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What Can the Capabilities Approach Learn from an *Ubuntu* Ethic? A Relational Approach to Development Theory

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Summary. — Over the last two decades, the capabilities' approach has become an increasingly influential theory of development. It conceptualizes human wellbeing in terms of an individual's ability to achieve functionings we have reason to value. In contrast, the ethic of *ubuntu* views human flourishing as the propensity to pursue relations of fellowship with others, such that relationships have fundamental value. These two theoretical perspectives seem to be in tension with each other. While the capabilities' approach seems to focus on individuals as the locus of ethical value, an *ubuntu* ethic concentrates on the relations between individuals as the locus.
In this article, we ask, to what extent is the capabilities' approach compatible with this African ethical theory? We argue that, on reflection, relations play a much stronger role in the capabilities' approach than often assumed. There is good reason to believe that relationality is part of the concept of a capability itself, where such relationality has intrinsic ethical value. This understanding of the ethical centrality of relations grounds new normative perspectives on capabilities, and offers a more comprehensive grasp of the relevance of relationships to empirical enquiry.
We hope this provides an indication of the rich conversations that are possible when African and Anglo-American intellectual traditions engage one another, and whets the appetite of thinkers working in western traditions to engage with their colleagues in Africa and the global South more generally.

Key words — African ethics, capabilities' approach, poverty, *ubuntu*, development theory, relational ethics

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the capabilities' approach, human flourishing as it relates to justice is an individual's possession of the capabilities to achieve functionings that we have reason to value. In contrast, by one salient African approach, human flourishing consists of having the propensity to pursue communal relations with other individuals, or relations of fellowship, such that relationships, or people's capacities for them, have fundamental value. This is often called an *ubuntu* ethic, after the southern African isiNguni word for humanness. At first blush, there appears to be a tension between these two theoretical perspectives. While the former seems to focus on individuals as the locus of ethical value, the latter concentrates on the relations between individuals as the locus.

This tension can be sharpened if we consider their different conceptualizations of freedom. For a capabilities' theorist like Sen (1999), an individual's freedom consists in her capabilities to achieve valuable functionings, regardless of the conditions of others; this suggests that an individual's freedom is essentially a form of *independence* from others. Yet, as we explain below, an *ubuntu* ethic conceives of freedom, i.e., governance by one's higher self, at least partially in terms of an individual's ability to care for others, suggesting that an individual's freedom is inherently a form of *interdependence* with others.

Are these two approaches incompatible, or might the most attractive facets of each in fact admit of unification? In this article we aim to show that the latter is the case. A number of capabilities' theorists have emphasized that the reasoned identification of what is valuable has relational features inasmuch as it requires public deliberation, that the possession of some capabilities instrumentally relies on other people, and that a small number of capabilities are intrinsically relational and valuable for their own sake. These arguments have been made in a piecemeal fashion over time by different theorists; in contrast, we maintain that an *ubuntu* ethic provides a promising unified theoretical grounding for deeming capabilities in general to be inherently relational (at least in part).

An *ubuntu* ethic plausibly suggests that relations play a much stronger role in the capabilities' approach than often assumed. We argue for the novel claim that relationality is part of the concept of a capability itself, where such relationality has intrinsic ethical value. Where the standard capabilities' approach conceives of poverty as an individual's inability to achieve goals that we have reason to value, we contend that an *ubuntu* approach conceptualizes poverty as essentially (even if not exhaustively) a disruption of relationship in three respects. First, it undermines an individual's ability to care for others; second, it as an expression of the lack of care on the part of social actors, such as the state; third, if an individual attains a capability by actively depriving others or passively benefiting from their deprivation, then she cannot be said to have fully attained the relevant capability since it is achieved by having failed to commune with others.

Capabilities, as we conceive of them, are essentially (in part) abilities to relate to other persons in ways that roughly express friendliness with them. By extension, we argue that freedom is not independence from others but rather a certain form of interdependence. This understanding of the ethical centrality of relations grounds new normative perspectives on capabilities, and offers a more comprehensive grasp of the relevance of relationships to empirical enquiry.

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In aiming to show what the capabilities' approach can learn from *ubuntu*, we take both more or less for granted. Although we indicate what we find promising from both traditions, we do not take the time to respond to critiques of either, merely alluding to prima facie problems.

Instead we hope that this article provides an indication of the rich conversations that are possible when African and Anglo-American intellectual traditions engage one another, and whets the appetite of thinkers working in western traditions to engage with their colleagues in Africa and the global South more generally.

We begin by interpreting the capabilities' approach largely as a response to particularism, since this clarifies its current salient other-regarding features and provides conceptual space to develop a new view of capabilities as inherently relational (Section 2). We then articulate what we find particularly appealing about the ethic of *ubuntu*, though do note some objections that need to be addressed elsewhere for a full defense (Section 3). Following this, we consider what an *ubuntu*-based capabilities' approach might look like, arguing that a relational instance of the capabilities' approach is both unique and compelling (Section 4). Along the way, we apply our theory to deprivations related to poverty in order to illustrate several of the features that make the theory a promising new alternative.

