

Title: Need, Capability and Help

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Date: 4th June 2004
Text: 8376 words (excluding abstract, references and footnotes).
Abstract: 232 words
Prepared for blind review by removal of self-identifying references.

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Need, Capability and Help

ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that the concept of capability cannot displace the concept of need in specifying helping action. In development ethics the concepts of utility, holdings and basic need have been used as indicators of what help is required; the concept of capability was introduced by Amartya Sen to improve on all of them. The concept of need is criticised for being commodity-focused, paternalistic, and insensitive to freedoms. In § 1 I consider these criticisms, and argue that it is not commodity-focused, not paternalistic, and can capture the importance of freedoms. I argue that needs can be specified generally enough to guide policy, and needs-conflicts can be resolved. In § 2 I critically discuss the capability approach. I consider and reject the criticism that it places excessive emphasis on agency. I argue that it is vulnerable to paternalism, and cannot distinguish between needs and enhancements. I argue that the value of a capability must be holistic. In §3 I consider some deeper questions. First, far from being rivals, might need and capability be interdependent? Second, might they be products of a multi-million dollar 'justice concepts industry' which does no more than measure the flames of poverty as they burn? Third, might they be parts of an outdated picture of help in which an unaffected agent acts on the patient, when help should rather be seen as a mutual, community-creating activity?

1. Needs-Based Help

The Basic Needs approach to reducing world poverty had its heyday in the late 1970s and early 1980s, culminating in the publication of Paul Streeten's *First Things First* in 1981. This book, with the *imprimatur* of the World Bank, spelled out the approach, and presented the collective aim of helper nations: 'to halve world poverty by the year 2000' (p.*). The Basic Needs approach was to identify a universal set of 'basic human needs', and then set up political systems which would ensure that those needs were met. The approach focused on identifying and providing resources that were universally needed (water, food, houses, equipment, production systems, schools, hospitals, community infrastructure). To get consensus from helper-groups, only for universal, uncontentious, very basic needs was help demanded.

In operation, problems with the basic needs approach emerged. Measurement of commodity-requirements was complicated by the fact that different groups needed different quanta of the same good to achieve the same outcome, which could also be achieved through the provision of many different forms of help. Delivery of commodities was often poorly judged, inefficient or demonstrably unhelpful. Recipients of help, given little scope to identify their own needs, felt patronised. The emphasis on the 'basicness' of help-requiring needs caused particular offence, suggesting as it did that

helper-groups believed poor people 'really need' water, but do not 'really need' goods that subserve other dimensions of human life like religion or relationships.

Because of these problems, the basic needs approach was rejected by helper groups in favour of the capability approach, which was thought to avoid the problems and offer a better framework for helping action. But how many of those problems were down to the concept of need, and how many were contingent results of the way the concept was misunderstood and misused? My own view is that most of the criticisms are mistaken. The baby of need was thrown out with the bathwater of commodity focus, problems with specification, basicness and passivity. Need should be restored to its rightful place if effective help is to be offered.

a. Must a needs-based approach to help be commodity-focused?

One of Sen's main complaints about the basic needs approach was that it is commodity-focused (*, p.513). This means that when we say 'these people need our help', we ask what goods they require, estimate those, and supply them. But this is an unduly narrow interpretation of need. As David Wiggins (2004) has pointed out, and Sabina Alkire (2004) has conceded, to have a need met is not always to be supplied with a good. What sort of thing a human being may need, metaphysically speaking, is quite unconstrained: I may need anything from silence to bloodletting to my brain to my history to home to the universe to a good philosophical idea to an opportunity to a severe telling-off. A corollary is that what is involved in meeting a need, is similarly unconstrained. Far from implying that someone else must supply some quantum of a good, as in the rich-man-gives-beggar-money paradigm, a statement of need simply signals a moral requirement to meet the need. It does not yet say who is must meet the need; and it does not yet say how. It does not yet say with what. My need for silence might oblige me to leave the party early; it might oblige you to turn down the cricket programme on your radio; if it is widely shared, it might oblige the government to pass legislation banning piped music in public places. When we need, we rarely need fixed quantities of stuff to be given to us by other people with stuff to spare.

b. Must a needs-based approach be paternalistic?

