

A Hermeneutic of Sen's Concept of Capability

Assessing freedom's social space as an indicator of well being

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Introduction

For a reader with a certain philosophical inclination, taking a night off to go through Sen's work is a mighty challenge. Sitting in a huge chair, in the twilight of the sunset, the reader discovers a rigorous and detailed critique of the concept of well being as it has been presented and assessed in different utilitarian approaches. At that point, the reader will already have noticed the strange stance of the discussion as well as the unexpected set of questions raised by Sen. The epistemology ruling here is not that of philosophy, but indeed the one presiding over economical studies. Rigor of argument refers and belongs to that science.

At midnight, the tireless reader begins to grasp, between the twist and turn of the discussion, the very intuitions shaping Sen's extraordinarily powerful critique. In the meditative break following that discovery, staring into space, a criss-crossing of known concepts assaults the reader and sets off a first tentative translation into his own language: Sen's intuitions awake old echoes in the philosopher's cave. And the reader will have to recognise that Sen's argument is truly philosophical.

With a renewed interest our reader dives back into his book and dawn finds him, indeed heroic, but somehow frustrated. The rigor so much admired in the economical framework doesn't turn up on the philosophical level of Sen's main intuitions. «Agency», « freedom », « liberty », « functionings », « capability », « justice »: the coherence and foundations of these concepts definitively stay on more as intuitions – quasi-anthropological convictions – than as a conceptual whole, founded and argued on a philosophical basis. However, the strength and influence of these intuitions glimpsed during the night cheer up our reader and decide him to enter on a work of hermeneutic : on the translation of these concepts into the language, grammar and horizons of his own discipline ¹. We would like here to represent that reader and propose a hermeneutic of Sen's essential concepts.

¹ Marta C. Nussbaum, the only philosopher to have delved into Sen's work, has gone through a similar process by gradually discovering the philosophical dimension of Sen's argument, as she tells it in her book : *Women and Human Development. The Capability Approach*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK, 2000, 11-15.

It is worth, while, to point out that such an interpretative work has not been recognised as a task by philosophers. Works dedicated by philosophers to Sen's thought have usually focused on his critique of utilitarianism or on his dialogue with Rawls, Arrow, Nozick, etc. Nonetheless, we think it essential to formulate a few (philosophical) thoughts in order to establish a coherence between the few fundamental notions proposed by Sen. Together those intuitions arise as the Gordian knot of his approach and make up the foundation of all his further critique. We will not pretend here that Sen «has said» *such and such*, but that what *is said* can be interpreted - could be understood - *like that*². We work out a sense, we search for coherence, we look for a philosophical system of the so called capability approach.³

1. Sen's supposed methodological individualism

Navarro Girón⁴ suggests an interpretation of Sen's supposed methodological individualism which we will make our starting point. A methodological individualistic stance unveils the author's conviction that self perception is the cornerstone from which every statement has to be made⁵. Constructed knowledge will have to be founded on this particular position of the individual. Society is thus to be understood as emerging from individuals, that is, as a second step, posterior and secondary to individuals. Society certainly does spring up from the individuals composing it - as methodological individualism would state - but does not constitute an autonomous system. Relations to others with it are described as interdependency.

However, Navarro Girón suggests that Sen's individualism is not founded in such a self perception⁶. Sen's individual does not speak in the first person but in the third, and not even in the form of « he » or « she », but « one ». Sen's thought is not based on the « individual-I » but on the « individual-one ». He thus breaks down the very foundation of methodological individualism, at least as it has been conceived in western culture. If the individual is « someone that could be someone else », the starting point is not so much self-evidence of my singular existence as the conscience of human plurality, where the

² Cf. GADAMER, H.G., *Truth and Method*, London, 1974.

³ It is therefore relevant to point out the philosophical reference of this essay: Hannah ARENDT, Isaiah BERLIN, Paul RICOEUR with some references to BERGSON and ARISTOTLE. We are aware that such a panel does refer to a philosophical tradition somehow different than Sen's own.

⁴ NAVARRO GIRÓN, M.A., "Elementos metodológicos para la fundamentación de un individualismo ético en ciencias de la economía: Amartya Kumar Sen ", in *Miscelánea Comillas 60 (2002)*, 475-514.

