The implicit future orientation of the capability approach

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A B S T R A C T

Whilst the future is an important, almost constitutive aspect of the capability approach developed primarily by Sen and Nussbaum, the usual versions of the approach do not make the future orientation of the approach explicit. By making explicit the future orientation of the capability approach, the entire approach acquires a different flavour and offers new directions for development. The paper presents an array of ideas, such as the certainty of capabilities, the difference between the nature of values and the capacity to see them, the dynamic nature of agents, the distinction among three different acceptations of the category 'person', the idea of dynamic disease and the generation and consumption of futures, and futures literacy. As soon as the future is understood as an active force that is able to influence the present, it becomes one of the most relevant value-generating, sense-making force. The futures embedded in the agents' space of liberty act therefore as an active force which modifies the agents' present through their explicit and implicit anticipation. Three recommendations summarize the paper's main conclusions, respectively, on the capacity of agents (1) to generate their future; (2) to generate a future wide enough to appear unbounded; and (3) to generate a future such that the agents' space of liberty will not be diminished.

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1. Introduction

Whilst the future is an important, almost constitutive aspect of the capability approach developed primarily by Nussbaum (2000, 2011), Nussbaum and Sen (1993) and Sen (1985, 1992, 1999), the usual versions of the approach do not make the future orientation of the approach sufficiently explicit. The aim of this paper is to propose a reorientation of the capability approach in order to make its future orientation evident. Following this kind of gestalt switch, the entire capability approach acquires a different flavour that may better link different communities of scholars and practitioners, including ethicists, future students and decision-makers[1].

While the capability approach presents obvious overlaps with other approaches such as the basic needs paradigm, the human rights movement, the human security framework, the millennium development goal, and the sustainable development effort, it overcomes them because the capability approach "has a more articulated theoretical basis" (for an in-depth comparison between the capability approach and the other above-mentioned approaches, see Deneulin, 2009). While I share Deneulin's evaluation, I think that the capability approach should be further developed in the directions sketched below.

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[1] For an earlier effort to bridge futures studies and ethics see Poli (2011b).

The paper is organized as follows. Section 1 is this Introduction; Section 2 summarizes the main theses of the capability approach; Section 3 makes the future orientation of the capability approach more explicit; Section 4 focuses on the dynamic nature of agents; Section 5 introduces the all-important distinction between generating and consuming the future; Section 6 presents what is beginning to be called the Discipline of Anticipation; Section 7 hints at further directions of research; Section 8 concludes the paper.

2. A very brief introduction to the capability approach

Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum are the two giants of the capability approach[2]. They developed the capability approach with two different purposes in mind. While Sen's primary interest was to lay down a general framework for assessing and comparing the quality of life of different communities and countries (Sen, 1993), Nussbaum was more interested in developing a theory of justice. Not surprisingly, most of the differences between Sen's and Nussbaum's versions of the capability approach depend on the different problems that the approach is meant to address. However, on evidencing the hitherto implicit orientation-to-the-future of the capability approach, the differences between Sen's and Nussbaum's versions recede into the background and – more significantly – new potential developments of the capability approach come to the surface.

Capabilities are what Sen calls "substantial liberties", an ensemble of opportunities for choosing and acting. They are the answers to the question: "What is this person able to do and be?" The capability approach focuses mainly on persons and assumes that its extension to "communities", "organizations", or "institutions" does not raise major problems. On the other hand, as Deneulin notes, "by placing individual subjects at the centre stage of the capability approach, Sen maintains a conceptual tension between the individual and his or her society. That tension can survive at the theoretical level but cannot be maintained when the capability approach becomes a guiding theory for development practice" (, p. 106). In fact, development and the expansion of freedom cannot occur without the presence of key institutions such as the market, public services, the judiciary, political parties, and the media (, p. 108). It has been noted that this enlargement of the capability approach may be less troublesome than it may at first appear because the capability approach is ethically individualist, but it is neither methodologically nor ontologically individualist (, pp. 16–18; , pp. 107–110)[3]. However, it should be made explicit what is meant for a person, community, organization, or institution to have the possibility of becoming a full-fledged, deployed, complete agent. In order to operate at the appropriate level of generality, I shall use the terms "agent" – including person, community, organization, and institution – and "agency". The latter refers to whatever is valued by an agent. The goods, activities and symbols that contribute to the agency of an agent act as motivations, purposes, aims, or any other active force shaping the agent's future.

The agency of an agent comprises both components that depend and do not depend on an agent's actions. As Sen notes

> if my agency includes the elimination of famine from my country, then my agency will be realized whenever famine is extirpated from my country, independently of the role I could have performed in achieving such a result (Sen, 1992).

The capability approach is governed by the agent's space of liberty. This is represented by combinations of all the possibilities available to the agent. The agent's space of liberty depends on both "external" and "internal" constraints. External constraints are represented by the broad institutional, economic, political, and cultural milieus within which the agent takes its decisions and performs its actions. Internal constraints are represented by the agent's decisions and actions. Both constraints temporally modify the agent's space of liberty by shrinking and enlarging its "volume" and modifying its "structure" along with the actions that are performed. The terms "volume" and "structure" refer to the questions "how wide is the space of liberty?" and "how is it internally organized?"

Some capacities are more important than others because they enable or fail to enable an agent's development structurally. As far as individuals are concerned, respect for one's physical and psychological integrity and literacy are two of the most important enabling capacities. Abused children and illiterate persons may suffer their whole lives from a dramatically reduced space of liberty. Furthermore, persistent deprivation (misery, malnutrition, or chronic disease) structurally corrodes an agent's space of liberty[4]. To survive situations of persistent deprivation, agents adapt and learn to give up hopes of improvement—they learn to renounce their future.

A less cursory description would note that "compensatory abilities" often emerge in response to difficulty and deprivation (Wolf & de-Shalit, 2007). Furthermore, resilience research has found that a roughly constant percentage of agents find their own way of coping with even the worst situations (Southwick & Charney, 2012). While our understanding of what makes some agents more "resilient" than others has dramatically improved in the past twenty years, many surprises are still in store (Southwick & Charney, 2012; Zolli & Healy, 2012).

From the point of view of the capability approach, however, each individual is a value, and the relevant question is therefore how to shape authentically enabling spaces of liberty. To counteract individual and social adaptations to persistent

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[2] For a recent, authoritative presentation of the capability approach see Nussbaum (2011). Two collections discussing the many nuances of the capability approach are Comin, Qizilbash, and Alkire (2008) and Deneulin and Shahani (2009).

[3] Robeyns distinguishes the three types of individualisms in the following way: ethical individualism assumes that the ultimate unit of concern is the individual; methodological individualism claims that social phenomena can be explained by reference to individuals alone; finally, ontological individualism sees society as merely a sum of its individual parts. As it is apparent, there three kinds of individualism address very different problems.

[4] See the concept of "corrosive disadvantage" introduced by Wolf and de-Shalit (2007).