

The Capability Approach

Article for the Routledge Companion to Political Philosophy

Ingrid Robeyns

July 7, 2011

In its most general description, the capability approach is a flexible and multi-purpose normative framework, rather than a precise theory of well-being, freedom or justice.

At its core are two normative claims: first, the claim that the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance, and second, that freedom to achieve well-being is to be understood in terms of people's capabilities, that is, their real opportunities to do and be what they have reason to value. This framework can be used for a range of evaluative exercises, including most prominent the following: (1) the assessment of individual well-being; (2) the evaluation and assessment of social arrangements, including assessments of social and distributive justice; and (3) the design of policies and proposals about social change in society. In all these normative endeavors, the capability approach prioritizes (a selection of) peoples' beings and doings and their opportunities to realize those beings and doings (such as their genuine opportunities to be educated, their ability to move around or to enjoy supportive social relationships). This stands in contrast to other accounts of well-being, which focus exclusively on subjective categories (such as happiness) or on the means to well-being (such as resources like income or wealth).

This article will be limited to the capability approach to justice, which is the area within political philosophy where the capability approach is the furthest developed

and has up to now made most impact. Yet it is instructive to note that there are other debates in social and political philosophy where the capability approach has played a role, such as providing a metric for an all-things-considered evaluation of institutions (Claassen 2009), or as the basis to conceptualize education (Robeyns 2006).

This article will address the following main question. First, which metric of justice does the capability approach defend, and how does that compare with other metrics of justice? Second, has the capability approach succeeded in providing an alternative for John Rawls's theory of 'Justice as Fairness'? Third, which are the capabilities that are relevant for questions of justice? Fourth, since the capability approach endorses a multidimensional metric of justice, how should these dimensions be aggregated to come to an overall judgment, or are there ways to circumvent the need for aggregation? Finally, which other theoretical 'modules' need to be added to the metric of justice for a complete capability theory of justice?

1. Capabilities as a metric of justice

A theory of distributive justice can be compared with an engine, in which the capability approach provides only one part, or 'module' (Arneson 2010: 103). Not all theories of justice have exactly the same modules, yet theories of distributive justice must specify at least two things: a metric and a distributive rule (Anderson 2010: 81). The 'metric of justice' (also called 'the currency of justice') is the good that is to be compared between individuals when making statements of distributive injustices, hence the dimensions in which the interpersonal comparisons that are an integral part of claims of justice are made. The distributive rule specifies what justice requires in terms of the distribution of that good between people. Typical distributive rules are equality, sufficiency (minima that everyone should be situated above), or priority to

the worst off. Moreover, there are other modules to the full theory of distributive justice, such as the grounds for its principles of justice, or a specification of the duties of justice rather than merely the rights of justice (see section 5). As Arneson (2010: 103-104) point out, one of the theoretical difficulties of comparing the capability approach to justice with other theories is that one limits the comparison to only one module, whereas the comparison really requires an assessment of the entire engine. We can't make an overall comparison of, say, cars, by only comparing their wheels or their maximum speed. Thus, while some political philosophers mistakenly think the capability approach is a theory of equality or a theory of justice, the capability approach *only* specifies a metric of justice, and hence a variety of capability theories are possible, depending on the other modules that are integrated.

Capability theories of justice argue that when making those interpersonal comparisons needed for justice, we should focus on people's functionings and capabilities.

Functionings are 'beings and doings', that is, various states of human beings and activities that a person can undertake. Examples of the former (the 'beings') are being well-nourished, being undernourished, being housed in a pleasantly warm but not excessively hot house, being educated, being illiterate, being part of a supportive social network, being part of a criminal network, and being depressed. Examples of the second group of functionings (the 'doings') are travelling, caring for a child, voting in an election, taking part in a debate, taking drugs, killing animals, eating animals, consuming lots of fuel in order to heat one's house, and donating money to charity. To every functioning corresponds a capability, being the real opportunity one has to achieve that functioning. If we say that person A has a capability to functioning X, we are saying that if A chooses to (be or do) X, then A will succeed in (doing or being) X.

What reasons are there to focus on the evaluative space of functionings and capabilities, rather than other possible metrics of justice, such as Rawlsian primary goods or happiness? The capability approach holds that judgments of justice should focus on what really matters to people, which is their freedom to achieve well-being. Thus, we should focus on the ends rather than the means of well-being, and the capability approach postulates that these ends are what people are able to be and to do, rather than their happiness.