Another complaint about the basic needs approach in practice was that it was paternalistic (*, p.515). The problem lies with the 'basic' rather than the 'need', but the assumption is widely held that 'morally important need' and 'basic need' are equivalent in meaning. The complaint of paternalism has several elements. First, in practice, recipient groups had very little input into the specification of their needs. It was assumed that they were not competent to identify their real needs, and/or that aid agency experts were more competent than they were. This paternalism depends on the assumption that being needy or subjected to other pressures or privations makes it harder for you to identify your needs correctly. There is a grain of important, complex

truth in this; but there is no reason why the additional vulnerability conferred by neediness cannot be accommodated in a framework of attentive respect for the avowed concerns of the needy themselves.

Second, the basic needs approach was thought to be paternalistic because it dictated in advance which needs merited help, with the implication that others, whatever their felt importance, did not. This is the unfortunate implication of Streeten's title, *first things first*. Helper-groups judged that universally shared needs arising from our biological identity as human beings demanded help, whereas needs arising from other social identities did not. The poor need wholesome food, not beer and cigarettes. They need shelter, not a dance-club or a church. Recipient groups, with some justice, felt demeaned and patronised. A life in which only the needs that were met were those judged by wealthier people to be worthy of meeting was a controlled and impoverished life. But again, the concept of need has been made a scapegoat. To say that a need is morally important, you do not need to say that it is basic, that it arises from a widely shared identity as a woman, or a citizen. You need only say that it arises from some genuine identity, which it is appropriate for policy at this level to meet. International aid policy will have to focus on widely shared needs arising from generic identities, but there is no reason to restrict those to the biological. Being a dancer, or a storyteller, or a spiritual support to your community, could all count. Local operationalisation of that policy must then attend to the specific forms that those needs, and what is required to meet them, will have to take in the particular context in which they have arisen and must be met.

Third, the approach was thought to imply passivity on the part of the needy. Sen put it thus:

'Needs' is a more passive concept than 'capability'...the perspective of positive freedom links naturally with capabilities (what can the person *do*?) rather than with the fulfilment of their needs (what can be *done for* the person?). The perspective of fulfilling needs has some obvious advantages in dealing with dependents (e.g. children), but for responsible adults the format of capabilities may be much more suitable. (Sen (1985), p.514)

To think the concept of need implies passivity, one must take 'need' to mean two things which, strictly, are independent of it. First, 'need' must be taken to mean 'occurrent (i.e. currently unmet) need'; second, it must be taken to mean 'need that one cannot meet oneself'. But the concept of morally important need as such does not have these features. Every human being has needs, only some of which are ever occurrent. Children have no more needs than adults; sick people are no more needy than healthy. The differences come in how many of the needs are occurrent, and in how far they can meet their own needs. A sick person's health needs are occurrent; whether they are able to meet them, or must rely on others, will vary. Children are less able than adults to meet their own needs. Certainly to have an occurrent need which one cannot meet oneself is to be in a passive state, vulnerable to the

paternalism of those able to help. But as I have argued, to have needs is not thereby to be passive. It is a further question, given universal human vulnerability to occurrent need we cannot meet, why we should want to conceal that vulnerability behind brave talk of what we can do over one talk which says what we need (from ourselves or anyone else).

c. Can a needs-based approach capture the importance of freedoms?

One of the main advantages of the capability approach, is that it is meant to capture the importance of positive freedoms to do and be certain things, rather than just the actual doings and beings. As Sen puts it in (1993), it captures the difference between fasting and starving. Where the basic-needs approach would say that both faster and starver must be given food regardless of preference, the capability approach can discriminate between them, saying that the faster already has the capability to eat, but the starver lacks it. A capability-based policy will discriminate between the two, aiming to make the positive freedom to eat (which brings with it a positive freedom use food for other ends than nourishment, e.g. by fasting) universally available.

Capability theorists are right that this distinction is important, but they are wrong to think that a needs-based approach cannot capture it. The problem comes, once again, from taking the concept of need to involve something which strictly is independent of it: basicness. 'Basic needs' are generic, universal arising from our biological identity as human beings, specified a priori and taken to be prima facie morally obliging. Although they are contestable, and although different circumstances yield different normative implications about which of them are to be met, in what order of priority, by whom and how, there is general agreement that they are prior to other needs and wants. It is this general agreement that causes the problem. But why should we accept this? It is true that, as a biological human being, I need to eat. But it is also true that as a Brahmin or a politically motivated hunger striker I need to fast. We can apply the test for genuineness of need – namely, could I go on without it? – readily here. I am as surely prevented from being myself *qua* activist if I am force-fed, as I am *qua* biological human being if I am starved. To the extent that freedom is important to human beings, human needs will reflect this. Human freedoms are not in tension with needs, they generate and structure them.

d. Can needs be stated generally enough to guide policy?

