226

Two Versions of the Capability Approach and Their Respective Implications for Democratic Education

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As instances in which the capability approach to well-being and justice is applied to education continue to increase in both quantity and sophistication, it is imperative that we get clear on an essential difference that appears between two main versions of that approach: That version demonstrated in the work of Amartya Sen and that demonstrated in the work of Martha Nussbaum. Sen's 1979 lecture "Equality of What?" laid some important groundwork for the capability approach and introduced some of its key terms and concepts; he has continued to develop that groundwork in the thirty-plus years since.[1] Nussbaum has done her own extraordinary work in more thoroughly extending the approach from its original grounding in economics to more generally political and philosophical contexts. Sen and Nussbaum, of course, have also worked collaboratively on the development of the capability approach, and in many important ways their thinking about the approach itself and its possibilities in various contexts overlaps.[2] But there remains a key component of the approach on which they explicitly disagree: The formation (or not) of a specific list of capabilities. Nussbaum has been one of the strongest proponents of such a list while Sen has remained decidedly cool to the idea of a prescribed and fixed list of capabilities.

In this essay, I aim to flesh out this key difference between Sen and Nussbaum and to give particular attention to the implications that their different approaches to capabilities lists have for education. Drawing on the original work of both thinkers as well as the work of scholars influenced by them, I attempt to make some initial determinations regarding which thinker's version of the capability approach is more appropriate to a specifically democratic education concerned with things like empowerment, agency, and the cultivation of skills required for participation in political deliberations and processes. To begin, however, a brief overview of the capability approach is necessary.

THE CAPABILITY APPROACH

One of the key characteristics of the capability approach is how it measures human well-being relative to other, more traditional measures. Sen's own words are a useful starting point:

> The capability approach to a person's advantage is concerned with evaluating it in terms of his or her actual ability to achieve various valuable functionings as a part of living. The corresponding approach to social advantage — for aggregative appraisal as well as for the choice of institutions and policy — takes the set of individual capabilities as constituting an indispensable and central part of the relevant informational base of such evaluation.[3]

From the perspective of the capability approach, traditional measures of well-being such as preference satisfaction, income, and even Rawlsian primary goods — the broadest and most promising of these three traditional measures — are insufficient

in that their information bases are too narrow and they fail to some degree to account for or be sensitive to variations in actual persons. The capability approach, on the other hand, considers the most important measure of well-being and equality to be what people are *effectively able to do and be* (that is, their capabilities or freedoms) rather than what they *have*. It seeks to measure well-being from a much broader information base by taking into consideration the relevant circumstances that enable or make difficult or prevent altogether the *conversion* of preferences, income, primary goods, and the like "into the person's ability to promote her ends."[4] In other words, the capability approach measures well-being on the basis of "the *actual living* that people manage to achieve (or going beyond that, on the *freedom to achieve actual livings* that one can have reason to value)" (*DF*, 73).

The phrases "actual living" and "freedom to achieve actual livings" point to a distinction between two terms that are essential to a deeper understanding of the capability approach: functionings and capabilities. In drawing the distinction, it is helpful again to be guided by Sen's own words: "The concept of 'functionings' … reflects the various things a person may value doing or being" (*DF*, 75). These *functionings*, Sen says, can range from basic and elementary ones (like "being adequately nourished and free from avoidable disease") to more complex beings and doings (like "being able to take part in the life of the community and having self-respect") (*DF*, 75). The related concept of *capabilities* "refers to the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for [a person] to achieve. Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles)" (*DF*, 75). For example, consider, as Sen asks us to do, two people — one an affluent person who decides to fast for some political or religious cause, and the other an impoverished person who simply cannot afford food. Both persons are likely to be achieving a similar state of functioning, that is, both are falling short of *being* well-nourished and *doing* the things a well-nourished person can do. Yet, we would not consider their well-being to be equal. The two have very different "capability sets:" "the first can choose [that is, is free and has the capability to choose] to eat well and be well nourished in a way that the second cannot" (*DF*, 75).

