The Capability Approach: An Interdisciplinary Introduction

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* This text was originally written for the Training Course preceding the 3rd International Conference on the Capability Approach, Pavia, Italy, on 6 September 2003. Please do not quote or reproduce without my permission. I would like to thank all those friends and colleagues who commented on earlier papers on which this text is based, and in particular Amartya Sen who taught me much about the capability approach during my doctoral research. I am also very grateful to the students and scholars who gave suggestions during and after the Pavia training course, and in particular Sabina Alkire for written comments on the first draft.

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PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The aim of this text is to offer an introduction to the capability approach. This is not as easy or straightforward as it might look, for at least 4 reasons.

1. The capability approach appeals to students and scholars across the disciplines. As a consequence, each of them reads the writings on the capability approach through her own disciplinary lens, and has different requirements of the approach. It is also a challenge to engage in cross-disciplinary dialogue, as some “facts” taken for granted by one discipline are questioned by another. While an Anglo-American political philosopher will want to investigate the robustness of the use of the term ‘freedom’ by Amartya Sen, the applied social scientist will not bother but instead worry about how the capability approach can be applied to study poverty or inequality. Similarly, a mainstream economist will wonder how the capability approach differs from axiomatic welfare economics, whereas the heterodox economist will instead be worried that the capability approach will not suffer from the criticisms that he has on the core of mainstream economics, such as exaggerated attention to formalism or oversimplified assumptions. Thus, whenever someone discusses, scrutinises or evaluates the capability approach, it could help to ask from which perspective she works, and what she hopes to find in the capability approach.

2. People interested in the capability approach not only include students and scholars, but also NGO-workers, citizens engaged in the civil society and public officials. Most theoretical writings on the capability approach require familiarity with abstract reasoning and an interest in theory and philosophy. While in academic circles it is absolutely legitimate to undertake all sorts of thought-experiments and theoretical reasoning that does not *immediately* result in action or policy, this is not always appreciated at the grassroots level. Different questions are asked by scholars, policy makers, activists and other societal agents, and the capability approach has as yet not responded to all these questions. Different questions are also asked by people working on issues related to the global South or North. While the capability approach can be applied or used both for the study of welfare states reform in affluent societies, and for development issues in ‘developing’ countries, it is of course quite a different issue that one is studying. At the same time, the

fact that the capability approach can be used for the study of global problems or problems both of poorer and richer societies, makes that we can hopefully foster more communication between people committed to both issues. We will have to negotiate these different kinds of languages, and different interests that students of the capability approach have when they come from academic, policy or activists backgrounds, and depending on their geographical location.

3. As far as the writings of Amartya Sen are concerned, it is important to note that Sen has developed his capability approach gradually, and in a sense organically, and has substantially refined it over the last two decades. Sen has not only published a number of books in which he developed the capability approach, but he also wrote a number of crucial articles in journals across different disciplines. I believe that given Sen's style and the way he developed his main ideas, a good understanding of the capability approach requires reading from the earliest until the most recent of Sen's work, and across different journals.

4. Unfortunately, there is as yet no handbook on the capability approach. Most of the (chapters of) books published are contributions to research rather than teaching. As far as I know, there is as yet no introductory overview article on the capability approach published in a book or journal. This means that for the Pavia Training course I had to write my own course material – which will no doubt reflect my own disciplinary background (trained as an economist but working at the crossroads of economic philosophy and political theory). In addition, there are a number of disagreements among scholars of the capability approach, hence this course material will inevitably reflect some of my own views (and biases) on this. I have tried to minimise biases, and when I feel that somewhere I am discussing an issue that is contested, I hope to have given both sides of the debate, albeit explaining if and when I believe one reasoning or view to be mistaken.

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Finally: if you have any comments, please e-mail me. If a similar course would be organised in the future, or if this text would be further developed into an introductory handbook, it would be most helpful to know which parts you find helpful or not helpful, or any other suggestions you might have. Thanks!

PART 1: UNDERSTANDING THE CAPABILITY APPROACH

1 Introduction: a first look at the capability approach

Let us start with a first look at the capability approach; the rest of Part 1 will then elaborate in more depth the different aspects touched upon in this section.

The capability approach is a broad normative framework for the evaluation of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies and proposals about social change in society. The capability approach is used in a wide range of fields, most prominently in development thinking, welfare economics, social policy and political philosophy. It can be used to evaluate a wide variety of aspects of people's well-being, such as individual well-being, inequality and poverty. It can also be used as an alternative evaluative tool for social cost-benefit analysis, or to design and evaluate policies, ranging from welfare state design in affluent societies, to development policies by governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in developing countries. In academia, it is being discussed in quite abstract and philosophical terms, but also used for applied and empirical studies. In development policy circles, it has provided the foundations of the human development paradigm (Fukuda-Parr 2003; Fukuda-Parr and Kumar 2003).

The core characteristic of the capability approach is its focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be, that is, on their capabilities. This contrasts with philosophical approaches that concentrate on people's happiness or desire-fulfilment, or on theoretical and practical approaches that concentrate on income, expenditures, consumption or basic needs fulfilment. A focus on people's capabilities in the choice of development policies makes a profound theoretical difference, and leads to quite different policies compared to neo-liberalism and utilitarian policy prescriptions.

Some aspects of the capability approach can be traced back to, among others, Aristotle, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx (see Nussbaum 1988; 2003b; Sen 1993; 1999), but the approach in its present form has been pioneered by the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen (Sen 1980; 1984; 1985b; 1985a; 1987; 1992; 1993; 1995; Drèze and Sen 2002), and more recently also been significantly developed by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1988; 1992; 1995; 2000; 2002a; 2003a). Sen argued that in social evaluations and policy design, the focus should be on what people are able to do and

be, on the quality of their life, and on removing obstacles in their lives so that they have more freedom to live the kind of life which, upon reflection, they find valuable:

> "The capability approach to a person's advantage is concerned with evaluating it in terms of his or her actual ability to achieve various valuable functionings as a part of living. The corresponding approach to social advantage –for aggregative appraisal as well as for the choice of institutions and policy – takes the set of individual capabilities as constituting an indispensable and central part of the relevant informational base of such evaluation" (Sen 1993: 30).

The capability approach has been advanced in somewhat different directions by Martha Nussbaum, who has used the capability approach as the foundation for a partial theory of justice. In this text we will take Sen's capability approach as our starting point, and discuss Nussbaum's work when it criticises, divers from, or adds to Sen's work. The reason for this is that Sen's version of the capability approach is the broader and more general framework in comparison to Nussbaum's, albeit she has done much more work on the approach in the last five to ten years. We will discuss their differences in some detail in section 8.

A key analytical distinction in the capability approach is that between the means and the ends of well-being and development. Only the ends have intrinsic importance, whereas means are only instrumental to reach the goal of increased well-being and development. However, both in reality and in Sen's more applied work, these distinctions often blur. The importance therefore lies especially at the analytical level – we always have to ask and be aware what kind of value things have, whether the value is instrumental or intrinsic, hence whether what they are considering is intrinsically or instrumentally important.

What are then, according to the capability approach, the ends of well-being and development? Well-being and development should be discussed in terms of people's capabilities to function, that is, on their effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities that they want to engage in, and be whom they want to be. These beings and doings, which Sen calls achieved functionings, together constitute what makes a life valuable. Functionings include working, resting, being literate, being healthy, being part of a community, being respected, and so forth. The distinction between achieved functionings and capabilities is between the realised and the effectively possible, in other words,

between achievements and freedoms. What is ultimately important is that people have the freedoms (capabilities) to lead the kind of lives they want to lead, to do what they want to do and be the person they want to be. Once they effectively have these freedoms, they can choose to act on those freedoms in line with their own ideas of the kind of life they want to live. For example, every person should have the opportunity to be part of a community and to practice a religion, but if someone prefers to be a hermit or an atheist, they should also have this option. Thus, the capability approach is clearly a theory within the liberal school of thought in philosophy, albeit arguably of a critical strand within philosophical liberalism. However, note that the word 'liberal' in political philosophy refers to a philosophical tradition which values individual autonomy and freedom (Kymlicka 2002; Swift 2001), and should not be confused with the word 'liberal' in daily life. In daily life 'liberal' has different political meanings in different countries, and can cover both the political right or left. In additional it is often used to refer to (neo-)liberal economic policies which prioritise free markets and privatisation of public companies such as water-suppliers or the railways. In contrast, philosophical liberalism is neither necessarily left or right, nor does it *a priori* advocate any social or economic policies.

The capability approach to well-being and development thus evaluates policies according to their impact on people's capabilities. It asks whether people are being healthy, and whether the resources necessary for this capability, such as clean water, access to medical doctors, protection from infections and diseases, and basic knowledge on health issues, are present. It asks whether people are well-nourished, and whether the conditions for this capability, such as sufficient food supplies and food entitlements, are met. It asks whether people have access to a high quality education, to real political participation, to community activities which support them to cope with struggles in daily life and which foster real friendships, to religions that console them and which can give them peace of mind. For some of these capabilities, the main input will be financial resources and economic production, but for others it can also be political practices, such as the effective guaranteeing and protection of freedom of thought, religion or political participation, or social or cultural practices, social structures, social institutions, public goods, social norms, traditions and habits. The capability approach thus covers the full terrain of human well-being. Development and well-being are regarded in a comprehensive and integrated

manner, and much attention is paid to the links between material, mental, spiritual and social well-being, or to the economic, social, political and cultural dimensions of life.

2 Amartya Sen's capability approach: an evaluative framework, not a fully specified theory

The first clarification that needs to be made is to ask whether the capability approach is a well-defined theory, or something broader, like a paradigm. In its most broad form, the capability approach can indeed be considered to be a paradigm. However, not everyone uses it as such. It could help to distinguish between three different levels at which the capability approach is operating:

1. As a framework of thought for the evaluation of individual advantage and social arrangements
2. As a critique of other approaches to the evaluation of well-being and justice
3. As a formula or algorithm to make interpersonal comparisons of welfare or well-being

The capability approach is primarily and mainly a framework of thought, a mode of thinking about normative issues, hence – loosely defined – a paradigm. Sen has stressed that the capability approach can be used for a wide range of purposes (Sen 1993). What does it mean to see the capability approach as a general framework of thought for the assessment of individual advantage and social arrangements? The capability approach focuses on the information that we need to make judgements about individual well-being, social policies, and so forth, and consequently rejects alternative approaches that it considers normatively inadequate, for example when an evaluation is done exclusively in monetary terms. The capability approach also identifies social constraints that influence and restrict both well-being as well as the evaluative exercises. The capability approach can be used to measure poverty or inequality, or can be used as an alternative for traditional utilitarian cost-benefit analysis. It is a perspective that can be applied to efficiency evaluations. It can serve as an important constituent for a theory of justice but, as Sen argues, the capability approach specifies an evaluative space and this does not amount to a theory of justice (Sen 1995). He stresses that a theory of justice must include

both aggregative considerations as well as distributive ones, whereas the capability approach does not specify an aggregative principle.

An important illustration of how the capability approach can be used as such a broad framework of analysis and evaluation, is Sen's own work with Jean Drèze on development in India (Drèze and Sen 2002), which will be briefly discussed in section 9.

At the second place of importance is the capability approach as a critique, mainly on the welfarist approaches in welfare economics and on utilitarian and income- or resources-based theories.

Sen rejects welfarist theories because, whatever their further specifications, they rely *exclusively* on utility and thus exclude non-utility information from our moral judgements (e.g. Sen 1979). Thus Sen is concerned not only with the information that is included in a normative evaluation, but he is as much concerned with the information that is excluded. The non-utility-information that is excluded by utilitarianism could be a person's physical needs due to handicaps, but also social or moral aspects, such as the principle that men and women should be paid the same wage for the same work. For a utilitarian, this principle has no intrinsic value, and men and women should not be paid the same wage as long as women are satisfied with lower wages. But it is counter-intuitive, Sen argues, that such principles would not be taken into account in our moral judgements. Thus the first strand of normative theories that Sen attacks are those that rely exclusively on mental states. This does not mean that Sen thinks that mental states, such as happiness, are unimportant and have no role to play; rather, it is the *exclusive* reliance on mental states which he criticises.

