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Shaping the Capability Approach: Robeyns' Modular View

Ingrid Robeyns (2017) *Wellbeing, Freedom and Justice. The Capability Approach Re-Examined*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers. DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0130 (In open access).

The last decade has seen an outstanding rise in the use of the capability approach as a method for evaluating and conceptualising human development, flourishing, inequality and social justice across the whole range of the social sciences. The capability approach, as developed initially by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, is meant to be an alternative to income, utility and resource-metrics for evaluating what individuals are able to do, and the kind of person they are able to be.¹ In Robeyns' words, the capability approach 'asks what people can do and be (their capabilities) and what they are actually achieving in terms of beings and doings (their functionings)' (Robeyns, 2017: 9). By reframing the analysis of an individual's social position from the instruments (income, resources) which allow her to flourish, to a focus on the actual opportunities available to her, and her actual use of these opportunities, the capability approach expands the evaluative space for poverty indexes, theories of inequality and justice, and social and development policies on health, education, or women empowerment, among many other fields.

The use of the capability approach across disciplines has led to wide methodological and conceptual messiness in its use, its applicability, its limitations, and the definition of boundaries of what it is, what it can do, and what it is not and should not do. This is where Ingrid Robeyns' work comes in. Standing on her longstanding methodological research for the capabilities approach (Robeyns 2005; 2006; 2016), *Wellbeing, Freedom and Justice* aims to be a structural re-examination of the basic tenants which ground the capability approach in order to put order into a presently chaotic method. It offers a book-length explanation of how the capability approach should be understood, clarifying various misconceptions of it, and tackling important critiques posed by outsiders.

¹ See Amartya Sen (1992; 1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000; 2011), among many others.

The book's core purpose is methodological. It intends, first, to present a clear definition and model of the capability approach with the various fundamental elements that any researcher using it should follow (Chapters 1 and 2); second, it intervenes in certain internal debates (Chapter 3); and third, it aims to respond to external concerns and misconceptions of the capability approach, both proving how conceptual misunderstandings have led to wrongful interpretations of what it is, and providing a clear assessment of the limitations from which the approach suffers (Chapter 4). The main contribution of the book is its proposal for a 'modular structure,' which works as a guideline for the do's, do-not's and choices when working with a capability methodology (Robeyns, 2017: 36-75). Robeyns' modular view contends that any capability approach has certain non-optional core features which all capability theories must endorse (A-module),² non-optional modules with variable content (B-modules),³ and contingent or additional modules which may be included but are unnecessary for a capability theory (C-modules).⁴

Beyond this structural contribution, Robeyns' embarks on the painstaking duty of clarifying misconceptions surrounding the purpose and concepts used in the capability approach, and tying-up loose ends that capability scholars have not been able to clarify based on the dual core contributions of Sen and Nussbaum. For example, she clarifies the different ways in which 'capabilities' and 'functionings' have been conceptualised and used; their relation to the concept of 'freedom,' the role that the capability approach plays in debates on theories of justice, welfare economics, human rights, basic needs, or happiness metrics of human well-being.

The lack of narrative unity in the book makes it difficult to offer an analysis of its basic structure or claims, as more than half of it intends to work as a set of responses to varied and unconnected questions relating to the use, concepts and limitations of the capability approach. Although there are particular elements in Robeyns' specific interpretation of the capability approach, in her particular response to certain open debates, and in her use of capability concepts that could be contested, due to space constraints, I want to focus my reflection on a more general assessment. Namely, I intend to consider what Robeyns gets right, and what could improve from her structural analysis of the capability approach. I will offer my own understanding of what the main contribution of

2 The core content (A-modules) includes, for example, the use of the concepts of 'functionings' and 'capabilities,' acknowledgment of pluralism, endorsement of ethical individualism, and the accounting of conversion factors in affecting an individual's opportunities, among others (Robeyns 2017: 38-59).

3 Non-optional modules with optional content include (B-modules): defining a particular purpose, an account of agency, an account of human diversity, and endorsement of meta-theoretical commitments (Robeyns 2017: 59-67).

4 Contingent modules encompass additional normative principles which a theory endorses, ontological or explanatory structures, and empirical methods of analysis, for example. (Robeyns 2017: 68-73).

this book is to the literature, the role that its proposed 'modular structure' plays (and could play) for future capability studies, certain comments on the general construction and purpose of the book, and how it affects our understanding of the audience who will most benefit from reading it.