The capability approach argues against subjective metrics of justice on at least two grounds (Anderson 2010: 85-87). First, subjective metrics are sensitive to problems of adaptation, that is, the problem that people adapt their subjective well-being to their deprived circumstances or oppressive social norms. The opposite kind of adaptation, whereby one gets used to high levels of affluence or the privileges caused by social hierarchies, is possible too – a phenomenon known as ‘expensive tastes’ in theories of equality and justice (Dworkin 1981a: pagenumbers).

Arguments against subjective metrics of justice could be used to motivate a shift to resources, seen as the means of justice, as has been done in the theories of justice defended by John Rawls (1971) and Ronald Dworkin (1981a,b). Yet the problem with shifting to means is that people differ in their ability to convert means into valuable opportunities (capabilities) or outcomes (functionings) (Sen 1992: 26-28, 36-38). Since ends are what ultimately matters when thinking about well-being and the quality of life, means can only work as reliable proxies of people’s opportunities to achieve those ends if all people have the same capacities or powers to convert those means into equal capability sets. Capability scholars believe that these inter-individual differences are far-reaching and significant, and that theories that focus on means tend

to downplay their normative relevance. The sources of inter-individual differences to convert means into ends can be personal (e.g. impairments), social (e.g. social norms) or environmental (e.g. living in an area affected by malaria).

2. Capabilities versus social primary goods

Of all the possible metrics of justice, philosophers defending the capability approach have most explicitly targeted John Rawls's metric of justice, the 'social primary goods' (Nussbaum 2006; Sen 1980, 2009). In his 1979 Tanner lecture entitled 'Equality of What?', Sen (1980) argued that "the primary goods approach seems to take little note of the diversity of human beings. ... If people were basically very similar, then an index of primary goods might be quite a good way of judging advantage. But, in fact, people seem to have very different needs varying with health, longevity, climatic conditions, location, work conditions, temperament, and even body size. ... So what is being involved is not merely ignoring a few hard cases, but overlooking very widespread and real differences" (Sen 1980: 215-216). A person with a disability, however severe, would not have a claim to additional resources grounded in his impairment under Rawls's two principles of justice. Sen argues that Rawls's difference principle would not justify any redistribution to the disabled on grounds of disability. Rawls's strategy has been to postpone the question of our obligations towards the disabled, and exclude them from the scope of his theory. Rawls certainly does not want to deny our moral duties towards the people that fall outside the scope of his theory, but he thinks that we should first work out a robust and convincing theory of justice for the "normal" cases and only then try to extend it to the "more extreme cases" (Rawls 2001: 176).

Sen's critique in his Tanner lecture, however, was not only about the case of the severely disabled. Sen's more general critique concerned what he saw as the inflexibility of primary goods as a metric of justice. Sen believes that the more general problem with the use of primary goods is that it cannot adequately deal with the pervasive inter-individual differences between people. Primary goods, he argues, cannot adequately account for differences among individuals in their abilities to convert these primary goods into what people are able to be and to do in their lives. Primary goods are among the valuable means to pursue one's life plan. But the real opportunities or possibilities that a person has to pursue her own life plan, are not only influenced by the primary goods that she has at her disposal, but also by a range of factors that determine to what extent she can use these primary goods to generate valuable states of being and doing. Hence, Sen claims that we should focus on the extent of substantive freedom that a person effectively has, i.e. her capabilities.

Yet Rawls has defended the exclusion of the disabled from his theory. Rawls stressed, especially in his later work, that in his theory "everyone has physical needs and psychological capacities within the normal range", and therefore he excludes people with severe physical or mental disabilities from the scope of justice as fairness (2001: 170-176). In his earlier work (Rawls 1971), Rawls justified the restriction by arguing that a theory of justice should in any case apply for 'normal cases' – if the theory is inconsistent or implausible for such cases, then it will certainly not be an attractive theory for the more challenging cases, such as people with severe disabilities. We could postpone the question of how to treat people with disabilities to one of the later (legislative) stages of the design of the basic structure of society, though, of course, even in his earliest discussions of this Rawls thinks that the final theory of justice must deal adequately with the claims of people whose abilities fall outside the normal

range, and that any theory that cannot do so should be rejected on those grounds. In later work Rawls (2001: 176) no longer argued that the case of justice towards the disabled had to be postponed to the legislative phase, but rather that we had to try to extend justice as fairness to include those cases. Rawls has not pursued this task systematically himself, though he has emphasized the role that his conception of the person possessed of the capacities for a sense of justice and a conception of the good plays in justice, and has argued (2001: 176-178) that this conception enables him to deflect accusations of “fetishism” about the primary goods.