The capability approach entails also a critique (albeit often in very diplomatic wording) of how economists have applied the utilitarian framework for empirical analysis in welfare economics. Economists use utility as the focal variable in theoretical work, but translate this into a focus on income in their applied work. Sen has argued that, while income can be an important means to advantage, it can only serve as a rough proxy for what intrinsically matters, namely people's capabilities. He argues that "the informational bases of justice cannot be provided by comparisons of *means* to freedom (such as "primary goods", "resources" or "incomes")" (Sen 1990b).

While Sen has often acknowledged his debt to the philosopher John Rawls, he also criticises Rawls's concentration on primary goods, because it neglects the importance of the diversity of human beings. If all persons were the same, then an index of primary goods

would tend to yield similar freedoms for all; but given human diversity, the Rawlsian justice conception will fail to take note that different people need different amounts and different kinds of goods to reach the same levels of well-being or advantage. In a similar vein, Sen has criticised other resources-based normative theories, such as Ronald Dworkin's account of equality of resources (Sen 1984). More recently, Martha Nussbaum has significantly extended the capability critique on Rawls by not only focussing on the difference between primary goods and capabilities, but also examining the implications of the fact that Rawls's theory of justice belongs to the social contract tradition, whereas the capability approach does not (Nussbaum 2002a). However, Thomas Pogge (2002) recently has argued against the capability approach to justice, and in favour of a Rawlsian approach; it is clear that the debate on the pros and cons of Rawlsian justice versus capability justice is far from closed.

On a third, and least important level, is the capability approach as a formula for interpersonal comparisons of welfare. The focus here is on a *formula*, in the sense that the capability approach would provide a neat recipe or even an algorithm to carry out empirical exercises in welfare comparisons. Some economists have tried to read Sen's writings on the capability approach looking for such a formula or algorithm (e.g. Roemer 1996), and have consequently been disappointed when they discovered that this has not been Sen's primary focus. As I will argue below, some of the critiques and questions addressing the capability approach follow from an implicit assumption that the capability approach should be read on this third level. Once its three-level structure and the importance of each level are appreciated, most of these critiques either weaken considerably or evaporate. This is not to deny that the three levels are interconnected. At the level of being a framework of thought for the evaluation of individual advantage and social arrangements, the capability approach proposes to focus on functionings and capabilities. But this proposal could only be developed after Sen had analysed the shortcomings of the prevailing evaluative theories, such as welfarism and Rawlsian theories. And while at this first level the capability approach is very general and only delineates normative thinking, a more formula-like use of the capability approach can be necessary for quantitative empirical assessments of poverty and inequality. The three levels are connected, with the first being the most general, and the second and third more

specified and directed towards particular debates in the literature discussing people's well-being and advantage.

3 The core concepts: functionings and capabilities

The capability approach involves "concentration on freedoms to achieve in general and the capabilities to function in particular" (Sen 1995). The major constituents of the capability approach are *functionings* and *capabilities*.[1] Functionings are the "beings and doings" of a person, whereas a person's capability is "the various combinations of functionings that a person can achieve. Capability is thus a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another" (Sen 1992). A person's functionings and her capability are closely related but distinct.

> "A functioning is an achievement, whereas a capability is the ability to achieve. Functionings are, in a sense, more directly related to living conditions, since they *are* different aspects of living conditions. Capabilities, in contrast, are notions of freedom, in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead" (Sen 1987: 36).

The difference between functioning and capability can best be clarified with an example. Consider the following variation on Sen's classical illustration of two persons who both don't eat enough to enable the functioning of being well-nourished. The first person is a victim of a famine in Ethiopia, while the second person decided to go on a hunger strike in front of the Chinese embassy in Washington to protest against the occupation of Tibet. Although both persons lack the functioning of being well-nourished, the freedom they had to avoid being hungry is crucially distinct. To be able to make this distinction, we need the concept of capability, i.e. the functionings that a person *could* have achieved. While both hungry people lack the achieved functioning of being well-nourished and hunger-free, the protester in Washington has the capability to achieve this functioning which the Ethiopian person lacks.

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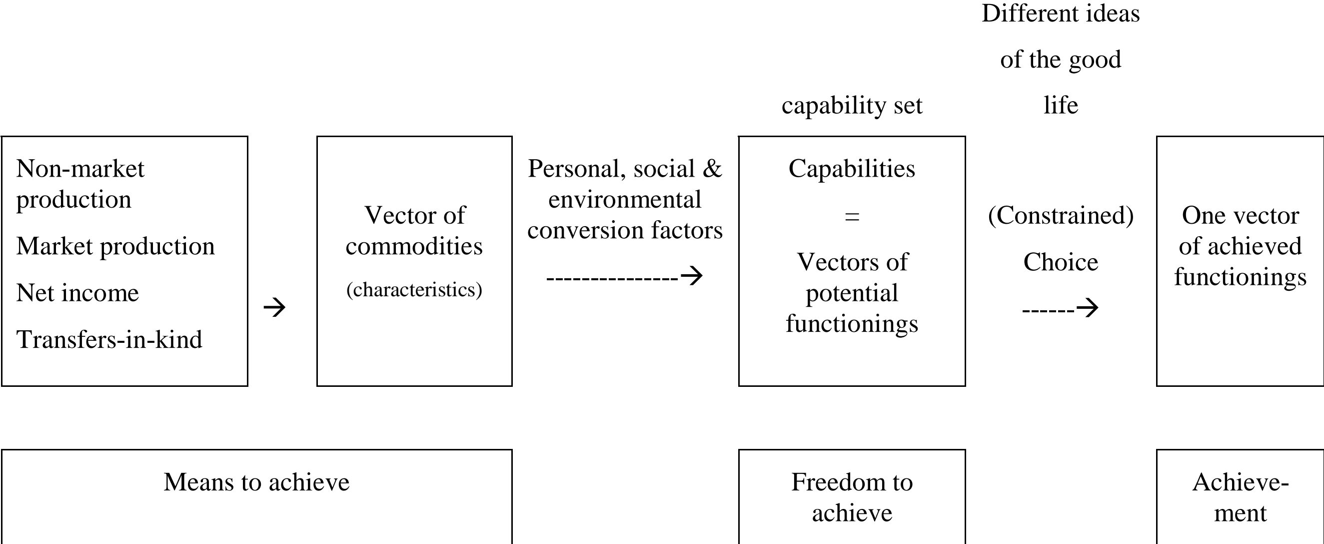
[1] Some scholars applying or criticising the capability approach have not sufficiently acknowledged this distinction. For example, in an otherwise excellent empirical study on poverty and deprivation, Stephan Klasen (2000) claims to measure capabilities while he is effectively measuring achieved functioning levels.

Another crucial distinction in the capability approach is the distinction between commodities (that is, goods and services) on the one hand and functionings on the other hand. The different constituents of the capability approach and the role that commodities have to play are perhaps best represented schematically:



Commodities are goods and services. They should not necessarily be thought of as exchangeable for income or money – as this would restrict the capability approach to analyses and measurement in market-based economies, which it does not intend. A commodity has certain characteristics, which makes it of interest to people. For example, we are not interested in a bike because it is an object made from certain materials with a specific shape and colour, but because it can bring us to places where we want to go, and in a faster way than if we were walking. These characteristics of a good enable a functioning. In our example, the bike enables the functioning of mobility, to be able to move oneself freely and more rapidly than walking.

However, the relation between the good and the functionings to achieve certain beings and doings is influenced by three *conversion factors*. Firstly, *personal characteristics* (e.g. metabolism, physical condition, sex, reading skills, intelligence) influence how a person can convert the characteristics of the commodity into a functioning. If a person is disabled, or in a bad physical condition, or has never learned to cycle, than the bike will be of limited help to enable the functioning of mobility. Secondly, *social characteristics* (e.g. public policies, social norms, discriminating practises, gender roles, societal hierarchies,

power relations) and *environmental characteristics* (e.g. climate, infrastructure, institutions, public goods) play a role in the conversion from characteristics of the good to the individual functioning. If there are no paved roads, or if a society imposes a social or legal norm that women are not allowed to cycle without being accompanied by a male family member, then it becomes much more difficult or even impossible to use the good to enable the functioning. Hence, knowing the goods a person owns or can use is not enough to know which functionings she can achieve; therefore we need to know much more about the person and the circumstances in which she is living.

The capability approach does not consider the functionings that a person has achieved as the ultimate normative measure. In principle, we are concerned with people's real freedoms, that is, with their capability to function, and not with her achieved functionings-levels. The functionings of a person are the set of things that she is and does in life, whereas the capability of that person is the alternative combination of functionings that this person can achieve and from which she can choose one vector of functionings. Capability is thus closely related to the idea of opportunity, but, as Sen warns, this should not be understood in the limited traditional sense, but more as a positive notion of overall freedom.

The basic idea is thus that we are concerned with people's capabilities, with their affective freedoms to be whom they want to be and do what they want to do. Let us now look at three theoretical refinements.

Firstly, a focus on functionings and capabilities does not have to imply that a capability analysis would not pay any attention to resources, or the evaluation of social institutions, economic growth, technical advancement, and so forth. Thus, while functionings and capabilities are of ultimate concern, other dimensions can be important as well. Indeed, in their evaluation if development in India, Drèze and Sen have stressed that working within the capability approach does in no way exclude the integration of an analysis of resources:

> "It should be clear that we have tended to judge development by the expansion of substantive human freedoms – not just by economic growth (for example, of the gross national product), or technical progress, or social modernization. This is not to deny, in any way, that advances in the latter fields can be very important, depending on circumstances, as 'instruments' for the enhancement of human freedom. But they have to

be appraised precisely in that light – in terms of their actual effectiveness in enriching the lives and liberties of people – rather than taking them to be valuable in themselves." (Drèze and Sen 2002: 3)

The second remark is that there are cases and situations where it makes much more sense to investigate people's achieved functionings directly, instead of evaluating their capabilities. For example, if we are focussing on the capability of bodily integrity, we will not be concerned with a boxer who deliberately puts his body at danger of being beaten up. He has the capability of not being attacked, but chooses to engages in violent fights. But as far as domestic violence is concerned, we will use the very plausible assumption that no-one wants to be beaten up by another person in the household, and therefore the achieved disfunctioning of bodily integrity due to domestic violence is a univocal sign that the victim didn't have the capability of being safe from bodily harm in the first place. Other examples where it makes more sense to focus on achieved functionings levels directly instead of capabilities are being well-nourished in areas fraught by hunger and famines, and all situations of extreme material and bodily deprivation in very poor societies or communities.

Finally, it is important to note that in real life, two people with identical capability sets are likely to end up with different types and levels of achieved functionings, as they have made different choices from their effective options. In philosophical terms, we could say that they have different ideas of the good life, that is, different desires and wishes on what kind of life they want to lead. As a liberal philosophical framework, the capability approach respects people's different ideas of the good life, and this is why capability, and not achieved functioning is the appropriate political goal. However, it is also clear that in real life, our ideas of the good life are profoundly moulded by our family, tribal, religious, community or cultural background. There are very few children from Christian parents who end up being Muslim, for example. One could question, therefore, to what extent this is a choice at all, and if we characterise it as a choice, it would still remain a constrained choice. This does not mean that these constraints always have to be negative or unjust; on the contrary, some people might find them very enabling and supporting. There is very little about these constraints that one could say in general terms, as they are so closely interwoven with a person's own history and thus with her personality, emotions, values,

desires and preferences. It is however important to question to what extent people have genuinely access to all the capabilities in their capability set, and whether or not they are punished by members of their family or community for making certain life-style choices.