To complete this brief introduction to the capability approach and to set up the next section of this essay, we must also consider one of the strongest criticisms of Sen's particular version of the capability approach: The "incomplete" state in which he has left it (and is content to continue leaving it). As Sabina Alkire has pointed out, Sen is more interested in showing how the approach can be "shared by persons of diverging, even contradictory, philosophical systems" than he is in specifying the approach to any great degree.[5] Alkire finds this to be one of the greatest and most important *advantages* of the capability approach. But all do not agree. Many have found this perceived incompleteness to be the approach's greatest *weakness*, the weakness that prevents it from being easily put to use or operationalized, in educational or other contexts. The criticisms over the perceived impracticable nature of the approach (as Sen has developed it) are, generally speaking, three: first, Sen gives little indication as to which capabilities people have "reason to value";

second, Sen offers little or no help in devising a systematic process by which we can determine which capabilities people have "reason to value" or handle situations in which such values conflict; and third, he has provided no means by which we can rank or evaluate any capabilities or measure the changes in capability levels that various economic, social, or other development-based initiatives may bring about.

One way that many — though certainly not all — of Sen's critics have attempted to rectify these perceived shortcomings is to develop a specific list of capabilities that can help make the approach more practicable and concrete. Nussbaum, for example, one of the strongest proponents of such a list and, with Sen, a leading voice regarding the capability approach, criticizes Sen for never specifying a fixed list of central capabilities and describing how it could be used in generating specific political principles; she also declares her intention to go beyond Sen by articulating "an account of how the capabilities, together with the idea of a threshold level of capabilities, can provide a basis for central constitutional principles that citizens have a right to demand from their government."[6] Nussbaum's list has become one of the most recognizable lists of central capabilities. It is the nature and creation of that list (and, more generally, others like it and the whole notion of a list itself) that the next section aims primarily to examine.

Nussbaum and Sen: Specifying (or Not) a List of Capabilities

Both the creation of Nussbaum's list and her desire to see it used as a "basis for central constitutional principles" are informed by a particular conception of personhood. For Nussbaum, personhood focuses on *dignity*, characterized by reason but also by our natural sociability and our animality. By sociability, she means a kind of Aristotelian tendency toward social and political existence as a source of fulfillment; by animality, a kind of vulnerability that renders us "needy" in a way that gives occasion for compassion and makes us more human.[7] To put it another way, she insists "that need and capacity, rationality and animality, are thoroughly interwoven, and that the dignity of the human being is the dignity of a needy enmattered being" (*FJ*, 278). And so, based on this conception of the person, Nussbaum constructs her "list of ten capabilities as central requirements of a life with dignity" (*FJ*, 75). Any person forced to live with anything less than the minimum threshold of all ten capabilities cannot be said to be living a life that is truly worthy of human dignity. For that reason, she allows no possibility for trade-offs between the ten capabilities: "The list is, emphatically, a list of *separate components*. We cannot satisfy the need for one of them by giving a larger amount of another one. All are of central importance and all are distinct in quality."[8] She includes the following central capabilities: Life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; control over one's environment (both political and material control) (*FJ*, 76–78). If a society is to be just, a guaranteed threshold level of these capabilities must be the aim of its political goals and its constitutional principles.

Nussbaum intends — or, at least, she claims that she intends — her list to be "open-ended," already subject to past and certainly subject to future "modification in the light of criticism" (*FJ*, 76). Though she admits that some of the capabilities

are probably more "fixed than others," her general claim is to have put the list forth "in a Socratic fashion, to be tested" (*FJ*, 77). In developing the list, she appears to have relied largely on empirical methods. For example, she claims that it is "the result of years of cross-cultural discussion" and that its content has been shaped by "the input of other voices" and by people with "very different views on human life" (*FJ*, 76). She even notes how "the current version of the list reflects changes made as a result of … discussions with people in India" (*FJ*, 78). Despite these claims — that personhood is at least partially characterized by social and political existence, that the list is open-ended, that it is subject to change based on criticisms and discussion, that it needs to be tested, that is developed empirically, and without any grounding in metaphysical principles — questions abound, primarily about the wisdom of specifying such a list at all, about the content of specific lists such as Nussbaum's, and about the process by which she (and others) go about specifying and evaluating capabilities. All these questions demand our attention.

