The *Capability Approach*: An introduction to the Sen's view based on the contribution by Ingrid Robeyns

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The aim of this text is to present Amartya Sen's *capability approach* in the explanation that Robeyns provides us in her paper entitled "The *capability approach*: a theoretical survey"[1].

For reasons of shortness the essay will emphasize some aspects rather than others with a view to providing an analytical introduction to the *capability approach* as clear as possible.

The text is articulated in two parts: the former concerns the conceptual foundation of the *capability approach*, while the latter offers a description of its constituent elements.

The capability approach and its conceptual foundation

In the paper under examination, Ingrid Robeyns describes Sen's *capability approach* in the following terms:

"The capability approach is a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements"[2].

This proposition contains two different aspects: first, concerning the nature of the subject; then, concerning its use.

The first part of the proposition describes the *capability approach* as a "broad normative framework"[3], that is, a paradigm in which it is possible to conceptualize a phenomenon. This means that it is not a theory that can be used to explain a phenomenon, but it is only a framework that can be useful in providing a whole set of tools for its "evaluation and assessment"[4]. This point leads us to the next part of the proposition that refers both to the use of this framework and to its conceptual foundation.

The most popular use of the *capability approach* can be found in welfare economics and social policy, in making comparisons between people or in evaluating a policy in a developing country. Of course, it is also used in political philosophy as a constituent of a theory of justice, but in this sense it can be considered as a subsequent development of its original form focused on "individual well-being and social arrangements"[5].

Notwithstanding this kind of consideration, the most important point here is the epistemological concern of the *capability approach* or, in other words, the answer to the following question: why does the development of an alternative framework for the evaluation of people focus on individual well-being?

The reason for this "can be found in Sen's critique of traditional welfare economics, which typically conflates well-being with either opulence (income, commodity command) or utility"[6].

In fact, in many points of his work[7], Sen sets several examples where it is possible to see clearly the asymmetry between a GDP pro capite analysis and a well-being analysis. Of course, it doesn't mean that this relation is always asymmetric or exclusive. The point is

that the economic analysis reduces the complexity of economic and social phenomena to such an incomplete and one-dimensional level as to imply repercussions even on the idea of economic development itself, expressed, indeed, only in terms of economic growth.

Following this scheme, Sen's first aim was to identify what should be the most important focus in an economic assessment. This research was pursued through a critical analysis[8] of two philosophical paradigms of western philosophy: utilitarianism and the Rawlsian theory. In the examined paper Robeyns treats this point briefly, but its importance merits a few more words.

Utilitarianism, in its pioneering form proposed by Jeremy Bentham, is focused on the person's utility in terms of their level of pleasure or happiness. Since, in the utilitarian view, the goal of a person and the maximization of their interests seem to go together, we could say that utilitarianism is an individualistic theory. But this is not so[9].

In fact, it is interesting to note that this approach postulates a perfect relation between personal and collective interests. This seems to be very logical: since the welfare of a person depends on their global satisfaction, the welfare of a society should depend on the same factor. And since the goal of a person is to maximize their utility, so the goal of a society should be to maximize its total utility. What is the utilitarian way to do this? The focus is on an aggregate value that expresses the total sum of utility. It is clear that utilitarianism cannot be an individualistic theory because it does not account for the real distribution of utility among people.

According to Sen, this is a good reason for not considering utilitarianism as an efficient approach to the evaluation of wellbeing.

Furthermore, another important reason concerns the concept of utility itself. It seems very difficult, in fact, to have a clear concept of utility devoid of subjective characteristics. Both utility and happiness are strictly linked to mental states, implying that any interpersonal comparison focused on this particular informational basis is not reliable.[10]

Many other interesting aspects about this issue could be analysed, but for reasons of brevity we now turn to Sen's criticism of Rawlsian theory.