Let us conclude this section with a small 'technical' note. It could be useful to pay attention to the different ways in which the word 'capability' has been used in the theoretical literature. In Sen's original terminology, a person has only one capability (or capability set), which consists of a combination of possible or reachable functionings. Functionings could therefore be either potential or achieved. This kind of language is most familiar to social choice scholars, where the focus of much analysis is the opportunity set. A person's capability is best thought to be the equivalent of a person's opportunity set. But many other scholars working in the capability paradigm, including Martha Nussbaum, have labelled these potential functionings 'capabilities'. In that terminology the capability set consists of a number of capabilities, in the same way as a person's overall freedom is made up by a number of more specific freedoms. One does not find this usage of capabilities (as being the individual elements of one person's capability set) in Sen's earlier writings, and in his later writings he uses both uses of the word capability interchangeably. The plural use of capabilities is widespread in the work of Sen's commentators and the scholars who apply the capability approach. The terminology as used by the broader group of scholars working on the capability approach seems to be more straightforward and less technical, but when reading Sen's (earlier) work it is important to know that the term 'capability' started with in a different definition.

4 Distinguishing well-being and agency, freedom and achievements

Another aspect of the capability approach is the distinction between well-being and agency goals, and the possibility of narrowing down the concept of well-being to the standard of living. The main differences between these concepts can be summarised as follows. The standard of living is "personal well-being related to one's own life." If we add the outcomes resulting from sympathies (i.e. from helping another person and thereby feeling oneself better off), we measure well-being. If well-being is supplemented with commitments (i.e. an action which is not beneficial to the agent herself), then we are focusing on overall agency (Sen 1987). Moreover, all of these concepts of advantage can

be further specified as being either achieved outcomes, or the freedom people have to achieve these outcomes, independent of whether they opt to achieve them or not. The distinction between achievements and freedoms is important for well-being and agency, but discussions on standard of living focus primarily on achievement levels.

The distinction between agency and well-being and between freedom and achievement can be clarified with an example. Suppose two sisters, Anna and Becca, live in peaceful village in England and have the same achieved well-being levels. Both of them believe that the power of global corporations is undermining democracy, and that governments should prioritise global justice and the fight against poverty in the South instead of taking care of the interests of global corporations. Anna decides to travel to an Italian town to demonstrate against the G8 meetings, while Becca stays home. At that moment Anna is using her agency freedom to voice some of her political concerns. However, the Italian police does not like the protesters and violates Anna's civil and political rights by beating her up in prison. Obviously Anna's achieved well-being has lowered considerably (as has her standard of living). Anna is offered to sign a piece of paper declaring that she committed violence organised by an extreme-left organisation (which will give her a criminal record and ban her from any further G8-demonstrations). If she does not sign, she will be kept in prison for a further unspecified time. At that moment, Anna has a (highly constrained) option to trade off her agency freedom for higher achieved well-being, which our heroine refuses. Becca had the same agency freedom to voice her concerns and protest against either the G8 itself or the way the Italian police officers abused their power, but chose not to do so. She is concerned about the hollowing of democracy, the protection of human rights and the fascist tendencies among some police officers, but does not want to sacrifice her well-being to achieve these agency goals.

Such an example shows that the distinctions that Sen makes are important because in evaluative exercises one has to ask whether the relevant dimension of advantage is the standard of living, achieved well-being, agency achievement, well-being freedom, or agency freedom. The central claim of the capability approach is that whatever concept of advantage one wants to consider, the informational base of this judgement must relate to the space of functionings and especially capabilities. Sen's claim is that well-being achievements should be measured in functionings, whereas well-being freedom is reflected by a person's capability set. A focus on agency will always transcend an analysis in terms

of functionings and capabilities and take agency goals into account. However, it is typical for Sen's work that he does not defend this as a closed theory or as a dogma: he will always allow for the fact that there can be good reasons to include other sources of information as well.

Note that the distinction between agency and well-being is absent from Nussbaum's account for the capability approach. Nussbaum argues that "all the important distinctions can be captured as aspects of the capability/functioning distinction" (Nussbaum 2000).

5 The importance of human diversity

One of the strengths of the capability approach is that it can account for interpersonal variations in conversion of the characteristics of the commodities into functionings. These interpersonal variations in conversion can be due to either personal or socio-environmental factors. This is of central importance to Sen:

> "Investigations of equality –theoretical as well as practical- that proceed with the assumption of antecedent uniformity (including the presumption that 'all men are created equal') thus miss out on a major aspect of the problem. Human diversity is no secondary complication (to be ignored, or to be introduced 'later on'); it is a fundamental aspect of our interest in equality" (Sen 1992: xi).

Indeed, if human beings would not be diverse, then inequality in one space, say income, would more or less be identical with inequality in another space, like capabilities.

The capability approach accounts for diversity in two ways: by its focus on functionings and capabilities as the evaluative space, and by the explicit role it assigns to personal and socio-environmental conversion factors of commodities into functionings. For a person who is working full time in a decent job, who is in good health and physical and psychological condition, and does not bear the responsibility of caring for children or frail elderly, income might reveal much of their well-being. But what does it tell us about an unemployed person, or a person suffering from emotional or psychological stress, or a care taker, or a dependent person? We need, therefore, to investigate inequality or poverty between very diverse people based on a *multidimensional distribuendum* that can account for non-financial and non-material elements. The capability approach offers this. However, this requires a radical shift away from the traditional welfarist evaluation in economics,

because, as Sen puts it, “these standard measures are all basically parasitic on the traditional concentration on the income space and ultimately ignoring the fundamental fact of human diversity and the foundational importance of human freedom” (Sen 1992: 101).

Secondly, the conversion of the characteristics of the commodities into functionings can also differ over individuals. Some of these differences will be individual, while others will be structural differences in society, related to gender, class, race, caste, and so on. Take the case of gender as an example. Gender discrimination is one of those factors influencing conversion, not only for income but for other commodities as well. Suppose a man and a woman have equal access to higher education and receive the same scholarship. Both eventually receive the same educational degree, and both want to use this degree to enable some functionings (like the functioning to lead an interesting life by means of one’s profession, the functioning to increase self-esteem, to secure financial autonomy, to be able to provide support for dependent others, to develop interesting social contacts, to live one’s professional ambitions, and so on). But since women are discriminated on the labour market, it will be more difficult for the woman to use her degree to enable all those functionings, compared with the man who has the same degree.[2] More generally, group-dependent constraints (e.g. prejudices, social norms, habits, traditions) can affect the conversion of the characteristics of the commodities into functionings. The capability approach thus acknowledges the normative importance of groups.

6 Capabilities, basic capabilities and general capabilities

The difference between capabilities and basic capabilities is intrinsically important, but it is also the source of a fair amount of conceptual confusion and contradictory readings of Sen’s work. Basic capabilities are a subset of all capabilities; they refer to the freedom to do some basic things that are necessary for survival and to avoid or escape poverty. The relevance of basic capabilities is “not so much in ranking living standards, but in deciding on a cut-off point for the purpose of assessing poverty and deprivation” (Sen 1987: 109) Hence, while the notion of capabilities refers to a very broad range, basic capabilities refer to the freedom to do some things that are necessary to keep one out of poverty. To quote

[2] For empirical evidence of discrimination of women on the labour market, see, among others, (Darity and Mason 1998; Goldin and Rouse 2000; Neumark, Bank, and Van Nort 1996; Neumark and McLennan 1995; Wennerås and Wold 1997).

Sen: “the term ‘basic capability’, used in Sen (1980), was intended to separate out the ability to satisfy certain crucially important functionings up to certain minimally adequate levels” (Sen 1993: 41). Basic capabilities will thus be crucial for poverty analysis and more in general for studying the well-being of the majority of people in developing countries, while in affluent countries well-being analysis would often focus on capabilities which are less necessary for physical survival.

As the capability approach could best be seen as a framework of thought, the relevance of either basic capabilities or all capabilities depends on the issue at hand. But it is important to acknowledge that the capability approach is not restricted to poverty and deprivation analysis, or development studies, but can also serve as a framework for, say, project or policy evaluations or inequality measurement in affluent communities. Despite this clear conceptual distinction between capabilities and basic capabilities, there has been some confusion over this terminology. I see four possible causes for this confusion.

First, in *Equality of What?*, his very first paper on the capability approach, Sen (1980) referred to basic capabilities while, I believe, his discussion was concerned with capabilities in general. The fact that the capability approach has been developed somewhat ‘organically’ implies that we should read the use of basic capabilities in that paper as a first step towards the development of the concept, and not as a statement by Sen that only basic capabilities matter.[3]

A second source of confusion comes from the fact that Sen's writings on development often refers to basic capabilities. However, this should not be read as if only basic capabilities matter, but that in the context of development information on basic capabilities is often sufficient to answer many questions.

Thirdly, Martha Nussbaum also uses the term ‘basic capabilities’, but ‘basic’ for Nussbaum is not the same as ‘basic’ for Sen, nor are their uses of the notion of capabilities identical.[4] For example, Nussbaum defines basic capabilities as follows:

> “First, there are basic capabilities: the innate equipment of individuals that is the necessary basis for developing the more advanced capabilities and a ground of moral

[3] Sen has acknowledged his own slight shift in terminology and stresses that “it is important to recognise that the use of the capability approach is not confined to basic capabilities only” (Sen 1993: 41).

[4] Sen warned against the confusion which could arise from the different usage which Nussbaum and himself adopt for the notion basic capability (Sen 1993: 41, fn 32).

concern. These capabilities are sometimes more or less ready to function: the capability for seeing and hearing is usually like this. More often, however, they are very rudimentary, and cannot be directly converted into functioning. A newborn child has, in this sense, the capability for speech and language, a capability for love and gratitude, the capability for practical reason, the capacity for work" (Nussbaum 2000: 84).

In short, for Nussbaum basic capabilities are more defined like natural and innate capacities, or talents, and have little to do with the cut off point for poverty or deprivation analysis.

Fourthly, Bernard Williams has used the notion basic capability in yet another meaning. Williams has argued that it is important to distinguish between the capability to choose yet another new brand of washing powder from, say, Adam Smith's often referred to capability to appear in public without shame. Williams rightly notes that "what you need, in order to appear without shame in public, differs depending on where you are, but there is an invariant capability here, namely that of appearing in public without shame. This underlying capability is more basic" (Williams 1987: 101). I agree with the need for the distinction that Williams makes, but I would rather call these underlying capabilities the *general capabilities*, so as to avoid confusion with Sen's use of basic capabilities.[5] These general capabilities are the deeper, foundational, generic, fundamental, aggregated (not over persons but over different capabilities in one person) capabilities. Interestingly enough, several empirical applications of the capability approach *use* the concept of general capabilities, without using this terminology or conceptually acknowledging this distinction. Based on these empirical studies, we could think of general capabilities as including the following: being sheltered and living in a pleasant and safe environment; health and physiological well-being; education and knowledge; social relations and interactions; emotional and psychological well-being; safety and bodily integrity. The issue of general capabilities relates closely to the question whether Sen should endorse a list of capabilities, which will be discussed below.

[5] This notion of general capabilities comes close to Nussbaum's 'central human functional capabilities'. This more general level of capabilities has also been discussed by Alkire and Black (1997). One could also call these general capabilities 'fundamental capabilities' (Robeyns 2000), but given the consistent and clear use of 'general capabilities' by Alkire (2002b), I would suggest that we follow this terminology.

Some of these empirical studies also include a kind of financial functioning. While having financial means is not a functionings in itself, an index of financial security is used as an approximation of functionings that have intrinsic value. It is understandable that some quantitative empirical applications are forced to include financial variables due to data restrictions, but we should keep in mind that in the capability approach financial means and possibilities can only be a proxy for the functionings and capabilities that really matter. Money only matters instrumentally in the capability approach, in so far as it can help us secure and develop functionings and capabilities. I therefore believe that financial functionings or capabilities should not be included in a list of general functionings or capabilities – which does not preclude that money can be an important means for many intrinsically important capabilities.

7 Is the capability approach an opportunity or an outcome-based theory?

In this section we will focus on one core question in political philosophy and in the interdisciplinary debates on distributive justice and equality. From the discussion so far, it is clear that the capability approach attaches great importance to personal choice. This makes the theory belong to the class of "opportunity-based" theories instead of "outcome-based" theories. In principle, it allows for a notion of responsibility to be introduced: if you are able-bodied and there is a job on offer for you (implying the individual and social conversion of the characteristics of the commodities runs smoothly), then having a job and earning money (enabling functionings like self-worth, increased human capital, being part of social networks,….) is an opportunity. Not taking the job would mean those functionings will not (to the same degree) be achieved, but these functionings were part of your capability set, hence the opportunity to take it was present. However, in striking contrast to the mainstream of Anglo-American political philosophy, Sen has paid very little attention to the issue of personal responsibility.