Sen emphatically opposes any universally specified list — that is, a list created "without appropriate specification of the context of [its] use (which could vary)."[9] In this way, he has made a clear distinction between his and Nussbaum's work with the capability approach. We can take them as two opposite extremes on this issue: one opposed to and one in favor of a universal list of capabilities that can serve as normative framework for handling issues of equality, justice, human development, and so on. Nussbaum's case for such a list has been adequately discussed above, but what is Sen's opposition? In his words: "The problem is not with listing important capabilities, but with insisting on one predetermined canonical list of capabilities, chosen by theorists without any general social discussion or public reasoning."[10] In fact, Sen's own work demonstrates his concerns clearly: He has, at various times, discussed and even created various lists and named specific capabilities that he thinks would "demand attention in any theory of justice and more generally in social assessment" — for example, freedom to be well-nourished, live free of avoidable diseases, move around, be educated, and participate in public life.[11] He has consistently opposed, however, the "fixing of a cemented list of capabilities, which is absolutely complete (nothing could be added to it) and totally fixed (it could not respond to public reasoning and to the formation of social values)."[12]

This opposition should not be surprising given Sen's repeated emphasis on *social discussion* and *public reasoning* as well as his insistence that persons be free to act as *agents* — that is, to "[act] and [bring] about change" and to have their "achievements … judged in terms of [their] own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well" (*DF*, 19). By fixing a universal list, we cut off social discussion and arrest the work of public reason; we disempower persons, treating them as patients rather than agents; we deny "the reach of democracy."[13] Even if we could specify a complete and accurate list of capabilities that people truly have reason to value and could do so without using the kind of social and political process that Sen emphasizes — one marked by individual agency, public reasoning, and deliberation — Sen would still, I suspect, reject such a list. He would do so because, for him, the deliberative democratic process through which we

are to specify and evaluate capabilities is of great benefit *in and of itself*. And so, only by leaving such specification and evaluation to a process and allowing it to be both conducted in a context and constantly subjected to public reasoning can we arrive at a truly valuable and appropriate working (though still not fixed and absolute) list.

In fairness to Nussbaum, however, she does, as was noted above, claim that her list is open-ended, subject to revisions and open to some kind of deliberation. For example, she says it can only be "more concretely specified in accordance with local beliefs and circumstances;" further, she claims that the threshold of each capability "will need more precise determination, as citizens work toward a consensus for political purposes."[14] She repeats these claims again in a more recent work, arguing that, despite the list being "fully universal" and specifying capabilities that are "important for each and every citizen, in each and every nation," it is also "open-ended and subject to on-going revision and rethinking;" it is "somewhat abstract and general … precisely in order to leave room for the activities of specifying and deliberating by citizens and their legislatures and courts" (*FJ*, 78–79).

The question, however, must be asked: are Nussbaum's claims to open-endedness, pluralism, deliberation, public reasoning, and so on genuine? As suggested earlier, Nussbaum's conception of the person emphasizes, in part, "the person as a political animal … as having a deep interest in choice, including the choice of a way of life and of political principles that govern it" (*FJ*, 88). Yet, despite vague claims of empirical research (such as those mentioned above), there is little mention of the process of deliberation and choice by which the ten capabilities were developed. She claims that "in the capabilities approach, [intuitions and considered judgments] are consulted in the making of the capabilities list" (*FJ*, 173). But how and when and among whom does that consultation process occur? Answers to these questions are, at best, unclear. For example, as Alkire has pointed out, Nussbaum fails to identify the "we" she uses so often in *Women and Human Development*. It is used frequently, but in different ways, to indicate some group's involvement in the process of developing the capability approach and the capabilities themselves, but we are left wondering, with Alkire, "Who might this 'we' be?"[15] We may even have reason to wonder whether there is *any* significant role for persons in the "procedure" aimed at developing the capabilities. Indeed, the capabilities to which Nussbaum claims persons are entitled do not seem to have been developed in a social and political way at all — a way that would be more consistent with Sen's ideas about deliberation, public reason, and agency and with Nussbaum's own stated conception of persons. Instead, there is a greater emphasis on "intuitions" than on "considered judgments" when it comes to the origin of the capabilities. And the implied claim that we can all intuit the same central human capabilities in a way that universalizes them is immediately problematic.

