

# 3

## Capability and Agency

DAVID A. CROCKER AND INGRID ROBEYNS

### INTRODUCTION

The capability approach is one of Amartya Sen's most significant contributions to philosophy and the 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 (see the chapters by Alkire, Pettit, and Roberts in this volume). Moreover, the capability approach has practical relevance for policy design and assessment, most famously through the work of the United Nations' *Human Development Reports* (United Nations Development Programme 1990–2007/8).

This chapter provides an overview of the conceptual and normative foundations of the capability approach and the role of agency within the approach. It puts aside the diverse ways in which the capability approach has been applied and implemented (Robeyns 2006). The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part, of which Ingrid Robeyns is the primary author, describes the main purpose of the capability approach, the concepts of functioning and capability, and the question of selecting and weighing capabilities. The second part, of which David A. Crocker is the primary author, focuses on the nature, value, and role of agency in the capability approach.

### I. CAPABILITY

#### The Capability Approach

Scholars and policy makers use the capability approach in a wide range of fields, most prominently in development studies and policymaking, welfare economics, social policy, and social and political philosophy. It can be employed in both narrower and broader ways. In a narrower way, the capability approach tells us what information we should look at if we are to judge how well someone's life is going or has gone; this kind of information

is needed in any account of well-being or human development. Since the capability approach contends that the relevant kind of information is that of human functionings and capabilities, the approach allows for interpersonal comparisons of well-being. This makes the approach attractive to a variety of theorists and scholars since interpersonal comparisons are needed for a range of different exercises, such as comparing how well two persons (or societies) are doing at the same time or comparing one person (or society) at two different times. In the narrower use of the capability approach, the focus is often strictly on the evaluation of individual functioning levels or on both functionings and capabilities.

In its broader uses, the capability approach is more evaluative in nature and often pays attention to agency and other explicitly normative considerations. For example, the capability approach can be used as an alternative evaluative tool for social cost-benefit analysis. Or it can be used as a normative framework within which to evaluate and design policies, ranging from welfare-state design in affluent societies, to governmental and non-governmental development policies in poor countries, to policies that affluent countries and international institutions employ in their efforts to aid poor countries. The capability approach is not a theory to *explain* poverty, inequality, or well-being, although it does offer concepts that can be used in such explanations. Instead, it provides concepts and, in its broader forms, normative frameworks within which to conceptualize, measure, and evaluate these phenomena as well as the institutions and policies that affect them. Capability theorists differ as to whether the capability orientation can or should generate a cross-cultural or universal theory of justice: some argue against such a theory, while others aspire to a capability-based theory of justice. Although we can trace some aspects of the capability approach back to, among others, Aristotle, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx (see Nussbaum 1988; Sen 1993, 1999), it is economist-philosopher Amartya Sen who pioneered the approach and philosopher Martha Nussbaum and a growing number of other scholars across the humanities and the social sciences who have significantly developed it.

### 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 (aid, protection) (Sen 1985b: 169–221; 1992: 39–42, 56–72; 1999: 189–91). The centrality of these two

	Well-Being	Agency
Achievements	Well-Being Achievements (Functionings)	Agency Achievements
Freedom	Well-Being Freedoms (Capabilities)	Agency Freedoms

**Figure 3.1**

**Au: Please  
 provide Figure  
 Caption**

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, “Well-being, Agency and Freedom” (Sen 1985b), and his more recent essay “Agency and Well-Being: The Development Agenda” (Sen 1995a). 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 3.1 shows Sen’s two cross-cutting distinctions: (i) well-being and agency, and (ii) achievement and freedom. With the help of Figure 3.1, we explain the basic ideas.

As we shall see in more detail in the second part of this chapter, 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 1985b: 203–4, 207; 1999: 19). A person’s well-being achievements, in contrast, concern not “the totality of her considered goals and objectives” but rather only the person’s “wellness” (Sen 1993: 37), “advantage” (Sen 1993: 30), or “personal welfare” (Sen 1993: 36). This state of a person, his or her beings and doings, may be the outcome of his or her own or other people’s decisions and actions, or these achievements may be the result of causes internal or external to the person. Sen uses “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).

The well-being of a person can be seen in terms of the quality (the ‘wellness’, as it were) of the person’s being. Living may be seen as consisting of a set of interrelated ‘functionings’, consisting of beings and doings. A person’s achievement in this respect can be seen as the vector of his or her functionings. The relevant functionings can vary from such elementary things as being adequately nourished, being in good health, avoiding escapable morbidity and premature mortality, etc., to more complex achievements such as being happy, having self-respect, taking part in the life of the community, and so on. The claim is that functionings are *constitutive* of a person’s being, and an evaluation of well-being has to take the form of an assessment of these constituent elements. (Sen 1992: 39)

A person’s well-being, for Sen, consists not only of his or her *current* states and activities (functionings), which may include the *activity* of choosing, but also of the person’s freedom or real opportunities to function in ways alternative to his or 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 they want to engage in, and to be whom they want to be. These “activities . . . or states of existence or being” (Sen 1985b: 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, as 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 the options 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, he or she should also have these latter options.

A person’s own well-being, whether functionings or capabilities or both, is 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 a person may also pursue goals that reduce his or her well-being and even end his or her life. The concept of agency marks what a person does or can do to realize any of his or her goals and not only ones that advance or protect his or her well-being (see also the chapter by Morris in this volume).

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 1985b: 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. In the second part of this chapter, we analyze Sen's concept of agency in more detail and argue that it has evolved to have at least two uses. Given this introductory distinction between well-being and agency, we turn now to a further clarification of Sen's distinction between capability and functioning.

#### **Well-Being: Functionings and Capabilities**

A key analytical distinction in the capability approach is between the means and the ends of, for example, well-being, agency, and development. The capability approach evaluates policies according to their impact on people's capabilities as well as their actual functionings. It asks whether people are *able* to be healthy, and whether the means or resources necessary for this capability, such as clean water, adequate sanitation, access to doctors, protection from infections and diseases, and basic knowledge on health issues, are present. It asks whether people are well-nourished, and whether the conditions for the realization of this capability, such as having sufficient food supplies and food entitlements, are being met. It asks whether people have access to a high-quality educational system, to real political participation, and to community activities that support them, that enable them to cope with struggles in daily life, and that foster real friendships. For some of these capabilities, the main input will be financial resources and economic production, but for others it may be political practices and institutions, such as effective guarantees and protections of freedom of thought, political participation, social or cultural practices, social structures, social

institutions, public goods, social norms, and traditions and habits. The capability approach thus proposes a broad, rich, and multidimensional view of human well-being and pays much attention to the links between material, mental, and social well-being, or to the economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions of life. The following sections describe the capability approach in more detail.

