

Martha C. Nussbaum
Creating Capabilities.
The Human Development Approach
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Sergio Filippo Magni

1. *Creating Capabilities* is conceived by Martha Craven Nussbaum as an introduction to her ethical and political theory, usually called “capability approach” or (as the subtitle of the book reads) “human development approach”. This is one of the most important theories of social justice developed in recent years. It has been proposed since the early 70’s by the Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, and has found in the American philosopher an original prosecution in many respects.

The book aims to highlight Nussbaum’s version of the capability approach and to stress similarities and differences with respect to Sen’s version. Sen’s and Nussbaum’s views are similar in several aspects: the centrality of capabilities and functionings (public actions ought to provide individuals with the capabilities to achieve worthwhile functionings); the identification of capabilities with social freedoms (according to a positive concept of freedom) and with moral rights; the definition of well-being based on capabilities and functionings; the arguments against the views that identify well-being with an agent’s mental states (such as utilitarianism), or with the possession of resources or the high gross domestic product; and, finally, the meta-ethical justification of the theory itself. According to this justification, fundamental capabilities are identified by a reference to the normative concept of human dignity and not to the descriptive concept of human nature, as in Nussbaum’s early works: «the capabilities approach - she now writes – is not a theory of what human nature is, and it does not read norms off from innate human nature» (p. 28). This position is classifiable as a constructivist meta-ethics, inspired by the Rawlsian method of reflective equilibrium, and it is now explicitly endorsed by Sen too, who has recently clarified his ethical methodology («I will take reasoned scrutiny from different perspectives to be an essential part of the demands of objectivity for ethical and political convictions» (Sen 2009, p. 45)).

2. Yet, despite these similarities, Sen’s and Nussbaum’s versions of the capa-

bility approach are not fully coincident. Nussbaum calls her version a «normative version», because it outlines the details of a liberal theory of justice based on capabilities. This version tries to define a list of ten fundamental capabilities, conceived as a threshold of fundamental moral rights, and it is explicitly distinguished from Sen's «comparative version», a version mainly aimed at a careful measurement of the level of well-being and quality of life in different countries, without further articulations of the normative theory. Moreover, in Nussbaum's view, the general ethical framework of the approach is deontological («the capabilities approach has close links to deontology» p. 94), while according to Sen that framework is consequentialist (capabilities and functionings are the main goals of public choices). Finally, Nussbaum extends the theory in the direction of an inter-specific justice that acknowledges the moral obligation to respect fundamental animal entitlements, an extension that is not made explicit by Sen.

Another difference is in how functionings and capabilities are conceived: that is, in the very kernel of the theory. Sen defines functionings as the various things that someone *does* or *is*. According to him, functionings present dynamic as well static aspects: they are «activities (like eating or reading or seeing), or states of existence or being, e. g., being well nourished, being free from malaria, not being ashamed by the poverty of one's clothing or shoes» (Sen 1985, p. 197). Moreover, according to Sen, functionings are not only states achieved, directly or indirectly, by the agent, but also states achieved without any contribution from her part: an authoritarian government anti-epidemic policy, realized without any direct or indirect participation of the agent, gives her the functioning of being free from malaria (Sen 1993, 119).

Functionings are closely related to capabilities: «capability stands to functioning as the possible stands to the actual» (Williams 1987, p. 96). The concept of capability has a wide use: it refers either to favorable external conditions (what can be called an external *opportunity* that may be removed by obstacles or by a lack of means), or to internal conditions (what can be called a *capacity* or an *ability*, that is removed by a lack of specific mental or physical conditions). The case of someone who has a physical handicap (which is the most common example given by Sen for a lack of capability) shows the centrality of the sense of capability as a capacity or ability.

Sen does not explicitly distinguish these two meanings of capability; yet, this distinction is crucial, because opportunity and ability present different logical aspects. In the case of *opportunity*, the so-called 'axiom of possibility' is true; this logical axiom states that *ab esse ad posse valet consequentia*, and means that if something happens then it is possible (namely, that we have the opportunity to do it). Yet, this axiom is false in the case of *ability*, since doing something does

not imply the ability to do it: if I am a beginner darts player, and my dart hits the bull's eye by chance, this does not imply my ability to hit the bull's eye, since I may not be able to repeat that performance (Kenny 1975 p. 136).