Does the fact that the capability approach is an opportunity based theory imply that it can handle the problems of expensive tastes and cheap tastes - two famous problems in the liberal egalitarian literature?[6] An expensive taste is a taste or a preference that requires a

[6] For a clear discussion of the expensive taste problem in the context of egalitarian theories, see (Cohen 1993: 10-16).

large amount of resources to satisfy this taste or preference. Examples from the real world can be the preference to wear expensive cloths or own a luxury car. Resources could in this context be financial resources, but also other resources such as time or access to jobs. Cheap tastes are exactly the opposite: a person with cheap tastes can reach a level of mental satisfaction with small amounts of resources. Classical examples in the literature are a poor peasant who is satisfied with very limited material resources, or a housewife who has very few opportunities but does not complain.

If a welfarist theory would equalise resources, this would lead to a lower level of well-being for the person with expensive tastes. Thus, if we want to equalise well-being in terms of utility or mental satisfaction, we have to give the person with expensive tastes more resources - which is counter-intuitive and seems unfair to most people.

Can the capability approach solve this problem? There is no straightforward answer to this question. Generally speaking, insofar as an amount of resources leads to similar levels of capabilities, but lower levels of utility for the person with expensive tastes, this will not bother the capability egalitarian. A problem arises in the fact that some functionings, such as enjoying social status or psychological well-being, might be preference-dependent. Hence, a snobbish upper class man might 'need' an expensive car in order to earn respect from his peers, while an alternative environmentalist needs only a bike. Similarly, business consultants need relatively expensive clothes to work, while most academics or social workers can do their job in relatively cheap clothes, in order to have the functioning of not having to be ashamed when appearing on the work floor. Thus, it seems that the capability approach can handle the expensive taste problem only in so far as the expensive taste cannot be justified by environment-dependant functionings, but the difficult question remains in how far expensive tastes can be justified and should be respected when they impinge upon functionings and capabilities.

The problem of cheap tastes is similar: if a person with low capability well-being is contented with her situation and requires only low levels of resources to reach high utility levels, then the capability approach will assess her capability level, and disregard her utility level. But while some functionings (such as mortality or morbidity) are purely objective, the same problem of evaluation remains for those functionings which are influenced by, or a function of, societal factors such as norms regarding social status. In short, the problem of expensive and cheap tastes will remain to be addressed for those

functionings which have a subjective component; in other words, when the evaluation of the well-being of the person is dependent upon her preferences which might have been shaped by societal processes.

There is another difficulty with respect to the fact that the capability approach is an opportunity based theory. It concerns the question of how to measure opportunities instead of outcomes. There are a number of reasons why it is much more difficult to measure the capability of a person rather than her realised functionings. The first reason is quite obvious: achieved functionings are (at least indirectly) observable, whereas the person's capability would also include all the opportunities this person had but did choose not to take – counterfactuals and therefore unobservable. The second reason is that whereas the achieved functionings are a vector of beings and doings, the capability set contains *potential* beings and doings, where it is not obvious how this set should be measured let alone be evaluated. Thirdly, the transition from achieved functionings to capabilities involves the process of choice, and I will argue below that the choice process itself should be evaluated if we want to use the capability approach to judge individual advantage or social arrangements. For all these reasons, almost all the empirical applications are limited to the measurement of achieved functionings. They will be discussed in section 9 below.

8 Sen versus Nussbaum's capability approaches: some core differences

Amartya Sen has provided the framework for the capability approach largely in the 1980s and 1990s. In the last couple of years, however, most new work on the capability approach has been done by other scholars. There are many scholars in different fields working on the capability approach these days, but without doubt the most widely known, and the most productive is the philosopher Martha Nussbaum. If one considers the wide spectrum of normative social frameworks Sen's and Nussbaum's approaches are very closely related, and are allies in their opposition to and critique of theories such as utilitarianism. It should thus always be kept in mind that within the range of possible theories, both thinkers have presented different versions of the capability approach and thus are sharing some fundamental views and ideas. However, Nussbaum and Sen also differ on a number of issues, and therefore some critiques that can be made of Sen cannot be made of Nussbaum,

and vice versa. In this section I want to briefly point out some differences between Sen's capability approach and Nussbaum's capabilities approach.[7]

First and in my view most importantly, Nussbaum and Sen have different goals with their work on capabilities, and have also different personal intellectual histories in which their work needs to be situated. Nussbaum aims to develop a partial theory of justice, by arguing for the political principles that should underlie a constitution. Thus, Nussbaum enters the capability approach from a perspective of moral-legal-political philosophy with the specific aim to argue for political principles that a government should guarantee all its citizens through its constitution. To perform this task, Nussbaum develops and argues for a well-defined but general list of 'central human capabilities' that should be incorporated in all constitutions. As such, her work on the capability approach is universalistic, as she believes all governments should endorse these capabilities.

Sen, on the other hand, clearly didn't have such a clear aim when he started to work on the capability approach. On the one hand, he was interested in the "equality of what?' question in the liberal-egalitarian literature, and argued that there are good reasons to focus on capabilities instead of resources or utility (Sen 1980). On the other hand, Sen was doing some much more applied work on poverty and destitution in developing countries, in which he found some 'empirical support' for a focus on what people can do and be instead of the measures that were more dominant in development economics in the early 1980s (e.g. Kynch and Sen 1983; Sen 1985a; 1988). Finally, Sen was also working in social choice, the field which launched his academic career, and in this field axiomatic reasoning is the common language, that is, formal, mathematical reasoning, without too much distraction of the fleshing out of empirical details.

The upshot of these different "histories" is that Sen's work on the capability approach is closer to economic reasoning than Nussbaum's and more attuned to quantitative empirical applications and measurement. It lies closer to those fields and paradigms that are characterised by parsimonious, formal, non-narrative, and axiomatic modelling. Nussbaum's work, on the other hand, is much closer to traditions in the humanities, such as narrative approaches. Her work engages more with the power of narratives and poetic texts to better understand people's hopes, desires, aspirations, motivations and decisions.

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[7] See also (Crocker 1992; 1995) and (Gasper 1997; 2002).

How do those differences translate in the kind of capability approach that Nussbaum and Sen have developed? Firstly, whereas in Sen's work the notion of capabilities is primarily that of a real or effective opportunity (– here one sees the link with social choice–), in Nussbaum's notion of capability there is more attention to people's skills and personality traits as aspects of capabilities. Some scholars therefore favour Nussbaum's approach over Sen's, because it would have more attention to thoughts and emotions, and meaning and action. For example, Des Gasper and Irene van Staveren argue that Nussbaum's approach has more potential to understand actions, meanings and motivations (Gasper and van Staveren 2003).

Second, with her focus on the design of a just constitution, Nussbaum proposes a list of ten central human capabilities: 1. Life; 2. Bodily health; 3. Bodily integrity; 4. Senses, imagination and thought; 5. Emotions; 6. Practical reason; 7. Affiliation; 8. Other species; 9. Play; 10. Control over one's environment. Nussbaum has specified this list in more detail in several of her recent publications (Nussbaum 2000; 2002a; 2002b; 2003a). The list is always open for revision, hence one needs to look at the most recent version of her list. In addition, Nussbaum argues that if Sen's capability approach wants to have any bite with respect to justice, he too will have to endorse such a list. However, Sen has always refused to endorse one specific well-defined list of capabilities. This is currently an issue of much dispute in the capability literature, and will therefore be discussed in Part 2.

Thirdly, Nussbaum clearly sees her work on capabilities as providing citizens with a justification and arguments for "central constitutional principles that citizens have a right to demand from their government" (Nussbaum 2003a). Sen's capability approach, in contrast, need not be so focussed on claims on the government, due to its wider scope. Indeed, one can discuss inequality in capabilities without necessarily knowing how these inequalities can be rectified, or without assuming that all redistribution and rectification has to be done by the government. Nussbaum has been criticised for her belief in a benevolent government, especially from authors who are more situated in the traditions of post-structuralism, post-colonialism, post-modernism and critical theory (e.g. Menon 2002). In liberal Anglo-American political philosophy, it is commonplace to discuss issues of social and distributive justice in terms of what the government's responsibilities are to do justice, but in other paradigms there is no such a focus, or perhaps even a belief, in the actions of government.

Fourth and finally, as indicated earlier, Nussbaum does not endorse the agency-well-being distinction that Sen advocates. To my knowledge, there has not been much discussion in the literature on whether that distinction is crucial or not, but some criticisms on Nussbaum's approach point at a lack of attention to agency in her work (see below). However, Nussbaum has argued that practical reason has an architectonic role in her approach, and practical reason has a role that goes beyond its direct contribution to well-being. Thus, the exercise of practical reason is probably a main site of agency in Nussbaum's approach, but it remains to be further explored how the concepts of agency differ in Sen's and Nussbaum's work.

9 Empirical applications: an updated annotated survey

Finally, to conclude the first part in which the capability approach is explained, let's have a look at the empirical applications that have been done based on the capability approach. I will list the studies chronologically, thereby updating an earlier annotated bibliography (Robeyns 2000), and then draw some general conclusions.[8]

The two first applications were made by Sen himself, and were meant to illustrate the basic principles and ideas behind the capability approach. The first application (Sen 1985a: 46-51), using data from 1980 to 1982, showed that while the (roughly equivalent) GNP per capita of Brazil and Mexico are more than 7 times the (roughly equivalent) GNP per capita of India, China and Sri Lanka, performances in life expectancy, infant mortality and child death rates were best in Sri Lanka, and better in China compared to India and Mexico compared to Brazil. Another finding was that India performed badly regarding basic education but had considerably higher tertiary education rates than China and Sri Lanka. Thus Sen concluded that the public policy of China and especially Sri Lanka towards distributing food, public health measures, medical services and school education have led to their remarkable achievements in the capabilities of survival and education. What did this application teach us on the capability approach? First, ranking of countries based on GNP per capita is quite different from a ranking based on the selected functionings. Second, growth in GNP per capita should not be equated with growth in living standards.

[8] This overview is updated with studies published until August 2003. While it aims to be as complete as possible, there is no way to guarantee that all empirical studies are included, and I would very much welcome any suggestions on other empirical studies that are overlooked in this survey.

Sen's second application (Sen 1985a: 52-69) examined sex bias in India. It showed that there is some evidence of gender differences in the perception bias of one's health condition. Moreover, females have worse achievements than males for a number of functionings, like age-specific mortality rates, malnutrition and morbidity.

This kind of quantitative applications based on aggregated data has become widespread, especially in development studies. The most famous one is undoubtedly the concept of human development, which has its theoretical basis in the capability approach (Fukuda-Parr 2003; Fukuda-Parr and Kumar 2003), and which has resulted in the construction of a number of indices: e.g. human development index (HDI) (1990), human freedom index (1991), gender-disparity-adjusted HDI (1993), income-distribution-adjusted HDI (1993), gender related development index (1995), gender empowerment measure (1995) and human poverty index (1997) (UNDP 1990-2003). The functionings that are incorporated in these indices are life expectancy at birth, education (measured by adult literacy and educational enrolment rates) and adjusted real GDP per capita which is taken as a proxy for a number of functionings with material preconditions, such as being sheltered and well-fed. These indexes clearly show that GDP/capita is an imperfect indicator of human development and that the ranking of countries according to GDP-based indicators and the human development indicators are different. Although using just a few functionings and perhaps in a somewhat crude way, it is probably the application which has had the largest impact on policy making. Perhaps this is one of the best illustration of the *usefulness* of the capability approach.

Ellman (1994) studied the sharp decline in living standards after the collapse of the USSR and argued that there were severe negative effects on mortality and morbidity over the period 1987-1993, which a welfare analysis concentrating on price, income and consumption data did not capture. He concluded that his study "more generally supports the usefulness of the capability approach to the measurement of welfare" (Ellman 1994: 353).