⁵ O'Neill, J., (ed.), *Modes of Individualism and Collectivism*, London, 1973. ALAIN, L., *L'individualisme méthodologique*, 1994, Paris.

⁶ NAVARRO-GIRÓN, 510-513.

apprehension of the «self» comes out first as «same as the other»⁷; namely, in a relationship where a certain «sameness» is recognised first and before all «distinctiveness» as a singular being⁸. Conscience of myself and conscience of others do not follow each other as two separate and hierarchical moments of perception, but occur as two elements of a single and same perception. Knowledge of plurality and individuality do happen together.

It could be argued, though, that the stress put by Sen on the choice of «beings and doings» each as reason to value, proves – beyond all doubt – Sen's commitment to the individual as source and foundation of all considerations, in normative economy as in philosophy. It is this evidence we challenge. We are not convinced that such a reading of Sen is a comprehensive one. Sen's attention to the third, and specially the excluded-third – poor, women, untouchables – is, to say the least, as important in his work as the previous statement. And what is more, Sen's attention is not to be related to an attitude of commiseration or compassion⁹, but to the perception of an essential requirement: agency should be recognised and granted to everyone.

If «every one» - this plural singular; this person in condition of plurality – effectively represents Sen's anthropological underpinning, notions such as «agency» and «freedom» do bear a sense different than the one commonly assumed. Sen's determination to stress what an occidental can understand as requirement of justice argued from the perspective of the self makes sense and a new sense.¹⁰

⁷ Paul Ricoeur's approach to the concept of person in «his little ethics» begins precisely with a semantic study of the identifying reference to person. RICOEUR, P., *Soi-même comme un autre*, Seuil, Paris, 1990, 39-54.

⁸ Cf. SEN, A., *Collective Choices and Social Welfare*, Holden-Day, San Francisco, 1970, 15ss. This solves the seeming contradiction between Sen's emphasis on the individual subject and his readiness to take on groups or even social classes as an example of capabilities. Cf. DOUGLAS, M., NEY, S., *Missing Persons: a Critique of Personhood in the Social Sciences*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, 72. COMM, F., "Operationalizing Sen's Capability Approach", 9.

⁹ Sen uses the following anecdote as grounds of his research: because of his poverty a man was forced to risk his life by crossing, in the middle of a religious insurrection, a Hindu borough and ended stabbed to death. Yet, what marks this narration is not so much Sen's compassion for the poor fellow, as the outrageous character of such a privation of liberty/capability. He dedicates his work to the identification and eradication these privations of liberty. Therefore, Sen's working base is what we call a «sense of justice» previous to an elaborate concept of justice. His differences with Nussbaum on that point are well known. She develops a theory of justice on the basis of a list of fundamental capabilities, while he is reluctant to turn his framework into a full-grown theory of justice (universalization; cultural context and partial orderings).

¹⁰ We probably deal here with two different experiences of the individual, seen through two different cultural prisms. Experiences and not concepts, for they refer to that phenomenological substratum previous to all rational perception. Sen comes from India. His thought comes into expression in English. Could there be a systematic cultural bias to our reading of Sen?

2. Action reveals freedom

The quality of agency put forward by Sen describes the person "(...) *who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives (...)*"¹¹. The concept of agency appears in his thought as an element to work out distinctions to assess well being¹². Measuring well-being freedom (or well-being achievements), does not coincide with an assessment of human agency (or agency achievements)¹³. Agency is linked to the capacity someone has to act and, through his action, to induce changes he values and seeks. This is one of Sen's key concepts, and one of tremendous density. To display all its richness we need some additional work. A first step is to note the quasi identification between freedom and agency, along the line of the following definition made by Sen: " *A person's «agency freedom» refers to what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important. A person's agency aspect cannot be understood without taking note of his or her aims, objectives, allegiances, obligations, and – in a broad sense – the person's conception of the good. (...) Agency freedom is freedom to achieve whatever the person, as a responsible agent, decides he or she should achieve.*"¹⁴. In other words, Sen identifies two things: the human «capacity to act» - a capacity oriented to an end, ascribed to an agent and justified by him – and freedom. " *Agency freedom has claims to being taken as freedom «tout court» (...)*"¹⁵. This last assessment is interesting, for it gives an insight into Sen's political philosophy where freedom shows – unavoidably so – through the mediation of action. The sphere of interiority, of «no-being-public», of the a-historical transcendence is neither developed or mentioned by Sen¹⁶. What does attract Sen's attention is the social, political moment of

¹¹ SEN, A., *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, 19.

