

***Human Richness and Personhood:
The Capability Approach and Its Philosophical Foundations***
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Introduction

Notions such as *well-being* and *good* have been widely investigated both by economists and philosophers: policy-making, economic evaluation, sociological analysis, and philosophical inquiry have dealt (and will always deal) with such concepts.

Moreover, the focus on ‘good’ and ‘well-being’ raises a further issue, that is, the compatibility between a substantive notion of the ‘*Good*’ (expressed through universal moral values) and individual preferences. This issue is also at stake in the Capability Approach, whose final idea seems to be that moral actions and judgements would best be oriented through reference to a universal notion of the ‘*Good*’, which keeps its objectivity, but at the same time permits a sort of *pluralism*.

Respect for and sensitivity to pluralism and human diversity, together with the reference to a universal Good, show that human beings cannot be reduced to their utility function but are rather *pluralistic* entities, in whom a multiplicity of capabilities is at stake. The Capability Approach (thereafter CA) thus leads us beyond the idea of the (utilitarian) economic individual and indicates a different anthropological model - the *person*. Nonetheless, a full development of the fundamental redefinition of the idea of *personhood* is still lacking: the importance of *agency* in Sen’s works, as well as the focus on *human dignity* in Nussbaum’s, always implicitly refer to a particular idea of personhood, but do not examine it in detail. This lack of inquiry could be addressed by taking into account a key concept that is essential to CA’s idea of personhood, but which the approach itself has not investigated enough - the idea of *richness*.

The *aim of this paper* is thus to reconsider such a key notion in order to argue for an interpretation of it in *anthropological-ethical* terms and to show how fruitful it is for a redefinition of the status of personhood. This means that richness is mainly understood as *human richness*, as an internal multidimensionality and plurality which intrinsically characterises each person and that every society should guarantee or at least promote.

Such an anthropological richness, best reached through a capability perspective and its pluralistic approach, allows us to think of human beings in a *dynamic* frame in which they are constantly involved in the process of ‘becoming’ themselves and realizing themselves. Such fulfilment is nothing other than *self-realisation* and construction of a personal *identity* through each person’s capabilities to do and to be. Moreover, through this interrelation of being, doing and becoming, each one of us finds her or himself to be intrinsically related to the other members of a society, since every other person expresses an anthropological richness and at the same time represents the highest possibility of richness for each one of us.

In order to develop these considerations, this paper will first discuss – examining the work of CA’s major exponents – the topic of *happiness* in order to gain a better understanding of CA’s formulation of two further notions, ‘Good’ and ‘well-being’. All these issues will be considered through an interpretation of CA aimed at connecting its main exponents as well as highlighting various (and in many cases important) differences among them. The focus, however, is not on differences or similarities as such. In fact, the final aim here is to take into account Sen’s and Nussbaum’s approaches and to set up a productive dialogue *between* them and *with*

them: *between* them, because the present work will analyse similarities and differences in their approaches; *with* them, because from such an analysis some limits and further possibilities arise. Thus, the dialogue *within* CA (and *between* its major exponents) is the topic of the first two paragraphs of this paper, and the dialogue *with* the CA is the object of the last two.

The point this paper offers is that the comparison of both approaches as well as the consideration of their limits creates a ‘space’ that can go ‘beyond’ the CA itself. Needless to say, the expression ‘beyond’ must not be understood as the attempt to formulate something more comprehensive or ‘better’ than the approach itself; the purpose is rather to start focusing on some key categories that CA implicitly assumes, or refers to, but does not seem to investigate deeply, the notions of *human richness* and *personhood*. This is why the final part of the paper investigates both these notions and argues why it is worthwhile to consider them for a qualitative broadening of the CA itself, and for a development of its underlying philosophical anthropology.

§1. Happiness or ‘Flourishing’?

One of the major disputes involving both philosophers and economists concerns the interpretation of notions like welfare and well-being, with further implications regarding the concept of happiness as well.

In fact, economists seem to understand happiness mainly as subjective well-being, that is, as a subjective evaluation of each person’s life, taken as a whole, and often related to other notions like pleasure or desire fulfilment, or, more broadly, utility.