Slottje (1991) used 20 indicators to compute a well-being index for 126 countries. His study showed that "world rankings of the quality of life index vary as we summarize the information from several economic well-being indicators into one summary index" (1991: 685). Despite his explicit reference to Sen's (1985a; 1987)work, his application only loosely follows the capability framework, as some indicators clearly measure capabilities

(e.g. political rights and civil liberty) while some represent functionings (e.g. life expectancy) and others are commodities (e.g. telephones per capita).

Balestrino and Sciclone (2001) tested the strength of the correlation between income and functionings on a regional comparison of well-being in Italy. Their study showed that the functionings-based ranking and income based rankings are strongly positively correlated, though the rankings are not identical (it differs for 7 out of 20 regions).

Another group of quantitative applications used micro-data. Schokkaert and Van Ootegem (1990), who were the first to operationalise the capability approach using micro-data, applied the capability approach on 1979 data on the Belgian unemployed. They showed that material factors are almost irrelevant in the determination of the well-being of the unemployed, thus providing support for a broad concept of well-being. For a number of functionings, the size of the income loss, gender, age and family composition matter. Hence, their analysis suggests that the use of non-financial policy instruments targeted at specific groups might be helpful.

Balestrino (1996) analysed whether a sample of officially poor people are functioning poor, income poor or both. Out of the 281 Italian households in his sample, 73 households are pure functioning poor (i.e. education, nutrition or health failure), 71 are pure income poor and 137 are both. The analysis suggests that a sizeable share of the poor in affluent societies is actually not income poor. A policy conclusion which can be drawn from this study is that for pure functioning poor, in-kind transfers would be more effective to fight poverty than cash transfers.

Ruggeri Laderchi (1997) tested on 1992 Chilean data to what extent an income indicator can capture some of the most essential functionings (education, health and child nutrition). She concluded that the income variable appears an insignificant determinant for shortfall in the three selected functionings. Hence, poverty analysis is highly conditional on the indicators chosen and thus “the approach should be kept as broad as possible in order to capture more fully the multidimensional mature of such a complex phenomenon” (1997: 345).

Brandolini and D’Alessio (1998) used the Bank of Italy’s 1995 household survey covering 6 functionings (health, education, employment, housing, social relationships and economic resources). Despite data limitations the exercise provides an interesting picture of the distribution of functionings achievements and deprivation. They also investigated

and discussed a number of techniques which can be used, like sequential dominance analysis and multidimensional poverty indexes.

Phipps (1999) made a comparison of the well-being of children aged 0-11 in Canada, Norway and the USA, using equivalent household incomes and ten quite specific functionings (low birth weight, asthma, accidents, activity limitation, trouble concentrating, disobedience at school, bullying, anxiety, lying, hyperactivity). Her study had two main findings. First, the Canadian and USA distributions of functionings can not be ranked, but the Canadian children with incomes in the bottom quintile are better of than the American children. Second, while average incomes are similar in the three countries, Norwegian children are better of in terms of the 10 functionings than the Canadian. This study thus showed, once more, that measurement of functionings and incomes give complementary information; the respective rankings are not the same.

Chiappero-Martinetti (2000) used the 1994 Italian household survey to further the methodological development of the fuzzy set theory to measure well-being in the functionings and capabilities space (Chiappero Martinetti 1994). Her study measured 5 functionings (health, education, knowledge, social interaction and psychological conditions), at three levels of aggregation. Women, elderly (especially if they live alone), people living in the South of Italy, housewives and blue-collar workers have lower functionings achievements, no matter how the overall well-being has been determined. Chiappero-Martinetti's study also shows that aggregation is not necessary for many questions that we would like to address. Moreover, aggregation can obscure the human diversity. Depending on the questions asked, other levels of aggregation will be more appropriate, hence there is a strong case to present the analysis at different levels of aggregation, as Chiappero-Martinetti did.

Klasen (2000) measured and compared expenditure poverty and functionings poverty in South Africa. Klasen made a very detailed analysis of 14 functionings (education, income, wealth, housing, water, sanitation, energy, employment, transport, financial services, nutrition, health care, safety, perceived well-being) and constructed an aggregated index. On the aggregated level, the expenditure poverty measure is among the best proxies for the functionings-index, but not equally well for all quintiles; but, as Klasen argues, it is not more difficult to construct the functionings index than measure expenditures levels. Also, some groups are much deeper functionings-deprived than suggested by the expenditure

measurement, and 17% of the functionings deprived are not identified by the expenditure measure.

Mozaffar Qizilbash (2002b) used fuzzy set theoretic measures to rank South-African provinces in terms of financial and human poverty, whereby the latter contained some capability-like dimensions, and some resources that served as proxies for capabilities. Qizilbash showed that the ranking change considerably depending on whether one focuses on household expenditures or on the capability-related multidimensional poverty measure and concluded that "we can say unambiguously that the picture we get from looking at household expenditures alone can be highly misleading" (Qizilbash 2002b: 768).

A major recent book on the capability approach is Sabina Alkire's (2002b) *Valuing Freedoms: Sen's capability approach and poverty reduction.* Part II of *Valuing Freedoms* consists of one specific empirical application of the capability approach: a capability evaluation of three Oxfam projects in Pakistan. The first question to address is how a capabilities-based cost-benefit analysis could be conducted (chapter 6). How can non-economic capabilities be taken into account in such evaluations? Alkire first discusses two existing participatory methodologies (Rabel Burdge's social impact assessment and the World Bank's social assessment methodologies) to account for those non-economic dimensions, but refutes them on two grounds. They both lack a systematic method for identifying the changes that are valued by the involved actors themselves, and they lack a method to give the decision control to the lowest level capable of making this decision. She then presents her own method to account for non-economic capabilities, which she applied during her fieldwork in Pakistan. Chapter 7 contains the results from this fieldwork. Alkire presents a "capabilities cost-benefit analysis" of three poverty reduction projects: goat rearing, female literacy classes, and rose garland production. The goat rearing activity is a sound economic investment, although the internal rate of return depends substantially on the choice of women's shadow wages. In addition, there were a number of largely *non-quantifiable* effects, like the acquisition of useful knowledge, cultivation of friendships amongst each other, etc. Whereas for the goat rearing project the evaluation of the economic and intangible social effects go in the same direction, the female literacy project is a prime example of a project that would no longer be funded if it were evaluated *only* based on a traditional cost-benefit analysis. Because markets for female employment are effectively missing in the area of the literacy project, there is hardly any effect on women's

earnings. However, “it had a fundamental and transformative impact on the women students” (p. 256), which a purely economic analysis that only takes the quantifiable dimensions into account, would miss out. These intangible changes include that women learn that they are equal to men, that they do not need to suffer abuse, that literate women can solve their own problems, that they learn how to read, and their experience of great satisfaction at being able to study. A similar relation between a negative internal rate of return on the one hand, and a number of important non-economic benefits on the other holds for the rose cultivation project. In pure economic terms, a comparison of these three projects would clearly conclude that the goat-rearing project dominates the literacy and rose cultivation projects. However, the literacy classes had the strongest impact on knowledge and empowerment. Thus, from a capability perspective no project clearly dominates the other. As a consequence, “the choice cannot be made on technical grounds but rather is a morally significant choice” (p. 286). The capabilities evaluation becomes *vaguer* and *less precise*, because it includes those dimensions that cannot be quantified but that obviously are important and that can lead to different overall judgments. In other words, Alkire’s case study makes the point that a capability evaluation *does* lead to different normative conclusions than those drawn in standard economic evaluations.

Finally, in my own applied/empirical research (Robeyns 2002; 2003b), I have tried to assess gender inequality in Western societies in terms of functionings and capabilities. On the one hand, I used the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) to make a quantitative empirical application. However, while the BHPS is probably one of the richest household surveys available, many relevant dimensions could not be covered in quantitative terms. This assessment of gender inequality revealed a much greater ambiguity then is generally assumed by those who either claim that women are univocally disadvantaged compared to men, or by those who claim that there are no relevant inequalities left. While women are indeed disadvantaged on more dimensions than men, there are strong indications than men have worse social relations than women, and for many capabilities the results are inconclusive. On the methodological front, the study clearly showed the limitations of a assessment that is *only* based on a quantitative assessment of existing surveys. Even if we would collect data specifically focusing on capabilities, it is far from clear that all relevant information can be captured with one large-scale survey, as some information might need different data collection techniques (e.g. in-depth interviews, ethnographic methods, etc.)

All studies discussed so far share a similar approach, in the sense that they use a dataset to measure functionings level, either to measure poverty or inequality. However, there are some studies that are different, in the sense that they do not measure and assess poverty and inequality in a *quantitative* way. Jasek-Rysdahl discusses a community project in a destitute area in California, which wants to strengthen the community and improve the quality of life for its residents, by making an inventory of the inhabitants capabilities through so-called 'asset mapping' (Jasek-Rysdahl 2001). Capabilities are in this context understood as the talents, the abilities and the potential of the individuals of this community. Thus, the focus shifts from what external experts can deliver to this community to what those people can do themselves to improve the quality of their lives. The asset mapping consists of a door-to-door survey where people are asked about their capabilities and what they would like to do, and whether they would be willing to use their capabilities to help others. As Jasek-Rysdahl points out, the sole matter of *asking* people this question already makes them much more aware of the degree in which they themselves can be agents of change and improve the quality of their lives and of their neighbours. For example, multi-lingual residents could help others who do not understand English with their language skills, while residents with construction skills could improve the housing and living conditions of neighbours.

A very elaborate study that used the capability approach as its theoretical spine is the earlier mentioned evaluation of India by Drèze and Sen (2002). Their analysis of India's recent development achievements focussed on a number of (missing) capabilities and the goods, institutions and practices needed to enable them, which were each analysed at length: education, health, hunger, political participation, reproductive health, violence and the effects on human well-being of nuclear threats, among others. Drèze and Sen did not limit their analysis to the collection and presentation of the available statistics and data, but provided a critical discussion of the opportunities and well-being of groups and individuals in India, based on these quantitative data and a wide range of other resources, including political and social events.

A final study that should be mentioned is Clark (2002). David Clark did not assess well-being or social arrangements as such, but surveyed the inhabitants of two deprived South-

African communities to find out which capabilities they reported to be valuable.[9] Clark also discussed what different sorts of capabilities a particular commodity generates for a particular group, and how this related to mental satisfactions.

Which conclusions can we draw from this list? First, despite the fact that Sen published *Commodities and Capabilities* in 1985, the number of empirical applications is still quite limited. At the same time most of them are published in national journals or minor international journals. It makes one wonder whether these applications are really much more difficult to make than standard poverty and inequality analyses (and e.g. data sets are lacking), or why perhaps welfare economists in general are not more interested in taking up this line of research, and whether the fact that the 'comparative advantage' of the capability approach is informational richness and not formal sophistication has anything to do with this.

Second, in my reading none of the applications were using surveys which were specifically constructed to measure functionings; we are, thus, still working with second-best surveys and the current applications are likely to be limited by possible construction biases in the available data. It would be interesting to see the results which an analysis on surveys specifically designed to measure functionings would give.

Third, despite the fact that the applications are limited in number, together they offer a lot of interesting techniques which can be applied. Much more work needs to be done to investigate the strength and weaknesses of different techniques. One option is to analyse the functionings-well being based on one household survey with different methods and analyse to what extent the choice of the techniques determines the results. Sarah Lelli (Lelli 2001) did such an empirical test for on the Panel Study of Belgian Households, and found that an analysis with fuzzy sets or factor analysis makes little difference if the same variables are selected. Of course, an empirical test does not equal a mathematical proof, and in increased participation by econometricians in this field could bring new techniques under the spotlights (see e.g. Kuklys 2003).

Fourth, empirical applications should not be reduced to *quantitative* applications, nor to well-being measurement. Both Nussbaum's (2000) narrative account on Indian women as

[9] For a critical review of Clark's book, see (Robeyns 2003a).

well as Jasek-Rysdahl's (2001) description of capability asset mapping are illustrations of enlightening, creative and insightful applications outside quantitative measurement.