¹² SEN, A., "Capability and Well-being", in NUSSBAUM, M., SEN, A., (ed), *The Quality of Life*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1995, 30-53. "We can make a fourfold classification of points of evaluative interest in assessing human advantage, based on two different distinctions. One distinction is between (1.1) the promotion of the person's «well-being» and (1.2) the pursuit of the person's overall «agency goals». The latter encompasses the goals that a person has reasons to adopt, which can «inter alia» include goals other than the advancement of his or her own well being. The second distinction is between (2.1) «achievement», and (2.2) the «freedom to achieve». This contrast can be applied both to the perspective of well being and to that of agency. The two distinctions together yield four different concepts of advantage, related to a person: (1) well-being achievement, (2) agency achievement, (3) well-being freedom, (4) agency freedom." Ibid. 35. Cf. 36-38.

¹³ "Assessing well-being may take us in one direction; judging achievement in terms of the person's overall goals may take us in a somewhat different direction, since a person can have objectives other than the pursuit of his or her own well-being." Ibid. 35.

¹⁴ SEN, A., " Well-Being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984 ", in *Journal of Philosophy* 82:4 (1985), 203-204.

¹⁵ Ibid. 2004, note 1.

¹⁶ Contrasting with Isaiah Berlin's essay – quoted again and again by Sen (*Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford, 1970) – which opens the field of his investigation to the inner dimension of freedom.

freedom: “ *This work is particularly concerned with the agency role of the individual as a member of the public and as a participant in economic, social and political actions (varying from taking part in the market to being involved directly or indirectly, in individual or joint activities in political and other spheres)*”¹⁷. From that peculiar perspective – distinctive of an actualization of freedom in space and time – there is no freedom that does not take the form of an act, i.e., there is no freedom outside of actions. Therefore, the power to act as well as the real possibilities to act carry on the capacity of revealing freedom. One can already perceive the crucial importance of such a presupposition to the notion of « capability ». Indeed, if humanity is shown through the power and possibility to act¹⁸, then there is also a possibility to assess and weigh freedom according to its social expression. Nussbaum has also highlighted the relation of Sen’s work to Aristotle ; another reference could be drawn up to Hannah Arendt and her concepts of « action » and « power ». The first matches human activity in one of its fundamental stances : “ *Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world* ”¹⁹. Every action needs and points to a *disclosure space*, a stage where it shows up, calls for recognition and finally is recognised. Action disclosure space is the *web of human relationships*, in other words the crisscrossing of other past and present actions. Furthermore, what is disclosed by action is the *inner life of human beings*, which characteristically rests on the ability to think. But it is thought capable of the new, unexpected ; a free-thinking-human-being²⁰. Thinking is not by itself a public activity - quite the opposite - there is nothing more private. Thoughts can be seen and listened to, only through speech and action. Someone is recognised as human through his action and his speech ; and those who recognise him as such are other men. So far so good. Once more, following another path, we finally came across Sen’s focus on the agent as a person, acting for reasons and able to answer for them. What we have learned from Arendt is a fair explanation of the crucial importance Sen gives to the « acting agent » as disclosing human constitutive freedom. Arendt also gives an explicit account of that dimension of plurality we have seen underlying Sen’s notion of individuality.²¹

¹⁷ SEN, A., *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, 19.

¹⁸ “[...] *the good life is, among other things, also a life of freedom*”. Sen (according to Nussbaum) points out the possible coincidence of his proposal with Aristotle’s ethics; and not only in the emphasis put on action, but also in his idea of the good life. SEN, A., *Development as Freedom*, 24, footnote 14; also “Capability and Well-being”, 46-47.

¹⁹ ARENDT, H., *The Human Condition*, Chicago, 1958, 7.

²⁰ Cf. ARENDT, H., *Life of the Mind* London, 1978.

