

THE SEN'S CAPABILITY APPROACH: A RECENT DEBATE

by **Renata Targetti Lenti**

The works included in the *Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*¹ have been collected and edited by three very well-known leading scholars. Enrica Chiappero Martinetti is Full Professor of Economic Policy at the University of Pavia: she teaches economics, sustainable development and development economics and cooperation at undergraduate and graduate levels. She has acted as Vice-President of the Human Development and Capability Association and currently serves that Association as editor of the “Journal of Human Development and Capabilities”.

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Amartya Sen has developed, refined and defended a framework di-

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¹ E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, University Printing House, 2020.

rectly concerned with human capability and freedom. Subsequently, the capability approach has inspired a large and growing literature across many disciplines, both in theoretical and empirical domains, promoting works that become relevant to policymakers. It is a theoretical framework that entails two normative claims: firstly, the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance, secondly the well-being should be understood in terms of people's capabilities and functionings, with reference to the central concepts of functioning and capability. The capability approach is usually understood as a general perspective on a variety of subjects (such as the quality of life, egalitarian justice and poverty), and then it provides a distinctive view (rather than some comprehensive theory) of those subjects. From the philosophical point of view, the capability approach has been employed to the development of several conceptual and normative theories: development ethics, political philosophy, public health ethics, environmental ethics and climate justice, philosophy of education. In the field of economics this is a new approach to the studies of development, inequality and poverty, substituting the concept of human development with one based on income per capita. In the field of social choice too it introduced a new way of thinking.

The capability approach has its origins in a number of studies in which Amartya Sen² criticizes the limited informational bases of the traditional economic models and evaluative accounts (i.e., utilitarianism). The capability approach has emerged from the engagement with, but distinguishing itself from, some alternative frameworks and traditions across various disciplines. It differs from utilitarian views, which understand the quality of life in terms of pleasure, happiness or the satisfaction of desires. It also differs from the perspectives which evaluate advantage in terms of the possession of resources, income, wealth or what John Rawls³ termed 'primary social goods' (or 'primary goods'),

² A. SEN, *On Economic Inequality*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973; A. SEN, *Equality of What?*, in S.M. McMURRIN (ed.), "Tanner Lectures on Human Values", Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 197-220; A. SEN, *Capability and Well-Being*, in M.C. NUSSBAUM, A. SEN (eds.), "The Quality of Life". Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, pp. 30-53; A. SEN, *Dialogue, Capabilities, Lists, and public reason: Continuing the Conversation*, in "Feminist Economics", november 2004, pp. 77-80.

³ J. RAWLS, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1971.

which are all-purpose means. Distinguishing itself from these alternatives, the capability approach has broken with some orthodox ways of thinking. From the beginning, Sen acknowledged strong connections with Classical Political Economy and Karl Marx⁴. Later on, Sen⁵ recognized that the most powerful conceptual connections relate to Aristotle's theory of human flourishing *eudaimonia*⁶.

One of the most prominent illustrations within the capability literature of the need to move beyond the focus on goods and resources is found in Sen's *Equality of What?* Tanner lectures⁷. In *Equality of What?* Sen objects to the utilitarian measures of well-being. According to the utilitarian measure, someone's well-being should be evaluated in terms of the amount of utility, such as pleasure or happiness, that men derive from the resources and goods that they have. What is missing from these traditional models, Sen argues, is a notion of what activities we are able to undertake ('doings') and the kinds of persons we are able to be ('beings'). Sen calls this notion *capabilities*. Capabilities are the *real freedoms* that people have to achieve with reference to their potential doings and beings. Real freedom, in this sense, means that one has all the required means necessary to achieve that doing or being if one wishes to. That is, it is not merely the formal freedom to do or be something, but the substantial opportunity to achieve it. In this way, the capability approach changes the focus from means (the resources people have and the public goods they can access) to ends (what they are able to do and be with those resources and goods). This shift in focus is justified because resources and goods alone do not ensure that people are able to convert them into actual doings and beings.