The multiple relativities of true needs statements described by David Wiggins in his landmark analytical paper on need, 'Claims of Need' (1998) include relativity to an account of well-being, to culture and individual understanding, and to feasible possibilities at the time. These relativities, Sabina Alkire argues, mean that 'specifications [of need] could only be made

in a very local situation and timeframe. They could never be framed as a set of global goals.' (2004, p.*)

This causes problems:

If we only specify needs locally, then would every institution that is designed to meet terrible human deprivation have to hold their breath in suspense until the mystery of what basic needs are in a particular situation was revealed? Or might these needs – in a sufficiently general way – be predicted? Further, if we have no hypothesis regarding what needs might be, we do not gather data on them (on nutritional status, on causes of mortality and morbidity, on ability to drink clean water etc) and perhaps some of our understanding of human need is further deepened by this information. If all needs cannot be met locally nor by the state but require external or non-state interventions (and, as we have seen, claims of need are politically powerful), then how do we make a more efficient process by which those in need and those responsive to need can communicate? These clearly practical problems would be encountered because of the deep sensitivity and relativity of an adequate account of needs. (2004, p.*)

Needs statements are relative to an understanding of the needing being's well-functioning, to culture and individual outlook, and to what it practically feasible. Each relativity is a point of contest. Communities, recipients and providers of help, debate about what is a well-functioning human life, about what are needs and what are requirements relating to dispensable or corrupt elements of a life, and about how much of which resources can be mobilised how to meet a need. These relativities are ineradicable. To help well is to negotiate them – to make reasonable decisions about what sort of life, what sort of cultural projects and what sort of help can be given. But these relativities do not put global goals out of reach. Nor do they condemn us to hold our breath pending revelation of a mystery, or prevent us from forming any prediction or hypothesis about need, or from looking for ways to improve identification of need, communication about need, and provision of help. The relativity of needs statements is a general feature of normative statements. It is as much of a problem for statements about capability as it is for statements of need. (Statements about capabilities are statements about human well-functioning, which Wiggins identifies as essentially contestable, and as a prerequisite for the identification of needs.) The capability-theorist, as much as the needs-theorist, must tackle the problem of relativity, or show how it is no problem.

The solution is to show that it is no problem. Relative statements can be robustly and usefully true. Indeed, spelling out the relativities – what sort of being this statement is about, their way of life and habitat, and what is available to help them here and now – is what makes robust, useful truth possible. To see how this can be done in ways that make meaningful hypotheses, predictions and global goals possible, and provide concrete guidance to actual people trying to help, we need to look more closely at the mechanics of normative statements in general, through the lens of needs-statements in particular.

Needs statements can be general or specific, universal or particular. These two dimensions of variation (which Wiggins takes from Richard Hare) are distinct, and determine the truth-value of needs statements. Needs statements speak of a needer being, the object of their need, and the meeter of the need. Each element can be spoken of at any level on either of the general/specific and universal/particular dimensions. Thus if we say 'Murial needs her landlord to give her access to her land to dig', we speak of all three elements with perfect specificity: this needer, this need-meeter, this object of need. But we can also make more generic statements: 'Tilling women need landowners to give them access to some suitable land'; or 'Farmers need a system of entitlement relations that give them land'; or 'People need to be able to enact their working identities'. The levels can also be mixed, as when we say 'Murial needs some landowners to make land available.' or 'The people need this land for digging.' True statements about the same need can be general or specific.

What of universality and particularity? A universal statement holds for all members of the kind it refers to. So every statement above was universal: *all* tilling women, farmers and people have those needs; *all* farmable land, stuff worked on by workers, are objects of those needs; *all* landowners, systems of entitlement relations, systems of community are obliged to meet those needs.¹ A particular statement does not hold for all members of the kind. Some rowers, like me, need a pad on their seat to express their skill as rowers. 'Some rowers needs a seat-pad.' is robustly true, and normative, but it is not universal. A policy supplying seat pads to all rowers would show the meaning of this need-statement had not been appreciated. Again, each of the three elements of a needs-statement can be given at any level of particularity or universality: Some farmworkers need to till; some land should be available for tilling; some landowners should make land available.