A more recent wave of philosophical enquiry has highlighted how complex the comparisons between Rawls’s theory of justice and the capability view are (Pogge 2002; Robeyns 2009; Brighthouse and Robeyns 2010). One reason is that the capability metric is a general metric of well-being freedom, whereas the social primary goods metric emerges as one element of an integral and complex theory of political justice (rather than social justice more broadly, let alone the even wider category of moral evaluations). Also, Rawls’s theory of justice is an ideal theory of justice since it tries to outline the conditions of a completely just utopia, which the capability does not aspire to do. This means that it is very hard to compare Rawls’s work on justice with the philosophical work on the capability approach, since their scope and theoretical aims are not the same (Robeyns 2009, 2011).

Regarding scope, Rawls’s theory of justice is limited in scope to (1) the basic structure of society (that is, the set of most important social institutions), (2) to liberal democratic societies rather than also to nondemocratic and illiberal societies, (3) and to the principles of justice insofar as they apply to people in their capacity as citizens. The scope of the capability approach can be summarized as “justice applies

everywhere” – that is, it applies to all human beings independently of their country of birth or residence, and not only to social institutions but also to the social ethos and to social practices.

Regarding theoretical aims, one can safely say that most capability scholars tend to disfavor top-down theorizing, and prefer to find out how theory or philosophy can help us make the actual world, a social institution or a practice more just, rather than to work more abstractly on the principles of justice and their justification. This last difference has been a main point of attention in Sen’s more recent work (Sen 2009).

Rawlsians have criticized the capability approach too, and not all of their critiques have been sufficiently rebutted (Pogge 2002; Kelly 2010).

Firstly, the capability approach is claimed to be endorsing a particular comprehensive moral view, which Rawlsians find objectionable. Rawls aims to stay away from a perfectionist account of justice, and the question is whether this is possible for a capability theory of justice. This is an important area of dispute, to which we will return briefly in section 3.

Another main Rawlsian objection to the capability approach concerns the publicity criterion, which stipulates that the conception of justice must be public and the necessary information to make a claim of injustice must be verifiable by all, and easily accessible. Rawlsians argue that a theory of justice needs a public standard of interpersonal comparisons, as otherwise the obtained principles of justice among citizens with diverse conceptions of the good life will not prove stable. The suggestion is that as capabilities are very hard to measure or assess in such a public fashion, and as they would require very large amounts and difficult sorts of information, the capability approach is unworkable as a theory of justice. Clearly, not

everyone would agree that this is valid complaint. For example, Elizabeth Anderson (2010: 85) has argued that the capabilities metric does meet the publicity criterion, while Richard Arneson (2010: 114) has argued that concerns of justice overrule concerns of publicity: if social justice can only be achieved by relying on measures that violate the publicity criterion, then that is a price worth paying. Finally, it has also been questioned whether the social primary goods metric, which prominently includes opportunities, can itself meet the publicity requirement, in which case the publicity critique would lose much of its force (Robeyns 2009: 409).

3. Which are the capabilities relevant for justice?

A major challenge for a capability theory of justice is the question which capabilities matter. In answering this question, philosophers have had two different notions of justice in mind. One sees the question of justice as a question about truth, sharply distinguished from questions about implementation, justice-enhancing policies, feasibility, and other practical concerns. G.A. Cohen (2008) is an important representative of this line of work. However, very few articles analyzing or defending the capability approach to justice take this line. An exception is Peter Vallentyne (2005), who argues that all functionings should be included when considering issues of justice. According to Vallentyne (2005: 362), “given that any functioning could, under some circumstances, enhance (or otherwise affect) the quality of someone’s life, it is a mistake to exclude some functionings from consideration. To do so would leave out something that is relevant for justice.” However, Vallentyne adds that this is not to deny that when designing policies, we need to select the most important capabilities. Since virtually all capability theorists implicitly or explicitly understand ‘justice’ as a practical concept, that is, as a concept that will help us in telling what we

ought to do or how we ought to shape social institutions, they take some (minimal) feasibility constraints into account. Those working in a more practical line of political philosophy have argued that considerations of justice require that we demarcate morally relevant from morally irrelevant and morally bad capabilities (Nussbaum 2003; Pogge 2002; Pierik and Robeyns 2007). Put differently, any capability account of justice will have to tell us which capabilities are relevant and which are not for purposes of justice.

