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Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined

by Ingrid Robeyns

Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2017, pp. 256, £14.95, ISBN 978-1-78374-421-3

The second half of the title of this new book by Ingrid Robeyns is really the informative part: its purpose is a thorough exposition of the capability approach. This exposition is both comprehensive enough to serve as an introductory textbook, and novel enough to represent a major contribution to the approach's on-going development. That the book can do both is a credit to its admirable clarity of structure and prose. I don't have much more to say about the textbook aspect: it is an excellent resource. Here I focus on Robeyns's theoretical contributions.

Most readers will be familiar with the capability approach introduced by Amartya Sen, pioneered by he and Martha Nussbaum, and developed through the work of many scholars, not least Robeyns herself. The approach begins from the claim that when considering normative questions of policy, action, or evaluation, the fundamental normatively relevant data is what individual people can actually do and the lives they can actually lead, rather than, say, the resources they hold or formal institutions they live under. This move has been enormously influential both as a philosophical-methodological stance and as a practical framework in international development.

In my view, Robeyns introduces two important innovations. The first is the distinction between *the* capability approach, and *a* capability theory. The second is, relatedly, a 'modular conception' of the capability approach.

The idea is this: there is one central capability approach, but potentially many developments of this into particular capability theories for different fields or purposes. *Using* the capability approach for a particular purpose means building a capability theory – which, Robeyns proposes, means selecting 'modules' from three groups.

The first is 'non-optional modules with non-optional content', the core theoretical commitments of the capability *approach* tout court. If a theory is to be a *capability* theory then it must commit to all of these modules; for example, 'functionings and capabilities as the evaluative space'.

The second group is 'non-optional modules with optional content'. Capability theories must take a stance on these, but which stance they take is not constrained. For instance, the recognition of 'human diversity' is a core motivation for the capability approach, but which account of human diversity is endorsed is open; perhaps categories like class or ethnicity are central, or perhaps diversity is more individually-grained.

The third group is 'contingent modules'. Capability theories may or may not consider these issues, and are not constrained in which stance they take. These include, for instance, 'methods for empirical analysis' and 'additional normative principles and concerns'.

This modular conception has much to recommend it, and other aspects that will strike some as worrisome.

The framework is clear, organised, and user-friendly. It also opens a way for the capability approach to be widely compatible with different purposes and even theoretical perspectives. This is so because some of what the theory-builder is permitted to choose within 'optional content' and 'contingent modules' is rather weighty, for example: overall purpose; account of agency; additional ontological and explanatory theories. This means the approach is not solely the preserve of particular ideological or theoretical stances. One could develop capability theories that are strongly Marxian, seeing individuals as grouped and their capabilities profoundly shaped by economic structure, or radically libertarian, emphasising choice and individual difference.

Herein, though, also lies a concern. A habitual worry of critical-minded scholars and practitioners has been that the capability approach may have a somewhat depoliticising tendency (Deneulin 2011; Gore, 2002). Its (seeming) individualism appears in tension with more radical approaches to injustice and inequality which typically emphasise the structural and group-relational nature of these ills (Elwood, Lawson, & Sheppard, 2017; Tilly, 1999; Young, 1990). As Robeyns notes (p. 183–189), the individualism worry is probably misconceived, stemming from a failure to appreciate the distinction between methodological and normative individualisms. However, I believe it nevertheless points towards the real problem. The capabilitarian's riposte to the individualism worry often flags Sen's notion of 'conversion factors'; that is, the idea (classified as a 'compulsory' module by Robeyns) that contextual or structural features of societies must be taken into account. But really this is the *source* of the worry: isn't it sometimes better not to simply 'take into account' structural features, analytically, and instead critique and challenge them, normatively? Which conversion factors should be taken as givens, and, conversely, which should be critically assessed as variables?

Put another way, what is the relationship between the capability approach and political progressivism, the idea of transformative change to institutions and structures? Robeyns would say this is a question for modules such as C1, 'Additional ontological and explanatory theories', and C4, 'Additional normative principles and concerns', and that it is valuable for the approach to be ideologically free-and-easy, rather than stifling debate. This is a fair point, especially in our current simplistically polarised political climate.

However, there is still a justifiable worry that this might represent a strategic risk, in a worldly sense, for the capability approach. The development industry is notoriously effective at turning usefully critical standpoints (as

capabilities has been) into platitudinous nonsense (Cornwall, 2007). If capabilities discourse became habitually utilised in rather conservative or reactionary interventions this could risk its longer-term credibility and value.

Perhaps that simply represents a challenge to be taken up by those who wish to see the capability approach used for politically progressive ends. But at the very least it places, it seems to me, enormous importance on modules C1 and C4, and possibly also calls for prior theory explicitly critically assessing which things should have the status of givens or variables in a particular context before a capabilities application is undertaken. By the same token, though, Robeyns's account may help us further understand how capabilities coherently combines with social-political critique – something that has been attempted in excellent existing work (for example Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007), but which would still benefit from further exploration.

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