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Capability Approach of Amartya Sen: An Incentive to Humanization

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Abstract: The capability approach is on of Amartya Sen's most significant contributions to philosophy and social sciences. His writings on the capability approach are not only of theoretical interest on their own, but also provide concepts used in his work on social choice, freedoms, and development. Moreover, the capability has practical relevance for policy design and assessment. The Capability Approach attempts to address various concerns that Sen had about contemporary approaches to the evaluation of well-being, namely: Individuals can differ greatly in their abilities to convert the same resources into valuable functionings ('beings' and 'doings'). People can internalize the harshness of their circumstances so that they do not desire what they can never expect to achieve. Whether or not people take up the options they have, the fact that they do have valuable options is significant. Reality is complicated and evaluation should reflect that complexity rather than take a short-cut

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by excluding all sorts of information from consideration in advance.

Keywords: Capability, Agency, Incentive, Well-being, Self-determination, Functionings, Being and doing, Freedom

Introduction

This paper aims to provide an overview of the conceptual and normative foundations of the ideal of agency within Sen's capability approach. It is adapted from a longer, two-part essay in which Ingrid Robeyns and David A. Crocker address the Sen's concept of capability as well as that of agency (Crocker and Royeyns 2010). In the present essay, I focus on the nature, value, and role of agency in the capability approach and relating it with the incentive dimension. How the whole approach turns out to be an incentive initiation for an agent to operate in our world.

Well-Being and Agency

Sen conceives of *well-being* and *agency* as two distinguishable but equally important and interdependent aspects of human life, each of which should be taken into account in our understanding of how individuals and groups are doing and each of which calls for respect (Sen 1985a: 169-221; 1992: 39-42, 56-72; 1999: 189-91). The centrality of these two concepts in Sen's broader approach to evaluation in the field of well-being and development is suggested by the title of two essays: his 1984 Dewey Lectures on "Well-being, Agency and Freedom" (Sen 1985a) and his another essay: "Agency and Well-Being: The Development Agenda" (Sen 1995). To understand human beings, either individually or collectively, we should understand how well their lives are going and who or what controls them. Before explicating Sen's concepts of well-being and agency further, however, we must attend to a cross cutting distinction, namely, achievement and freedom:

> A person's position in a social arrangement can be judged in two different perspectives, viz. (1) the actual achievement, and (2) the freedom to achieve. Achievement is concerned with what we *manage* to accomplish, and freedom with the *real opportunity* that we have to accomplish what we value. The two need not be congruent (Sen 1992: 31).

Figure 1 shows Sen's two cross-cutting distinctions: (i) well-being and agency, and (ii) achievement and freedom. With the help of Figure 1, we explain the basic ideas:

	Well-being	Agency
Achievements	Well-being Achievements	Agency Achievements
Freedom	Well-being Freedoms (Capabilities)	Agency Freedom

As we shall see in more detail subsequently, in his initial account of agency, set forth in articles and books through 1992, Sen describes agency achievement in the following way: "a person's agency achievement refers to the realization of goals and values she has reasons to pursue, whether or not they are connected with her own well-being" (1992: 56; see also 1985a: 203-204, 207; 1999: 19). A person's well-being achievements, in contrast, concern not "the totality of her considered goals and objectives" but rather only her "wellness," "personal advantage," or "personal welfare." This state of a person, her beings and doings, may be the outcome of her own or of other people's decisions and actions or these achievements may be the result of causes internal or external to the person. Sen uses the term "functionings" to designate well-being (and ill-being) achievements: They are "the state of a person—in particular the

various things he or she manages to do or be in leading a life" (1993: 31):

A person's well-being, for Sen, consists not only of her *current* states and activities (functionings), which may include the *activity* of choosing, but also of her freedom or real opportunities to function in ways alternative to her current functioning. Sen designates these real opportunities or freedoms for functioning as "capabilities." According to the capability approach, the ends of well-being, justice, and development should be conceptualized, *inter alia*, in terms of people's *capabilities to function*, that is, their effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities that they want to engage in, and be whom they want to be. These "activities … or states of existence or being" (Sen 1985a: 197), and the freedom to engage in them, together constitute what makes a life valuable. The distinction between functionings and capabilities is between the realized and the effectively possible, in other words, between achievements, on the one hand, and freedoms or valuable options from which one can choose, on the other. Examples of functionings, we have seen, are working, resting, being literate, being healthy, being part of a community, and so forth. What is ultimately important is that people have the freedoms or valuable opportunities (capabilities) for these functionings, hence the real freedom to lead the kinds of lives they want to lead, to do what they want to do, and to be the person they want to be. Once they effectively have these substantive opportunities, they can choose those options which they value most. 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 these latter options.