Amartya Sen (2004, 2009: 242-243) notoriously has refused to answer this question, claiming that processes of public reasons and democratic deliberation should lead to the selection of relevant capabilities. Yet this ‘democratic route’ to selecting the relevant capabilities requires a specific account of the deliberative processes that are needed, and that specific account has not been provided by Sen. While several capability theorists have debated issues of democratic deliberation in the context of development questions or other policy decisions, within the context of distributive justice this work remains to be done.

The second way to select the relevant capabilities for the purpose of justice is the ‘criteria route’, whereby the criteria that the selected capabilities should meet are proposed and defended. A prominent example of the ‘criteria route’ is Elizabeth Anderson’s (1999) theory of democratic equality. Anderson (1999: 316), who aims to develop the outline of a *political* theory of justice (rather than a theory of social justice that encompasses all spheres of life), argues that people should be entitled “to whatever capabilities are necessary to enable them to avoid or escape entanglement in oppressive social relationships” and “to the capabilities necessary for functioning as

an equal citizen in a democratic state”, without giving a complete list of which capabilities are meeting these criteria.

The third way to select the relevant capabilities for the purpose of justice is the ‘objective-list route’. Following Derek Parfit’s notion of objective list theories, being theories claiming that “certain things are good or bad for us, whether or not we want to have the good things, or to avoid the bad things” (Parfit 1984: 493), the capability theorist proposes an objective list of well-being which will be the concern of distributive justice. Richard Arneson (2010) defends this version of the capability approach, which he dubs the ‘perfectionist capability theory’ – without, however, specifying an account of well-being in terms of an objective list.

Martha Nussbaum’s (2000, 2006, 2011) minimal theory of justice is the most well-known version of the capabilities approach which relies on an objective list of well-being. Nussbaum’s theory of social justice is comprehensive, in the sense that it is not limited to an account of political justice, or to liberal democracies. Rather, her account holds for all human beings on earth, independently of whether they are living in a liberal democratic regime, or of whether they are severely disabled. The main demarcation of Nussbaum’s account is that it provides only “a partial and minimal account of social justice” (Nussbaum 2006: 71) by specifying thresholds of a list of capabilities that governments in all nations should guarantee to their citizens.

Nussbaum’s theory focuses on thresholds, but this does not imply that reaching these thresholds is all that matters for social justice; rather, her theory is partial and simply leaves unaddressed the question what social justice requires once those thresholds are met. Nussbaum’s well-known list contains capabilities that are grouped together under ten “central human capabilities”: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses,

imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment (Nussbaum 2006: 76-78; 2011: 33-34).

Nussbaum (2000: 70-77; 2006: 78-81) justifies her list by arguing that each of these capabilities is needed in order for a human life to be "not so impoverished that it is not worthy of the dignity of a human being" (2000: 72). She defends these capabilities as being the moral entitlements of every human being on earth. She formulates the list at an abstract level and advocates that the translation to implementation and policies should be done at a local level, taking into account local differences. Nussbaum argues that this list can be derived from a Rawlsian overlapping consensus and stresses that her list remains open-ended and always open for revision (Nussbaum 2000: 77), yet other philosophers have taken issue with her claim that this would result in a form of political liberalism, claiming that she is a perfectionist liberal after all (Barclay 2003).

4. Aggregating capabilities

The selection of relevant capabilities is one major challenge for the capability approach to justice, yet another is the question how to aggregate the different capabilities that are judged to be relevant for issues of justice. If judgments of justice require us to make interpersonal comparisons of people's overall freedom to achieve well-being, don't we need a way to aggregate the value of the different capabilities into an overall value?

In many cases, this will be true. Yet the literature capability-justice is remarkably silent on this question. There are some proposals for aggregating capabilities either using social choice procedures (Chakraborty 1996) or else equating the value of a capability by its contribution to a person's happiness (Schokkaert 2007), but these are

made in the context of welfare economics, rather than as part of an attempt to assessing justice. Amartya Sen deliberately refuses to investigate the question how such aggregation should or could be done, since he believes that striving for complete rankings is a mistake (Sen 2009).