In conclusion, both the theoretical arguments as well as the described empirical applications show that it has proven unfounded to conclude that the capability approach is not operational. However, we should note that the existing quantitative applications are largely descriptive (e.g. by conceptualising and measuring poverty or inequality in terms of functionings rather than using functionings and capabilities in explanatory research which tries to explain e.g. functionings-poverty). It remains an open question how successful more theoretical and formal models based on the capability approach will be, e.g. models which predict the effects of policy changes on people's capabilities.

PART 2: INTERPRETATIONS, CRITIQUES AND DEBATES

In this second part, we will look in some depth at 4 main debates in the capability approach: the selection of capabilities, that is, the question of what capabilities should be on a list of relevant capabilities (section 1), the dispute around whether or not the capability approach is too individualistic (section 2), the discussion about the critical or conservative nature of the capability approach, and related to that, the treatment of choice and power (section 3), and finally, the question whether the capability approach will encourage paternalism and inappropriate policies (section 4).

1 A theoretical problem: how to select the capabilities?

So far we have noted that the capability approach replaces the traditional concern with either resources or utilities (in theory) or income (in empirical analysis and applied studies) by a more intrinsic concern with what people manage to do and to be. However, there are innumerable functionings which can be taken into account to provide a picture of people's well-being. Any applied normative analysis will thus be confronted with the selection of the relevant functionings (at the abstract ideal philosophical level one can of course argue that all valuable capabilities matter and should be taken into account, but this is no option for second-best theorizing or for applications).

There are several problems related to the selection of capabilities, that is, the drawing up of the list. Firstly, there is the question whether we need one well-defined list of capabilities. Secondly, if a procedural approach is followed, there is the risk that some biases will creep into the selection. Finally, if we choose not to endorse one well-defined list for all uses of the capability approach, we need to know how to select the capabilities.

1.1 Does the capability approach need a well-defined list of capabilities?

Sen's capability approach does *not* prescribe a list of functionings that should be taken into account. As a consequence, every evaluative exercise using the capability framework will require an additional selection of the functionings. Some economists, like Robert Sugden or John Roemer have been critical about the fact that Sen hasn't proposed a list of relevant

functionings, nor has he specified how this selection of capabilities should be made (Roemer 1996; Sugden 1993). Among philosophers, Martha Nussbaum has been a prominent voice arguing that Sen should endorse a list (Nussbaum 1988; 2003a). However, Sen has responded to those criticisms by arguing that selecting functionings will always be an "act of reasoning". He doesn't want to endorse a specific list of functionings for two reasons. On the one hand he wants to advance the capability approach as a general approach to the evaluation of individual advantage and social arrangements, and not as a well-defined theory, for example about the good life or constitutional principles in the way that Nussbaum has developed the capability approach. A further specification or application of the capability approach will always be combined with a particular selection of social theories (such as an account of human nature or the good life), and each specification might result in a different selection of valuable functionings. Hence the capability approach as such is (deliberately) too underspecified to endorse just one single list (Sen 1993). On the other hand, Sen stresses the role of agency, the process of choice and the freedom to reason in the selection of relevant capabilities. He argues that we must leave it to the democratic processes and social choice procedures to define the distributive policies. In other words, when the capability approach is used for policy work, it is the people who will be affected by the policies who should decide on what will count as valuable capabilities in this policy question. This immediately makes clear that in order to be operational for (small-scale) policy implementation the capability approach needs to engage with theories of deliberative democracy and public deliberation and participation.

Thus, I disagree with Nussbaum's claim that Sen should endorse *one definite* list of capabilities (Robeyns 2003b). As explained in part 1, it is crucial to note that Nussbaum and Sen's versions of the capability approach have different theoretical assertions, and therefore their approaches entail different conceptions of what the list should be doing. Nussbaum's list is "a list of normative things-to-do" (Alkire 2002a). Her list has a highly prescriptive character and she makes strong universalistic claims regarding the scope of her theory. Nussbaum has used the capability approach to develop a universal theory of the good: it applies to all social justice issues, and to the global world. This does not imply, she argues, that her list is not sensitive to culture and context. Her list is formulated at a highly abstract level, and for each country or community it can then be made more specific depending on the local context. Hence, in Nussbaum's theory, there is one universal

general list, which can be translated in more detailed and specific lists so as to suit the context (Nussbaum 2000).

Sen's capability approach, in contrast, has broader and less specified theoretical pretensions: it is only a framework, not a theory. I would argue that given the *intrinsic* underspecification of Sen's capability approach, there cannot be *one* catch-all definite list. Instead, each application of the capability approach will require its own list. For Sen, a list of capabilities *must* be context dependent, where the context is both the geographical area to which it applies, as well as the sort of evaluation that is done. Applications of Sen's capability approach can be very diverse. They can be academic, activist, or policy-oriented. They can be abstract and philosophical, or applied and very down to earth. They can be theoretical or empirical. These applications can concern social, political, economic, legal, psychological or other dimensions of advantage, either all taken together, or considering only a few. The capability approach can be specified for a global or a local context. And so forth.

As already discussed in the first part of this text, the differences in Sen's and Nussbaum's capability approaches, and their different views on the desirability of one definite list can be better understood by keeping in mind their respective academic fields and expertise. Sen's roots are in the field of social choice, and he therefore believes that we should search for fair and consistent democratic procedures to draw up the list. Nussbaum, on the other hand, has done a lot of work on the philosophy of the good life and, more recently, on constitutional design, and in this context it is much more important that a scholar proposes and defends a fully-fleshed out list of capabilities. As Fabienne Peter concludes from her analysis of the relevance of Sen's contribution to social choice theory for gender issues, "taking people seriously as agents entails giving them a chance to be heard, and to be involved in collective evaluations and decisions" (Peter 2003). For a collective evaluation or decision from a capability perspective, this certainly includes being heard and involved in the selection of capabilities.

Suppose now that we apply Sen's capability approach to a particular question, and we end up with exactly the same list that Nussbaum has been defending. Would that then confirm that Nussbaum is correct by defending the use of one particular list? I do not think so. Firstly, even if the actual list that someone who uses Sen's capability approach might draw up would be the same as Nussbaum's, then the underlying assumptions of what this

list *is*, and what it is supposed to *do*, remain different. The theoretical status and assertions of the lists will remain distinct, even if they contain exactly the same elements.

Secondly, the *process* that has generated the two lists is different, and this could affect the lists' democratic or academic *legitimacy*. Sen has written repeatedly that, in matters of social choice and distributive justice, processes matter. Indeed, we should not only be concerned with *culmination outcomes* (the outcome narrowly defined, here the items on the list), but with the *comprehensive outcome*, which includes aspects of the choice process, including the identity of the chooser (Sen 1997). Suppose that a social scientist applies the capability approach to gender inequality assessment, or a village council uses the capability approach to decide how to allocate its funds, and they end up using the same list of capabilities that Nussbaum has proposed. Then it might still be important in terms of the comprehensive outcome that this social scientist or the village council went trough the process of drawing up the list herself. It will give legitimacy to their list that a simple blind copying of Nussbaum's list will lack. In other words, even if the application of Sen's capability approach leads us to adopt a list that is identical to Nussbaum's, the process by which Nussbaum's list is generated might lack the democratic legitimacy that is needed for a political or policy context. Similarly, when the capability approach is applied to particular research questions, we might prefer lists that are derived from, are embedded in, and engage with the existing literature in that field. In that case, Nussbaum's list, even when proposing the same dimensions, might lack sufficient academic legitimacy. This, of course, does not only hold for Nussbaum's list, but for any list with universal pretensions.

Of course, Nussbaum has heard this critique many times and has stressed repeatedly that her list is a humble, open-ended list, which is always open for revisions. However, while some of her readers agree and don't see any epistemological or ethical problem in her list, other readers feel that they don't read this list as humble and open-ended, and they especially wonder who is going to decide, and on what grounds, if, when and how the list can be modified.

Summing up, if we want to respect Sen's capability approach as a general framework for normative assessments, then we cannot endorse one definite list of capabilities without narrowing down the capability approach from a framework to a theory.

Scholars who endorse Nussbaum's capability theory instead of Sen's approach, might argue that the fact that Sen only offers an approach, and not a fully fleshed-out theory, is

exactly the problem, as it does not sufficiently inform us on how to apply it. I think this claim, if made, would be unwarranted. Indeed, the empirical applications discussed above may illustrate that it is perfectly possible to use Sen's framework to address normative questions and come to definite evaluations.

Mozaffar Qizilbash (Qizilbash 2002a) has noted that many of the existing lists of capabilities, and of related dimensions, are reconcilable. I agree with Qizilbash that the content and length of different lists is influenced by the context and strategic reasons, rather than some fundamental differences on the relevant dimensions of well-being or advantage. Thus, while the discussion on the selection of capabilities is very important for the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the capability approach, for more applied and practical applications its importance is limited. Indeed, for applications of the capability approach other questions related to the selection of capabilities are more important. We now turn to these questions.

1.2 Risks of biases in the selection of capabilities

The selection of capabilities is, like any scientific or intellectual endeavour, vulnerable to biases and mistakes. Indeed, the "act of reasoning" which Sen favours to select the capabilities, might run the risk of becoming the source of potential biases in the evaluative exercise. When the capability approach is used in a research context, the bias stems from the fact that the life world, values and social embedding of the researcher might influence which functionings will be included or not. I will illustrate this claim by focussing on gender inequality research, but similar arguments can be made for e.g. poverty or inequality research in a society one does not know, or other research on situations one is not familiar with.

Functionings and capabilities make it possible to take into account many activities and concerns that are highly gendered. For example, the following functionings could be measured: to control or manage one's care-responsibilities; to exercise a profession without being discriminated on the labour market; to choose a profession autonomously; to be free from sexual and familial violence; to combine a family life with a job and career; to be paid the same wage for the same work, and so on. However, the observation that most contemporary inequality researchers know little about gender and how gender inequality

arises, and the prevailing androcentrism in the inequality literature both in political philosophy and in welfare economics might lead to a gender bias in the selection of functionings. The epistemological importance of knowledge on descriptive gender inequalities is important here: if an inequality researcher does not know what the major constituents and causes of gender inequality are, she or he will probably not think about the related functionings when selecting them. For example, as many normative welfare economists do not consider the division of household labour and care responsibilities to be part of their object of study or academic field, it is doubtful whether they will consider to include the functioning e.g. to control and manage one's care-responsibilities in the list of functionings constituting well-being. Indeed, none of the existing empirical applications of the capability approach have included any of these dimensions. In short, moving from traditional informational bases to functionings and capability does not *guarantee* that the measurement would become less gender-biased, although it opens up a possibility to be more inclusive. More generally, it seems that the capability approach needs to be supplemented with methodological tools which would enable us to correct for biases in the selection of functionings which result from the social positioning of the researchers. The danger of these kinds of biases are most prominent when the capability approach is used for research purposes, but it can manifest itself also when the capability approach is used for political processes in the real world.

Bernard Williams, among others, has suggested that it is necessary to put some constraints on "the kinds of capability that are going to count in thinking about the relation between capability on one hand and well-being or the standard of living on the other" (Williams 1987). The difficulty is, however, where these constraints which will single out these capabilities from the set of all capabilities are going to come from. Williams notes that traditionally they have come either from nature or from convention. It is easy to see that we all need safe water and clean air, but as soon as we leave these straightforward examples of some basic capabilities behind us, we run into difficulties. Again, consider the functioning to lead a life where one is not forced to 'choose' between care and household work on the one hand, and a job on the other hand. Traditionally, most men and almost all people without children or frail parents enjoy this functioning, as they do not have any, or only very limited, responsibilities for household work and the day-to-day care of others. So, for the majority of people, this functioning is not high on their list of priorities, as they

can take this functioning quasi for granted. Nevertheless, for many women, especially young mothers and the daughters of frail old people, this has been one of their most pressing needs. If we leave it to either nature or convention to decide whether this is a relevant functioning, then the outcome is predictable, but also highly questionable. The same problems will arise if we would agree on the list of relevant functionings, but if we still need to decide on the weights to attach to them.