A person's own well-being, whether functionings or capabilities or both, are often part and even all of a person's objectives. But one's own well-being may not be a person's exclusive goal, for she may also pursue goals that reduce her well-being and even end her life. The concept of agency marks what a person does or can do to realize any of her goals and not only ones that

advance or protect her well-being. Agency, like well-being, has two dimensions, namely, agency *achievements* and the *freedom* for those achievements. As agents, persons individually and collectively decide and achieve their goals – whether altruistic or not –in the world, and as agents they have more or less freedom and power to exercise their agency: "Agency freedom is freedom to achieve whatever the person, as a responsible agent, decides he or she should achieve" (Sen 1985a: 204). Although agency "is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political, and economic opportunities available to us" (Sen 1999: xi-xii), not only do people have more or less freedom to decide, act, and make a difference in the world but social arrangements can also extend the reach of agency achievements and agency freedom.

Agency

Sen's concept of agency – although often misunderstood or neglected by followers and critics alike – has come to be crucial in his solution to the problem of the selection and weighting of capabilities and, more generally, in his social-scientific and normative outlook. It is important to ask not only what it means for an individual's life to go well or for a group to be doing well, which capabilities and functionings are most important, but also who should decide these questions, how they should do so, and who should act to effect change. If well-being freedoms and functionings were the only items with normative importance, it would not matter who decided what was important or the process by which these decisions were made or enacted. With the concept of agency, however, Sen (1999: 11, 53, 281) signals an "agent-oriented view" in which individuals and groups should decide these matters for themselves, "effectively shape their own destiny and help each other," (Sen 1999: 11) and be "active participant[s] in change, rather than … passive and docile recipient[s] of instructions or of dispensed assistance" (Sen, 1999: 281).

Self-Determination

Even though an agent gets what she wants, she has not exercised agency unless she herself decides to perform the act in question. When external circumstances or internal compulsions or addictions *cause* the agent's behavior or when other agents force or manipulate her, the person does not exercise agency even though the she gets what she wants: "There is clearly a violation of freedom [i.e., agency freedom]" when an agent "is being forced to do exactly what she would have chosen to do anyway" (Sen 2004: 331). When the agent is coerced ("Your money or your life") in contrast to being forced (being carried to the paddy wagon), there is some – but minimal – agency freedom.

Reason-Orientation and Deliberation

Not just any behavior that an agent "emits" is an agency achievement, for acting on whim (let alone impulse) is behavior not under the agent's control. Sometimes Sen says "free" or "active" agency to characterize internally-caused behavior that is freely self-determined.

Agency takes place when a person acts on purpose and for a purpose, goal, or reason. Such activity Sen and co-author Jean Drèze sometimes calls "reasoned agency" (Drèze and Sen 2002: 19) or "critical agency" (Drèze and Sen 2002: 258) because it involves more or less scrutiny of and deliberation about reasons and values: "What is needed is not merely freedom and power to act, but also freedom and power to question and reassess the prevailing norms and values" (Drèze and Sen 2002: 258). The agent's decision is not for *no* reason, based on a whim or impulse, but is for *some* reason or to achieve some goal, regardless whether that goal is self-regarding or other-regarding. The more that the agent values the options, the more is she able to exercise agency; choosing to surrender money at gunpoint rather than die is an exercise of agency but a minimal one.