The capability literature thus seems to leave us with empty hands. Yet the problem of aggregating the dimensions of the metric of justice is of course relevant for all multidimensional metrics of justice, including Rawls's social primary goods metric, or Dworkin's resource egalitarianism. Could the capability approach borrow the aggregation mechanisms available in Dworkin's or Rawls's theory?

On one interpretation of Rawls, the aggregation problems is an unsolved problem in his theory of justice, since the social primary goods are noncommensurable. On another interpretation, the social primary goods of basic liberties, opportunities and the social basis of self-respect, will be distributed equality if Rawls's first principle of justice (the principle of equal liberties) is met, implying that for distributive questions the relevant social primary goods reduce to income and wealth. If one finds this reduction of the full range of social primary goods for questions of distributive justice to only income and wealth problematic, then there is no satisfactory solution to the aggregation problem in Rawls's theory of justice either. So the problem of aggregating would then be a problem for the capability approach to justice, but as well to the social primary goods metric.

Dworkin (1981b) proposes the so-called 'envy-test' to make comparisons between the 'resources' that people hold, which in Dworkin's conceptualization includes not only their material possessions and leisure time, but also their skills, talents and handicaps. If one is willing to take a pill to trade with the place of another person, taking the

entire ‘package deal’ of their life, one has a justified complaint that one has not received one’s fair share in life. Yet while Dworkin’s envy test may be a useful heuristic device, the envy test entails impossible epistemological requirements, and operates against a number of background assumptions that make Dworkin’s theory highly idealized (Pierik and Robeyns 2007). Moreover, while it may be a useful device in micro-situations or for thought experiments, it offers little to political leaders or policy makers who cannot make these envy tests on behalf of all the citizens. Still, the point which capability theorists of justice should take home is that something like a Dworkinian envy test will have to be developed if one wants the capability metric to do the work of a complete theory of distributive justice.

A capability theory of justice that endorses sufficiency as the distributive rule, such as Martha Nussbaum’s theory (2000, 2006, 2011) can avoid the problem of aggregation, since such theory specifies that justice requires only that all people meet a certain threshold-level for each capability. Yet even such a theory has two major problems to solve. First, we will need to know where the thresholds are set, or which person or which foundational principles decides on the thresholds; basically, the normative decisions that confront the selection of relevant capabilities re-emerge here, albeit in a slightly different guise. Secondly, in an unjust world, the theory of transitional justice or the non-ideal theory of justice will need to tell us which capability to prioritize if not all people are above the thresholds of all relevant capabilities. Should we prioritize education, health, or being able to hold a decent job? Nussbaum (2011: 37-38) has argued that the impossibility to get all people above the thresholds for all capabilities involves a tragic choice, which should prompt us to ask the question how we can work towards a future where this is no longer the case. For Nussbaum, this strategy will be sufficient, since “If the whole list has been wisely crafted and the

thresholds set at a reasonable level, there usually will be some answer to that question.” (Nussbaum 2011: 38) Yet one could wonder whether this response does solve the problem: many of the one billion most deprived people on Earth are below reasonable thresholds on most of the capabilities on Nussbaum’s list. Which one should a justice-seeking organization or government prioritize?

5. A family of capability theories of justice

The capability approach is often wrongly taken to be an egalitarian theory or a theory of social or distributive justice, yet its core doesn’t entail more than the two normative propositions stated at the beginning of this article. The capability approach specifies what should count for interpersonal evaluations and thus provides *one* important aspect (or ‘module’) of a theory of social or distributive justice, yet more is needed before one can speak of a theory of justice (Robeyns 2011).

Nussbaum (2000, 2006, 2011) offers us a capability theory of justice, but her theory too doesn’t amount to a full theory of social justice. Moreover, it would be a mistake to think that there can be only one capability theory of justice; on the contrary, the open nature of the capability approach allows for the development of a family of capability theories of justice. But this prompts the question: what is needed to develop a full capability theory of justice, and which of these aspects have already been developed by capability theorists? Assuming that the capability theory of justice has addressed the issues outlined above – that is, the selection of the relevant capabilities, and the question of aggregation – another number of theoretical choices remain to be made and defended.