This theory, called after its author John Rawls, is not consequential, unlike utilitarianism, but deontological. This means that a choice is not judged by its consequences or utility, but on its level of conformity to a set of fundamental principles. Given the aims of this present text, it is not necessary to examine this theory in depth, but it is useful to understand the way in which, in the Rawlsian view, it is possible to make interpersonal comparisons. About this, "Rawls holds that a person's advantage should be specified by social primary goods, which are all-purpose means that every person is presumed to want, as they are useful for a sufficiently wide range of ends."[11]

In this way, the Rawlsian concept of primary good combines two elements: first, the idea that life can be seen in terms of a dynamic realization of ends; second, the idea that these ends are pursued by a bundle of goods. Since Rawls claims that people are responsible for pursuing their goals, or not, he deduces that primary goods are reliable indicators for the purposes of comparison.

Sen agrees with Rawls about this conception of life but he disagrees with him about the idea that a bundle of means can be a reliable indicator for comparisons between people:

If people were basically very similar, then an index of primary goods might be quite a good way of judging advantage. But, in fact, people seem to have very different needs varying with health, longevity, climatic conditions, location, work condition, temperament, and body size.[12]

Sen argues that a better way to account for people's advantage is to focus directly on what they "are effectively able to do and to be; that is, on their capabilities."[13] Furthermore the status of this "being and doing" is determined not only by a bundle of means (incomes, goods, commodities) but also "by three groups of conversion factors"[14] that are personal, social and environmental. On this point, it is interesting to note that the contrast between people and goods is resolved in favour of the former, similarly to utilitarianism, but switching the informational focus from utility to "the material and non-material circumstances that shape people's opportunity set"[15].

So, if on the one hand, the *capability approach* can be seen as an extension of Rawlsian primary goods in a non-fetishistic direction, on the other, it can be seen as a supposition for a non-utilitarian consequentialism, into which it is possible to incorporate some considerations about fundamental freedoms and rights.

After examining some basic theoretical issues, it can been recognized that the *capability approach* is the result of Sen's aim to switch the informational focus of economic measurement from income to other elements which, as we have just seen, is obtained through a critical review of two of the more discussed Western ethical approaches.

Capability, wellbeing and agency

According to Sen, the core of *capability approach* consists of two concepts: functioning and capability.

A functioning is the "being or doing" a person gives value to: it concerns what a person manages to do or to be and is related to his or her real living conditions. In a choice process, achieving a functioning depends on many aspects. Of course, it depends on a number of commodities (as underlined by Rawls); it also depends on personal status (relevant for the utilitarian analysis), but above all, it depends on the capability of a person to do it.

In fact, since a functioning is an achievement connected with a style of life, then a capability is a kind of freedom, or more precisely, a freedom to achieve. For example, if it is a functioning to be well nourished, the associated capability is the freedom to access an adequate quantity of food. Thus, the capability approach is focused on a set of potential functionings that it is possible to put into action, or in other words, it is focused neither on utility nor on commodities, but on the real opportunities that a person has. This point is very important because it permits us to understand more clearly the real potential of this approach, especially for the purposes of evaluation.

If, for example, we compare the status of two persons, a cripple and a non-cripple, and related to this we have to choose how to allocate an amount of resources, we need a point of view that reflects clearly the advantages or disadvantages of those persons. For utilitarianism the only distinction is between their respective abilities to maximize utility. Thus, if the non-cripple is better able to do this, we should give him the necessary resources, so as to increase total utility the most.

The Rawlsian approach is even simpler, in the sense that a physical characteristic doesn't represent a judgement criterion.

On the contrary, the *capability approach* accounts for the cripple's

disadvantage in terms of the evidence that all of his or her capabilities, called a capability set, are more limited than those of the non-cripple.

Now it's clear how the capability approach provides a framework for the evaluation of people's wellbeing, considered as the personal advantage of a person in terms of their capability and functionings.

However, it's important to underline that, even if this approach is focused on people's wellbeing, it does not mean that we should consider them as strict maximizers of such wellbeing. In fact, a person's wellbeing doesn't exhaust their capabilities. Sen's approach recognizes the possibility that every person can pursue any goal they want to, independently of any contingent reduction in wellbeing that may occur.

In this view, every person has the freedom of agency, making them responsible for their choices. This theoretical aspect is very powerful because it introduces, in an (non-ontological) individualistic view[16], the possibility of pursuing altruistic values without involving any kind of comunitarianism. Nevertheless, if recognizing the theoretical value of this paradigm is relatively easy, on the contrary, putting it into practice requires hard work.