Just as 'overspecificity in a needs sentence [might!] makes it false'(1987, p.22), as when Wiggins points out that our 'need' for transport is overspecified; what we really need is 'access [to facilities that are frequently needed]' (p.23), so overgenerality, universality and particularity can have the same effect, as when we say overgenerally that 'human beings need milk', or make the universal claim that 'all mothers need to stay home to care for their children', or the particular claim that 'this mother needs to breastfeed her baby'. While Wiggins suggests that greater generality aids truth (p.22), it is more accurate to say that true precise specification of a need is difficult, and this has the effect that any specific claim is empirically more likely to be false. However vulnerable to error specification of need is, we cannot meet needs without it. A perfectly specific need statement might be said to be universal 'All Murials need x', but it makes little sense to speak of 'all members of the kind' when

the 'kind' has only one member. The particularity that is necessary at the point of action (where it must always be *this* being needing *this* from *this* moral agent) is where the dimensions of generality-specificity and universality-particularity merge – the perfectly specific is the particular.

Because the complex variability of needs statements applies to all normative statements, Wiggins' analysis of need is of interest beyond development ethics. Any normative statement involves something being said of something, about which someone should do something. 'You are in check.', like the first statement about Murial above, is a robustly truth-apt particular (i.e., perfectly specific universal) normative statement; it can be given more general, but equally truth-apt and universal forms: chess-players must get out of check immediately; game-players must follow the rules of their particular game; playing companions mustn't irritate each other; people should play the game; do as you would be done by; act only on that maxim such that you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law of nature.

The difficulty of making true useful normative statements is a practical difficulty, and it faces any attempt to formulate policy for helping action, from individual action as when each of us must decide whom to help and how, to international aid agency action as when an NGO must decide which community requires what, who should deliver what and how. The idea that it could be otherwise is wishful thinking. It is an understandable temptation for capability theorists to imagine that their framework, which is relatively new and untainted by the failures of specification and delivery that have dragged the needs-based approach down, carries its own specification within it. But this analysis of normativity shows why, as another normative theory, it cannot be any better off.

2. The Capability Approach

Amartya Sen offered the capability approach as an alternative which might avoid the shortcomings in the basic needs approach that he and the leading needs-theorist at the world bank, Paul Streeten, had identified. Capability was conceived as an alternative for economics, rational choice theory and consequentialism, to subjective state maximands like pleasure, utility, preference satisfaction, or happiness on the one hand, and to objective state maximands like agency and well-being achievements and holdings on the other, representing a conception of well-being which Jerry Cohen called 'midfare' to because it falls between and combines the important aspects of both subjective (e.g. utility) and objective (e.g. goods) well-being (1993, p.18).

Capability theory says that human well-being is revealed in the range of valuable beings and doings that are genuinely available to a person or group. This contrasts with utilitarianism, which would say it is revealed in how happy they are, and with classical economics, which would say it is revealed in the wealth they have amassed. (Needs-theory does not measure well-

being, but simply describes the necessary conditions for a characteristic human life to be possible.) Sen's theory, as Sabina Alkire's work emphasises, makes human freedoms central. Rather than focusing on what people actually are and do (their well-being and agency 'achievements'), capability theory focuses on what people are genuinely able – that is, free – to be and do (their well-being and agency 'freedoms'). This adds an extra step to the conception of helping action: rather than making people be and do x, helping is a matter of making it possible for them to be and do x.

The issue that concerns me in this paper is whether the notion of capability offers any improvement as a framing concept for helping action on the concept of need. I have argued above that the concept of need does not face the difficulties capability theorists have claimed, and that where it does face difficulty, the same difficulty must confront any alternative, including the capability alternative. In this section I consider criticisms of the capability approach.

a. Is the notion of capability excessively agency-focused?