John Schischka, Paul Dalziel, and Caroline Saunders offer a useful concluding remark here: "The two components of Sen's formulation (value and have reason to value) are important; it is not appropriate for an external observer to ascribe to participants a set of things that the observer thinks the participants have reason to value while ignoring their actual values."[16] To do so, I argue, is more than just

"inappropriate"; it puts the "external observer" and the "participants" into a relationship in which the former is working *for* or *on* rather than *with* the latter. Such a relationship does not empower; it does not speak to a person's agency; it does not recognize the value of social discussion, public reason, and deliberation. Worse, it quite possibly creates or perpetuates an oppressive relationship.

A DEMOCRATIC (AND SENIAN) APPROACH TO CAPABILITIES LISTS AND EDUCATION

While it is clear that Nussbaum's particular approach to her own list (and any other list like it) is not something Sen would endorse — given, in particular, his emphasis on social choice, political deliberation, public reason, and human agency — we need not do away with the notion of a list of capabilities all together. There can be, in other words, middle ground between Nussbaum's prescriptive, universalized, and imposed list and Sen's more deliberate efforts at a kind of incompleteness in the capability approach. Indeed, writers have made such attempts at a kind of middle ground, claiming, generally speaking, that a list is useful (even necessary) for putting the capability approach to work in more local and specific contexts but that such lists should not take the form of a prescribed and imposed universal set of capabilities. Given that the purpose of this essay is to explore the application of the capability approach to education, it is helpful to give brief attention here to Melanie Walker's attempt at a list of capabilities for use in a particular education context — that of girls' education in South Africa.[17] The point is to consider how a list can be developed in a way that remains consistent with Sen's version of the capability approach, with its emphasis on "incompleteness" and its simultaneous insistence on social discussion, public reasoning, and agency.

There are four key points to be made regarding Walker's list of capabilities. First, her list is developed according to Ingrid Robeyns's criteria for developing capabilities lists: *explicit formulation* (the list is made explicit, discussed, and defended); *methodological justification* (the method of development is also scrutinized, discussed, and defended); *different levels of generality* (the list should comprise two stages: an ideal list and a pragmatic list); *exhaustion and non-reduction* (the capabilities list should include all important elements).[18] Second, the context for Walker's list is specific and makes no claims to being universal; she focuses on the development of a "provisional, situated list of education capabilities, with specific attention to gender equity in contemporary South African schools."[19] Third, and also clear from this quotation, Walker understands her list to be provisional. Finally, Walker's list is significantly informed by "the context and experiences of those whom the list concerns."[20] In other words, she engaged in the kind of empirical work necessary to develop a list of capabilities that can be useful while also avoiding (to a much larger degree than a list like Nussbaum's) prescription, imposition, and the accompanying epistemological and ethical problems.

Ultimately, Walker develops a drafted list of capabilities tailored to the specific context of her work. Some of her capabilities do overlap with Nussbaum's; for example, both include bodily integrity and bodily health, emotions, and some degree of social relations. However, Walker's list also and more importantly responds to (and reflects) the *specific capabilities that the women with whom her list was*

developed have reason to value. The girls with whom she worked were engaged in a process of democratic deliberation; they were empowered and treated as agents in a process of developing these capabilities — again, the ones *they* have reason to value. It is helpful here to remember a point made earlier: There is more value in the process of developing capabilities than there is in adopting a prescribed list (or having that list imposed from outside) — even if the former turns out to be the same as the latter. Walker herself helps us keep this in mind: She emphasizes that no list can "substitute for participation and dialogue in a deliberative democratic process of policy making."[21] The echoes of Sen's own thinking regarding the development of the capabilities are clear.