In fact, Sen's approach does not presuppose any philosophical analysis offering a scheme of human capabilities. This means that we cannot count on any list of capabilities to use in a simple way. It is clear that this point follows from Sen's choice of developing a framework and not a theory: the capability approach is deliberately too underspecified for producing a predetermined list of capabilities.

The only suggestion that Sen makes regarding this concern is the concept of basic level of capability, as a "subset of all capabilities"[17], or, in other words, the idea that some capabilities are preliminary to others, useful especially in the cut-off choices in poverty analysis.

Of course, there are other points of view regarding these issues; for example, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, aiming to develop a theory of good based on Sen's approach, not only formulates a list of capabilities but defines some of them as "basic", in the sense that they are innate faculties of the human being.

But is the "problem of the list" resolvable without any anthropological assumption?

On this point Sen stresses the role of agency, in the sense that the selection of capabilities needs the process of choice related to democratic debate and to its mechanisms of participation and deliberation: "in other words", Robeyns points out, "when the capability approach is used to set out a policy, 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."[18]

This point clarifies very well the double role of agency: if on the one hand, it can be a dimension to evaluate, on the other, it is a constituent of the participatory process that leads the observer to assume, in the evaluative exercise, the same values as the observed.
We may note in closing this text that, even if this approach seems fully to respect intercultural factors, it hardly provides a list of basic values, which suggests the need for a much broader theory of the good.

Comments and conclusions

Understanding the *capability approach* requires a wide knowledge not only of economics but also of philosophy and social sciences. For this reason, Robeyn's aim to

present "the core conceptual and theoretical aspects of the *capability approach* in an accessible way"[19] is very helpful for every scholar who wants to have the possibility of developing Sen's framework in the different directions required from his or her fields of study. As we have just said, in this text we have presented only the elements that we consider fundamental for a unified vision of Sen's contribution.

Despite the positive or critical[20] theoretical perspectives that a large literature can provide us on this issue, it is nevertheless appropriate to remember the important role that the *capability approach* has played in overturning the relation between human wellbeing and economic development, proposing a new idea of economic development in terms of the expansion of human capability.

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NOTE:

[1] Robeyns I., *The capability approach: a theoretical survey*, Journal of Human Development, 6:1, 2005
[2] *Ivi*, p.94
[3] *Ibidem*
[4] *Ibidem*
[5] *Ibidem*
[6] Clark D., *The capability approach,* in *The Elgar Companion to Development Studies,* Edward Elgar, Cheltenam 2006, p.2
[7] See Sen A.K., *op. cit.*
[8] See Sen A.K., *Equality of What*, in Sterling M. McMurrin (ed.), *The Tanner Lectures on Human Value,* University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City 1980, p. 195-220
[9] See Rawls J., *op. cit.* p. 48
[10] About this point see also the "expensive taste problem" in Choen G.A., *On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice*, Ethics 99, 1989
[11] Robeyns I., *Justice as Fairness and the Capability Approach*, paper written for the 2004 APSA meetings, Chicago on 2 September 2004 p. 6
[12] Sen A.K., *Equality of What*, in Sterling M. McMurrin (ed.), *The Tanner Lectures on Human Value,* University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City 1980, p.215-216
[13] Robeyns I., *The capability approach: a theoretical survey*, Journal of Human Development, 2005, 6:1.p94
[14] *Ivi*, p. 99
[15] *Ibidem*
[16] See Robeyns I., *The capability approach: a theoretical survey*, Journal of Human Development, 2005, 6:1 p.107-109
[17] *Ivi* p. 101
[18] Robeyns, *The Capability Approach: An Interdisciplinary Introduction,* paper written for the III International Conference on the capability approach, Pavia, Italy, on 6 September 2003
[19] Robeyns I., *The capability approach: a theoretical survey*, Journal of Human Development, 2005, 6:1 p. 110
[20] See for example: Pogge T., *Can the capability approach be justified?*, Philosophical Topics, 30(2) 2002, pp. 167-228