The role that Sen reserves for democratic procedures and social choice in the selection of relevant capabilities thus contains a danger, if the majority of the people would vote for a racial- or gender biased list. Democracy is not the only ultimate value, and it seems that we need to integrate more thinking on democratic decision procedures if we want to safely use them as the tool to select the list of capabilities. Moreover, this selection must be done explicitly, and be subjected to genuine discussions, if we want to eliminate the above mentioned biases stemming from the social positioning of researchers.

We will now look at some proposals that have been made in the literature on how the selection of capabilities could be done in a procedural fashion.

1.3 Procedures to select relevant capabilities

It is obvious that we can not use the capability approach as a general framework for more specified purposes, be it theoretical or empirical, without selecting the valuable functionings. How can such a selection be made, and can we think of ways to avoid the above-mentioned biases?

Let us start with the latter question first. To avoid the possible biases discussed above, I have argued (Robeyns 2003b) that all lists should meet a number of criteria:

1. Explicit formulation: the list should be made explicit, discussed and defended.
2. Methodological justification: we should clarify and scrutinise the method that has generated the list, and defend it. This method will be different for different uses of the capability approach.
3. Different levels of generality: If a selection aims at an empirical application, or wants to lead to implementable policy proposals, then the list should be drawn up in at least two stages. Each stage will generate a list at a different level, ranging from the level of ideal theory to more pragmatic lists. This means that only from the second stage onwards will constraints and limitations related to the measurement design and data

collection, or to political or socio-economic feasibility in the case of policy-oriented applications, be taken into account. Distinguishing between the ideal and the second-best level is important, because these second best constraints might change over time, for example as knowledge expands, empirical research methods become more refined, or the reality of political or economic feasibility changes.

4. Exhaustion and non-reduction: the capabilities on the list should include all elements that are important: no dimensions that are relevant should be left out.

Obviously, these are only very general principles, which are proposed to avoid biases in the selection of capabilities. Their only goal is to provide a sort of 'check and balance' for the fact that every policy maker or researcher is situated in a personal context and therefore needs to pay special attention to avoid baised that are induced by his or her own background. These background features can include personal aspects, such as being male or female, black or white, working-class, middle-class or upper-class, with many experiences with other groups and other cultures or not, and so forth. But it also includes biases induced by disciplinary customs, habits, traditions and values.

Assuming that the above principles can help us to avoid, or at least significantly reduce, biases, the next question to ask is which methods have been proposed in the literature to effectively select capabilities. I think there is no *general* answer to this question, that can be applied to all uses of the capability approach. Perhaps it could help to make a distinction between three different categories in which different procedures are needed: small-scale projects (whether empirical assessments or policy design), large-scale empirical assessments, and large-scale political and policy design.

Small-scale projects are characterised by the fact that (1) it is relatively clear who the affected person are, e.g. the target group of an employment or development project; and (2) all affected persons can in principle meet to discuss the project or the policy. In such a setting, the relevant capabilities can be selected by using participatory methods, whereby the capabilities are debated in the group. The literature on this methodology, together with a discussion of possible pitfalls and ways to try to make sure that all relevant capabilities are included, without being imposed by the outside, have been discussed at length by Sabina Alkire (2002b).

Large-scale empirical assessments obviously can't ask all affected people which capabilities they might find important. Still, the selection should be done carefully and

explicitly, to avoid the potential biased discussed below. For this type of use of the capability approach, I have proposed a method that starts with a brainstorm, engages with *all* relevant literatures (not just academic!), engages with other relevant lists, and opens the draft list up for discussion (Robeyns 2003b: 72-74). While for some scholars this might seem a self-evident methodology, many empirical applications discussed in part 1 are simply listed ad-hoc, without any methodological or theoretical justification.

Finally, political philosophers and social and political theorists will need to ask which method could be used for large-scale policies and proposals for social change, that is, if we want to select capabilities for proposals for the future, policy design, and normative judgements at a more theoretical level? For example, if one would want to develop a theory of social justice based on the capability approach, but derive the list of capabilities in a procedural way, how should this be done? As far as I am aware, there has not been much discussion about this. An exception is Elizabeth Anderson (1999), who has suggested that the capabilities which the government should aim to guarantee are those that enable people to function as a human being, as a participant in a system of cooperative production, and as a citizen of a democratic state. Hence, having adequate shelter is a relevant capability, while being able playing cards or enjoying luxury vacations in Tahiti is not (Anderson 1999: 316-318).

2 Is the capability approach too individualistic?

The critique that the capability approach would be too individualistic can be heard in discussions with social scientists or philosophers, especially communitarians, who in general argue that neoclassical economics or liberal political philosophy is too individualistic. This critique states that any theory should regard individuals as part of their social environment, and hence agents should be recognised as socially embedded and connected to others, and not as atomised individuals. It is critique that is much more frequently heard during discussions than that it is published; however, one clear example of this critique can be found in Deneulin and Stewart (2002).

To scrutinise this critique, and to assess the alleged individualistic character of the capability approach, we should distinguish between ethical individualism on the one hand and methodological and ontological individualism on the other hand.

Ethical individualism makes a claim about who or what should count in our evaluative exercises and decisions. It postulates that individuals, and only individuals are the units of moral concern. In other words, when evaluating different states of social affairs, we are only interested in the (direct and indirect) effects of those states on individuals.

Methodological and ontological individualism are somewhat more difficult to describe, as the debate on methodological individualism has suffered from confusion and much obscurity. Nevertheless at its core is the claim that "all social phenomena are to be explained wholly and exclusively in terms of individuals and their properties" (Bhargava 1992). It is a doctrine which includes semantic, ontological and explanatory individualism. The last is probably the most important of these doctrines, and this can also explain why many people reduce methodological individualism to explanatory individualism. Ontological individualism states that only individuals and their properties exist, and that all social entities and properties can be identified by reducing them to individuals and their properties. Ontological individualism hence makes a claim about the nature of human beings, about the way they live their lives and about their relation to society. In this view, society is built up from individuals only, and hence is nothing more than the sum of individuals and their properties. Similarly, explanatory individualism is the doctrine that all social phenomena can in principle be explained in terms of individuals and their properties. The crucial issue here is that a commitment to ethical individualism is not incompatible with an ontology that recognises the connections between people, their social relations, and their social embedment. Similarly, a social policy focussing and targeting certain groups or communities can be perfectly compatible with ethical individualism.

The capability approach embraces ethical individualism, but does *not* rely on ontological individualism.[10] On the theoretical level, the capability approach does account for social relations and the constraints and opportunities of societal structures and institutions on individuals in two ways. First, by recognising the social and environmental

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[10] I made this point for the first time in Robeyns (2000), a paper that was read and commented upon by Severine Deneulin. Nevertheless, Deneulin and Stewart (2002) make exactly the opposite claims without undertaking a critique or refutation of my arguments, when they write that "The [capability] approach is an example of methodological individualism" (Deneulin and Stewart 2002: 66). Amartya Sen has responded to their critique by stating that "I fear I do not see at all the basis of their diagnosis" (Sen 2002: 80). Indeed, in my view their paper is another unfortunate example of a confusion of the different types of individualism, and does not appreciate the crucial point that a theory or a framework can very well be ethically individualist *without being* methodologically individualist. Adam Swift (2001: 149-155) offers an enlightening discussion of similar misunderstandings and misrepresentations by communitarians against liberal thinkers.

factors which influence the conversions of commodities into functionings. For example, suppose that Jaap and Joseph both have the same individual conversion factors and possess the same commodities. Both have a bike and are able bodied. However, Jaap is living in a Dutch town with cycle lanes and low criminality rates, whereas Joseph is living in Antananarivo in Madagascar, a capital with massive poverty, and high levels of criminality and theft. Whereas Jaap can use his bike to cycle anywhere he wants, at any moment of the day, Joseph will be faced with a much higher chance that he will be robbed or that his bike will be stolen. Hence, the same commodity (a bike) leads to different levels of the functioning 'to transport oneself safely', due to characteristics of the society in which one lives (its public infrastructure, poverty and crime levels and so on.)

The second way in which the capability approach accounts for the societal structures and constraints is by theoretically distinguishing functionings from capabilities. More precisely, the crossing from capabilities to achieved functionings requires an act of choice. Now, it is perfectly possible (and, as I will argue further on, even necessary) to take into account the influence of societal structures and constraints on those choices. For example, suppose Sarah and Sigal both have the same intellectual capacities and human capital at the age of 6, and live in a country where education is free and children from poorer families receive scholarships. Sarah was born in a class were little attention was paid to intellectual achievement and studying, whereas Sigal's parents are both graduates pursuing intellectual careers. The social environment of Sarah and Sigal will greatly influence and shape their preferences for studying. In other words, while initially Sarah and Sigal have the same capability set, the social structures and constraints which influence and shape their preferences will influence the choice they will make to pick one bundle of functionings. However, Sen's capability approach *allows* to take those structures and constraints on choices into account, even though it does not offer such a full account, and this complementary theory of choice has ultimately far reaching consequences for our evaluative exercises.

Once more this shows that the capability approach is an *approach* to interpersonal comparisons which argues for functionings and capabilities as the relevant evaluative space where each application (be it theoretical or empirical) can, and probably has to, be supplemented with other theories. These other theories are normative theories (for example a normative theory of choice or a theory on the normative relevance of class, gender or

race) which are in turn based on positive theories of human behaviour and agency and societal processes.

It is difficult to see how the capability approach can be understood to be methodologically or ontologically individualistic, especially since Sen himself has analysed some processes that are profoundly collective, such as his analysis of households as sites of cooperative conflict (Sen 1990a). The following quote should hopefully clear away any remaining misunderstandings:

> "The [capability] approach used in this study is much concerned with the opportunities that people have to improve the quality of their lives. It is essentially a 'people-centered' approach, which puts human agency (rather than organizations such as markets or governments) at the centre of the stage. The crucial role of social opportunities is to expand the realm of human agency and freedom, both as an end in itself and as a means of further expansion of freedom. The word 'social' in the expression 'social opportunity' (…) is a useful reminder not to view individuals and their opportunities in isolated terms. The options that a person has depend greatly on relations with others and on what the state and other institutions do. We shall be particularly concerned with those opportunities that are strongly influenced by social circumstances and public policy…" (Drèze and Sen 2002: 6).

So far I have argued that the capability approach does not rely on ontological individualism, while it does embrace ethical individualism. Can this claim be the basis of the critique that the capability approach is too individualistic? I do not believe so. The capability approach is ethically individualistic and ought to be ethically individualistic. In a similar vein, Martha Nussbaum has also offered a very elaborate and profound defense of what she calls "the principle of each person as an end"

> "The account we strive for [i.e. the capability approach] should preserve liberties and opportunities for each and every person, taken one by one, respecting each of them as an end, rather than simply as the agent or supporter of the ends of others. … We need only notice that there is a type of focus on the individual person as such that requires no particular metaphysical position, and no bias against love or care. It arises naturally from the recognition that each person has just one life to live, not more than one. … If we combine this observation with the thought … that each person is valuable and worthy of

respect as an end, we must conclude that we should look not just to the total or the average, but to the functioning of each and every person." (Nussbaum 2000: 55-56)

In fact, by its very nature the evaluation of functionings and capabilities is an evaluation of the well-being of individuals. Therefore I believe that it is a mistake to talk of 'social functionings' or 'community functionings' (or social or community capabilities, for that matter). Just as it is *strictly speaking* ontologically impossible to speak of the well-being of a community, it is also impossible to speak of the capability of a community. Of course, in daily speech we often do use those terms, but what is generally meant is an aggregation, e.g. an average of the well-being of all the people in that community. It is true that certain public goods or structural characteristics of society, or "irreducible social goods", like social norms or traditions, increase or decrease the capability of individuals. But this is something quite different to claiming that these public goods or structural features would enable a social capability or community capability. The only exception would be if the latter would be defined as an aggregative function of individual capabilities. But then I believe that the notion of capability is no longer being used in the way that it is defined in Sen's approach, and will only lead to conceptual obscurity and confused debates. For example, one could say that the USA has the capability to bomb Kabul at will, or that Pakistan has a nuclear capability. These kinds of capabilities are ontologically non-individualistic (as they are not properties of persons), but obviously neither are they a constituent part of Sen's capability approach.