One of Sen’s critiques of the notion of happiness addresses precisely this problem: happiness is interpreted too subjectively and cannot therefore constitute a general standard for evaluating well-being.

Sen’s critique of happiness is strictly connected with that of utilitarianism, which ultimately rests on utility only, taking it as the unique informational basis for every evaluative approach (although different forms of utilitarianism have defined it in different ways). Consequently, even if utilitarianism has the merit of taking into account both the results of social arrangements and the well-being of the people involved, it suffers from that fact that, when judging social arrangements and their results, it reduces well-being itself to a particular and limited concept of happiness and utility.

It is thus clear that the utilitarian approach cannot succeed in both its claims as a theory of personal morality as well as a theory of public choice or the criteria applicable to a public policy role¹. In fact, it neglects freedom, rights and liberties, (which can only have a role, to the extent that they may have an impact on utility); it has a ‘distributional indifference’ (because of its aggregative framework); it does not lead immediately to any way of making interpersonal comparisons (since it concentrates on each individual’s choice seen separately), and when it makes comparisons, they still happen in the form of *utility comparisons* based on choice behaviour, which amounts, at best, to comparisons of ‘*real incomes*’ or of the ‘*commodity basis*’ of utility.

Sen’s critique thus addresses both the principle of utility as ultimate informational basis and the interpretation of happiness in utilitarian terms, i.e., as welfare, satisfaction, and maximization of utility function. Therefore, his criticism seems aimed more at the equivalence between welfare, happiness and utility, than at the notion of happiness itself. This seems to be proven by the fact that Sen does speak about happiness, but very differently than utilitarian thinkers: in fact, he wants to

¹ According to Sen and Williams this is the twofold role that utilitarianism claims for itself (see Sen/Williams 1982, ‘Introduction’).

restore happiness to its traditionally essential and broader meaning, linked to the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonia*, which is commonly translated as happiness, but which instead is closer to *flourishing*. The distinction between ‘happiness’ and ‘flourishing’, emphasizes the importance of the topic of happiness, while at the same time distinguishing it from its common modern (and especially utilitarian) understanding.

Far from being identified with pleasure, and meaning something which ‘happens’, *eudaimonia*, in Aristotle’s view, was in fact connected with the notion of virtue, the ultimate aim (*telos*) and highest Good that human beings could realize. Furthermore, *eudaimonia* was deeply social, that is, it also depended on social relationships and friendship (*philia*). *Eudaimonia* was thus something that needed to be ‘realized’ by human beings, in a virtuous life in which they could, in fact, ‘flourish’.

This is why both Sen and Nussbaum avoid the term happiness, and use the word ‘flourishing’: the CA shows how people can be happy in the sense of ‘flourishing’, but not in the sense of ‘subjective well-being’ (as used by the welfarist and utilitarian tradition).

Sen’s and Nussbaum’s critique of happiness thus addresses not happiness as such, but rather a subjective (and limited) interpretation of it, or, in other words, the notion of happiness as subjective well-being and utility. Clearly, then, CA’s criticism of the (modern) notion of happiness relates to the broader criticism of subjective approaches to welfare and well-being.

§2. Human Diversity and Human Richness: Beyond Individual Well-Being

Subjective approaches to welfare and well-being can be critiqued in at least two ways, methodologically (and meta-ethically) and ethically; both directions seem to be strictly connected with the problem of preference-deformation and have been developed by Sen and Nussbaum².

The final point of both criticisms seems to be a strong sensitivity to people’s beliefs, values and desires. However, although this attention to diversity indicates the importance and *dignity* the CA attributes to *human diversity*, it does not degrade into radical individualism, because it always maintains its link to a substantive Good theory.

This is very explicit in both Sen’s and Nussbaum’s view, though Nussbaum provides a normative foundation. She seeks, in fact, to develop a particular type of normative philosophical theory, based on a *universalist* account of central human functionings and respectful of human dignity. She summarizes the core of CA by defining it as ‘the philosophical base for fundamental constitutional principles establishing a social minimum or threshold’ and sees it as the object of an ‘overlapping consensus’ (Nussbaum 2000: 5, 6).

But at the same time, the capabilities in question should be pursued for each and every person: she terms this ‘a *principle of each person’s capability*, based on a *principle of each person as an end*’ (Nussbaum 2000: 5).