### **An Alternative Framework for Evaluation of Well-Being**

In its broader form, we have said, the capability approach is a perspective that can be used for a wide range of evaluative purposes. The approach focuses on the information that we need in order to make judgments about individual well-being (and agency), social policies, and so forth, and consequently rejects alternative approaches that it considers normatively inadequate, for example when an evaluation is done exclusively in monetary terms. In its broader use, the capability approach also identifies social constraints that influence and restrict well-being (and agency) and those institutions and policies that promote or protect well-being (and agency). The approach can also be applied to efficiency evaluations. For example, Alkire (2002) used the capability approach to evaluate three Oxfam projects in Pakistan, comparing a conventional cost-benefit analysis with an evaluation based on a range of valuable functionings. Wolff and de-Shalit (2007) have developed a capabilities-based theory to develop policies to support the disadvantaged in affluent societies.

The capability approach can serve as an important constituent for a theory of justice, but, as Sen argues, the capability approach specifies an evaluative space, and this does not amount by itself to a theory of justice (Sen 2004: 337). He stresses that a theory of justice must include not just a choice for a specific “currency of justice” (that is, the information on well-being that will be taken into account when making the judgments of justice), but also aggregative considerations and distributive principles that the capability approach itself does not specify. Moreover, as we shall see, given his commitment to the agency of individuals and communities, and to democratic decision making, Sen contends that “foundational ideas of justice can separate out some basic issues as being inescapably relevant, but they cannot plausibly end up . . . with an exclusive choice of some highly delineated formula of relative weights as being the unique blueprint for ‘the just society’” (1999: 286–7).

The capability approach entails a critique of other evaluative approaches, mainly of the welfarist approaches in welfare economics and of

utilitarian and income- or resource-based theories. Sen characterizes welfare theories as those consequentialist theories that restrict “the judgments of state of affairs to the utilities in the respective states (paying no direct attention to such things as the fulfillment or violation of rights, duties, and so on)” (Sen 1999: 59). He rejects such theories because, whatever their further specifications, they rely *exclusively* on utility and thus exclude nonutility information from our moral judgments (Sen 1999: 62). Sen is concerned not only with the information that is included in a normative evaluation, but also with the information that is excluded. The nonutility information that is excluded by utilitarianism includes a person’s additional physical needs, due to being physically disabled for example, but also social or moral principles, such as human rights or the specific principle that men and women should be paid the same wage for the same work. For a utilitarian, these features of life and principles have no intrinsic value. Men and women, for example, should not be paid the same wage as long as women are satisfied with lower wages or total utility is maximized. But Sen believes it mistaken to think that such egalitarian and other moral principles would not be taken directly into account in our moral judgments. Thus the normative theories that Sen attacks include those that rely exclusively on mental states. This does not mean that Sen thinks that mental states, such as happiness, are unimportant and have no role to play, for they too are functionings that we sometimes have reason to value. Rather, it is the *exclusive* reliance on mental states that he rejects.

Although Sen has often acknowledged his debt to John Rawls (1971), he also criticizes Rawls’s use of primary goods for interpersonal comparisons, because primary goods are mere means, not intrinsically worthwhile ends, and as a consequence would not be able to account for the full range of the diversity of human beings (Sen 1980; 1992: 81–7; 2004: 332). If all persons were identical, then an index of primary goods would yield similar freedoms for all; but given human diversity, the comparisons in the space of social primary goods will fail to note that different people need different amounts and different kinds of goods to reach the same levels of well-being or advantage. The right amount of food to enable one person to labor effectively may be insufficient for a second person and too much for a third.<sup>1</sup> However, Thomas Pogge (2002) has argued against the

<sup>1</sup> More recently, Martha Nussbaum has significantly extended the capability critique of Rawls by not only focusing on the difference between primary goods and capabilities, but also by examining the implications of the fact that Rawls’s theory of justice belongs to the social contract tradition, whereas the capability approach does not (Nussbaum 2006).

capability approach to justice and in favor of a Rawlsian approach. The debate between Rawlsians and capability theorists is certainly not settled (Brighouse and Robeyns, forthcoming). In a similar vein, Sen has criticized other resource-based normative theories, such as Ronald Dworkin's (1981) account of equality of resources, which has also generated a highly abstract philosophical debate on the precise differences between these two theories (Dworkin 2000: 299–303; Kaufman 2006b: 125–8; Pierik and Robeyns 2007; Sen 1984; Williams 2002).

In its narrower understanding, as we adumbrated earlier in this chapter, the capability approach serves as a metric for interpersonal comparisons of well-being freedom and well-being achievement. Yet some economists have taken this to imply that the capability approach must provide a *formula* for interpersonal comparisons of well-being, in the sense that the capability approach would provide a neat recipe or even an algorithm to carry out empirical exercises in welfare comparisons. They have tried in vain to find in Sen's writings such a formula or algorithm and then criticized it based on this restrictive assumption of what the capability approach should deliver (Roemer 1996: 191–3; Sugden 1993: 1953–4). Similarly, some political philosophers criticize the capability approach for not providing for a complete outline of a theory of equality or social justice (Dworkin 2000: 299–303). In both cases it should be stressed that the capability approach delineates a class or family of possible criteria for or measures of interpersonal well-being, but that within this family there are still many different options, depending on the selection of capabilities and their relative weights. As we shall see, the ideal of individual and group agency plays an important role in Sen's (but not Nussbaum's) way of addressing capability selection, weighting, and sequencing.

### Conversion Factors and Human Diversity

Recall that a crucial distinction in the capability approach is the distinction between the means (such as goods and services) and the ends of well-being and development, which are conceptualized, *inter alia*, as functionings (the realized dimensions of well-being) and capabilities (those dimensions of well-being that are potentially available to a person). Goods and services (which may include nonmarket goods and services), have certain characteristics that make them of interest to people. For example, we may not be interested in a bike because it is an object made from certain materials with a specific shape and color, but because it can take us to places where we want to go, and in a faster way than if we were walking. These characteristics of a

good or commodity, we might say, enable or contribute to a functioning. A bike enables the functioning of mobility, to be able to move oneself freely and more rapidly than walking.