²¹ A condition of plurality, which opens to a «sameness», which in turn introduces the subject of justice: “*Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction.*” ARENDT, H., *The Human Condition*, 175.

3. From action to interaction

Yet it is Arendt's concept of «power» that furnishes an original element to Sen's work, bringing together philosophically some of his key notions. Arendt stresses a difference frequently overlooked : « action » and « interaction » do not completely identify ²². The first one fits the capacity to act of an individual ; the second matches a human being's faculty to act in a «concerted way» ²³, that is to say, the *capacity to join* in a *common action or interaction* in a *coordinated* way. In other words, human beings can freely cooperate in an organised interaction. That such cooperation does not make individual freedom disappear seems obvious. Less so is the fact that the moral characteristics of such a situated freedom change drastically especially in regard to rationality and responsibility. ²⁴

No matter how my action joins in an interaction – how I cooperate in a common action – if such an interaction is to last ²⁵, it has to be institutionalised. Some distinctions will help grasp the sense of what is an institution ²⁶. First of all, each institution is to be understood as a *distributive entity*: it *recognises* a «membership» (that someone have a share in the interaction) and *allows to participate* (giving permission to «take part to...»). That is, it provides a membership and allows an effective participation in the common action. A

²² See also the sociological development of the notion of interaction Cf. PARSON, T., SHILS, E., (ed.), *Toward a General Theory of Action*, New York, 1951, 14-16, 434-464.

²³ ARENDT, H., *Crisis of the Republic*, Harmondsworth (UK), 1973, 113.

²⁴ Such a distinction allows to separate «what I can do alone» (own force) from «what I can only achieve in togetherness» (shared power), as a member of an organised interaction. For the same reason, Arendt states: "Power is never a individual property; it belongs to a group and will belong to him as long as it is not divided" (ARENDT, H., *Crisis of the Republic*, 113). Power is ours, and mine only by having been shared to me. Power is such because it is linked to the preexistence of the community of persons brought together «by» and «for» the interaction. A dispersion of this community directly induces the fading of power or its substitution by coercion and violence.

²⁵ The notion of «duration» is one Arendt's fundamental categories. It is probably linked to Husserl's lecture on a phenomenology of time, Heidegger's work «Sein und Zeit», Bergson's essay on memory and Augustine's reflection on time, although Arendt never disclosed on that point what she owed to her masters. HUSSERL, E., *Leçon pour une phénoménologie de la conscience intime du temps*, Paris, 1964, 15-19. BERGSON, H., *Matière et mémoire. Essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit* (1896), in *Oeuvres*, Paris, 1963. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, XIII.

²⁶ Arendt does not study this process of institutionalisation. We do refer here to Paul Ricoeur's work in , *Soi-même comme un autre*, 227-238. He underlines the institutional fact as the bridge passing from the notion of *solicitude* to the one of *justice*; a passage which has to achieve the search of «equality beyond inequalities» proper to *solicitude* which has, in the relationship to the «far-away-other» (autrui), lost its spontaneity. The acumen of Ricoeur has been to see all institutions (not only the market or the State) as key operators of justice's distributive process.

second characteristic is that every institution refers to a *project*²⁷. Such a project functions as the crucial element presiding over the whole process of organisation, working as its «raison d'être» and its rationality. It will define the spacio-temporal limits of the interaction ; be decisive for the choice of means ; require, justify and sanction the rules of cooperation, etc. In other words, the project arises as the *normative framework of the common action*²⁸. A third and fourth characteristic can be drawn from the two previous ones²⁹. Every institution will enact rules in order to coordinate the different individual inputs in one effective interaction. Furthermore, every institutionalised interaction will constitute the spacio-temporal limits in which it will be valid and will take place, i.e., the time and space over which the common project presides and to which applies the rules governing it. A fifth characteristic consist in working out the distribution defining every institution. To each member a status is attributed by which he is recognised as part of the common project. Such a status defines, within the interaction, the agent's own sphere of responsibility ; i.e. the share of work which is assigned to him, so that the common action can achieve its goal (also tantamount to the other members' expectations regarding this agent). Yet such a status is still formal and passive and calls for an active assumption. The personal taking up of the sphere of responsibility put forward in the status we call role. Thus, assuming his status means, for the agent, to lend his own power of action to the common action within the designed framework (status). The role is the agent's actualization of his status.