In the "Tanner Lectures", Sen invites us to consider two persons with the same set of resources. Yet, one person suffers from a disability. This disability makes her unequal to the able-bodied person in two re-

⁴ K. MARX, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. English trans., Moscow Progressive Publishers, 1977.

⁵ A. SEN, *Capability and Well-Being*, cit..

⁶ M.C. NUSSBAUM, *Nature, Function, and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution*, Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, Supplement to vol. 1, 1988, pp. 145-184; M.C. NUSSBAUM, *Aristotelian Social Democracy*, in B. DOUGLASS, G. MARA AND H. RICHARDSON (eds.), "Liberalism and the Good". London: Routledge, 1990, pp. 203-252.

⁷ A. SEN, *Equality of What?*, in S.M. MCMURRIN (ed.), "Tanner Lectures on Human Values", Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 197-220.

gards, which cannot be captured by a sole focus on resources. First of all, the disabled person is unequal in terms of what she can do or to be with her resources compared with the physically able person. She may, for example, be confined to a wheelchair and thus restricted to places that are wheelchair-accessible. Secondly, the disabled person may even be doubly worse off because she only gets the same amount of resources even though she has more expenses in order to correct for her disability. That is, because the disabled person needs to spend a considerable amount of her resources in a wheelchair merely to move around, he or she has fewer resources available to pursue other goals than the able-bodied person who can spend all her resources on pursuing her valued ends. Thus, in order to evaluate people's well-being, we need to not only consider the amount of resources they have, but also what they are able to do and to be with those resources. The critic toward utilitarianism is very clear-cut and comprehensive. According to an utilitarian we ought to distribute *more* resources, goods, and freedoms to who gains a lot of utility to the able-bodied person. As Amartya Sen has shown, however, this response is inadequate⁸. The disabled person should receive resources to the extent that she experiences the same amount of well-being as a person that is not handicapped person. In other words it is necessary to compensate the disability.

The "capability approach" has become, progressively, an important new paradigm in thinking both in economics and philosophy. The proliferation of capability literature has led to questions concerning what kind of framework it is; how its core concepts should be defined; how it can be further specified for particular purposes; what is needed to develop the capability approach into an account of social justice; how it relates to Western and non-Western philosophy; and how it can be and has been applied in practice. Understanding the capability approach is imperative in view of the wide range of disciplines and debates involved. This Handbook brings together in a single volume most of the diverse areas/strands of research within the large field of capability research. Provides surveys of specific sub-fields and offers new updates contributions that extend the existing literature in important ways. It includes contributions by leading scholars working on the capability

⁸ A. SEN, *Equality of What?*, cit..

approach. It includes both introductory chapters and “more in-depth analysis relating to the central philosophical, conceptual and theoretical issues of capability research”, ranging from development studies, economics, gender studies, political science and political philosophy. It, also, includes more analytical and measurement tools, as well as policy aimed studies which follow from the original approach. In the foreword Amartya Sen argues that “The enormous contributions made by the capability perspective toward the discernment of human well-being and freedom have been well brought out by the papers in this Handbook”⁹

The Handbook is divided into three parts which cover overlapping areas. Each of the three editors took primary responsibility for one of these parts. The introduction of each part, that frames or provides an outline of the contributions to the Handbook, was authored by the relevant editor. A “General Introduction”, at the beginning of the volume, provides an overview of the central themes that run through the whole collection. Mozaffar Qizilbash is the editor of Part I of the Handbook. In this part he collected works which discuss the historical antecedents and the global roots of Sen’s approach, including philosophical debates. It includes chapters on the historical roots of the capability approach, philosophical debates, questions of measurement and evaluation, and questions of public policy and social concerns. Some of them “relate to: a closer examination of the relationship between the works of specific thinkers and the contemporary capability literature”. Much of the existing literature on the philosophical antecedents of the capabilities approach focuses narrowly on well-known figures such as Plato, Aristotle, Adam Smith, Karl Marx and J. S. Mill, mostly in ‘Western’ philosophy and political economy.¹⁰

Martha Nussbaum, one of the world’s most influential moral philosophers, widely contributed to the expansion of interest in capability approach and to a better understanding of it. The Nussbaum’s chapter, included in part I, shows how the capability approach is a complex set of arguments and theories deeply rooted in many philosophical traditions.