The relation between a good and the achievement of certain beings and doings is influenced by *conversion factors*. There are several different types of conversion factors, and the conversion factors discussed in Sen's writings can be categorized into three groups. All conversion factors influence how a person can be or is free to convert the characteristics of the good or service into a functioning, yet the sources of these factors may differ. *Personal conversion factors* are internal to the person, such as metabolism, physical condition, sex, reading skills, or intelligence. If a person is disabled, is in bad physical condition, or has never learned to cycle, then the bike will be of limited help in enabling the functioning of mobility. *Social conversion factors* are factors from the society in which one lives, such as public policies, social norms, practices that unfairly discriminate, societal hierarchies, or power relations related to class, gender, race, or caste. *Environmental conversion factors* emerge from the physical or built environment in which a person lives. Among aspects of one's geographical location are climate, pollution, the proneness to earthquakes, and the presence or absence of seas and oceans. Among aspects of the built environment are the stability of buildings, roads, and bridges and means of transportation and communication. The three types of conversion factors all stress that it is not sufficient to know the goods a person owns or can use in order to be able to assess the well-being that he or she has achieved or could achieve; rather, we need to know much more about the person and the circumstances in which he or she is living. Sen uses "capability" not to refer exclusively to a person's abilities or other internal powers but to refer to an opportunity made feasible, and constrained by, both internal and external conversion factors (Crocker 2008: 171–2; Robeyns 2005: 99).

The capability approach thus takes account of human diversity in at least two ways: (i) by its focus on the plurality of functionings and capabilities as an important evaluative space, and (ii) by the explicit focus on personal and socio-environmental factors that make possible the conversion of commodities into functionings, and on the whole social, institutional, and environmental context that affects the conversion factors and the capability set directly.

Moreover, goods and services are not the only means to people's capabilities. There are other means that function as "inputs" in the creation or expansion of capabilities, such as social institutions broadly defined. The material and nonmaterial circumstances that shape people's opportunity

sets, and the circumstances that influence the choices that people make from the capability set, should receive a central place in capability evaluations. For example, both Sen and Nussbaum have paid much attention to the social norms and traditions that form women's preferences and that influence their aspirations and their effective choices (Nussbaum 2000; Sen 1990a, 1995b). The capability approach does not only advocate an evaluation of people's capability sets but also insists on scrutinizing the context in which economic production and social interactions take place, and whether the circumstances in which people choose from their opportunity sets are enabling and just.

A focus on functionings and capabilities does not imply that a capability analysis would pay no attention to resources, such as food availability, or the evaluation of social institutions, economic growth, technical advancement, social cohesion, and so forth. Although functionings and capabilities are of ultimate normative concern, other values may be important as well. For example, in their evaluation of development in India, Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (2002: 3) have stressed that working within the capability approach in no way excludes the integration of an analysis of resources, such as food, or other means. In sum, all the means of well-being, like the availability of commodities, legal entitlements to them, other social institutions, and so forth, *are* important, but the capability approach presses the point that they are not the ends of well-being, only their means. Food may be abundant in the village, but a starving person may have nothing to exchange for it, no legal claim on it, or no way of preventing intestinal parasites from consuming it before he or she does.

### Capabilities as Real Opportunities

A terminological note concerns the meaning of the term 'basic capabilities'. In Sen's work, basic capabilities are a subset of all capabilities. A basic capability, says Sen, is "the ability to satisfy certain elementary and crucially important functionings up to certain levels" (1992: 45 n. 19). Basic capabilities refer to the freedom to do some basic things considered necessary for survival and to avoid or escape poverty or other serious deprivations. The relevance of basic capabilities is "not so much in ranking living standards, but in deciding on a cut-off point for the purpose of assessing poverty and deprivation" (Sen 1987: 109). Hence, while the notion of capabilities refers to a very broad range of opportunities, basic capabilities refer to the real opportunity to avoid poverty or to meet or exceed a threshold of well-being. Basic capabilities will thus be crucial for poverty analysis and in

general for studying the well-being of the majority of people in poor countries. In affluent countries, by contrast, well-being analysis would often focus on capabilities that are less necessary for survival. It is important to acknowledge that the capability approach is not restricted to poverty and deprivation analysis but can also serve as a framework for, say, project or policy evaluations or inequality measurement in affluent communities.

A second misunderstanding concerns the use of the term ‘freedom’. Especially in his more recent work, Sen often equates capabilities with freedoms, without always specifying in more detail what kind of freedoms he is referring to. Yet this equation can easily be misunderstood, since Sen insists both that there are many kinds of freedom (some valuable, some negative, and some trivial) and that ‘freedom’ means very different things to different people. One misunderstanding to get out of the way is that capabilities as freedoms refer exclusively to the “free market.” Functionings and capabilities are conceptualizations of well-being achievement and well-being freedoms. Sen does argue that people have reason to value the freedom or liberty to produce, buy, and sell in markets. This point, however, is a very different matter than the highly disputed question in economics and politics regarding the benefits and limits of the market as a system of economic production and distribution.

What kind of freedoms are capabilities? A careful reading of Sen’s work clarifies that capabilities are freedoms conceived as real opportunities (Sen 1985a: 3–4; 1985b: 201; 2002: chapter 20). For Sen, capabilities as freedoms refer to the *presence* of valuable freedoms or alternatives, in the sense of opportunities that do not exist only formally or legally but are also effectively available to the agent. Understanding capability as an opportunity concept of freedom, rather than some other kind of freedom, may undermine mistaken critiques on Sen’s work (Kaufman 2006a).

### **Functionings or Capabilities?**

In addition to these terminological remarks, capability proponents have addressed the question of whether the appropriate well-being metric should be capabilities or functionings. What considerations are relevant for this choice? The first consideration is normative, and this is the argument Sen and Nussbaum most often offer: by focusing on capabilities rather than functionings, we do not privilege a particular account of good lives but instead aim at a range of possible ways of life from which each person can choose. Thus, it is the liberal nature of the capability approach, or an antipaternalist consideration, that motivates a principled choice for capabilities rather than functionings. A second normative consideration stems from

the importance given to personal responsibility in contemporary political philosophy: each person should have the same real opportunity (capability), but once that is in place, each individual should be held responsible for his or her own choices. This responsibility-sensitivity principle is widely endorsed not only in political philosophy but also in the mathematical models being developed in normative welfare economics. If one wants to endorse and implement this principle of responsibility-sensitivity, then specifications and applications of the capability approach should focus on capabilities, rather than functionings. Yet even at a highly abstract theoretical level, philosophers disagree on whether we should endorse responsibility-sensitivity in developing the capability approach (e.g., Fleurbaey 2002; Vallentyne 2005; Wolff and de-Shalit 2007). Third, there are cases in which a capability is available to a person but only if other people do not also want to realize that capability (Basu 1987: 74; Basu and López-Calva, forthcoming). For example, two spouses may each have the capability of holding demanding jobs incompatible with large caring responsibilities. However, if these spouses also have children or relatives with extensive needs for care, then at best only one of the spouses may effectively realize that capability. Since capability sets may therefore include freedoms that are conditional (because they depend on the choices of other people), it might be better to focus both on the individual's capability set and also on what people have been able to realize from their own capability sets, that is, their functionings or well-being achievements. The question of who decides or *should* decide this sort of spousal question highlights the importance of agency.