Taken together, these elements make up the «structured field of action». This human artefact, mostly invisible, is the only way a common project can be achieved. It certainly reduces individual freedom, but it also enhance it. A structured field of action indeed restrict individual freedom (for individuals have to bow to the institution's normative framework), but people accept these restrictions in order to gain access to the good commanded by the interaction. A trivial example is a football match. In order to participate in the play, I have to bow to the rules organising it. If I do not respect them, I will be expelled from the play. I accept these restrictions to my liberty *in order to play*.

²⁷ Whether the project is implicit or explicit, has the status of something forgotten, arises from a mythological narrative or is founded in a written text is of not importance. The project exists for human action – and therefore interaction – to be finalized. Cf. BRODERICK, A., *The French Institutional*, Cambridge Mass., 1970.

²⁸ An important distinction has to be drawn between the «formal goal» (or formal finality) and the «effective goal» (or effective finality). The first matches the proposed goal of the interaction; the second corresponds to what is really achieved by the interaction.

²⁹ Much of this sequence is owed to CROZIER, M., FRIEDBERG, E., *L'acteur et le système*, Paris, 1977 and to SEARLE, J.R., *Construction of Social Reality*, London, 1996.

To take part in or be excluded from a football match does not carry serious consequences. Yet some institutions rule over social spaces crucial to human life³⁰. Depending on the good they control and give access to, there will be no «free decision» to join in and no possibility either to leave the structured field of action (unless by exile or death). For example, a German, born during the twenties, had no choice to escape military service for Nazi Germany during World War II (State)³¹. Another example: a starving father will have to choose either to «sell» one of his children or to see them all die of hunger (Market). The market's structured field of action in which he is situated does not leave him any decent alternative; what is more, it is this field that obliges him to make such a choice. For some institutions – called fundamentals or essentials for that reason – are mine for having being made mine. Typically, institutions like the market, the State or the school system are inherited by the person and make up his «given» situation. In those cases, neither the project nor the rationality of these institutions have been freely chosen by individuals. Such institutions become mine by the fact that I live in a certain community, the history of which exceeds my lifetime³². Therefore, if an institution enhances the person's range of action, such an increase does not necessarily correspond to a free choice of the person, nor will it necessarily mean a real increase in freedom. The social increase of

³⁰ We will not develop this aspect here. It shall only be said that it is possible to distinguish between «macro-institutions», which pretend to organise and grasp the totality of the living-together of an historical community (like the State, the culture, or the Market) and «micro-institutions», presiding over an interaction involving only a reduced group of persons. The first generate three spheres configuring in a fundamental way the reality of each individual agent. Those three are not chosen but already given. They are inherited and made mine through education and inculturation. The cultural sphere governs the transmission of the human artefact. It gives access to the common world (language, collective memory, Weltanschauung, wisdom, art of life, knowledge, technique, practical reason, etc.). It is essential to a full actualisation of the character of personhood. The market sphere presides over the exchange of goods in the community. It conditions survival and may give access to well being (to the ones recognised as enjoying a purchase power). The political sphere corresponds to the institutionalised recognition of the other (autrui) as being able to act and act with freedom. It matches the extension of the reciprocal recognition arising from solicitude to the totality of the living-together. But what was spontaneous, as the search of equality through inequalities, remains at the same time as conflicting as rational, having to be operated through an institution (State of Law). Indeed, the living-together, as «will to live and act together», is set ablaze by a hope: that of the recognition of each and every member in its freedom. This hope dwelling in the community is hope of Aristotle's good-life, the first requirement of which is justice. These macro-institutions are latent. They only become actualised by means of micro-institutions inserted in the structured field they have defined and respecting the rules of these fields.

³¹ Cf. HAFNER, S., *Histoire d'un Allemand*, Paris, 2002.