⁹ E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, cit., p. XVIII.

¹⁰ M.C. NUSSBAUM, *The Capabilities Approach and the History of Philosophy*, in E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), “The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach”, Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, University Printing House, 2020, pp. 13-39.

Her chapter of the Handbook is mainly concerned with the influence on the works of Amartya Sen of many ancient philosophers including those of Greek tragedy, Stoic and Buddhist thought. She explores the historical sources of Sen's thinking, going back to ancient philosophers as Socrates, Aristotele and Plato¹¹. She stresses the particular influence on Sen's works from twentieth-century India¹², including the works of Rabinranath Tagore¹³. In both these ways, this contribution makes a strong case for expanding the literature on the predecessors of, and influences on, contemporary work on the capabilities approach well beyond the philosophical 'Western' tradition and encourages scholars to consider the extent to which the roots of the capabilities approach can be found in 'non-Western' traditions and ideas which have been relatively neglected in the literature on Sen's works. Nussbaum stresses, in particular, "the importance of critical thinking through dialogue with others"¹⁴.

A very important concept is that human flourishing or *eudamonia* ...applies to a whole...only if it applies to "all or most" of its members individually. Nussbaum highlights the Smith's contribution to the concept of human dignity¹⁵. Smith breaks "with the Stoics...developing an aristotelian account of the human being and of basic needs"¹⁶. In describing the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries thinkers, from Kant¹⁷ to Rawls, she focuses on Rawls's *Theory of Justice*. Sen admitted that Rawls's emphasis on self-respect and access to primary goods has deeply influenced his approach¹⁸. Nussbaum finds some similarities between the two approaches. However, she argues that the Rawlsian original position "has difficulties when it comes to the rights of people with

¹¹ M.C. NUSSBAUM, *Nature, Function, and Capability*, cit..

¹² A. SEN, *Dialogue, Capabilities, Lists, and public reason: Continuing the Conversation*, cit..

¹³ R.TAGORE, *The Essential Tagore*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2014.

¹⁴ E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, cit., p. 15.

¹⁵ A. SMITH, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by A.L. MACFIE, D.D. RAPHAEL, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976.

¹⁶ E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, cit., p. 23.

¹⁷ I. KANT, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. (translated and edited by M. GREGOR, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

¹⁸ A. SEN, *The Idea of Justice*, London, Allen Lane, 2009; J. RAWLS, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1971 (rev. ed. 1999).

physical and mental disabilities...since the hypothesis of rough equality is deeply rooted in the social contract tradition in which Rawls situates himself”¹⁹. The capability approach is very different from what John Rawls termed ‘primary social goods’ (or ‘primary goods’) which are all-purpose means. In distinguishing itself from these alternatives the capability approach has broken with some orthodox ways of thinking.

David Leopold’s chapter discusses the associations between Marx and the capabilities approach. They are occasionally invoked but not so much explored. He admits that Marx²⁰, along with Adam Smith,²¹ has been considered a “forerunner” by Sen. A *substantive* affinity is found in the *human flourishing* concept. However “Marx remains rather on the margins”²², Leopold argues. Efforts for identifying some connections between Marx and the capability approach are “far from exhaustive”. The other Chapters (Sumner, Luigino Bruni, Suzumura) analyze the similarities and the differences between Sen, Smith, the Cambridge tradition, the Welfare Economics and the Social Choice Theory. No doubts that Sen’s approach differs from utilitarian views which identify the quality of life in terms of pleasure, happiness or the satisfaction of desires. It also differs from the perspectives which evaluate advantage in terms of the possession of resources, income, wealth. Some other chapters (Richardson, Arneson, Ibrahim) explore the links with political liberalism, individualism and the role of collectivities in expanding human capabilities. Very important is the focus on the multidimensionality of the capability approach.