First, a theory of justice needs to explain on what basis it justifies its principles or claims of justice. For example, in Rawls’s theory of justice the two principles of

justice are justified by the thought-experiment of the original position and the more general social contract framework on which this is based. Dworkin's egalitarian justice theory starts from the meta-principle of equal respect and concern, which he then develops in the principles that the distribution of burdens and benefits should be sensitive to the ambitions that people have but should not reflect the unequal natural endowments with which individuals are born. One could also develop a capability theory of justice arguing that the ultimate driving force is a concern with autonomy or with human dignity, or with human vulnerability, or with a combination of these. If capability scholars want to develop a full theory of justice, they will also need to explain on what bases they will justify their principles or claims. As mentioned earlier, Nussbaum starts from a notion of human dignity, whereas the Senian strand in the capability approach stresses the importance of what people have reason to value, hence an account of public reasoning. However, little work has been done so far to flesh out this embryonic idea of 'having reason to value', and it therefore remains unclear whether the capability approach has a solid unified rationale on the basis of which a full account of justice could be developed.

Second, a capability theory of justice needs to take a position on the 'distributive rule' that it will endorse: will it argue for plain equality, or for sufficiency, or for prioritarianism, or for some other (mixed) distributive rule? Both Martha Nussbaum's and Elizabeth Anderson's theories are sufficiency accounts (Anderson 1999, 2010; Nussbaum 2006), but from this it does not follow, as one sometimes reads in the secondary literature, that the capability approach entails a sufficiency rule. Sen may have given the (wrong) impression of defending straight equality as a distributive rule, by asking the question 'Equality of what?' (Sen 1980), though a careful reading shows that he was merely asking the question '*If we want to be defending equality of*

something, then what would that be?’ In fact, Sen has remained uncommitted to one single distributive rule, which probably can be explained by the fact that he is averse of building a well-defined theory of justice but rather prefers to investigate how real-life unjust situations can be turned into more just situations, even if perfect justice is unattainable (Sen 2009). The capability approach clearly plays a role in Sen’s work on justice, since when assessing a situation he will investigate inequalities in people’s capabilities and analyze the processes that led to those inequalities. Yet Sen has an eclectic approach to theorizing, and hence other notions and theories (such as human rights or more formal analyses of freedoms from social choice theory) also play a role in his work on justice. The presence and importance of the capability approach in Sen’s work is thus undeniable, but should not be seen as the only defining feature.

Third, when developing a capability theory of justice we must decide whether we want it to be an outcome or an opportunity theory, that is, whether we think that we should assess injustices in terms of functionings, or rather in terms of capabilities, or a mixture. At the level of theory and principles, most theorists of justice endorse the view that justice is done if all have equal genuine opportunities, or if all reach a minimal threshold of capability levels. Translated to the capability language, this would imply that at the level of theory and principles, capabilities are the relevant metric of justice, and not functionings. However while most theorists defend opportunities rather than outcomes, the focus on opportunities is not entirely uncontested (e.g. Fleurbaey 2002; Phillips, 2004; Wolff and De-Shalit 2007).

Fourth, a capability theory of justice needs to specify where the line between individual and collective responsibility is drawn, or how it will be decided, and by whom, where this line will be drawn. There is a remarkable absence of any discussion

about issues of responsibility in the capability literature, in sharp contrast to political philosophy and welfare economics where this is one of the most important lines of debate, certainly since the publication of Ronald Dworkin's (1981b) work on justice and equality which led to what Elizabeth Anderson (1999) has called 'luck-egalitarianism'. An exception is Peter Vallentyne (2005: 365), who has argued that the relevant metric of justice is 'brute luck capabilities', being the capabilities that one has as a matter of brute luck only; those that one has as a matter of option luck (that is, due to one's own choices) are not a concern of justice. While Vallentyne endorses a strict separation between theorizing about justice and policy and institutional design, the question of responsibility also has important effects for the more practical approach to justice. Indeed, whether one wants to discuss it explicitly or not, *any* concrete capability-based policy proposal can be analyzed in terms of the division between personal and collective responsibility; but this terminology is largely absent from the capability literature. There may be plausible explanations for why this issue is not discussed in the capability literature, but if a capability theory of justice wants to be applicable to questions of justice, then it cannot but confront the question about the just division between personal and collective responsibility (Pierik and Robeyns 2007: 148-149).

This brings us to a related issue: a theory of justice generally specifies rights, but also duties. However, capability theorists have remained largely silent on the questions who should bear the duties for the expansion of the selected capabilities. Nussbaum passionately advocates that all people all over the world should be entitled, as a matter of justice, to threshold levels of all the capabilities on her list; but apart from mentioning that it is the governments' duties to guarantee these entitlements (2006: 70), she remains silent on the question who precisely should bear the burdens and

responsibilities for realizing these capabilities. Yet as Onora O'Neill (1996: chapter 5) has argued, questions of obligations and responsibilities should be central to any account of justice.