It should also be mentioned that the concept of functioning has particular relevance for our relations to those human beings who are not yet able to choose (infants), who will never be able to choose (severely mentally disabled individuals), or who have lost this ability through advanced dementia or serious brain damage. Whether or not these persons can decide to be well nourished and healthy, we (through families, governments, or other institutions) have the obligation to promote or protect their nutritional and healthy functioning.

Finally, the choice between functionings and capabilities can also be bridged by a conceptual move. Sen (1987: 36–7) has proposed the concept of 'refined functioning' to designate functioning that takes note of the available alternatives. Sen (1992: 52) notes: "fasting' as a functioning is not just starving; it is *choosing to starve when one does have other options.*" That is, one could focus on achieved functionings levels but – where appropriate – include the exercise of choice as one of the relevant functionings (Fleurbaey 2002; Stewart 1995).

In addition to these normative and conceptual arguments, there are also concerns related to the application and measurability that influence the choice of capabilities, functionings, or a combination of the two (Robeyns 2006). It is, for example, often easier to observe and measure functionings than capabilities (Sen 1992: 52–3).

### Selecting and Weighing Capabilities

Other major points of debate in the capability literature are the questions of which capabilities should be selected as relevant and who should decide. At the level of ideal theories of justice, some have argued that each and every capability is relevant and should count in our moral calculus (Vallentyne 2005). Others have argued that considerations of justice require that we demarcate morally relevant from morally irrelevant and morally bad capabilities (Nussbaum 2003; Pogge 2002). This demarcation could be done in various ways. Anderson (1999) argues that, for purposes of political justice, the only relevant capabilities are those needed for a person to participate as a citizen. Nussbaum endorses a well-defined list of capabilities, which, she argues, should be enshrined in every country's constitution (Nussbaum 2000, 2003, 2006; see the appendix to this chapter). Sen, we shall argue, draws on his ideal of agency to argue that each group should itself select, weigh, trade off, and sequence capabilities as well as prioritize them in relation to other normative considerations, such as agency, efficiency, and stability.

Moving from ideal theory to nonideal theory and empirical applications makes the selection of relevant capabilities even more complicated, for other concerns such as feasibility, data availability, practical relevance, and even parsimony may play significant roles. Several proposals are on offer ranging from substantive proposals with elaborate theoretical underpinnings, through several procedural methods, to the *atheoretical* practice that an investigator should simply conduct a survey in order to collect rich data (or use an existing survey) and let a statistical technique, such as factor analysis, “decide.” At one end of this spectrum is Martha Nussbaum's well-known list, which contains prescribed capabilities that are grouped together under ten “central human capabilities” (see the appendix to this chapter). Nussbaum defends these capabilities as being the moral entitlements of every human being on earth. She formulates the list at an abstract level, and the translation to implementation and policies should be done at a local level, taking into account local differences. Nussbaum claims that this list can be derived from a Rawlsian overlapping consensus and

stresses that her list remains “open-ended and humble” (Nussbaum 2000: 77) and always open for revision, yet this avowal has not convinced critics who have argued that there is insufficient scope for democratic deliberation and respect for agency in her capabilities approach (e.g., Crocker 2008; Robeyns 2003; Sen 2004). Amartya Sen consistently and explicitly refuses to defend “one pre-determined canonical list of capabilities, chosen by theorists without any general social discussion or public reasoning” (Sen 2005: 158). Of course, groups and theorists might construct lists for various purposes, and lists need not be “pre-determined” or “canonical,” however we might understand these terms. And Sen’s refusal to endorse Nussbaum’s list has not prevented him from using – for various purposes – particular selections of capabilities in his empirical as well as his normative work. However, beyond stating in general terms that some democratic process and public reasoning should be involved, Sen has never explained in detail how such a selection could and should be done. Several capability scholars, including Anderson, Alkire, Robeyns, and Crocker, have sought in various ways to fill this lacuna. Anderson (1999: 316) argues that people should be entitled “to whatever capabilities are necessary to enable them to avoid or escape entanglement in oppressive social relationships” and “to the capabilities necessary for functioning as an equal citizen in a democratic state.” Alkire (2002: chapter 2) proposes to select capabilities based on John Finnis’s practical reasoning approach. By iteratively asking “Why do I do what I do?”, one comes to the most basic reasons for acting: life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, sociability (friendship), practical reasonableness, and religion. Robeyns (2003) has proposed some pragmatic criteria, mainly relevant for empirical research, for the selection of capabilities for the context of inequality and well-being assessments. Crocker (2006; 2007; 2008: chapters 9–10) explores the theory and practice of deliberative democracy to bring more specificity to democratic procedures and participative institutions.

Suppose that, by whatever method, we (whoever the “we” is) unanimously agreed on a selection of capabilities. We still would be left with the question of whether the capabilities should be aggregated and, if so, what their relative weights will or should be. How should different capabilities be traded off against each other when they cannot all be realized fully? Some have argued against trade-offs on the basis that the different capabilities are incommensurable or that each capability is an absolute entitlement that never should be overridden by another entitlement or other normative consideration. For example, Nussbaum argues that the ten capabilities on her list, being incommensurable, cannot be traded off

against each other (and, hence, have no relative weights), and also that the state should provide each citizen with a minimum threshold of each capability.

In existing empirical applications, investigators employ the most prevalent weighing systems and simply adopt certain weights (with or without attempting to justify them) or to use a conventional statistical procedure. The United Nations Development Programme uses the first approach in its construction of the Human Development Index in which the three functionings (educational achievement, life expectancy, and an economic standard of living) each receive an equal weighting. Many economists find this procedure entirely arbitrary and disapprove of the explicit value judgments involved, but others appreciate the clarity that such an explicit weighting procedure brings. Obviously, one can always change the relative weights and test the robustness of the empirical results for a change in weights. The second approach, one that derives weights in a statistical way, also has proponents and opponents. The proponents believe that their deployment of statistical information enables them to determine the weights without appealing to “simplistic” or unscientific methods such as explicit choices. But there is very little discussion about the validity and plausibility of either the normative assumptions underlying these statistical methods or the related conceptions of good science.