CA thus admits compatibility between the reference to *universal* values (each person to be treated as an end, the idea of human dignity) and the attention to each one’s *individual* particularity. The latter attention also implies respect for difference and plurality, since each person differs from everyone else, and there is a plurality of

² The *methodological* (and meta-ethical) point of view is developed in detail by A. Sen, who connects the topic of adaptive preferences with an analysis of a theory’s ‘informational space’ (in particular see Sen 1985 and Sen 1999). The *ethical* point of view is developed especially by Nussbaum who focuses on subjective approaches’ role in the context of social choice and normative theory of political principles (see Nussbaum 2000).

persons. If we try to explicit this point, we can argue that, firstly, the difference among, and plurality of, human beings are particularly manifested through the *external* procedure of interpersonal comparisons: each person finds herself be different from the other when relating or comparing herself to another. But difference and plurality not only become evident in the relation or comparison *among* persons. They also are seen in *internal* characteristics *within* every person, as shown by the notion of capability itself: people have various aspirations, desires, preferences and, above all, various capabilities. The misleading utilitarian ‘narrow view’ of human beings consists exactly in overlooking their intrinsic pluralism and in reducing them to one function, and moreover to a merely quantitative one, that of utility maximization.

Such an *intrinsic* pluralism and multidimensionality within every human being could be defined a ‘*constitutive plurality*’.

It is worth mentioning that Sen adopts this expression, although he uses it mainly as a feature of evaluation. In fact, he distinguishes a ‘competitive’ from a ‘constitutive’ plurality, arguing that the former regards different views that are alternative to one another, whereas the latter describes a kind of ‘intrinsic diversity’ internal to a certain view, embracing different, though not mutually exclusive, aspects (Sen 1987).

To go beyond Sen’s use of this expression, we can show that ‘constitutive plurality’ could and should be seen not only as the characteristic of an adequate evaluative approach, but also as the main feature of our constitution and identity, in other words, as an *anthropological* ‘constitutive plurality’. In fact, the value of such a notion lies not only in a methodological and evaluative perspective, but also in a more fundamental *anthropological* one concerning our essence as human beings: moreover, both perspectives interrelate, since every evaluative approach expresses a complex picture of human beings.

Now, if such an internal ‘constitutive plurality’ characterizes human beings, does the notion of well-being still suffice to explain a similar anthropological complexity?

According to Sen, ‘well-being’ not only relates to one’s own life (‘standard of living’), but also regards the outcomes resulting from ‘sympathies’. This relational component is even more essential in the notion of ‘agency’, which is the result of well-being supplemented with commitments (Sen 1987a).

However, even if well-being and agency focus not only on the individual, but involve a certain relationship with others, their final focus nonetheless rests on the individual and, in the final analysis, they are defined in relation to a certain individual. Therefore, although the anthropological *relational* component is taken into account, it does not assume a primary role, as Sen’s continuous emphasis on *well-being* and personal advantage seems to demonstrate. On the one hand, he criticizes subjective well-being, but on the other, he ultimately returns to well-being itself. Of course, by ‘well-being’ he means something very different from the utilitarian tradition’s definition, but his final emphasis nonetheless centers on well-being. This is particularly evident when he admits that his intention is ‘to explore a particular approach to well-being and advantage in terms of a person’s ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being’ (Sen 1985: 30): the notion of capability itself, thus, is strictly connected with that of well-being.

Furthermore, it sometimes seems that for Sen, the value of *agency*, though very important in itself, mainly lies in its ability to adequately explain well-being. Of course, he does not question the value of agency as such; he does not see it merely as something ‘instrumental’. But even admitting the essential importance of agency, we cannot exclude that well-being is the ultimate notion Sen has in mind. In fact, even if agency does still keep its own value, it nonetheless seems that Sen mainly uses it to

better argue his view of well-being, and to articulate the main differences between the utilitarian account of well-being, and his own. Therefore, even if well-being is interpreted in pluralistic terms, it runs the risk of focusing excessively on the individual, especially because it is not a ‘universal’ and at the same ‘particular’ notion, but only a particular one, focused on each individual. The question we should answer now is the following: what notion can avoid such a risk, but at the same time maintain such a plurality? What notion can go ‘beyond well-being’?