This short and presumably incomplete list of the 'modules' which a complete capability theory of justice would need to entail, makes clear that a capability theory of justice is theoretically much more demanding than the basic presupposition of the capability approach to distributive justice, namely its claim that 'functionings' and 'capabilities' are the best metric of justice. While much has been written on the capability approach in recent years, by an increasing number of scholars, including philosophers, much of the philosophical work needed for turning the open-ended capability approach into a specific theory of justice remains to be done.

Related Topics

Contractualism and Political Liberalism; Utilitarianism and consequentialism; perfectionism; pluralism; luck egalitarianism; the difference principle; Needs and distributive justice; global justice and politics; Equality.

References

Anderson, E. (1999) "What is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics*, 109, 2, 287–337.

Anderson, E. (2010) "Justifying the capabilities approach to justice," in Brighouse and Robeyns (eds.), pp. 81-100.

Arneson, R. (2010) "Two cheers for capabilities," in Brighouse and Robeyns (eds.), pp. 101-127.

- Barclay, L. (2003) "What kind of liberal is Martha Nussbaum?", *SATS: Nordic Journal of Philosophy*, 4, 3, 5-24.
- Brighouse, H., and I. Robeyns (eds., 2010) *Measuring Justice: Primary Goods and Capabilities*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chakraborty, A. (1996) "On the Possibility of a Weighting System for Functionings," *Indian Economic Review*, 31, 241–50.
- Claassen, R. (2009) "Institutional Pluralism and the Limits of the Market", *Politics, Philosophy and Economics*, 8(4), pp. 420-447.
- Dworkin, R. (1981a) "What is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 10, 198-246.
- Dworkin, R. (1981b) "What is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 10, 283–345.
- Fleurbaey, M. (2002) "Development, Capabilities and Freedom," *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 37, 71–7.
- Kelly, E. (2010) "Equal Opportunity, Unequal Capability", in Brighouse and Robeyns (eds.), pp. 61-80.
- Nussbaum, M. (2000) *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. (2003) "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice," *Feminist Economics*, 9, 2/3, 33–59.

- Nussbaum, M. (2006) *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. (2011). *Creating Capabilities. The Human Development Approach*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- O'Neill, O. (1996) *Towards Justice and Virtue*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Parfit, D. (1984) *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pierik, R., and I. Robeyns (2007) "Resources versus Capabilities: Social Endowments in Egalitarian Theory," *Political Studies*, 55, 1, 133–52.
- Phillips, A. (2004) "Defending Equality of Outcome," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 12, 1, 1-19.
- Pogge, T. (2002) "Can the Capability Approach be Justified?" *Philosophical Topics*, 30, 2, 167–228.
- Rawls, J. (1971) *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, J. (2001) *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Robeyns, I. (2006) "Three models of education: rights, capabilities and human capital," *Theory and Research in Education*, 4(1), 69-84.
- Robeyns, I. (2009) "Justice as fairness and the capability approach," in: Kaushik Basu and Ravi Kanbur (eds.), *Arguments for a Better World. Essays for Amartya Sen's 75th Birthday*, Oxford University Press, pp. 397-413.

Robeyns, I. (2011) “The Capability Approach,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, online at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/capability-approach/>

Schokkaert, E., (2007) “Capabilities and Satisfaction with Life,” *Journal of Human Development*, 8, 3, 415–30.

Sen, A. (1980) “Equality of What?” in McMurrin (ed.), *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sen, A. (1992) *Inequality Re-examined*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sen, A. (1993) “Capability and Well-being,” in Nussbaum and Sen (eds.) *The Quality of Life*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sen, A. (2004) “Capabilities, Lists and Public Reasons: Continuing the Conversation,” *Feminist Economics* 10(3), 77-80.

Sen, A. (2009) *The Idea of Justice*, London: Allen Lane.

Vallentyne, P. (2005) “Debate: Capabilities versus Opportunities for Wellbeing,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 13, 359–71.

Wolff, J. and A. de-Shalit (2007) *Disadvantage*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bibliographical note

Ingrid Robeyns is a professor of practical philosophy at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her main area of research is normative political philosophy, especially theories of justice and normative questions regarding the economy, the family and development. She has also published widely on the capability approach.

Word count: 5,660