³² Cf. to be published: NEBEL, M., *La catégorie morale de péché structurel*, Paris, Cerf, 2005, chap. V. But had I have been able to choose to join some of these institutions, the question of the real knowledge I can gather from the project would still arise. More often than not, people do decide without knowing precisely what is effectively realised through the common action (from the formal project, usually easily available, the effective project may be very difficult to capture).

power granted to a person through her or his insertion in a structured field of action can work as much against agency freedom as for it. These questions compel us to a more detailed review of the agent's position within the structured field of action.

To assume his status and fulfil his responsibility, an agent needs to internalise the structured field of action and gain a *practical knowledge* of it. Such a «knowing how to behave» is directly linked to the human capacity of representation (Aristotle's *mimesis*)³³. Only the person able to draw up an adequate internal representation of the structured field of action will later be able to project himself in it, displaying the different possibilities open to his action. The status is still a formal delimitation of a sphere of responsibility (mission statement; competences; means and tools, etc.). Only the person's *dunamis* will be able to work out, in *this* space and at *that* time, by means of his *mimesis*, the set of possible actions open to him. The range of the «possible» is shaped by what is *plausible* and *necessary* within a structured field of action. That *set of what is possible* represents the personal assumption of the field's rationality by the subject and the restriction of his action to what is possible to achieve in it.

4. Back to Sen's notion of capability : a hermeneutic

And Sen? What has been developed above is crucial, in our view, to account for the distinctions he makes around freedom (freedom and agency, positive and negative freedom, liberty as control and liberty as power, well-being freedom, agency freedom). We will focus here on the distinction between negative and positive liberty (which he adopts from Isaiah Berlin), Sen's using it to introduce his own concept of capability.³⁴

Positive liberty is the actual capacity to realise, i.e. the *capacity or incapacity to achieve something*, peculiar to an individual, without trying to link such a capacity or incapacity to the agent's social situation. A person - indeed socially situated - but whose capability or incapacity to achieve does not depend on a distinctive social situation. Negative liberty deals with the sphere where that liberty becomes effective. The notion is defined as the absence of constraints, absence of obstacles raised by someone else (either an individual or an institution like the State) to the capacity to realise.³⁵

³³ Aristotle limits Plato's *mimesis* to the field of human «action and suffering». Mimetic activity is defined as an exploration of what is possible, giving to understand that a situation could be different than it is. Thus, it gains a creative dimension, an instrument crucial to the new and unforeseen. This «imaginative power» is the practical instrument of a situated liberty. Its norm is not an ideal model, but what is necessary and plausible Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1448b-1451^a.

³⁴ Those distinctions owe a lot to and are better understood by someone who has read ISAIAH BERLIN, *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford, 1970.

³⁵ SEN, A., *L'économie est une science morale*, 48.

The conceptual framework proposed above explains more accurately the reality tentatively grasped by the distinction between positive and negative liberty. Positive liberty focuses on the capacity of the subject to act: it describes what could effectively be realized, here and now, if only there was a will to realise it. This corresponds, in our view, to the *perspective of an agent* in a structured field of action. It matches the «set of possible actions» that an agent is able to perceive and could realise, if he so wished. Negative liberty, identified with the absence of obstacles put to the «capacity to realise», is consistent with the same individual perspective of the structured field of action, albeit not focussed on the possibilities open in it for the person's action, but on the *limitations* forced upon him by that field. Thus none of these two dimensions of liberty correspond to a solitary individual. Yet they do not account for and positively assess the insertion of one's own power of action into an interaction. Such a distinction has been built up in the liberal framework of an antagonism between society (State) and individuals³⁶. One cannot give an accurate account of society, thought as arising from the «inter-action» of people.

Therefore, it is quite appealing to see Sen introducing his concept of capability as going beyond such a distinction. The notion of «human functioning» is the one he uses to develop his concept of capability. By it, he means all «beings and doings» an individual has achieved³⁷, literally all one is and does, as so far as this «being» and this «doing» have springs up from a choice. Living, says Sen, "*may be seen as consisting of a set of interrelated 'functionings', consisting of beings and doings*"³⁸. The crucial point lays on the person being the one who assesses - weights - those functionings. They are valuable *to him* and he can give reasons for the value he finds in them. Yet, precisely because such *functionings are assessed by the person* they should also *be measurable*. We should be able to measure human development in terms of *hic et nunc* functionings of individuals: "*A person's achievement in this respect can be seen as the vector of his or her functionings. (...) 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*".³⁹

