

DIALOGUE  
CAPABILITIES, LISTS, AND PUBLIC REASON:  
CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

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*Amartya Sen*

ABSTRACT

Amartya Sen addresses the question why he is disinclined to provide a fixed list of capabilities to go with his general capability approach. Capability assessment can be used for different purposes (varying from poverty evaluation to the assessment of human rights or of human development), and public reasoning and discussion are necessary for selecting relevant capabilities and weighing them against each other in each context. It would be a mistake to build a mausoleum for a “fixed and final” list of capabilities usable for every purpose and unaffected by the progress of understanding of the social role and importance of different capabilities.

KEYWORDS

Capability approach, capability lists, democracy, evaluation, public reasoning, Amartya Sen

JEL Codes: D63, I3, I31

This contribution furthers the exchange, “Continuing the Conversation: Amartya Sen Talks with Bina Agarwal, Jane Humphries, and Ingrid Robeyns,” which appeared in *Feminist Economics*, Vol. 9, No. 2/3, July/November, 2003, “A Special Issue on Amartya Sen’s Work and Ideas: A Gender Perspective,” guest edited by Bina Agarwal, Jane Humphries, and Ingrid Robeyns.

*BA, JH, IR:* In your writings on the capability approach you provide no list of capabilities. Is that because you think such a list cannot be drawn?

*AS:* The problem is not with listing important capabilities, but with insisting on one predetermined canonical list of capabilities, chosen by theorists without any general social discussion or public reasoning. To have such a fixed list, emanating entirely from pure theory, is to deny the possibility of fruitful public participation on what should be included and why.

I have, of course, discussed various lists of capabilities that would seem to demand attention in any theory of justice and more generally in social assessment, such as the freedom to be well nourished, to live disease free lives, to be able to move around, to be educated, to participate in public life, and so on. Indeed, right from my first writings on using the capability perspective (for example in my 1979 Lectures “Equality of What?”), I have tried to discuss the relevance of many specific capabilities. The 1979 lecture went into the relevance of “the ability to move about” (and discussed why disabilities can be a central concern in a way that an income-centered approach may not be able to grasp), along with other basic capabilities, such as “the ability to meet one’s nutritional requirements, the wherewithal to be clothed and sheltered, the power to participate in the social life of the community” (see Sen 1982: 367–8). The contrast between lists of capabilities and commodities was a central concern in *Commodities and Capabilities* (Sen 1985). The relevance of many capabilities that are often neglected was discussed in the second set of Tanner Lectures (Sen 1987), given at Cambridge University, and published under the title *The Standard of Living*.

What I am against is the fixing of a cemented list of capabilities, which is absolutely complete (nothing could be added to it) and totally fixed (it could not respond to public reasoning and to the formation of social values). I am a great believer in theory. The theory of evaluation and assessment does, I believe, have the exacting task of pointing to the relevance of what we are free to do and free to be (the capabilities in general), as opposed to the material goods we have and the commodities we can command. But pure theory cannot “freeze” a list of capabilities for all societies for all time to come, irrespective of what the citizens come to understand and value. That would be not only a denial of the reach of democracy, but also a misunderstanding of what pure theory can do, completely divorced from the particular social reality that any particular society faces.

Along with the exercise of listing the relevant capabilities, there is also the problem of determining the relative weights and importance of the different capabilities included in the relevant list. Even with a given list, the question of valuation cannot be avoided. There is sometimes a temptation not only to have one fixed list, but also to have the elements of the list ordered in a lexicographic way. But this can hardly work. For example, the ability to be well nourished cannot in general be put invariably *above* or *below* the ability to be well sheltered, so that the tiniest improvement of one will always count as more important than a large change in the other. We may have to give priority to the ability to be well nourished when people are dying of hunger in their homes, whereas the freedom to be sheltered may rightly receive more weight when people are in general well fed, but lack shelter.

Some of the basic capabilities (with which my 1979 Tanner Lecture was particularly concerned) will no doubt figure in every list of relevant capabilities in every society. But the exact list to be used will have to take note of the purpose of the exercise. There is often good sense in narrowing the coverage of capabilities for a specific purpose. An example is the use of a selected list of very elementary capabilities for assessing the extent of poverty in some countries. Jean Drèze and I did try to do that in *Hunger and Public Action* (Dreze and Sen 1989), and *India: Participation and Development* (Dreze and Sen 2002). I see Martha Nussbaum's use of a given list of capabilities for some minimal rights against deprivation as being extremely useful in the same practical way. For another practical purpose, we may have another list.

For example, when my friend Mahbub ul Haq asked me, in 1989, to work with him on indicators of human development, and in particular to help develop a general index for global assessment and critique, it was clear to me that we were involved in a particular exercise of specific relevance. So the "human development index" (the HDI) was based on a very minimal listing of capabilities, with a particular focus on getting at a minimally basic quality of life, calculable from available statistics, in a way that the GNP or GDP failed to capture. Lists of capabilities have to be used for various purposes, and so long as we understand what we are doing (and in particular that we are getting a list for a particular reason, related to a particular assessment, evaluation, or critique), we do not put ourselves against other lists that may be relevant or useful for other purposes.

All this has to be contrasted with insisting on one "final list of capabilities that matter." To decide that some capability will not figure in the list of relevant capabilities at all amounts to putting a zero weight on that capability for every exercise, no matter what the exercise is concerned with, and no matter what the social conditions are. This could be very dogmatic, for many distinct reasons.

First, we use capabilities for different purposes. What we focus on cannot be independent of what we are doing and why (e.g., whether we are evaluating poverty, specifying certain basic human rights, getting a rough and ready measure of human development, and so on).

Second, social conditions and the priorities that they suggest may vary. For example, given the nature of poverty in India as well as the nature of available technology, it was not unreasonable in 1947 (when India became independent) to concentrate on elementary education, basic health, and so on, and not worry too much about whether everyone can effectively communicate across the country and beyond. However, with the development of the Internet and its wide-ranging applications, and the advance made in information technology (not least in India), access to the web and the freedom of general communication are now parts of a very important capability that is of interest and relevance to all Indians.

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Third, even with given social conditions, public discussion and reasoning can lead to a better understanding of the role, reach, and the significance of particular capabilities. For example, one of the many contributions of feminist economics has been precisely to bring out the importance of certain freedoms that were not recognized very clearly – or at all – earlier on, for example freedom from the imposition of fixed and time-honored family roles, or immunity from implicit derogation in social communication. To insist on a fixed forever list of capabilities would deny the possibility of progress in social understanding and also go against the productive role of public discussion, social agitation, and open debates.

I have nothing against the listing of capabilities but must stand up against a grand mausoleum to one fixed and final list of capabilities.

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