Another possible weighting system is to use a democratic or some other social choice procedure (Chakraborty 1996). The basic idea would be to encourage or prescribe that the relevant group of people decide on the weights. In some contexts, such as small-scale projects or evaluations, such capability weighting (and selection) could be done by participatory techniques. For larger-scale policy contexts, researchers (Gastil and Levine 2005) are exploring ways in which representative citizen panels or deliberative polling may generate a deliberated majority opinion on relative weights such that policy makers may be guided and even mandated to choose whether to invest public funds in education, health care, mobility infrastructure, or other public goods that they deem contextually urgent. For large-scale measurement applications, information on the weights could in theory be collected in the same way that data on functionings are collected (i.e., with household surveys or other types of questionnaires) or through other exercises, such as deliberative polling. Finally, it has also been suggested that we may determine the weights of capabilities as a function of how much they contribute to overall life satisfaction (Graham and Pettinato 2002; Schokkaert 2007).

## II. 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, and 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).

### Sen's Descriptive Concept of Agency

What does Sen mean by agency? How does he come to this focus on agency, and how does he support it? What role does individual and collective agency play in what we may call the "agency-oriented" capability approach?

Initially, Sen's concept of agency was descriptive or explanatory (with normative implications): it described human motivation as often going beyond self-interest, even enlightened self-interest. Recall that, for Sen, a person's well-being concerns his or her own wellness, his or her own "advantage," whether due to the person's own efforts, those of others, or the force of circumstances. Yet, with the concept of agency, Sen makes the point that one's own well-being – whether functionings or capabilities – need not exhaust one's motivations or objectives. We may also pursue goals that reduce our well-being and even end our lives. To achieve either well-being or non-well-being goals and to have the freedom of will and action to do so is to realize agency freedom in agency achievements. A person's agency achievement is his or her deciding and acting on the basis of what he or she values and has reason to value, whether or not that action is personally advantageous. A person's agency freedom is the freedom to so decide and the power to act and be effective.

What is the point of Sen's initial distinction between well-being and agency? It provides space for a conception of freedom and responsibility that breaks decisively with any egoism that claims that humans are no more than – and are bound to be – “strict maximizers of a narrowly defined self-interest” (Sen 1990b: 54). Some people most of the time and many people some of the time *do* strive to increase their own well-being. However, insofar as humans can and do devote themselves to causes beyond and even against their own welfare, with his descriptive concept of agency, Sen (1990b: 54) can answer a sceptical realist's concern about any normative theory that proposes a just treatment of conflicting interests or freedoms: “If . . . individuals as social persons have broader values and objectives, including sympathy for others and commitment to ethical norms, then the promotion of social justice need not face unremitting opposition at every move” (Sen 1990b: 54).

Moreover, Sen might have added, as he did in a 2006 address (Sen 2006), that effective implementation of development policies can and should build on people's sense of fairness and concern that they and others be treated fairly. Sen (1987, 1999, 2002) himself provides empirical content for this sort of altruistic conceptual space by referring to his own social-scientific work and that of many other social scientists, such as Albert Hirschman (1977). Also relevant are experiments that show that participants in controlled games often choose not to maximize their own self interest (Frolich and Oppenheimer 1992). In sum, employing the distinction between well-being and agency, Sen provides conceptual space for the commonplace that agents pursue not only their own self-interest but also altruistic goals for the sake of which they may sacrifice their health, friends, and even life itself. Although an agent may exercise agency only in seeking his or her well-being, he or she also may exercise it in seeking other ends.

### Sen's Normative Ideal of Agency

After 1992, Sen increasingly supplements this *descriptive* account of agency, one that makes room for both self-regarding and other-regarding human motivation, with an explicitly *normative* account that proposes human agency as something we have reason to value, realize in our lives, and exercise jointly in our groups and institutions. The ideal of agency now plays such an important role that there is good reason to call this perspective the “agency-oriented” capability approach. Not only should individuals exercise their agency by shaping or determining their own lives, but it is by

exercising joint agency that communities can and should select, weigh, and trade off capabilities, functionings, and other normative considerations.

Already in 1992, Sen edged toward a normative account of agency when he ramified his initial distinction between well-being and agency and distinguished two kinds of agency achievement or success: (i) “*realized* agency success,” a generic concept of agency, and (ii) “*instrumental* agency success,” a more specific and “participatory” concept of agency (Sen 1992: 58).

In “realized agency success,” one’s objectives – whether self-regarding or other-regarding – are realized, but someone or something else may be the cause or the “lever” of the achievement. Only in “instrumental agency success” – the specific and “more *participatory*” variety of agency – does agency require that the person *himself or herself* either bring things about by his or her *own* efforts or play an “active part” in some collective action. Sen’s generic concept of agency permits an individual or group – other than the person or group whose aims are realized – to exercise or “control” the “levers” of change. A person’s agency freedom, on this account, is enhanced not only when he or she actually does something but when something he or she values occurs – such as the elimination of famines – even when the person had nothing to do with its occurrence but would have chosen it *had he or she had* the chance and the means (Sen 1992: 57–8).

This generic concept of agency freedom and achievement does, we concede, point to something important. It permits us to say that institutions and *other* people can bring about or contribute to the realization of our own goals: a person’s ability to achieve various valuable functionings may be greatly enhanced by public action and policy (Sen 1999: xi–xii). Moreover, infants, severely mentally disabled individuals, and very old people are capable of healthy functioning even though they make few if any decisions and are dependent on others for care. Many good (and bad) things happen to people because of what other agents do for (or to) them. It is not the case that an individual’s evening meal is drained of worth unless he or she personally freely cooked it. Nor is it the case that Sen is claiming that the best life is a life of self-help or strenuous action rather than quiet reflection or equanimity, for one may exercise agency in the latter cases as well as the former.

It does not follow, however, that we should accept Sen’s conclusion and say that the actions of others that realize a person’s goals, which the person would have realized by himself or herself if he or she could have, are cases of *that person’s* agency. Here we must distinguish a variety of cases, only some of which qualify as agency achievement. Then, within agency achievement, we may distinguish between two kinds of agency but draw the distinction in a different way and for a different purpose than

does Sen. Let us distinguish not between the generic “realized agency” and the more specific “instrumental” agency but rather between (i) the agency of others (and force of circumstances), (ii) a person’s *indirect* agency, and (iii) a person’s *direct* agency.