The Value of Agency

Why is agency valuable and how valuable is it? Sen believes that agency is valuable in three ways. It is *intrinsically* valuable: we have reason to value agency for its own sake (although the exercise of agency may be used for trivial or nefarious actions). In defending the intrinsic value of agency, we may only be able to appeal to what Rawls (1971: section 9) calls a "considered judgment" that, all things considered, it is better to act than be acted upon either as someone else's tool or a pawn of circumstance. Isaiah Berlin captures this judgment in the following:

> I wish to be the instrument of my own, not other men's, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object . . . . I wish to be a somebody, not nobody; a doer—deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted on by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them (Berlin, 1969: 131; quoted in Reich 2002: 100).

Some agency-theorists seek additional justification by explaining agency's intrinsic value in relation to our conception of persons as morally responsible (Sen 1999: 288), worthy of respect (Berlin: "a somebody, not nobody"), or having the capacity to "have or strive for a meaningful life" (Nozick 1974: 50).

Agency is also *instrumentally* valuable as a means to good consequences. If people are involved in making their own decisions and running their own lives, their actions are more likely to result, when they so aim and act, in achievement of their well-being freedoms, such as being able to be healthy and well-nourished. Moreover, when individuals are agents in a joint enterprise rather than mere "patients" or pawns, they are more likely sustainably and loyally to contribute to the joint action.

Finally, agency is, what Sen calls, "*constructively"* valuable,[1] for in agency freedom the agent freely scrutinizes, decides on, and shapes its values. Included in the constructive value of agency

is agent's selecting, weighing, and trading-off capabilities and other values (see also Crocker 2006 and 2008: chapter 9).

The Traditional Economic Literature on Incentives

Economic theories of incentives and particularly agency theory traditionally assume that the more an individual is paid the higher his effort, even if there is decreasing returns. It is therefore possible for a principal to define his/her policy in terms of the relation he/she establishes between the wage or bonus given to the agent and the corresponding level of effort. It is also assumed that punishment (e.g. a fine) or threat of wage cuts or dismissal permits to avoid some deviant behaviors such as free-riding. Finally, even if it is costly, monitoring is considered as an efficient means to control agents' behavior and address it in the desired direction. When asymmetry of information is assumed, it is possible to build and an optimal (if not first-best) contract between the parties despite the fact that the interests of the agent (the worker) and the principal (the employer) are not aligned. But even in this case, the basic assumption is not removed. This assumption also applies if one extends the analytical framework in order to deal with teams instead of a single agent (Holmtröm, 1982), with complementary incentives or with multi-tasked agents (Holmström & Milgrom, 1991, Bai & Xu, 2001). In the case of teams, two novel features have to be introduced in the usual principal-agent setting. The first one refers to the free-rider problem, since agents may have some interest not to participate to the contribution of the group as much as he/she would do if he/she were alone. The second one is competition among agents. In broad outline, the multiagent setting implies new roles for the principal, in particular to administer incentive schemes that do not balance the budget since it is the only way to achieve efficiency in the presence of externalities (Holmström, 1982). In the case of complementary incentives, for instance, a combination of asset ownership (profit sharing), contingent rewards (pay for performance) and job design, the problem that arises is that exogenous variables can modify the co-movements

of the incentives that are endogenous to the model. In their seminal paper, Holmström & Milgrom (1994) provide a way, by using the properties of supermodular functions[2], to appraise the efficiency of the combination of those incentives. This theoretical framework is completely in lines with empirical results coming mainly from management sciences. Furthermore, it is an appropriate approach because it stresses first the fact that an organization is based on a bundle of incentives and second, that this bundle is efficient depending on the kind of combinations it supports. A similar kind of conception is applied by the Federal Acquisition Institute, which holds that the system of incentives shall include provisions that:

(A) relate pay to performance (including the extent to which the performance of personnel in such workforce contributes to achieving the cost goals, schedule goals, and performance), and

(B) provide for consideration, in personnel evaluations and promotion decisions, of the extent to which the performance of personnel in such workforce contributes to achieving such cost goals, schedule goals, and performance goals.