I will begin with what I consider to be the two main contributions of the book to the literature on the capability approach: first, its distinction between 'the capability approach' and 'capability theories', and, second, the creation of a structured model to explain what a capability theory requires. A major clarification is her distinction between the capability *approach* as opposed to particular capability *theories* (Robeyns, 2017: 29-31). The capability approach is a method for the evaluation of human well-being in social science research, while capability theories are specific applications of this method by various authors in particular disciplines. Robeyns considers that much of the critiques posed to the capability approach are actually directed at capability theories, and that the distinction is necessary in order to distinguish the method from its philosophical, economic, policy-based or empirical uses. A critique of, for example, Nussbaum's theory of justice (Nussbaum, 2006), does not equate to a critique to the capability approach, but simply to Nussbaum's own application of it as her own capability theory.

As for Robeyns' development of the 'modular structure' for determining the principles and conditions that make a theory a *capability* theory, this is something that needed to be done, and it is particularly helpful that Robeyns, as the leading researcher in capability methods, is the one to have taken up this task. Robeyns' modular structure achieves the dual purpose of ensuring unity and cohesiveness among the plural uses of the capability approach while leaving a certain plasticity and adaptability in its implementation in order to account for the variety of possible uses and applications it may have in different disciplines, and from particular political inclinations. Its basic structure clarifies the potential plurality of uses and roads that a capability theory may take, while maintaining a clear core structure that a theory must have in order for it to be considered an application of the capability approach.

I must however introduce certain reservations regarding her particular understanding of what this general structure should be.⁵ The modular structure's assignment of particular elements into each of the three modules (core, non-optional and contingent) may have the potential consequence of raising more questions and debates than those that it manages to appease. For example, there is the book's claim that, while functionings and capabilities are core concepts

5 Although I see faults with various particulars in the book's interpretation of certain secondary concepts, due to space constraints, I will focus on those that I consider more structural to its overall aim.

forming the evaluative space for *any* capability theory (A-module), particular capability theories are permitted to choose which of them actually play a role in their particular evaluation (B-module). Claiming that both concepts are ‘core’ concepts but allowing that their use is optional leaves the A-module lacking the stringency it intends to impose. This lack of stringency can be considered problematic, as well, in her concession to what she labels ‘hybrid’ theories (Robeyns, 2017: 75-77). Robeyns acknowledges the existence and validity of theories that do not comply in their entirety with the core elements which ground the capability approach. This is highly problematic: if A-modules are core and obligatory elements that should be included in any capability theory, this should apply in a more strict manner; if a capability theory does not endorse all A-modules, then either the theory is not based on the capability approach after all, or certain A-modules were wrongly placed in the ‘non-optional’ category. Robeyns’ concession misses the point of establishing a clear structure for the approach in the first place; the modular structure is malleable enough for it to include many different interpretations of what a capability theory is; it is unnecessary to allow hybrid approaches to count as well. A final concern with the modular structure is that it would benefit from more minimalism. The long list of modules, the ambiguity in what many of them entail, and the potential redundancy among many of them, makes the structure difficult to follow and implement.

When opening the book, my first expectation was to read an introduction to the capability approach targeting non-capability theorists across disciplines. My expectation was wrong. Although the book intends to present the most basic elements in the clearest form in order for non-capability theorists across disciplines to understand the capability approach, its core focus is on addressing particular debates and discussions which are of concern for capability theorists only. Only the first chapter of the book is particularly useful for non-capability theorists. The rest embarks on a detailed exploration of particular interpretations, debates and discussions *within* the capability literature, which may leave the first-time reader rather confused. The book works more as a FAQ source for individuals who are already working with the capability approach, and who want to work out certain confusions in their understanding of it, rather than as an introductory resource for someone who is new to it, and wants to grasp the approach’s basics. The book moves extremely fast from the presentation of what the capability approach is and what it does, to the minutia of the internal discussions and debates that have developed within the discipline, which, for someone who is not well versed in it, might lead to more confusion than clarification.

Reading Robeyns' book, one is led through the difficulties, variations, and general misunderstandings present in the capability approach as it has been applied in the literature, rather than being presented with a clear path forward for those who are interested in using this research method. I believe that this is a problem of structure rather than content. In a very short book, Robeyns managed to compile most (if not all) methodological and conceptual issues that capability theories encounter in a very remarkable way, fleshing out all the various uses, interpretations, debates, and issues.⁶ However, the fact that more than half of the book is focused on clarifying the approach through tackling its ambiguities and misinterpretations, makes one close the book with more questions than answers. I do not think this is necessarily negative. As a capability theorist, the book has helped me to question some of my assumptions about what a capability theory should be, requiring from me to revise certain misconceptions and wrongful uses I have made of it. Anyone who works within the capability approach should absolutely read Robeyns' book, and I also recommend it to anyone who considers applying the capability approach herself. It tests one's prejudices and offers an important contribution to many internal debates within the capability literature.

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⁶ The bibliography that the book offers can be considered as one of the best cross-disciplinary compilations of the capability literature.

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