Charles Gore provides a sensible analysis of this discussion, arguing that ultimately it boils down to the view of personhood between liberals and communitarians (Gore 1997). In my understanding, the capability approach fits the idea that irreducible social goods and community properties *are* relevant in the evaluative space, but only instrumentally. I disagree with Gore that denying the intrinsic importance of these social goods for evaluative purposes would lead to a poorer well-being evaluation. Their effects on people will be reflected in their capabilities, and if they would not affect people, then they are not intrinsically important. I also disagree with Gore that this would be an untenable position in multicultural or heterogeneous societies, where cultural meanings and interpretations are different for different social groups.

3 Power and choice: critical and conservative interpretations of the capability approach

While the critique that the capability approach would be individualistic is wrong, there is an underlying unease with the capability approach that is voiced in several ways and wordings. In my view, all these critiques have in common that they worry about a too narrow liberal (or even libertarian) interpretation of the capability approach, which pays insufficient attention to power, the social construction and constraints on choice, and the influence of societal structures on people's agency and well-being. Or, to formulate it slightly different, these commentators seem to be worried that the capability approach will be insufficiently critical of social constraints on people's actions, and will not pay due attention to "global forces of power and local systems of oppression" (Koggel 2003). Let us look at some of these critiques and worries, and then pull them all together.

First, there is the worry that the capability approach does not pay sufficient attention to social power (Hill 2003). The capability approach itself does not analyse the social institutions that produce and reproduce power, and that as such have great impact on people's opportunities, and social inequalities. Similarly, there is also a worry that the capability approach would be used in combination with a stripped-down version of human choice. For example, despite Sen's repeated criticism on choice as revealed preference, one could in principle make interpersonal comparisons of functionings assuming revealed preference theory. Depending on the choice theory one adopts, the capability approach could lead to widely divergent normative conclusions (Robeyns 2000; 2001). Standard economics pays very little attention to the social constraints that impinge on people's choices, in contrast to sociology, gender studies, cultural studies, among others. In political philosophy, one sees a similar split between the core of Anglo-American political philosophy, where the concept of the self that is endorsed is that of an agentic, autonomous agent, in contrast to the so-called continental philosophical tradition which pays much more attention to the social and cultural embedding of people. The consequence is that it is possible to use functionings and capabilities as the evaluative space in combination with many different normative accounts of choice, with a widely divergent critical content.

Take as an example the choice for paid (labour market) or unpaid (care and household) work by gender. In all societies women do much more household and care work, whereas

men do much more paid work. Both kinds of work can generate a number of different functionings so that the largest capability set might perhaps be reached only by giving everyone the opportunity to combine both types of work. However, I would argue that in the current world where hardly any society allows people to combine market work and non-market work without having to make large sacrifices on the quality of at least one of them, the labour market enables more (and more important) functionings than care work (psychological functionings like increased self-esteem, social functionings like having a social network; material functionings like being financially independent and securing financial needs for one's old age or in the event of divorce).[11] Many schools in political philosophy and normative welfare economics have typically seen the gender division of labour as ethically unproblematic, in the sense that this division would be the result of men's and women's free choices which reflect their preferences. However, this is an inadequate way of explaining and evaluating this division, because gender related structures and constraints convert this choice from an individual choice under perfect information into a collective decision under socially constructed constraints with imperfect information and asymmetrical risks. Moreover, evaluating the gender division of labour can only be done if we scrutinise the constraints on choice, and these may turn out to be very different for men and women.[12] What is crucial for the discussion here is that both positive theories of the gender division of labour bear different normative implications. If a housewife is held fully responsible for the fact that she works at home then the logical consequence would be that she had the capability to work on the labour market. However, if we embrace a positive theory of choice that focuses on gender specific constraints, then we will not hold the housewife fully responsible for her choice but acknowledge that her capability set was smaller and did not contain the possibility for a genuine choice to work on the labour market. It seems, thus, that it is perfectly possible to apply the capability approach in combination with different accounts of gender-specific constraints on choices.

By giving choice such a central position and making its place in well-being and social justice evaluations more explicit, the capability approach opens up a space for discussions

[11] As is also suggested by the empirical findings of Chiappero-Martinetti (2000) who measured achieved functioning levels for Italy.
[12] The seminal work in this area is (Okin 1989). On the gendered nature of the constraints on choice, see Nancy Folbre (1994) and (Robeyns 2002: chapter 2)

on how certain choices are constrained by gender-related societal mechanisms and expectations. But again, a narrow interpretation of the capability approach provides no guarantee for this. Conservative people will therefore want to integrate a conservative theory of gender relations within the capability approach, whereas for critical scholars it will be crucial to integrate a feminist account of gender relations. No doubt the two exercises will reach very different normative conclusions. In short, for scholars who defend a theory of human agency and social reality that challenges the status quo, one of the important tasks will be to negotiate which additional theories will be integrated in further specifications of the capability approach.

The conclusion is that, *strictly speaking*, the capability approach *only* specifies an evaluative space, and therefore can be used with widely divergent views on social realities and interpersonal relations. Indeed, the fact that the capability approach interests both scholars who work in the libertarian tradition, as well as scholars who work in the critical tradition, should make us pause. However, when we interpret the capability approach somewhat wider, and look at Sen's other writings, such as for example his work in intra-household power relations (Sen 1990a), then it seems obvious to me that we should not make simplifying assumptions on the nature of social reality, but *defend* our views on social reality and be willing to scrutinize them critically.

4 Will the capability approach encourage paternalism and inappropriate policies?

The final point of debate that we will consider, is the question whether the capability approach leads to inappropriate government intervention. A number of philosophers, but especially social scientists and perhaps economists in particular, have increasingly lost confidence in a government's ability to decide on any notion of the social good (such as the notion that we should strive to expand people's capabilities) and to develop policies based on it. It should therefore not come as a surprise that the capability approach is often criticised for leading to a government which is interfering too much in our lives.

The objection of inappropriate government intervention comes surprisingly enough from authors with generally a different perspective on normative issues. For example, Paul

Seabright argues from a contractarian perspective that in a plural society, where many conceptions of the good life coexist, "nothing is society's business unless it could be the subject of an appropriate hypothetical social contract. Thus it is not the business of society at large whether people have happy marriages or believe in God, because these are not the kind of things people could contract to do" (Seabright 1993). The capability approach would therefore lead to policies which intrude in domains that fall outside the appropriate sphere for the government. A different endorser of this critique is Ronald Dworkin, who argues that what a government should be concerned about is a fair distribution of resources, and not about people's capabilities: "The idea that people should be *equal* in their capacities to achieve these desirable states of affairs, however, is barely coherent and certainly bizarre—why would that be *good?*—and the idea that government should take steps to bring about that equality –can you imagine what steps those would be?—is frightening" (Dworkin 2000).

There are two distinct elements here. The explicit objection, which seems to be more prominent in Seabright's contractarian view than in Dworkin's, is a critique of the inappropriate scope of government intervention: government should not interfere in spheres that fall outside the scope of her legitimate action. The assumption in both Seabright's and Dworkin's objection to Sen, is that the moral ideal of distribution has to be defined in terms of governmental redistribution, hence that claims on equality or justice automatically imply claims on redistribution. Moreover, the objection that the capability approach would lead to redistributive policies in domains which fall outside the scope of government intervention is closely related to another objection that is sometimes voiced against the capability approach, namely that it would be too paternalistic.

Let's scrutinise the paternalism objection first. A critique of paternalism is inherent to any objective account of interpersonal comparisons of well-being. And strictly speaking, all societies contain some social arrangements which are partly based on paternalistic considerations. Thus the relevant question should not be whether the capability approach is paternalistic, but whether it is paternalistic to an unjustifiable degree. It is a matter of fact that people in most societies do want to have a redistributing government. The relevant question, really, is how much, and according to which principles, the government should redistribute. The capability approach does not propose any redistributive rules, but

forcefully argues that redistribution should be designed in the light of what intrinsically matters for people's well-being.

There are two important ways in which the capability approach can avoid becoming dictatorial with respect to the notion of the good life. Firstly, Sen has not specified an exact and definite list of functionings. And *if* such a list would be constructed, it would most likely be at the level of general functionings and not at the level of more specified functionings. Moreover, this selection would always have to be subjected to discussion, either through some deliberative democratic procedure or by providing social scientific and political space to allow for different selections which can then be discussed. Second and more importantly, the relevant focal variable is not a person's achieved functionings, but her capability set. Thus, even if a society tries to enlarge people's capability sets, people will always have the option to choose *not* to realise a certain being or doing. If society at large decides that sexual expression is an important functioning that should be included in the capability set, then this implies nothing more than that people should be *able* to relate to another person in an intimate and sexual way, without being tortured or killed if their sexuality turns out to be the one which is disapproved by the majority in society. We should all have the right to live our lives as lesbians or gays, but nobody will force us to have homosexual experiences if we don't want that. Indeed, nobody will force us to have any sexual experience at all. Having a capability is thus crucially distinct from having an achieved functioning.

How strong is the objection that applying the capability approach would lead to redistributive policies in domains which fall outside the scope of government intervention? Seabright argues that government can not and should not try to deliver happy marriages, and Dworkin argues that government should redistribute resources, not capabilities, because the latter would lead to a frightening government. This critique of the capability approach is based on an implicit confusion of distributive and redistributive considerations. It is implicitly assumed that the government will always develop policies in those area's of live with which it is concerned. But this need not be true. First, strictly speaking the capability approach does not make any recommendations on redistribution; it only claims that the space of functionings and capabilities is the most appropriate and relevant for evaluative exercises of well-being. Hence, happy marriages *are* the business of government, in so far as they contribute to higher levels of capability (and social scientific

research provides some evidence for that, as divorce is one of the most important factors of distress). Nevertheless, it does not follow that government should send every couple vouchers for free consultations at a relational therapist. But a government which takes the capability approach seriously, would for example acknowledge that unemployment and bad housing put a serious stress on marriages and families and hence ultimately on people's well-being in terms of their functionings and capability. Similarly, resources might be important and, in some cases, even the only way to enlarge people's capability sets. But for Sen resources are, and remain, *means* for redistribution, not the *ends* of our political concerns.

Secondly, there is not reason to restrict the recommendations that one could derive from a capability analysis to financial redistribution only. In several instances the enlargement of people's capability sets will require practices of empowerment or the design of social institutions which should not necessarily include redistribution of resources. For example, by changing the laws which restrict marriage to heterosexual couples and extend it to same-sex couples, the capability sets of gay and lesbian people would expand.

Thirdly, it should also be noted that in principle the capability approach can be used for the measurement of well-being or advantage as such, without any intention to derive policy recommendations from it. Moreover, it can also be used to evaluate and rank the well-being effects of different social policies which in a utilitarian (or purely income based) framework would yield the same level of well-being. Capability analysis is not just useful for the *a priori* design of policies, but can also be helpful to evaluate how people's well-being has been affected by some irreversible events where government can perhaps do little, like mad cow disease.

Finally, even if a specific application of the capability approach would make policy recommendations, this does not imply per definition that this kind of policy should be restricted to *governmental* or *state-induced* policy. Policy recommendations could also be directed to, or taken up by, families, private organisations, NGO's, interest groups, or self-organised community groups. In such cases, it becomes very difficult to see how a locally organised or self-organised organisation that develops a local and arguably small-scale policy can be accused of paternalism or of any unjustified redistributions.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

The current theoretical and empirical work on the capability approach to well-being and development make clear that this is a paradigm in the making, where several foundational problems remain to be addressed. Nevertheless, the growing global resistance against the alternatives, both in the real world and at the grassroots level (e.g. neoliberalism and the Washington consensus) but also in academic work (e.g. the increasing 'engineering' character of mainstream economics) show that the capability approach speaks to many people's hearts and minds. The next decades will show whether the capability approach remains primarily a philosophical framework, or whether it will grow into a mature paradigm for well-being, development, and social policy. This will require much work by scholars from all fields, and from societal actors and policy makers, in order to find the limits and possibilities of the capability approach.

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