Enrica Chiappero Martinetti is the editor of Part II, related to methods, measurement and empirical evidence. The twelve contributions included in this Part “exemplify the state -of-the-art debate on the operationalization of the CA and represent a good sample of consolidated methods applied to empirical investigations of the framework”²³.

¹⁹ E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, cit., p. 29.

²⁰ K. MARX, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. English trans., Moscow Progressive Publishers, 1977.

²¹ A. SMITH, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, cit.

²² E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, cit., p. 40.

²³ E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, cit., p. 246.

The first four chapters of this part focus on important methodological aspects with reference to social choice theory (Salles, Pattanaik and Xu) Game theory (van Hees), and welfare economics (Decancq, Schokkaert and Zuluaga). The connections between these theories and the capability approach are stronger than one would expect. The social choice theory, as a matter of facts, has been an important line of research also for Amartya Sen. He obtained the Nobel price “for his contribution to these theories”. In the new edition of *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* Sen has pointed out that various evaluative issues raised by the capability approach are a matter of Social Choice²⁴. Salles argues in his contribution that the capability approach is a very powerful instrument, for understanding what individual well-being is in comparison to social welfare. Its complexity, however, makes it difficult to formalize it with the usual tools of social sciences, and in particular of economics. The Pattanaik and Yongsheg Xu’s contribution is concerned with the measurement of an individual’s capability or freedom of choice in the functioning space. The aim of the van Hees’s chapter is to present a general framework for making a synthesis of the Sen’s version of the capability approach in comparison to the Nussbaum’s one. Sen claims that “a unique, canonical list of capabilities may be useful (for example, it can help in the fight for certain specific human rights ignoring other claims)”²⁵. Capability assessment can be used for different purposes (varying from poverty evaluation to the assessment of human rights or of human development), and public reasoning and discussion are necessary for selecting relevant capabilities and weighing them against each other in each context²⁶. Nussbaum, instead, claims that there is a universal list of central capabilities²⁷.

A second group of contributions focus on inequality. Kanbur argues

²⁴ A. SEN, *Collective Choice and Social Welfare*, expanded edition, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2017.

²⁵ A. SEN, *Foreword*, in E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), “The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach”, Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, University Printing House, 2020, p. XVIII.

²⁶ A. SEN, *Dialogue, Capabilities, Lists, and public reason: Continuing the Conversation*, cit..

²⁷ E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, cit., p. 293.

that the wide literature on the capability approach focuses mainly on outcomes in the functioning space, neglecting the opportunity space and its implications for equality. Tania Burchardt's chapter discusses how the capability approach make available tools which allow assessing multidimensional horizontal inequalities between individuals and/or groups. Vertical inequality, instead, in terms of income gaps, requires more research effort. Lambert and Subramanian's chapter is also focused on horizontal inequality. The authors discuss how social measures affect different socioeconomic groups in different way, raising the traditional "potential conflict between equality...and efficiency"²⁸. Finally, a third group of contributors examines the advances done in building indices based on the human development approach. These contributions offer "a neat, concise overview of the state of the debate on composite indices of human development and, as such, a good starting point for estimating future developments"²⁹. Sabina Alkire discusses the Alkire-Foster method for measuring multidimensional poverty. Stephan Klasen analyzes another important feature of inequality, the gender gap. The author argues that measuring this gap in the capabilities space is a very difficult and challenging task. Finally Jaya Krishnakumar "examines statistical and econometric models that have been particularly effective in accommodating the methodological features" of the capabilities approach³⁰.