What is also clear is that Walker's list, and more specifically the process through which it was developed — a process that empowered its participants, that emphasized reasoned democratic deliberation, and that treated participants to the deliberation as agents — is a strong model for how the capability approach can be applied to education and how the notion of a list of capabilities can be seen as entirely consistent with Sen's way of thinking, thereby avoiding some of the problems with Nussbaum's list and the manner of its construction. But we should take notice that Walker's example presupposes that the participants to the deliberation possess some skills and competencies related to what she calls "participation and dialogue in a deliberative democratic process." Clearly, democratic education must not concern itself only with the *use* of such skills and competencies, but also their very *development*. How, then, can we account for this development when we seek to apply the capability approach to education? Exploring this question helps us to say a bit more about the possibilities for applying Sen's version of capability approach to education.

To begin, it is helpful to note a distinction that Nussbaum makes. For adult citizens, she says, *capabilities* are the proper focus of political goals. But, when it comes to children *functionings* are the proper focus since certain functionings are often the means by which children can achieve adult capabilities.[22] When it comes to the education of children, then, Nussbaum might suggest that we ask something like this: "What *functionings* must children develop — what must they be able to be and do — in order that they may take advantage of the ten capabilities guaranteed to them as adults?" Proceeding in this manner might be very fruitful and enlightening. In fact, one could imagine taking Nussbaum's list of ten capabilities and attempting to derive from them specific education policies, practices, and even content that would prepare students — by helping them develop certain functionings — for the capabilities they are, by her thinking, constitutionally guaranteed to have in their adult life.

But again, this would be to start from a list that is highly problematic in its content and, more importantly, in the manner in which it is developed. And so, while I agree with Nussbaum's idea that "functioning in childhood is necessary for capability in adulthood" and that, consequently, education should focus on developing functionings necessary for future capabilities, I reject the idea that the ultimate

aim is "to produce adults who have *all the capabilities on the list*."[23] Instead, I argue that our educational aims should be to produce adults who have developed the *functionings necessary to engage in the process of deliberating democratically as a means to developing and defending a context-specific list of capabilities that they have reason to value*. Starting here requires us to ask, "what *functionings do children need* so that they may participate thoughtfully, critically, and compassionately in a process of democratic dialogue and deliberation?"

CONCLUSION

When we think of the capability approach in the way suggested in this essay — that is, when we follow Sen's version of the approach, particularly in regard to the question of prescribing or not a list of capabilities — we may start to see the so-called "incompleteness" of Sen's thinking as precisely the place where education can most significantly intersect with the capability approach. Cultivating the potential of this intersection means figuring out the functionings that children need — that is, what they need to be able to be and do — in order to be effective participators in social discussion and democratic deliberations, particularly those aimed at developing, refining, and defending a context-specific list of the capabilities they will require to live an adult life they value and have reason to value.

1. Amartya Sen, "Equality of What?" in *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 1, ed. Sterling McMurrin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

2. See, for example, Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

3. Ibid., 30.

4. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 74. This work will be cited as *DF* in the text for all subsequent references.

5. Sabina Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms, Sen's Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10.

6. Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 12–13.

7. Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 43. This work will be cited as *FJ* in the text for all subsequent references.

8. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 81.

9. Amartya Sen, "Human Rights and Capabilities," *Journal of Human Development* 6, no. 2 (2005): 151–66.

10. Amartya Sen, "Dialogue, Capabilities, Lists and Public Reason: Continuing the Conversation," *Feminist Economics* 10, no. 3 (2004): 77–80.

11. Ibid., 78.

12. Ibid.

13. Sen, "Human Rights and Capabilities," 157.

14. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 77.

15. Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 42.

16. John Schischka, Paul Dalziel, and Caroline Saunders, "Applying Sen's Capability Approach to Poverty Alleviation Programs: Two Case Studies," *Journal of Human Development* 9, no. 2 (2008): 229–46.

17. Melanie Walker, "Toward a Capability-Based Theory of Social Justice for Education Policy-Making," *Journal of Education Policy* 21, no. 2 (2006): 163–85.

18. Ingrid Robeyns, "The Capability Approach: An Interdisciplinary Introduction" (unpublished manuscript, 2003), 41–42.

19. Walker, "Toward a Capability-Based Theory of Social Justice," 168.

20. Ibid.,169.

21. Ibid.

22. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 87–90.

23. Ibid., 89–90 (emphasis added).