Then again, by assessing only achieved functionings we skip all those he could have desired to achieve but could not (element of choice). If we actually want to assess not only

³⁶ This is certainly an a priori of the Anglo-Saxon political philosophy assumed by Berlin's proposed distinction between negative and positive freedom. To focus on the absence of coercion or restriction to freedom is to perceive the others straightaway as an impediment to the development of my own liberty. We have already indicated that such a notion of an «I-alone» individual does not render Sen's conception of person as «one-that-could be another». Cf. Cf. HOLLENBACH, D., *The Common Good*, Cambridge, 2002, 9-17, 67-86.

³⁷ "*Perhaps the most primitive notion in this approach concerns «functionings». Functionings represent parts of the state of a person – in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life*" SEN, A., "Capability and Well-being", 31.

³⁸ SEN, A., *Inequality Re-Examined*, 39

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

achieved functionings, we will have to include possible functionings which were never realized. Opening up the whole range of evaluation of well-being from the *effective functionings* to the *possible functionings* is, ultimately, to assess the particular «well-being-freedom» of each individual: in one word, his «capability». The capability to function represents “*the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person’s freedom to lead one type of life or another.*”⁴⁰. “*In sorting out this tangled issue, the first thing to note is that capability is defined in terms of the same focal variables as functionings. In the space of functionings, any point represents an n tuple of functionings. Capability is a set of such functioning n-tuples, from which the person can choose one combination. (...) A functioning combination is a point in such a space, whereas capability is a set of such points*”⁴¹. “*Capability is primarily a reflection of the freedom to achieve valuable functionings. It concentrates directly on freedom as such rather than on the means to achieve freedom, and it identifies the real alternatives we have. In this sense it can be read as a reflection of substantive freedom. In so far as functionings are constitutive of well-being, capability represents a person’s freedom to achieve well-being.*”⁴²

Thus, Sen suggest, with the concept of capability, a metric of a person’s well-being freedom. Recent research has shown how difficult it is to make such a concept operational⁴³. The key difficulty lay, in our view, in the ambiguity of what we really try to assess (hence what is really meant by the notion of capability). Presumably the notions borrowed from Arendt and Ricoeur can help answer this question.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ SEN, A., *Inequality Re-Examined*, New York, 1992, 40. Another definition: “*The capability of a person reflects the alternative combination of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection. The approach is based on a view of living as a combination of various «doings and beings», with quality of life to be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings.*” SEN, A., “*Capability and Well-being*”, 31.

⁴¹ Ibid. 50.

⁴² Ibid. 49.

⁴³ BRANDOLINO, A., D’ALESSIO G., “*Measuring Well-being in the Functioning Space*”, 1998. COMIM, F., “*Operationalizing Sen’s Capability Approach*”, 2001. ALKIRE, S., .PEREZ-MAYO, J., “*Measuring Deprivation in Spain: Comparing Some Techniques*”, 2003. One difficulty arises from the empirical possibility to measure something that hasn’t even occurred (capabilities against functionings) under the suspicion that what has been chosen does not reveal what would have been chosen (counterfactual choices).

⁴⁴ Another distinction which could be analysed in this perspective is the difference Sen draws between *power* and *control*. Freedom as power corresponds to the real opportunities a person has to achieve what he has reasons to value. That is, the means of his action as it requires the collaboration of others to become effective. Freedom as control corresponds to the control over the processes of choice leading to action (goals and means). In the case of institutions those two dimensions differ widely. More often than not, an agent will not have control, or just in small and irrelevant field; while he does enjoy power (in Sen’s use of the term).

« Capability is a *set* of vectors of functionings, *reflecting the person's freedom* to lead one type of life or another»⁴⁵. Thus, capability points to the *possibilities open to the action of a person* within different *structured fields of action* to which *he has access*; in other words: a person's possibilities to act are linked (1) to what he can do by himself (own power and capacity to project himself into the structured field of action), (2) to what can be personally enjoyed by having joined an institutionalised interaction (the good controlled by the institution). So, what capabilities assess are *spaces, and especially social spaces where well-being freedom is achieved (condition of plurality)*.