The identification of capability with an opportunity as well as an ability enables Sen to establish a close connection between capability and functioning. Someone has the external opportunity to do something, provided that he is not constrained or without the necessary means, even when she has not internal ability to do it. Thus, we may have a functioning even though we lack the corresponding ability but we have only the corresponding opportunity. Therefore, any activity is, generally speaking, a functioning related to a capability. It is this wider meaning of the notion of capability that enables Sen to conceive functionings and capabilities in such a closely related way. As a consequence, the axiom of possibility is stated for capability in general: «if one *is* achieving a functioning in the relevant sense, then one does have the *capability* to function, in *that* sense» (Sen 1987, p. 111).

Unlike Sen, Nussbaum explicitly distinguishes between different forms of capabilities. On one hand, there are 'internal capabilities', which refer to physical or mental conditions (and that are the development of fundamental capabilities, possessed at a potential and innate stage, called 'basic capabilities'). On the other hand, there are 'combined capabilities', which indicate internal capabilities combined with external conditions. Combined capabilities are internal too, since they are capabilities, but combined with external conditions necessary for the exercise of that function. Such a distinction is useful to avoid a possible source of confusion, distinguishing clearly between the opportunity aspect and the ability aspect of a capability. In this way, Nussbaum resolves the ambiguity of Sen's use of the term 'capability'.

3. Nevertheless, a usually neglected difference between the two authors still persists in the reference and extension of the notions of capability and functioning.

As we have seen, Sen explicitly maintains that someone may have a capability even when she lacks an internal ability. By contrast, Nussbaum implicitly maintains that, in order to have a combined capability, one needs an internal ability: «because combined capabilities are defined as internal capabilities plus the social/political/economic conditions in which functioning can actually be chosen, it is not possible conceptually to think of a society producing combined capabilities without producing internal capabilities» (p. 22). There is no combined capability where there is no internal capability, and therefore no ability. In this way, compared to Sen, Nussbaum reduces the extension of what a capability is: to ensure favourable external conditions to someone without

giving her an effective ability is not giving her a combined capability, and, therefore, it is not giving her a capability.

Like Sen, Nussbaum maintains a close connection between capabilities and functionings: «functionings are beings and doings that are the outgrowths or realizations of capabilities» (p. 25). If there is no capability, then there is no functioning. Yet, unlike Sen, by reducing the extension of what a capability is, Nussbaum also reduces the extension of what a functioning is. Nussbaum agrees with Sen that functioning is what a person can do or be, but because of Nussbaum's more literal conception of capability, what a person does without having the corresponding ability does not count as a functioning. Unlike Sen, an anti-epidemic policy realized without any direct or indirect participation of the agent cannot be considered as a functioning of the agent herself.

Therefore, in the capability approach, several items are included in the sphere of capabilities and functionings. On the one hand, the term 'capabilities' refers to internal abilities as well as to external opportunities. On the other hand, the term 'functionings' refers to activities that one performs because she has the corresponding abilities, as well as - in Sen - activities that one performs without possessing the corresponding abilities, but having only the opportunity. Furthermore, the term 'functionings' refers to states of affairs realized by the person, as well as - in Sen - to states of affairs realized without any contribution from her part.

4. In this way the capability approach shows, in its very kernel, a possible source of confusion. The problem is not only a linguistic one, a problem of better or worse terminology. An ambiguous formulation usually reveals substantial problems. In this case, listing all the items mentioned above under the label 'capabilities and functionings', without distinguishing them clearly in the field of evaluation, may lead to neglecting possible sources of conflict within the theory. That is to say, it may lead to paying no attention to the fact that (in the sphere of capability) capacities and opportunities may be in conflict, or that (in the sphere of functioning) there may be a contrast between actions performed by the agent and states of affairs realized by others.

As an example of such a kind of conflict, we can use an imaginary reference to a capability to function, sometimes referred to by Sen: the capability to ride a bicycle. We may imagine a society completely composed of cyclists that assesses the capability of riding bicycles as one of the fundamental capabilities. In such a society we have to enhance this relevant capability, but that enhancement can be done in conflicting ways. We can ensure the capability to ride a bicycle using our scarce financial resources to organize public training that will give people the *ability* to ride a bicycle. Or we can use our resources to buy and

distribute bicycles among people, or again to build public cycle-lanes, giving people the *opportunity* to ride a bicycle. All these things are part of the notion of a capability to ride a bicycle. Nevertheless, the financial resources may not be enough to do all these things together. Thus, we have to choose which part of the capability of riding a bicycle is more important.

Accordingly, the capability approach should not be limited to selecting worthwhile functionings and capabilities. It should also select which different conceptions of capability and functioning should be preferred in cases of conflict between them. Yet, since the distinction among these different conceptions of capability and functioning is not drawn, such a conflict is not grasped, and that selection cannot be achieved.

References

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