddhist philosophy of non-self and the primal episteme appear at first inconsistent with the ethical individualist foundations of the CA. Ethical individualism means well-being is assessed in terms of individual capabilities or what individuals can and cannot do. This could appear as an important tension at the heart of this paper's argument. The Buddhist philosophy of non-self, however, is not so much in tension with ethical individualism as it is with our folk conception of a solid "I". This pearl view of the "I" and identity (Baggini, 2011) is an illusion responsible for humanity's suffering according to Buddhist philosophy. The integration of the primal episteme nevertheless requires non-anthropocentric values in addition to ethical individualism. This means that ethical individualism can no longer trump all other values that constitute the foundations of the CA.

The structure of the paper follows three questions: What is the capability approach? What are the Buddhist philosophy of non-self and the primal episteme? And how can we extend the capability approach as a metric for sustainable development? Section 2 after the introduction introduces the capability approach. In Section 3 the Buddhist philosophy of non-self is discussed. In Section 4 the integration of non-self and capability is laid out. The primal episteme of Birkin and Polesie is discussed in Section 5. Section 6 reviews the empirical literature on the relationship between Buddhism, well-being, and sustainable consumption while Section 7 sketches the contours of mindful capability for sustainable development. Section 8 concludes.

2. The Capability Approach

In the first statements on the capability approach (CA) Sen (1980: 218) argues that it is a measure of the basic things a person can do. He introduces the notion of a capability of a person on the premise that it reflects how individuals differ from each other in important ways when it comes to what they can and cannot do. Sen (1984: 85) follows Aristotle as he inquires on the meaning of well-being, separating the ultimately valuable from the instrumentally valuable. What is of ultimate value, accordingly, is the capability to function. A functioning is the most elementary building block in the CA. A functioning is an individual being (sickness, tiredness, happiness etc.) or doing (walking, working, caring etc.). All feasible ("effective") functionings an individual can be or do form the capability set. Which functionings are achieved depends on different elements including individual, social, and environmental conversion factors. Thus conversion factors moderate the size of the capability sets from which functionings are achieved.

An appropriate motivation for the CA is given in Alkire and Deneulin's (2009: 16) contention that "normative analysis is fundamental and in some ways prior to predictive and positive analysis". In fact the core components Sen articulates, including capability, functionings, and conversion factors, are thick ethical terms (Putnam, 2002). Unlike thin ethical terms, thick ones entangle facts and values. Thick terms include cruelty and crime. It is not possible to speak about or describe crime neutrally since crime is by definition something morally reprehensible. The philosopher Antony Appiah (2008: 13–14) aptly remarks in this regard that "trying to separate out the metaphysical from the psychological elements in this corpus is like trying to peel a raspberry." If human capability and functionings are thick terms, it follows that separating the factual from the moral is conceptually problematic. Putnam

(2002: 60) concludes the *Rosenthal Lecture* stating the CA "will require us to stop compartmentalizing "ethics" and "economics"".

Sen (1993: 48) claims that "the recognition that an agreement on the usability of the CA—an agreement on the nature of the 'space' of value-objects—need not presuppose an agreement on how the valuational exercise may be completed". In other words, the CA has broad foundations that specify an abstract conceptual space to conduct well-being evaluations. These foundations are not sufficiently specified, needing further theoretical, empirical, and moral substance. Furthermore, the foundations are moral since they answer the question *why are capability, functionings, and conversion factors worth our while as concepts in the assessment of well-being?*

The broad foundations of the CA can be made more specific with a range of theoretical, empirical, and moral extensions. Accordingly, the ethical concern for individual capabilities and functionings—or ethical individualism (Robeyns, 2005)—is further specified and articulated. The broad foundations do not presuppose a comprehensive agreement but an incompletely theorized one.¹ It follows that disagreements within the CA may persist. Incompletely theorized agreements entail "coming to a workable consensus around some elements of an issue without necessarily agreeing on every element" (Ruger, 2010: xiv). The broad foundations are an "Incompletely Specified Agreement" where disagreement over more specific and particular cases is permitted but disagreement over general principles is not. Here, disagreements only occur against a background of agreement.

Still, an incompletely theorized framework such as the CA can be too general and abstract, a beautiful theory with no implications. Such under-specification has often been perceived a weakness that "reflects a theory gap ... usually filled with ad hoc assumptions" (Binder and Witt, 2012: 721). However theory over-specification is also problematic. As Sen (1992: 48) argues, "there is a real danger of over precision" when dealing with well-being which is a broad and partly opaque concept. This is why advocates of the CA view its broadness as a strategic feature (Ruger, 2010). Martins (2006, 2011), for example, argues that the CA answers an ontological question namely "what is human well-being"? The CA, Martins adds, must be further supplemented by substantive theorizing or else it remains just that, a space for conducting evaluations with no grip on the world. The strategic under-specification that characterises only the foundations of the CA allows it to accommodate incommensurable moral theories while being less vulnerable to empirical disputes. Last but not least, broad and open foundations are consistent with the importance given to participation and democratic processes in the evaluation of capabilities (Sen, 1999, 2009, 2013).

Incompleteness is only a burden if the CA is not further refined and left as an open theoretical structure. But this has not been the case and it has been further specified in various ways, including listings of valuable capabilities. Even though lists go beyond the core components they remain "open" (i.e., not definitive) and broad enough to be in turn further culturally and individually contextualized.² Most lists seek to overcome under-specification while avoiding over-specification. In Nussbaum's list, over-specification is avoided as individuals are free to choose the functionings they wish to achieve (Nussbaum, 1987: 12). Nussbaum's (2002/3: 500) central human capabilities, for instance, are articulated in terms of "being able to ...". Still, to suggest a functioning or capability is essential or valuable is not the same as arguing it is or should be valuable for everyone at all times.³

While some lists are justified on the grounds of being necessary for flourishing (Nussbaum, 2000), others propose criteria or prerequisites that need to be fulfilled before the list is validated. Robeyns (2003) offers five criteria for the selection of valuable capabilities,

¹ See McNaughton (1988: 155), Ruger (2010: 70), and Sunstein (1994).

² Alkire (2002), Gasper (2004), and Philips (2006) offer excellent surveys.

³ Thus, a capability can be valuable to most people or to a representative population proportion, for example (Putnam, 2003: 404).

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