Using one of Sen’s examples, suppose governmental officials intend to eliminate and succeed in eliminating famine from their country and that such an achievement was also the goal of citizen Soumya. Soumya, however, did not exercise his own agency in this case, even though his goal was achieved, because he did nothing to bring it about. (He did not even decide not to block the government’s efforts.) Even if he intended to bring an end to famine, he would not be an agent in this feat, unless his intention was causally efficacious in some way in producing the desired event. Agency was exercised, but the agency was that of others and not Soumya’s. Soumya could be an agent in famine elimination in two ways. He would be a *direct agent* if he planned the extermination or played an important (and intentional) role in executing the plan. He would be an *indirect or remote agent* if he played a minor role in the causal chain between the formation and the execution of the plan. Such action might range from doing some minor paperwork connected with the project to protesting to or communicating with appropriate officials. And as a democratic citizen, Soumya exercises his *indirect agency* insofar as he makes known his desire that famine end and this view contributes to government officials’ – fearing the loss of the next election or anticipating destabilizing protest in the streets – taking action. But if Soumya’s desire or intention to exterminate famine in fact had no causal efficacy, even though he would have done his part if he had had a chance, he exercised no agency – direct or indirect – in the realization of his goal. Hypothetical or nonefficacious conditional agency is not actual agency.

Rather than extending, as does the notion of “realized agency success,” the notion of agency to include whatever event happens to realize an individual’s preferences (and would be chosen by him or her if he or she had had the chance), the notion of indirect agency enables us to make Pettit’s (1997, 2001) important point that tyrants are restrained not only by their so-called subjects’ direct doing (for example, mass agitation) but also by the tyrant’s knowledge that the subjects intend to blockade the city should the tyrant fail to accede to certain popular demands. A person’s indirect agency, with both backward and anticipatory reference, also occurs when a citizen’s senator casts a vote to disconfirm the president’s nomination for attorney general. The senator casts the vote, and the citizen does not. But the citizen has exercised indirect agency if he or she purposefully influenced the

senator's decision, perhaps because the senator expects that this constituent will hold him or her accountable if he or she votes against the expressed will of this and other constituents. If the senator knows what the constituents have elected him or her to do and stand for, and if he or she expects to lose their support if he or she votes for the nominee, then our citizen's agency has been indirectly exercised through the representative.

This last example leads us to see the merit but also a limitation in what we have called indirect agency. In modern society's complex organizations, such as representative democracy, Sen correctly recognizes that "it is often very hard, if not impossible, to have a system that gives each person all the levers of control over her own life" (Sen 1992: 65; cf. Sen 1985b: 210). It does not follow, however, that even in complex societies no further issue exists as to who makes decisions, who is in charge, or "how the controls are, in fact, exercised" (Sen 1992: 65). One challenge of movements to deepen and broaden democracy is, as Iris Marion Young (2000: chapter 4) argues, to find ways to strengthen and extend direct agency, make indirect agency less indirect, and link direct and indirect agency, for instance, by establishing venues for representatives and constituents to deliberate together between elections for or votes in representative bodies.

Even in 1992 Sen did recognize that what he called "active" or "participatory" agency is "closely related to the nature of our values" (Sen 1992: 58; cf. 1985b: 212) in the sense that we place a high value on bringing about our goals through our *own* efforts or jointly *with* others. After 1992, Sen drops or at least downplays the generic meaning of agency, refrains from discussing nonparticipatory agency, and emphasizes agency only in the sense of what in 1992 he called "instrumental agency success." Again, we agree with Sen that it is important to recognize that others can realize our goals on our behalf even though we have had no role – direct or indirect – in the process. But rather than including this sort of case under the category of one's "realized agency," it is more perspicuous to classify these cases not as sorts of agency but rather as one class of "realized goals."

The abandonment of the generic category "realized agency" is, we believe, no great loss. What is important is that people individually and collectively conduct their own lives, sometimes realizing their own self-regarding goals, sometimes realizing (or helping realize) others' goals, and sometimes by forming joint intentions and exercising collective agency. We exercise agency or control not when our goals are merely realized (as important as that may be) but when, in addition, we decide on and *intentionally* realize or contribute directly or indirectly to the realization of our goals.

### The Dimensions of Agency

How does Sen understand agency? The term ‘agency’, like the term ‘capability’, confuses many people. Not only does one think of travel agencies and real estate agents rather than individual or collective actors (in Spanish, *protagonistas*), but the word does not occur in some languages, such as Dutch. Moreover, agency, as Sen uses the term, has little to do with the principal-agent distinction used by institutional economists and some lawyers. Rather than denoting “a person who is acting on someone else’s behalf (perhaps being led on by a ‘principal’), and whose achievements are to be assessed in the light of someone else’s (the principal’s) goals,” Sen explains that he uses the term “in its older – and ‘grander’ – sense as 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” (Sen 1999: 18–19).

Especially in *Development as Freedom* (1999), but also in other writings after 1992, Sen employs a complex *ideal* of agency (and a related ideal of empowerment as, among other things, the acquisition of this kind of agency). Although he has not yet subjected the ideal to the careful analysis that we have come to expect of him, we draw on his scattered remarks to offer the following interpretation or “rational construction” of his current view. A person (or group) is an agent with respect to action X to the extent that the following four conditions hold (the labels are ours and not Sen’s): (i) *self-determination*: the person decides for himself or herself rather than someone or something else making the decision to do X; (ii) *reason orientation and deliberation*: the person bases his or her decisions on reasons, such as the pursuit of goals; (iii) *action*: the person performs or has a role in performing X; and (iv) *impact on the world*: the person thereby brings about (or contributes to bringing about) change in the world.<sup>2</sup> Rather than make each one of these four conditions necessary and together sufficient for agency, let us say that the more fully an agent’s action fulfills each condition, the more fully is that act one of agency. As Rob Reich (2002: 93) argues in relation to what he calls “minimalist autonomy,” agency is a matter of degree rather

---

<sup>2</sup> Although we put the point in a way that suggests that exercises of agency are positive doings, we also mean to include (as agency achievements) decisions to omit or refrain from positive action when such decisions are intentional and make a difference in the world (cf. Alvarez 2005: 49–52). When a handshake is customary, (the decision) not to shake an offered hand is, at least in Western culture, an act that rebuffs.

than “an ‘on/off’ capacity or condition.” We comment briefly on each of these four components:

*Self-determination*

Even though an agent gets what he or she wants, the agent has not exercised agency unless he or she personally 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 him or her, the person does not exercise agency even though he or she gets what he or 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 coauthor Jean Drèze sometimes call “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 of whether that goal is self-regarding or other-regarding. The more that the agent values the options, the more he or she is able to exercise agency: choosing to surrender money at gunpoint rather than die is an exercise of agency but a minimal one.

*Action*

Agency achievement involves more than the freedom to act, more than deciding, and more than scrutiny of reasons and norms for action. For

people lack full agency if they decide (on the basis of reasons) to act and either take no action or utterly fail to realize their goals. And, as we have seen, even though an agent gets what he or she intends – for instance, the elimination of famine – if he or she did not get it, at least partially, because of his or her own (direct or indirect) action (individually or with others), he or she is not an agent in that regard.