Siddiqur Osmani is the editor of Part III dedicated to issues in public policy. "The capability approach has been applied in many diverse areas of social enquiry, enriching the understanding of many complex social problems providing new insight into the levers that might fruitfully be applied in order to address those problems"³¹. The topics range from education (Melanie Walker) to disability. It is worthwhile stressing the role of education in creating valuable human capabilities. No doubt that this approach plays an especially important role in shaping

²⁸ E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, cit., p. 250.

²⁹ E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, cit., p. 250.

³⁰ E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, cit., p. 250.

³¹ E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, cit., p. 498.

children's capabilities. The well-known weak equity axiom is discussed by Lorella Terzi. She stresses the importance of the conversion factors, that transform means in capabilities, in making a "fundamental difference to a discourse on disability at both analytical and policy levels"³². These factors play an especially important role in shaping children's capabilities. Mario Biggeri discusses the several reasons that justify the putting of "children's well-being and well-becoming" at the center of policy-maker's action. Income distribution remains a central issue in the capability approach. Income, however, plays an instrumental role as power over resources needed to obtain functioning as to be well nourished. An equitable distribution of income must be an important goal for public action. As Sen observed "relative deprivation in the space of income can lead to absolute deprivation in the space of capabilities"³³. A high level of inequality can translate into a high level of poverty and deprivation. Rolph van der Hoeven stresses how income inequality can restrict "agency for individuals and households to increase capabilities"³⁴. The capability approach in itself does not provide a full theory of distributive justice, but rather argues that the metric of distributive justice should be based on functionings and/or capabilities. The implications of the Sen's approach for human rights law and for law in general are "insightfully analyzed" by Katharine Gelber. The chapter by Sanjay Reddy and Adel Daoud offers a lucid exposition of the interconnections between the entitlement and the capability approach. As Séverine Deneulin and Augusto Zampini-Davies, observe, Christian teaching "can contribute towards formation of values that are compatible with the fundamental value premises associated with the capability approach"³⁵. Human rights, democratic setting and the compliance with the law are, finally, the other issues discussed in this third and final part of the Handbook.

The three parts of the Handbook offer a wide range of state-of-the-

³² E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, cit., p. 500.

³³ E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, cit., p. 501.

³⁴ E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, cit., p. 602.

³⁵ E. CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI, S. OSMANI, M. QIZILBASH (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, cit., p. 686.

art research and analysis examining the capabilities approach. Research and analysis relevant both on a theoretical and policy-oriented level. The volume's contributions invite to conduct further research based on and supported by the analysis presented in the volume. The interest in this research's field are many, already existing or in progress and to be further developed: ranging from economic theory to applied economics and from philosophy to political science.

Riassunto - L' *Handbook* curato da Enrica Chiappero Martinetti, Mozaffar Qizilbash e Siddiqur Osmani raccoglie in volume alcuni tra i più significativi studi sull'approccio delle *capacità*. Comprende un'introduzione all'impostazione formulata per la prima volta da Amartya Sen, e nuovi contributi in questo campo multidisciplinare da parte di studiosi molto noti come Martha Nussbaum. Amartya Sen ha sviluppato, perfezionato e difeso una linea di ricerca diretta ad approfondire concetti molto complessi come quelli di capacità, funzionamenti e libertà umane. Questa impostazione innovativa ha, successivamente,

stimolato un'ampia e crescente letteratura in molte discipline, in ambito sia teorico sia empirico sia di *policy*. Il volume comprende tanto capitoli introduttivi quanto analisi approfondite delle questioni filosofiche, concettuali e teoriche che costituiscono il nucleo centrale della ricerca più avanzata sul tema delle capacità. Il volume costituisce quindi un importante strumento per gli studiosi che si avvicinano per la prima volta a tale approccio, nonché per i ricercatori da tempo impegnati in una vasta gamma di discipline: gli studi sullo sviluppo, le analisi di economia politica, gli studi di genere, di politologia e di filosofia politica.