2. THE ROLE OF OTHERS IN THE CAPABILITIES' APPROACH

(a) *Public deliberation and the role of others*

We take Amartya Sen's influential articulation of the capabilities' approach (1999) as the standard view for ease of discussion. This view can be understood partly as a response to particularism in moral philosophy, the position that much of the most revealing ethical insight does not come from abstract principles. Framing it in this way helps us understand the distinctive role of public deliberation in the capabilities' approach. The appeal to public deliberation means that other-regarding considerations are more central to the capabilities' approach than might appear at first blush, although in Sen these are limited to the reasoned identification of valuable functionings. Our aim in this section is to clarify the respects in which the capabilities' approach, as Sen and other capabilities' theorists understand it, already acknowledges relational factors, such that *ubuntu* considerations would extend them theoretically. For alternative accounts that have a weaker role for public deliberation or suggest a fixed list of capabilities, our *ubuntu* critique would constitute more of a challenge than an extension.

There are several versions of particularism in moral philosophy. For this discussion, the salient version belongs to Bernard Williams, who rejects the codification of ethics into an overarching theory like deontology or utilitarianism and has inspired Sen and others who are cautious of over-extending the role of abstract moral principles in practical reason.[1] The grounds for this approach are twofold. Firstly, our moral lives are messy: they are characterized by a plurality of values and marked by the possibility of ethical dilemmas and irretrievable regret. The attempt to provide an overarching theory risks simplifying such messiness away. This arguably not only is a hopeless task, but also profoundly disregards the value of having a rich and complex moral life (Williams, 1976). Secondly, pure theory cannot plausibly be used as a decision procedure for how to act. Williams argues that it is unintelligible to assume that something could be a genuine reason for us to act if it has no relation to anything we care about (Williams, 1981). One implication of this claim is that a moral theory can have traction on our reasons for acting only if we come to care deeply about this moral theory, which is hardly the way that good moral agents seem to conduct themselves. This context-dependence sets strong limits on the reach of theory in our practical lives.

It is helpful to understand the capabilities' approach as being informed by both claims. First, the approach is resolutely pluralistic and does not seek to simplify the complexity of our moral lives (Qizilbash, 2007; Sen, 1999, p. 77). In place of a single capability, Sen offers a plurality of capabilities that may be weighted in a variety of ways relative to functionings. Moreover, capabilities may have instrumental and non-instrumental values: while a capability gets its sense and worth primarily from the functioning that it enables, Sen argues that some capabilities can also be valued for themselves (Sen, 1999, p. 17). In addition, although a functioning is defined as an activity that we have reason to value for its own sake, Sen argues that reasoned reflection on our values can take different forms. A certain group can be guided by background social and moral norms, but it can also try to imagine whether other people could share its values. "If rationality were a church", he writes, "it would be a rather broad church" (Sen, 2009, p. 195).

These reflections suggest that the capabilities' approach is not primarily a moral theory; instead, it works as an epistemic tool for understanding how we come to conceive of wellbeing for purposes of morality or at least public policy, or what Anand and Sen (1994) call an *informational focus* on human development. Specifically, the approach makes a central claim: wellbeing is best understood by focusing on an individual's capabilities, where a capability represents the real opportunities that an individual has to achieve specific outcomes—beings and doings—that we have reason to value. This provides a distinctive conceptualization of human development in terms of freedom, understood as the ability of people to lead the kinds of lives they have reason to value. The process of development therefore consists primarily in expanding and enhancing individual capabilities, and this means giving them the freedom to accomplish more and better functionings.

The epistemic orientation of the capabilities' approach comes to the fore in Sen's consistent emphasis on the limits of what pure theory can do. This is especially clear in the debate initiated by Martha Nussbaum about whether to construct a definitive list of capabilities. Nussbaum (2001) famously develops a central list of capabilities, on the grounds that such a list is necessary to sharpen the critical edge of the capabilities' approach. She argues that Sen's perspective on freedom is too vague, because it does not identify those capabilities that limit other capabilities, and does not distinguish between significant and trivial capabilities or between good and bad capabilities (Nussbaum, 2003). In response, Sen concedes that central capabilities must be selected, but argues against a single, definitive list that applies to all places and at all times. "Pure theory", Sen contends, "cannot 'freeze' a list of capabilities for all societies for all time to come, irrespective of what the citizens come to understand and value. That would not only be a denial of the reach of democracy, but also a misunderstanding of what pure theory can do" (Sen, 2004, p. 78).

We understand Sen's claim as stemming from the particularist view that theory cannot provide a predefined, absolute set of procedures for identifying wellbeing; simply put, theory cannot do the thinking for us. Instead, it can guide and enrich

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