*Impact on the World*

The more an agent's actions make a difference in the world, the more fully does the agent exercise agency. Not only does one's exercise of agency include a doing and not merely an intention, the doing must have a larger or smaller impact. Because of this act, the agent alters the world – sometimes in ways intended, sometimes in ways not intended but foreseen, and sometimes in unintended or unexpected ways. When, by his or her action, the agent intentionally achieves a goal, he or she is in this instance an agent, the author of his or her own life. What is true of individuals is also true of groups who engage in joint actions: “The basic approach [of Drèze and Sen 2002] involves an overarching interest in the role of human beings – on their own and in cooperation with each other – in running their lives and in using and expanding their freedoms” (Drèze and Sen 2002: 33). To realize an individual's or a group's goals and to change the world, to have an ability to do the things we value (Drèze and Sen 2002: 17–20), requires that the individual or collective agent have agency freedom and effective power: “Greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and also to influence the world, and these matters [“the ‘agency aspect’ of the individual”] are central to the process of development” (Sen 1999: 18).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Sen's concept of agency differs not only from the notion of agent in institutional economics but also from the concept that the World Bank employs in its *World Development Report 2006: Equity and Development* (World Bank 2005: 5, 48–50, 205). The report defines agency as “the socioeconomically, culturally, and politically determined ability to shape the world around oneself” (2005: 5). Not only does this definition, with its notion of a “determined” ability, undermine the agent's self-determination or “free agency,” but it also unacceptably includes under the concept of full agency any impact that people have on the world, no matter how unthinking or unconscious: “Some [agency] is unconscious – for example when people engage in land transactions without questioning them, they reproduce the institutions of land tenure and the markets in land” (2005: 48–9). At best, such agency is pretty thin. We leave open the question of whether unintended but foreseen or reasonably foreseeable consequences are themselves expressions of agency – either because there is some higher-order intention or for some other reason.

### 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:

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 to contribute sustainably and loyally to the joint action.

Finally, agency is what Sen calls “constructively” valuable,<sup>4</sup> for in agency freedom the agent freely scrutinizes, decides on, and shapes its values. Included in the constructive value of agency is the agent’s selecting, weighing, and trading off of capabilities and other values that we discussed in the last section of this chapter’s first part (see also Crocker 2006; 2008: chapter 9).

<sup>4</sup> We leave open the question of whether Sen’s notion of “constructive” value straddles the “intrinsic-instrumental” value distinction instead of falling on one side or the other.

### Agency and Democracy

It is clear that Sen considers the “agency role” of individuals, acting alone or in concert, to be of fundamental importance in his vision of good institutional arrangements and change. Rather than stressing, as he did in 1992, the difficulty of citizens purposefully operating the “levers” of change, Sen now emphasizes the importance of direct as well as indirect citizen involvement in democratic governance, and he seeks ways to close the gap between the two (Drèze and Sen 2002: chapters 1, 10).

In other writings one of us considers the implications of this ideal of agency for a deepening of democracy and citizen participation from the local to the global (Crocker 2008: chapters 9, 10). One reason that development, conceived as good social change, is important for Sen is that it provides a variety of social arrangements in which human beings express their agency or become free to do so. The responsibility-sensitive analyst evaluates policies and practices – in both rich and poor countries – in light of, among other things, the extent to which these policies and processes enhance, guarantee, and restore the agency of individuals and various groups (Sen 1999: xii–xiii).

Societal arrangements, involving many institutions (the state, the market, the legal system, political parties, the media, public interest groups, and public discussion forums, among others) are investigated in terms of their contribution to enhancing and guaranteeing the substantive freedoms of individuals, seen as active agents of change, rather than passive recipients of dispensed benefits. (Sen 1999, xii–xiii)

One challenge for Sen and others is to give an account of how democracy, including public discussion, provides procedures for *collective* agency, procedures in which many agents can reason together to arrive at policy that is wise and action with which most can agree. For Sen, groups as well as individual persons can and should be authors of their own futures. Public deliberation and democratic decision making are arguably defensible ways in which citizens and their representatives both exercise their agency and forge good policy.

### FURTHER CHALLENGES

Much work remains for those in agreement or sympathy with an agency-oriented capability approach. On the practical side, researchers should

consider the ways in which individual and group agency might be measured (see Alkire: 2009). On the conceptual side, scholars should evaluate Sen's concepts of agency in relation to different conceptions of autonomy (see Alvarez 2005; Buss and Overtone 2002; Taylor 2005) as well as recent work on collective agency and action and its similarities to and differences from individual agency and action (Bratman 1999; Tuomela 1995). More normative work is called for to answer the questions of why and how much we should care about agency, and what should be done when agency is at odds with well-being freedoms and achievements or with other values such as stability or efficiency. Political philosophers should also take up the question of conflict resolution, when the agency (freedoms and achievements) of different individuals or of different groups conflict, and the question of what would count as a fair distribution of agency freedom and achievement within and between groups. Policy analysts should consider what agents are most likely to bring about progressive change and which strategies and institutions are most likely to protect, promote, and restore agency. If we adopt an "essentially 'people-centered' approach, which puts human agency (rather than organizations such as markets or governments) at the centre of the stage" (Sen 2002: 6), what are the implications for what ought to be done and who ought to do it?

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter, we have provided an overview of Sen's notions of capability and agency. We also have sought to dispel misunderstandings of these concepts and have called attention to their neglected or underappreciated nuances. We have discussed the evolution of Sen's formulations of these notions, and his employment of them in both his social scientific and normative inquiries. We have identified ongoing work of scholars developing these concepts and taking up new challenges in their clarification and defense. We conclude by underscoring that well-being (capabilities and functionings) and agency, although conceptually and normatively distinct, are also linked in various ways.

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. 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 2009; Sen 1985b: 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.”

#### APPENDIX: MARTHA NUSSBAUM’S LIST OF CENTRAL HUMAN CAPABILITIES

From: Martha Nussbaum (2006), *Frontiers of Justice*, Harvard University Press, pp. 76–8.