A common objection to Sen's capability approach is that it is, as Cohen put it, unduly 'athletic' (1993, pp.24, 25) – that it suggests that people are to be helped by expanding their activities, by making them free to be and do ever more, fulfilled by activity rather than by passive consumption. Closer study reveals that the capability approach can answer this objection. The 'freedom' Sen has in mind is not the Western capitalist notion of freedom as a measure of the sheer number of options a person has:

It is odd to conclude that the freedom of a person is no less when she has to choose between three alternatives which she sees respectively as 'bad', 'awful', and 'gruesome' than when she has the choice between three alternatives which she assesses as 'good', 'excellent' and 'superb'. (1993, p.34)

And nor is freedom to be measured solely from how much the person is able actively to do for themselves. Rather, it is the freedom to be what they value, as well as to do what they value, that matters. If what needy Karen values being is (say) a good traditional grandmother, then the capability approach would recommend not that we send sheafs of Third Age Education literature to her, nor that we arrange transport for her to a community college we have built for people like her nearby. What it would recommend is that we find out, above all from Karen, but also from those around her and our knowledge bank of similar situations, what she needs in order to be able to achieve good grandmotherhood, and we take steps to enable her to get what she needs. Freedom, although it does essentially involve choice, is not only freedom to be and do different things; the freedom to be and do exactly what you and your foremothers have always done may be just as valuable as opening your mind to new possibilities.

The capability approach uses a rich concept of freedom as well as a broad one, but it is not fully analysed, unambiguous or unproblematic. Indeed, Sen makes a virtue of this: 'in so far as there are genuine ambiguities in the

concept of freedom, that should be reflected in corresponding ambiguities in the characterisation of capability... if an underlying idea has an essential ambiguity, a precise formulation of that idea must try to *capture* that ambiguity rather than hide or eliminate it' (1993, p.33-4). Roughly, then, freedom in capability theory involves the absence of external and internal, social and historical constraints (so, negative freedom *from* constraint), as well as a presence of enabling conditions which reveal the valued option as genuine (so, positive freedom *to* enjoy the option).

The charges of athleticism or capitalist imperialism can be met by capability theory. But a residual worry remains about the role of choice. With certain midfare benefits, talk of choice seems not just wilful, bringing options in where they don't belong (as some do-gooder might 'expand the capabilities' of Karen the grandmother by making a middle-class western range of later-life options open to her), but incoherent. The problem arises for 'capability', but its source may be a problem with the more fundamental notion of 'functioning'. The problem is that not all valuable states of human beings can be understood as functionings. Is having a brain a functioning? Is being a certain colour? The same doubt arises about some favourite examples of Sen's: is being nourished really a functioning? At a certain, very basic level, human beings are objects, and they have what we might call constitutional needs as objects: the need for material parts, the need for those parts to be arranged in a certain way, and the need to have the manifest appearance that they do. These material facts of human being are not functionings, but are prior to them. They are a condition for the possibility of functioning, to be sure – but it is a mistake to conclude from that that they are (merely) instruments for functionings. At this level, talk of functioning, choice and capability make no sense. If this is right, it follows that policy for helping action at this level must refer not to functioning but to being, not to choice and capability but to their material pre-conditions.

Sen may be right that the notion of capability is a necessary component in the formulation of policy for helping action because it explains our discriminatory greater concern for the starving person over the fasting person: the difference between them is a difference not in utility, midfare or goods, but a difference in capability which cannot be captured any other way (1993, p.45). But he may overestimate the range of usefulness of the capability concept, and he may be neglecting an important problem to solve about identifying in policy the difference between places where it is good to expand capability of choice (contexts of oppression and physical deprivation, say), and places where it is not (Karen, again, and cases where people wish to choose to die or harm themselves). To address this issue properly would mean negotiating the very problems of policymaking that Alkire identified as presenting such obstacles for a needs-based approach: how general, specific, universal and particular can true claims about the limits of helpful capability-expansion be?

b. Is the capability approach vulnerable to paternalism?

Capability theory is meant to avoid paternalism by building the importance of freedom into our understanding of the whole of human life under its aspect of potentially requiring our help: 'we need to consider freedom not only in as a dimension of decision-making and autonomy, but also in regards to each of the 'vital needs'' (Alkire 2004, p.11). Freedom or capability is not just an extra dimension of human life in relation to which vital needs arise; it is valuable in connection with the whole range of different valuable human functionings, which may reasonably be traded off against each other (as when someone exercises their freedom not to eat for a religious purpose).

