

Integrating Diverse Ethical Paradigms: Philosophical Reappraisal of Capability Approach

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Abstract

The development of the capability approach as a normative framework has substantially advanced studies in human rights, justice, and well-being by redirecting attention from aggregate utility or material prosperity to the real freedom of individuals. While the capability approach incorporates ethical debates, there is little emphasis on a systematic study of comparing this approach with fundamental ethical doctrines such as Virtue Ethics, Consequentialism, and Deontology. Virtue ethics advances by stressing moral character and inner righteousness, supplementing the capability approach's exploration of external freedoms, incorporating an internal aspect of moral advancement. Consequentialism also guides this approach in addressing moral dilemmas and helps in resolving conflicts that arise from the scarcity of resources, facilitating a well-organized strategy for valuing capabilities. Deontological theories reinforce the capability approach's obligation to universal ethical principles, presenting a steadier groundwork for legal justice and human rights. Delving deeper than conceptual enhancement, the study will examine how incorporating these ethical perceptions strengthens the capability approach to evolve into a more refined ethical paradigm.

Keywords: capability approach, virtue ethics, consequentialism, deontology

Introduction:

The Capability Approach, as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, has reformed modern-day examinations of the idea of justice, well-being, and human rights studies. It emphasizes individuals' concrete freedoms to accomplish valued functionings. Contrasting to conventional theoretical models of economics or utilitarianism, the capability approach emphasizes achieving freedom and well-being – individuals' capability to lead a lifestyle they consider as valuable. This approach has significant implications in policymaking in fields like poverty analysis, education, healthcare, gender studies, and so forth. But regardless of its wide-ranging pertinence, the capability approach continues to lag as a methodical philosophical discourse in comparison to well-founded moral philosophies like virtue ethics, consequentialist ethics, and deontological ethics.

This analysis contends that a systematic comparison between the above-mentioned ethical theories and the capability approach is important to refine the approach's moral reasoning, strengthening its capacity to deal with more intricate moral conflicts. Each of the theories offers viewpoints that can enhance the capability approach's moral argumentation. Virtue Ethics emphasizes the importance of personal responsibility and moral character, which the capability approach has limited consideration of. Consequentialism presents a systematic outline to assess moral negotiations, an issue capability approach grapples with when deciding which capability should be given priority at the time of conflict. The objectives of this study include:

1. To ascertain harmonizing factors and competencies.
2. To discuss the capability approach's conceptual flaws.
3. To broaden the ethical scope of the capability approach.

The study starts with an overview of the core principles of the capability approach. Subsequently, it attempts to do an in-depth review of the three dominant ethical discourses, emphasizing their moral principles and commitments. Then, by making comparisons, this paper tries to examine how these theories can reinforce and enlighten the capability approach to its philosophical insight as well as its practical applicability. Subsequently, by incorporating these understandings, this paper shall synthesize major philosophical junctures and paradigmatic conflicts, highlighting the points where the capability approach can take inspiration from these theories. Further, the study also believes that such cross-disciplinary dialogues will not only enrich the normative basis of the capability approach, it also widens the approach's pertinency as a moral framework to address complex contemporary ethical challenges.

Capability Approach: An Overview:

The Capability approach, as mentioned earlier, is a normative tradition that examines justice, development, and well-being by emphasizing individuals' real freedoms or opportunities to lead a fulfilled life. This approach offers a comprehensive understanding of well-being by emphasizing human freedom and agency as significant requirements to achieve a flourished life (Sen, 1999). Sen, along with Nussbaum, considers human well-being as the uppermost moral concern. Human flourishing should not be measured solely by the accumulation of resources. Rather, it should be measured by people's having the actual freedoms to accomplish valuable functionings. Capabilities and functionings are two core concepts in the capability approach. The concept of functionings means 'the various things a person may value doing or being' (Sen, 1999). Thus, functioning indicates various components of living that enhance human well-being, e.g., human ability to acquire knowledge, participate in social life, be healthy, and experience career fulfillment. Capabilities, on the other hand, refer to 'the various combinations of functionings that the person can achieve' (Sen, 1992). Therefore, by capabilities, Sen has comprehended people's freedom to embrace a lifestyle they consider valuable.