In the following I will try to show that the answer seems to be the notion of *richness*, understood in *ethical-anthropological* terms and meaning precisely *human richness*.

When Sen distinguishes between the idea of being ‘*well off*’ and that of being ‘*well*’, or of having ‘*well-being*’, he seems to implicitly refer to such an anthropological richness. The idea of being ‘*well off*’ conveys opulence and refers to a person’s command over exterior things, whereas the idea of being ‘*well*’, or of having ‘*well-being*’, refers to something *in* a person, that she achieves. The latter expresses a distinctively personal quality lacking in the former (Sen 1985).

We can say that in the second case, the person can ‘flourish’, whereas in the first, she can only maximize her utility and enjoy opulence. But ‘flourishing’, as we have seen, means realizing the highest Good in a virtuous life, in the highly important context of social relations and friendship. How, then, can human beings ‘flourish’? Of course, not by focusing on *quantitative-economical* richness (opulence), but rather on an internal *qualitative richness*. Such an *anthropological richness* thus goes beyond the concept of opulence and means that intrinsic and qualitative ‘constitutive plurality’ that can foster self-realization and ‘flourishing’.

But *anthropological richness* also goes beyond the concept of well-being (as well as agency), especially because it ultimately focuses not merely on each single *individual*, but also represents the ‘*universal*’ feature, common to *every* human being. Therefore, *anthropological richness* is at the same time universal and particular, since *every* human being expresses – or at least should express – it through his or her *particularity*.

Sen’s and Nussbaum’s reference is ultimately to Aristotle also in this regard. According to the Greek philosopher human beings have different capabilities and realise the *same* essence in different ways. Anyway, in Sen’s and Nussbaum’s thought there seems to be a more radical pluralism, since human flourishing does not seem to consist in the realization of a *fixed* and *firm* essence which is the same for everyone. The basic idea is rather that there are other possibilities than the one I am realizing now. In this regard, the concept of *richness* seems to express in the best way such an openness to new possibilities of the self.

Moreover, since its ultimate focus centers not only on the individual, the notion of anthropological richness also affords a more nuanced examination of a key feature of human beings, the *relational* dimension, both *between* human beings, and *within* each human being.

All these components are implicit in CA, but not fully developed. By explicitly expressing them, the concept of anthropological richness also enables a different understanding of the anthropological model underlying CA. If it is true – as I think it is – that every approach reflects a particular and complex picture of personhood, then the notion of *anthropological richness* provides us with a a broader conception of *personhood* and a more fruitful perspective from which to examine CA’s idea of this concept.

Unfortunately, this notion has not been investigated enough by the capability literature, even though it seems to be a very central issue assumed by, and implicit in, the major ideas of CA itself.

§3. A ‘Richer’ Conception of Personhood: dynamical and interpersonal dimension of the self

In order to analyse CA’s idea of personhood, we must first point out another very important dimension that the notion of *anthropological richness* expresses - the *dynamical* dimension. CA’s intrinsic *plurality*, and its focus more on people’s capabilities than on their achieved functionings, give the idea of an ongoing and never ending process of self-formation. The stress on the dimension of ‘being able to do and to be’ shows the importance of a *dynamic* (and never ending) process in which people constitute themselves and their identity, trying to flourish and realize themselves.

Human richness seems to be the possibility, for each and every human being, of realizing him or herself through a dynamic process that involves people’s activity (capabilities to do) and their capacity to be – and become – ‘flourishing’ (capabilities to be and to become)³. This means that the way we are can be changed by developing our capabilities. Thus the dimension of *becoming* assumes great importance and it seems that ‘being’ can be best understood in relation to ‘becoming’, not in static, but in dynamic terms.

Beside the dynamical one, there is another essential dimension in CA’s idea of personhood. In order to develop it, we need to look again at the notion of *human richness*, in this case as formulated by a thinker who, along with Aristotle, exerted great influence on CA - Karl Marx. Just to give an example of this influence, Nussbaum explicitly refers to Marx in arguing that an authentically human life is permeated, primarily, by two faculties, ‘practical reason’ and ‘sociability’ (Nussbaum 2000: 72). Furthermore, she also refers to his (Aristotelian) understanding of human functionings.