But in spite of this very proper and overdue emphasis on freedoms, the capability approach is as vulnerable to paternalism as its needs-based predecessor. This is because the problem of paternalism is a problem of interpretation and operationalisation of *any* policy, rather than a problem internal to any particular policy.² Any policy, just qua policy, is vulnerable to paternalistic use. And paternalism is a standing temptation for those seeking to exercise their capability to help others. Capability theory risks paternalism in its use of technical language which requires elite experts to explain and apply: the immediacy of that risk can be felt in what follows the definition of capability on the capability approach website: 'this sounds confusing...'. It also risks paternalism in defining which capabilities are valuable and which are not. This issue structures a disagreement between the two major theorists of the capability approach, Sen and Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum is happy to run the risk of paternalism, and uses a 'thick, vague' and vaguely Aristotelian specification of the human good to determine which capabilities are valuable. Sen refuses to risk paternalism in this way, and leaves it to social contestation to settle the question in particular cases of which capabilities matter and how much (1993, p.46-8). Sen is to be applauded, I think, for emphasising that paternalism is not a necessary internal feature of the policy itself here.

But in doing so, it is worth noting that he makes the theory vulnerable to one of the objections made against needs-based theory above: if we can't say a priori which capabilities are how valuable, must the institutions designed to help hold their breath until the mystery of which capabilities matter how much in *this* particular situation is revealed? In the absence of a priori specification, will we be prevented or deterred from offering hypotheses, making predictions, gathering potentially valuable data? In the absence of a priori general specification of capabilities, how can we make communication

² This is not to say there could not be an intrinsically paternalistic policy, nor even that needs-based policy has never been like that. A policy which said: 'decide what people need without consulting them; supply them with needs-meeting goods; co-erce them to consume those goods' would be an example, and it is a sorry fact that much policy for helping action, going back hundreds of years, is guilty of this kind of explicit paternalism.

about obligations arising from capabilities efficient, to ensure that the most important ones are given priority when we offer help?

As I have argued above in defending a needs-based approach, I think these 'problems' are better seen as the ineradicable work of putting policy into practice than as conceptual difficulties that can be ironed out by adopting a new framework. The fact that they cannot be eliminated from a capability approach without falling into paternalism, strengthens my case that there is nothing to choose between the two approaches on this point.

c. Can the capability approach distinguish need from enhancement?

It is presented as an advantage of the capability approach, that it can be applied to formulate policy for help not just in situations of extreme deprivation, but also in situations of relative deprivation of capabilities in privileged communities. Sen is an egalitarian who believes political policy should aim at equality with respect to capability. Needs-theorists, in contrast, may not be egalitarians. They believe that morally important needs should be met, but beyond the point at which those needs are met, it is an open question what political policy should be. Some needs theorists will be egalitarians, who argue that policy should aim at equality of utility, capability or goods. Others will be laissez fairists, who believe that policy should ensure needs are met, and simply ensure freedom once that threshold has been achieved. Others believe that the concept of morally important need itself advances with development: as a community develops, what community members need qua community members grows, in such a way that rough equality remains the goal of policy, although its content expands (so that at stage 1 equality with respect to food is required, but at stage 3 equality with respect to shopping malls, entertainments and restaurants must be ensured by policy).

What Sen and others represent as an advantage of the capability approach, is in fact a problem for it. The fundamental insight, which needs-based theory makes central, is lost in the move from need to capability. Capability theory shares this problem with all consequentialist moral theories. The insight is that increments on any maximand scale (i.e., whether utility, midfare or goods) vary in value according to where they appear on the scale. This means not just that increments become progressively less valuable the further up the scale of well-being they occur; it means that both increments and decreases are actually subject to value-reversal. Expanding someone's capability when their life is already full, might not just fail to be a very good thing to do. It might actually be a bad thing to do. In such a case, the value of capability-expansion is reversed. Similarly, where someone or some community has vast capability, including an increasing capability to expand

their own capability, decreasing their capability might not just fail to be bad, but be positively good.

Capability theory has dispensed with the idea of a threshold of well-being, below which expansions have positive value and structure morally obligations to help, and above which expansions are at best neutral, at worst of negative value, and deflations may actually be morally mandated. More capability is not always better. Needs-theory faces the considerable difficulty of pinning down, both locally, and generally in durable policy, what the threshold is, below which we have morally obliging needs, and above which we have non-obliging enhancements or mere additions. But the difficulty, although considerable, is not insoluble. Just as Sen argues that underlying conceptual ambiguity must be captured rather than eliminated in theory, so I would argue that the contestability of the threshold of need should be recognised and negotiated in theory and in policy formulation.

d. Are capabilities more apt for use in policy than needs?