The Capability Approach and Virtue Ethics:

Virtue ethics stresses that morality is rooted in the refinement of character, incorporating courage,

wisdom, and justice. The current section examines the mutual influence between the virtue ethics of Aristotle and the capability approach by drawing attention to elements of similarity and differences. Even though these two frameworks vary in their core concerns, capability thinkers, preeminently Martha Nussbaum, have widely used Aristotle's ideas in forming their ethical discourses.

Aristotelian ethics is primarily based on the notion of *eudaimonia*, usually rendered as the ultimate goal of human existence or human flourishing. For Aristotle, virtues refer to the properties or merits that lead us to the realization of *eudaimonia*. He opines, "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason, the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim" (Aristotle, 1980). Nevertheless, the good he talks about is a non-singular, diverse entity. Different spheres of human learning and activity aspire for various expressions of goodness and moral excellence. However, regardless of this diversity, Aristotle argues that there exists a supreme good that can be achieved by action, i.e. *eudaimonia*: "the highest of all goods achievable by action" (Aristotle, 1980). As different from goods that have instrumental value only (e.g., wealth), *eudaimonia* is an 'end in itself'. It has an intrinsic value and does not act as a tool or medium to attain another objective. Martha Nussbaum borrows this idea of Aristotle on *eudaimonia* to enhance her understanding of human well-being. According to her, happiness is 'something like flourishing human living, a kind of living that is active, inclusive of all that has intrinsic value' (Nussbaum, 2005). Considered in this light, virtue ethics offers a foundation for the capability approach, since Nussbaum endorses a moral framework seeking assurance for individuals to be offered the privilege to realize their potential and live a flourishing life.

Despite the resemblances, both approaches differ in many respects. One important distinction is evident in their moral consideration of character formation and motivation. Virtue ethics stresses cultivating the character of individuals through proper motivations and integration of righteousness within oneself. However, Nussbaum is less concerned with this psychological process and more with socio-political circumstances that allow individuals to realize their potential. She emphasizes people's having the actual opportunity to utilize or demonstrate their capabilities in a meaningful way. Thus, the capability approach offers a moral framework that incorporates individual capabilities with outward social conditions. It highlights the idea that human flourishing is not only an abstract ideal but a concrete reality based on realizable opportunities. Therefore, the capability approach may be regarded as a value-based framework that transcends mere individual virtues. It examines well-being against the backdrop of social life, political freedom, and economy, which makes it more relevant in contemporary ethical debates on justice, policy-making, and human rights.

The Capability Approach and Consequentialism:

The ethical theory of consequentialism examines the moral significance of an action by considering its outcomes or results. According to this theory, moral principles should be directed towards the attainment of maximum well-being for the maximum people. These are often calculated in terms of material prosperity, utility,

or sometimes happiness. For Amartya Sen, consequentialism is a theory that stresses the idea that ‘every choice, whether of actions, institutions, motivations, rules, etc., be ultimately determined by the goodness of the consequent states of affairs’ (Sen, 1987). Hence, the goal of the capability approach is to scale up the freedoms and opportunities of individuals, including their material prosperity, which can be roughly viewed as having a consequentialist aim. However, this interpretation is too basic and does not fully grasp the core contrast between the two approaches.

The major criterion of comparison between the two frameworks is how both have addressed the issue of poverty and social justice. Peter Singer, a prominent consequentialist philosopher, points out that poverty can be reduced on a global level through redistributive measures and policies like a philanthropic contribution or voluntary aid to the disadvantaged by wealthy people (Singer, 1972). He contends that such initiatives will help an overall increase in utility by mitigating suffering and enhancing well-being. In a similar manner, the capability approach also aims to lessen poverty and increase opportunities for the poor. But they differ in their ethical justification. The former aims at aggregate utility, and the latter emphasizes human dignity and the individual’s intrinsic worth. The aggregate outlook of consequentialism, particularly utilitarian ethics, overlooks individual uniqueness, quantifies the general welfare, and fails to deliberate on the subjective nature of well-being. Nussbaum criticized this by maintaining that ‘aggregate data aren’t enough for a normative assessment of how a nation is doing: we need to know how each one is doing, considering each as a separate life’ (Nussbaum, 2000).