But something even more important in Marx’s thought, especially in his *Manuscripts*, seems to have influenced CA, although it has not been recognized explicitly enough. This further element concerns Marx’s interpretation of, and stress on, the notion of *richness*.

In fact, in his *Manuscripts*, he argues that, instead of considering richness and poverty as political economy does, one should rather pay attention to the ‘rich human being’. According to Marx, such a ‘rich’ human being needs a *plurality* of human dimensions for his own *self-realization*; moreover, his self-realization exists as an internal necessity, in other words, as a ‘need’.

But such a self-realization is linked to a further element. In fact, Marx observes that both poverty and richness should gain a ‘*human, and therefore social meaning*’: in other words, the highest richness for each human being is *other human beings* and such a richness is felt in the form of a *need* (Marx 1844)⁴.

This means that self-realization cannot fully succeed if human beings ‘only’ respect one another; it requires something further, since every person is *intrinsically relational*. This further element lies exactly in the recognition of the *relational dimension of personhood*⁵.

³ The importance of the dynamical dimension (and of the ‘capability to become’) has been developed by Comim 2003. Notice that the importance of the dynamic dimension is another feature that the concept of ‘well-being’ does not seem to adequately express.

⁴ Marx uses the following terms: ‘Reichtum’, ‘der reich Mensch’, ‘eine menschliche und daher gesellschaftliche Bedeutung’ (See Marx 1844, *Drittes Manuskript*, §2. *Privateigentum und Kommunismus*, pp. 111-126, here p. 123/4).

⁵ This recalls Nussbaum’s emphasis on ‘relational goods’ (Nussbaum 1986), as well as the recognition of the cooperative nature of human needs, but at the same time seems to go beyond all this.

More specifically, through their relational dimension, human beings do not just respect one another, but can better ‘flourish’, in the sense that they become ‘richer’, since their relationship with others increases their identity. In order to ‘flourish’, human beings should first, maintain and express their constitutive *anthropological richness* and their *internal plurality* and *multidimensionality*⁶, and second, recognize that the most important ‘anthropological richness’, lies in a connection with *other human beings*.

This recognition does not mean that every person should develop something like a communitarian identity. Nor does it mean that each person can more highly value her own personal identity and characteristics than the identity and characteristics of others. Of course, interpersonal relation and comparison greatly help each person to better understand some of his or her own features, and maybe also to have a deeper conscienceness of such features: but this is not the central point. The most important point, rather, is that interpersonal relation and comparison can *change* each one’s personal *identity*. In fact, if personhood should be understood – as argued above – as a dynamic notion, then its development is ongoing and never definitively defined. In this framework, each human being can enrich other ones and be enriched by them. The fact that other human beings exist and are intrinsically ‘relational’ means that each one ‘needs’ to be in relation with the others. Moreover, it also means that such a relation enables new possibilities, capabilities and life-horizons for *each* person, and thus makes her anthropologically ‘richer’.

This kind of richness, far from being quantitative and individualistic, is thus *anthropological*, the ultimate foundation for the idea of *personhood*.

§4. Conclusion?

CA seems to refer to such an idea of *anthropological richness*, without developing it exhaustively: in this sense, going ‘beyond’ CA can enable us to better think through some of its major (though not explicit) issues, and to develop its redefinition of the idea of *personhood*.

In this context, some important questions arise. First of all, does the importance of *anthropological richness*, together with the recognition of the human relational and social dimension, also allow us to speak of *social richness*? If so, how would the latter be linked to the individual *anthropological richness*? And again, how could the notion of *personhood* be further developed? And how would it differ from both the original idea of personhood (developed by 20th century Catholic thought) and the modern notion of the (economic) individual?

These are some of the further issues that Capability literature should formulate and try to answer, since the notion of capability seems to demand an *anthropology* as well as an *ethics*, and a particular notion of *personhood*.

⁶ Notice that Sen refers to Marx, and to his multidimensional human perspective, in order to show his view of a good life as a life of freedom (Sen 1985: 202, footnote 39, with quotation from: K. Marx and F. Engels (1845/46), *The German Ideology*, New York: International Publishers 1947, p. 22).

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