Module 3 - Critical Thinking Assignment: The Capability Approach

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The capacity approach is a framework for evaluating well-being and social arrangements (institutions, structures, norms, and relationships between society and individuals within). The approach was developed by Amartya Sen and furthered by Ingrid Robeyns. It claims that the freedom to achieve well-being is morally important, and well-being is the capacity of people to function (Robeyns & Byskov, 2011). Additionally, the approach evaluates social justice, individual well-being, and development by focusing on what people are actually able to do and be, their "capabilities" and achieved "functionings." This differs from the traditional approach where well-being is measured by like income or resources, a measurement of means rather than individuals' capacities and functionality -self-worth-. This essay provides an overview of the capacity approach, addresses the approach's skeptics' concerns, and how it can be used as a yardstick to evaluate prosperity and progress.

Capacity Approach Overview

The capability approach argues that true freedom is not just having the right to do something but also having the ability to do it. The approach can be defined as "an intellectual discipline that gives a central role to the evaluation of a person's achievements and freedoms in terms of his or her actual ability to do the different things a person has reason to value doing or being" (Sen, 2009, p. 16). The "doings" and "beings" can range from achieving well-being by meeting basic physical needs to achieving social goals such as participating in politics or having meaningful relationships (Robeyns & Byskov, 2011). This introduces the key capability approach concepts of "functionings," which are the various things a person can do or be, and "capabilities," which are the real opportunities a person has to achieve these functionings. The list below provides the different components of the capacity approach:

- Functionings: These are the "beings and doings" that constitute a person's life (Robeyns, 2017, p.38).

- Capabilities: These represent a person's real freedom or opportunity to achieve valuable functionings (Robeyns, 2017, p.39).

- Conversion Factors: Individuals differ in their ability to convert resources into capabilities (Robeyns, 2017, p.45).

- Agency: Is when, "someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well" (Robeyns, 2017, p.63).

In other words, the capability approach is a framework for understanding well-being, agency, and social justice. The framework focuses on individuals' capacities rather than traditional economic measures such as income or resources, that is, an individual's wealth.

Worries of the Skeptics

Some critics argue that the capability approach doesn't bring anything new, that it just repackages existing ideas from social science (Robeyns, 2017). Other, like John Rawls, one of the most influential political philosophers of the 20th century, argues that the approach is "unworkable" because it does not provide precise definitions and operational guidelines. Additionally, skeptics question the practical application of such an approach in policymaking and measuring individuals' capabilities can be complex and challenging, to practically impossible. Others worry that it requires a level of social and economic equality that is unrealistic or undesirable. Although measurement of individuals' capabilities may be challenging, it can be argued that the approach is flexible and adaptable enough that qualitative

measurement and comparative analyses can still be done and provide valuable insights (Gasper, 2010).

Scope and Development

While initially focused on individuals' well-being, the capacity approach has evolved to include a wider range of social and political issues (Robeyns, 2017). The approach is now applied to many fields such as development economics, where it is used to evaluate strategies to reduce poverty; social policy, where it is used to help design welfare programs; and in environmental sustainability, where it helps evaluate the impact of unfavorable environments on human well-being.

The Capability Approach as a Yardstick

The capability approach can be used as a yardstick to evaluate prosperity and progress. It is an alternative to traditional economic indicators like Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or Gross National Product (GNP) per capita. The GDP approach has limitations, it is maybe useful for measuring economic production, but it fails to measure individuals' well-being. It does not measure inequalities or social and economic progress (Robeyns, 2017). For example, GDP can increase while a significant portion of the population is in poverty and cannot access essential services (Wells, n.d.). One economic metric does not fully capture the well-being of individuals, such as health, education, and social inclusion or participation, which is the core of the capability approach. Thus, it can be argued that the capability approach can be used as an alternative or in addition to the GDP, as a yardstick for evaluating prosperity and progress, by measuring individuals' ability to achieve the kind of life they value.

The capability approach can play a substantial role in evaluating the potential of technology. For example, telehealth has improved healthcare access for individuals in remote

areas or those with limited mobility, evaluating the impact of telehealth on those could be done using the capability approach by measuring the improved or diminished capabilities of those individuals to be healthy, and to access health information and medicinal treatments. Another example is the rise of surveillance technologies, which brings privacy concerns, often hindering how much control individuals have over some aspects of their personal information (uCertify, 2025). The capability approach could help evaluate whether these surveillance technologies improve or diminish individuals' capabilities to achieve a life they value. Additionally, the approach can be crucial in assessing the impact that AI use and implementation is starting to have on individuals' well-being. For example, in the field of employment, AI implementations could lead to job displacement and diminish the ability for individuals to earn a living. On the other hand, AI could empower individuals to be productive or more creative, and to pursue new and more meaningful forms of work. In other words, the capability approach could help policymakers and AI developers evaluate whether these changes driven by AI are actually improving people's lives, not just boosting economic statistics or big-tech profits.

Conclusion

The capacity approach is a framework for assessing human well-being, social arrangements, and social progress. It helps not only to quantify but also to understand well-being, agency, and social justice. Although the approach has some limitations, it can be used as a yardstick to evaluate the impact of technologies, policies, and institutions on individuals' abilities to achieve a life they value and overall well-being. With the emergence of advanced AI, the capability approach is a crucial tool for evaluating the impact of AI on individuals' capabilities, agency, and overall well-being. This framework enables policymakers, developers, and society as a whole to

make informed and ethical decisions that prioritize human needs over purely technological or

economic gains.

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