The next point of comparison between utilitarianism and the capability approach is their consideration of cultural diversity and moral pluralism. Both Sen and Nussbaum acknowledge the significance of considering contextual and cultural differences in evaluating well-being. Conversely, utilitarianism usually thinks about the universalized concept of well-being, using utility as a single criterion to measure good. This attitude results in overlooking the essence of generational and cultural differences in determining a good life. So, the capability approach criticizes this assimilation by highlighting the importance of differences in social evaluation and moral reasoning. In comparison to consequentialism, the capability approach offers a more comprehensive account of well-being by considering human freedom, agency, and capabilities along with material opulence. Consequentialism is concerned with only external factors, whereas the capability approach incorporates internal affairs by holding that well-being realization requires not only material possessions but also substantive freedom to pursue a meaningful life.

The Capability Approach and Deontological Ethics:

Deontology and the capability approach illustrate a close association, particularly in terms of moral duty, intrinsic worth, and human dignity. Kant’s moral principle that strongly strike a chord with capability approach is the maxim: “So act that you use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (Kant, 2011). This imperative resonates with the fundamental commitment of the capability approach to treat individuals as ends in themselves, and not just as

means to social or economic policies. Sen's emphasis on the function of human agency in assessing human life, requiring that individuals must possess agency to make life decisions on their own so that they can lead a valuable life, mirrors Kantian understanding that moral actions are based on personal autonomy and rational agency. Similarly, Nussbaum builds upon Kantian philosophy by integrating human dignity as the foundation of the 'list of capabilities' prepared by her (Nussbaum, 2005). Kant's assertion that every individual possesses an intrinsic worth, independent of his/her external situation, is represented by Nussbaum in her analysis of justice, where dignity is considered to be the normative foundation of the justice system.

Sen and Nussbaum, by emphasizing the functioning concept, give weight to what individuals should be capable of doing and becoming, corresponding to deontological ethics of moral obligation and duty. The capability approach somewhat manifests deontological principles by directing moral agents to act and become what they aspire for. Functioning has two dimensions: doing and being. The 'doing' aspect of functioning has deontological implications, whereas the 'being' aspect corresponds more closely to virtue ethics, emphasizing the type of person one ought to develop into.

Conclusion: The Capability Approach as an Evolving Ethical Paradigm:

This study unveils valuable perspectives that align with the overall objective of this analysis, emphasizing how the capability approach incorporates and rises above traditional ethical discourses to evolve into a more efficient ethical paradigm. One crucial feature of philosophically sound ethical theories is their ability to coordinate manifold moral reflections – character, outcome, and duties— without slipping into reductionism. The capability approach maintains this middle ground by incorporating:

1. **Virtue Ethics:** Sen (followed by Nussbaum), by focusing on human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) and the realization of capabilities, embraces Aristotle's philosophy of a flourishing life. But unlike the Aristotelian version, this approach does not look to an intangible abstract vision of virtue. Instead, the approach presents policy-driven, concrete suggestions to ensure that people have real freedom and opportunities to exercise as well as cultivate their capabilities.
2. **Consequential Ethics:** While criticizing a completely utility-oriented blueprint, the approach of capability acknowledges the significance of considering outcomes in evaluating well-being. But unlike consequential ethics, this approach emphasizes people's well-being and agency. Capability philosophers do not see individuals as mere facilitators of social welfare; rather, they advocate for analyzing their defined conditions, opportunities, and freedoms. This advancement has helped Sen and Nussbaum's approach to uphold an ethical emphasis on justice without committing the same mistake as utilitarianism (neglecting individual entitlements in the interest of collective well-being)
3. **Deontology:** The capability approach endorses Kant's moral principles by advocating that no individual should be regarded as a mere instrument to attain some end, emphasizing the idea that justice implies appreciating individuals' autonomy and their fundamental worth. But unlike established deontological

principles, this approach abstains from strict ethical absolutism by considering insights from social and economic principles, hence enabling greater moral flexibility.

To sum up, we can say that refined with the philosophical insights of traditional ethical theories discussed above, the capability approach gains prominence as a more ethically refined and philosophically nuanced framework. It not only safeguards the fundamental principles of these ethical traditions but also succeeds in surmounting their shortcomings. This makes the capability approach strategically qualified to address the contemporary issues of justice, well-being, and development.

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