##### The Central Human Capabilities

1. *Life*. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length: not dying prematurely, or before one’s life is so reduced as to be not worth living.
2. *Bodily Health*. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.
3. *Bodily Integrity*. Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.
4. *Senses, Imagination, and Thought*. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason – and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific

- training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid nonbeneficial pain.
5. *Emotions*. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial for their development.)
  6. *Practical Reason*. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance.)
  7. *Affiliation*.
    - A. Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.)
    - B. Having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin.
  8. *Other Species*. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
  9. *Play*. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
  10. *Control over One's Environment*
    - A. *Political*. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association.
    - B. *Material*. Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

### References

- Alkire, S. (2002). *Valuing Freedoms: Sen's Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Alkire, S. (2009). "Concepts and Measures of Agency" in Basu and Kanbur (eds.), *Arguments for a Better World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Alvarez, M. (2005). "Agents, Actions, and Reasons," *Philosophical Books*, 46, 1, 45–58.
- Anderson, E. (1999). "What is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics*, 109, 2, 287–337.
- Basu, K. (1987). "Achievements, Capabilities, and the Concept of Well-being," *Social Choice and Welfare*, 4, 69–76.
- Basu, K., and L. López-Calva (forthcoming). "Functionings and Capabilities," in Arrow, Sen, and Suzumura (eds.), *Handbook of Social Choice and Welfare*, Vol. 3 (North Holland: Elsevier Science).
- Berlin, I. (1969). *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Bratman, M. (1999). *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Brighouse, H., and I. Robeyns (eds.) (forthcoming). *Measuring Justice: Primary Goods and Capabilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Buss, S., and L. Overtone (eds.) (2002). *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- Chakraborty, A. (1996). "On the Possibility of a Weighting System for Functionings," *Indian Economic Review*, 31, 241–50.
- Crocker, D. A. (2006). "Sen and Deliberative Democracy," in Kaufman (ed.), *Capabilities Equality: Basic Issues and Problems* (New York: Routledge).
- Crocker, D. A. (2007). "Deliberative Participation in Local Development," *Journal of Human Development*, 8, 3, 431–55.
- Crocker, D. A. (2008). *Ethics of Global Development: Agency, Capability, and Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Drèze, J., and A. Sen (2002). *India: Development and Participation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Dworkin, R. (1981). "What is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 10, 283–345.
- Dworkin, R. (2000). *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Fleurbaey, M. (2002). "Development, Capabilities and Freedom," *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 37, 71–7.
- Frolich, N., and J. Oppenheimer (1992). *Choosing Justice: An Experimental Approach to Ethical Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Gastil, J., and P. Levine (eds.) (2005). *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the 21st Century* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).
- Graham, C., and S. Pettinato (2002). *Happiness and Hardship* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press).
- Hirschman, A. (1977). *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

- Kaufman, A. (2006a). "Capabilities and Freedom," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 14, 3, 289–300.
- Kaufman, A. (2006b). "What Goods Do to (and for) People: Duality and Ambiguity in Sen's Capabilities Approach?" in Kaufman (ed.), *Capabilities Equality: Basic Issues and Problems* (New York: Routledge).
- Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books).
- Nussbaum, M. (1988). "Nature, Functioning and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 6, suppl. vol., 145–84.
- Nussbaum, M. (2000). *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Nussbaum, M. (2003). "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice," *Feminist Economics*, 9, 2/3, 33–59.
- Nussbaum, M. (2006). *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Pettit, P. (1997). *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Pettit, P. (2001). "Capability and Freedom: A Defense of Sen," *Economics and Philosophy*, 17, 1–20.
- Pierik, R., and I. Robeyns (2007). "Resources Versus Capabilities: Social Endowments in Egalitarian Theory," *Political Studies*, 55, 1, 133–52.
- Pogge, T. (2002). "Can the Capability Approach be Justified?" *Philosophical Topics*, 30, 2, 167–228.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Reich, R. (2002). *Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism in American Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Robeyns, I. (2003). "Sen's Capability Approach and Gender Inequality: Selecting Relevant Capabilities," *Feminist Economics*, 9, 2/3, 61–92.
- Robeyns, I. (2005). "The Capability Approach: A Theoretical Survey," *Journal of Human Development*, 6, 1, 93–114.
- Robeyns, I. (2006). "The Capability Approach in Practice," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 14, 3, 351–76.
- Roemer, J. (1996). *Theories of Distributive Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Schokkaert, E. (2007). "Capabilities and Satisfaction with Life," *Journal of Human Development*, 8, 3, 415–30.
- Sen, A. K. (1980). "Equality of What?" in McMurrin (ed.), *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Sen, A. K. (1984). "Rights and Capabilities," in *Resources, Values and Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Sen, A. K. (1985a). *Commodities and Capabilities* (Amsterdam: North-Holland).
- Sen, A. K. (1985b). "Well-being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984," *Journal of Philosophy*, 82, 4, 169–221.

- Sen, A. K. (1987). "The Standard of Living," in Sen, Muellbauer, Kanbur, Hart, and Williams, *The Standard of Living: The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Sen, A. K. (1990a). "Gender and Cooperative Conflicts," in Tinker (ed.), *Persistent Inequalities* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Sen, A. K. (1990b). "Individual Freedom as a Social Commitment," *New York Review of Books*, 37, 10 (14 June).
- Sen, A. K. (1992). *Inequality Re-examined* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Sen, A. K. (1993). "Capability and Well-being," in Nussbaum and Sen (eds.), *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Sen, A. K. (1995a). "Agency and Well-Being: The Development Agenda," in Heyzer, Kapoor, and Sandler (eds.), *A Commitment to the World's Women* (New York: UNIFEM).
- Sen, A. K. (1995b). "Gender Inequality and Theories of Justice," in Nussbaum and Glover (eds.), *Women, Culture and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Sen, A. K. (1999). *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf).
- Sen, A. K. (2002). *Rationality and Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Sen, A. K. (2004). "Elements of a Theory of Human Rights," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 32, 4, 315–56.
- Sen, A. K. (2005). "Human Rights and Capabilities," *Journal of Human Development*, 6, 2, 151–66.
- Sen, A. K. (2006). "The Importance of Ethics for the Efficient Design and Implementation of Development Policies and Projects," International Social Capital, Ethics and Development Day, Inter-American Development Bank, 24 February.
- Stewart, F. (1995). "Basic Needs, Capabilities and Human Development," *Greek Economic Review*, 17, 2, 83–96.
- Sugden, R. (1993). "Welfare, Resources, and Capabilities: A Review of Inequality Reexamined by Amartya Sen," *Journal of Economic Literature*, 31, 1947–62.
- Taylor, J. S. (ed.) (2005). *Personal Autonomy: New Essays on Personal Autonomy and Its Role in Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Tuomela, R. (1995). *The Importance of Us* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
- United Nations Development Programme (1990–2007/8). *Human Development Report* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Vallentyne, P. (2005). "Debate: Capabilities versus Opportunities for Wellbeing," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 13, 359–71.
- Williams, A. (2002). "Dworkin on Capability," *Ethics*, 113, 23–39.
- Wolff, J., and A. de-Shalit (2007). *Disadvantage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- World Bank (2005). *World Development Report 2006: Equity and Development* (Washington, DC: World Bank / Oxford University Press).
- Young, I. (2000). *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).