Direct incentives (payment) and indirect ones (promotion) are here seen as complementary.[3] Concerning the problem of multi-tasked agents, Bai and Xu (2001) use Holmström and Milgrom's framework in order to analyze the incentives system that need to be applied to CEOs in a multitask context. According to Holmström and Milgrom (1991) introducing the assumption of multi-task contexts in a principal-agent problem permits to explain why generally employment contracts do involve mute incentives and favors fixed wages even when "good, objective output measures are available and agents are highly responsive to incentive pay" and loose ownership patterns even when contracts are complete (full account of all observable variables is taken, court enforcement is perfect). The intuition is that in multi-tasks contexts, if contingent task incentives are implemented, agents might concentrate their efforts on those specific tasks at the detriment of other complementary tasks. In sum, these

more sophisticated versions of the principal-agent approach do not challenge the idea that ceteris paribus direct incentives are efficient in terms of the effort they induce. This proposition is however a two strong assumption and has been challenged by psychologists and more recently by economists.

The Importance of How Incentives are Implemented

The importance of how incentives are implemented is a recurrent conclusion of the psychological literature. From an economic perspective, Frey (1997) points out that agents' perceptions of the incentives scheme that are implemented in firms or organizations may be either controlling or informing, depending on the extent of differentiation made between agents. When differentiation is low, i.e. when all agents are treated the same, those who have above-average work morale feel that their competence is not recognized and therefore adjust their intrinsic motivation downwards. At the opposite, when differentiation is high, i.e., when the principal makes explicit effort to adjust rewards according to the agents' presumed level of work ethics, intrinsic motivation is enhanced (Frey, 1997: 433). In the same vein, Frey, Benz and Stutzer (2004) underline the importance of how rewards are implemented, by advocating for the consideration of an additional source of utility (different from the usual outcome-oriented instrumental economic notion of utility), which they call procedural utility which refers to the "noninstrumental pleasures and displeasures of processes" (Frey, Benz & Stutzer 2004: 378). In everyday parlance, this expresses the idea that people attach importance not only to the result of their actions (material rewards) but also to the processes by which it is obtained. In particular, there are two sources of procedural utility that are relevant for our discussion on incentives and motivation. The first one derives from institutions and concerns the distribution of political rights (e.g., the presence of trade unions, upward mobility) and how allocative and redistributive decisions are taken in organizations (profit-sharing devices, remuneration schemes, unemployment benefits, health care) (Ibid. pp. 382-83).

The second one is involved in the interaction between agents and refers to different kinds of pro-social behavior (norm sharing, preference for fairness or even self-reputational motives). Note that there is no obvious link between pro-social behavior and intrinsic motivation. One might work hard at a task in order to gain social approval. Such work, undertaken as a means to an end, is typically deficit motivated behavior, in which there is a reward as a consequence of effort to reach a goal where the deficit is reduced. For Deci and his co-authors, this would correspond to situations where substitute needs such as the desire for social recognition emerge as a consequence of unsatisfied basic psychological needs. By contrast, intrinsic motivation tends more to be appetitive, new information arousing a slight interest leading to an appetite for more.

Conclusion

In the longer essay, from which this paper is adapted, I have provided an overview of Sen's notions of capability and agency. Both agency and those capabilities (and functionings) that we have reason to value are intrinsically good as well as instrumentally good in relation to each other. When the incentive attached with is more people put in more effort to enrich their capabilities. If people exercise their own agency in deciding on and realizing their well-being freedoms (capabilities), they are more likely to realize well-being achievements (functionings), such as a reduction of deprivation, than if they depend on luck or on the development programs that others provide. Moreover, when people make their own decisions, run their own lives, and make a mark on the world, this exercise of agency is often accompanied by a sense of satisfaction – a component of well-being achievement (Alkire forthcoming: 5; Sen 1985a: 187).

If people have and realize capabilities, they have reason to value, such as health, nutritional well-being, education, and valuable employment, they are more likely to have the ability to decide on and the power to achieve what they want. It is difficult

if not impossible for people suffering from severe deprivation to be able to run their own lives and help decide the direction of their communities. The more people are responsible for their own lives, the more they can and should "be in charge of their own well-being; it is for them to decide how to use their capabilities" (Sen 1999: 288).

Without agency freedom, without "the liberty of acting as citizens who matter and whose voices counts," people run the risk of "living as well-fed, well-clothed, and well-entertained vassals" (Drèze and Sen 2002: 288). Without an adequate level of well-being freedom and achievement, people are unable to realize their potential as agents. Because of the important linkages between well-being and agency, there is good reason to advocate an "agency-focused capability approach."

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