Freedom or agency cannot be assessed, as Sen rightly states. What can be measured is the real – actual – space in which it is actualised. It is not an intangible space, but one we can measure through the structure and possibilities it opens to the person⁴⁶. The metric Sen suggests with his capability approach consist in measuring a *vectorial space* (taken from the social space) taking into consideration that an individual is effectively free to lead the live he or she has reason to value (the space «points to» but is not «identical with» freedom; that space is not freedom, but its historical expression in a condition of plurality). Sen adds : « capability is defined in terms of the same focal variables as functionings ». The functionings allow us to effectively identify the social spaces (the structured fields of action) in which we want to measure the possibilities open to the liberty of a person or a group of individuals (for example to be educated, to enjoy good health, self-esteem, etc.)⁴⁷. The assessment of capabilities includes, therefore, an earlier selection of the focal variables of a set of capabilities. But such a focus should only facilitate the identification of those institutions presiding over the spaces where these functionings can effectively be achieved. The inner complexity and inter-connection of these institutional spaces increase the

⁴⁵ SEN, A., *Inequality Re-examined*, New York, 1992, 40.

⁴⁶ A further characteristic could be discussed in relation to the notion of choice. The freedom Sen proposes to measure is an individual well-being freedom, respecting the diversity of life each has reasons to value. Sen's genius was to show that we can indeed focus on and measure such a freedom, while leaving intact the dimension of personal choice and respecting the plurality of the possible answers (emphasis on democracy and impossibility to fix a definitive and universal list of basic capabilities). However, Sen also argues that some capabilities are more important, more relevant than others. He also states that an increase in the number of functionings does not automatically mean an increase in well-being freedom. This twofold assertion is not necessarily contradictory (subjective versus objective). It reflects, in our perspective, the genuine freedom enjoyed by a person within a structured field of action on one hand, and the fact that there are institutions presiding to the actualisation of fundamental dimensions of human being on the other; among these, those essential to a full actualisation of freedom. Thus, in answer to the question of the more relevant capabilities we could say: (1) Institutions of the cultural sphere, controlling the full development of the personal being by presiding over the transmission of the common world; (2) Institutions of the economical sphere, controlling surviving and well-being; (3) Institutions of the political sphere, presiding over the good-life. Each of these spheres controls one of the crucial components of agency freedom, and, therefore, of well-being freedom. SEN, A., "Well-being, Agency and Freedom", 216-221.

⁴⁷ Evaluative spaces.

difficulty measurement (aggregation; weighing). But, as Sen states, it is neither necessary to look for complete order nor to work on a great number of social spaces.⁴⁸

5. A concluding remark on « Time »

As a concluding remark we would like to include temporality in the previous argument. If a measure for capability points to the measurement of the delineated space constituted by the possibilities of action open to an individual in the structured field of action, then, when including the variable «time », we will be able to measure the fluctuation of such a space. Volume fluctuation will indicate an increase or decrease of that capability.

Still, such a calculation leaves out part of the complexity of the notion of capability : only the person is capable of the internal representation of the possible and forecast his (future) action in the structured field (transformation). Yet, human beings have a specific relation to time : they are the point at which transcendence of time allows the creation of duration within the permanent passing of time (Augustine, Bergson). To say «myself » implies a temporal distance to oneself, where a judgment claims the identity of that «self» with «me» in spite of the passing of time. An inter-temporal measure of capabilities cannot relinquish this duration creating man (memory). Capabilities cannot function as a coherent concept if we do not take into consideration that persons go through history bearing memory of their past.

Therefore an individual or a group of individuals will not be exactly the same between the first and last measurement. The passing of time will not only have modified the socially structured space of the possible but he also will have changed. A change induced by his actions, the events he has been living. A change that may induce other preferences and weighing of functionings and therefore a modification of the space we are measuring.

Nevertheless, this added complexity should not deter those looking for basic capabilities, for these remain crucial not only to well being or a good-life, but basically to the very fact of survival. The socially structured space of freedom and its individual transformation is indeed the key element to any measurement of human flourishing.

⁴⁸ SEN, A., "Well-being, Agency and Freedom", 177-181.