Because needs-statements are relative, and because this is thought to hinder the formulation of useful, universally true policy, capabilities talk is offered as an improvement. The notion of capability must be thought to be less relative, and better apt for expression in useful, universally true policy. But is this right? Sabina Alkire compares the two approaches:

What would be lost if needs were framed not with reference to the direct satisfier(s), however generically defined, but rather with reference to that general aspect of human flourishing that risks being blighted? And what is lost if they are framed at a very general way, with the understanding that the relativities and circumstantial conditions will be 'taken into account' during implementation? Quite a bit would be lost, such as the particular understandings of what, precisely, is required in order to meet a need (understandings of wretchedness, understandings of the feasible alternatives, understandings of the concrete satisfiers). But a greater relevance could be gained. (2004, p.6)

I think Alkire and other capability theorists are wrong to think statements about capability could be free of the relativities Wiggins spells out for needs-statements, and wrong to think that any more general, useful or universal-truth-apt claims can be made about them than can be made about needs. To see this, we need only to look more closely at the notion of capability. A capability is a freedom with respect to 'some general aspect of human flourishing'. Early critics of the capability approach, like Bernard Williams, pressed the questions of how many aspects there were, whether any old feature of any old human life was a capability, or whether some were excluded, and whether any were more basic than others, and if so, which, and why. Sen, as Alkire notes, has never provided systematic theoretical answers to these questions. Rather, he has indicated that the questions are real, and must be socially negotiated. Alkire points out that he has insisted that some capabilities have priority over others, but the criteria he offers for making judgements about the relative priority of different capabilities are highly

relative: high-priority capabilities must satisfy conditions of 'special importance' and 'social influenceability' (p.6).

It may be worth pressing some of Williams' questions a little harder, to expose an unclarity in the capability approach which may give the needs-based approach an advantage. What kinds of thing, metaphysically speaking, are capabilities? What are the criteria for individuating them? How can we, as Wiggins expresses it in a different context, 'single them out, keep track of them, and chronicle what they do'? The examples capability theorists offer are a heterogenous lot:

The ability to be nourished, to learn, to be at peace, to travel, to go about without shame, to be friends, to contemplate higher matters, to take action on causes that matter, to have meaningful work. (Capability Approach Website, 2004)

If, as seems likely, a capability is just any feature of a human life that might be valued, we might wonder what the notion adds. We already know what it costs: 'capability' is a technical term, requiring experts to explain it; it is 'confusing'. What would be lost if talk of helping action were to be framed not with respect to 'capabilities' or 'aspects of life', but just to 'life'? A capability on its own – going about without shame, say – resembles the metaphysical notion of a bare particular, which doesn't have any moral significance until we know more about the life (of the individual, and of the community) in which it features. Just expanding the capability, regardless of context, could be completely the wrong thing to do. The identity and value of capabilities is not, as the capability approach can seem to suggest, intrinsic and independent. It is holistic. To find out how to help people – and, equally, to formulate policy for helping people – we need to keep in view the whole range of capabilities, and the way they interact. There is nothing in the notion of 'capability' to compel us to formulate and deliver aid policy in a holistic way; on the contrary, the notion of capability might easily encourage the kind compartmentalised, reductive thinking that has been the scourge of development aid policy in practice, however well-intended by those formulating it, for centuries.

Sen doesn't tackle the potential problem of reductionism of life to a modular set of capabilities, but leaves it to social negotiation to resolve, along with all the other potential conceptual problems. Indeed, he explicitly claims that this requirement for social negotiation of capability statements is a virtue of the approach, giving it 'substantial cutting power' (1993, p.49). I would suggest that there is a universally shared familiar intuition, or conceptual presupposition, which is what actually does most of the work here, rather than social negotiation: the intuition that it is human life, in all its complex diversity and interconnection, that matters, and that must shape our decisions about how to help. What aids our understanding is not the idea that capabilities are plural, but the idea that human life is a complex, diverse, changing unity. But whether or not that is right, from the point of view of this paper, it should be clear that in terms of specifiability a priori, and thence

degree of self-interpretingness and self-implementingness of policy, a policy framed in terms of expansion of capability has no advantage over one framed in terms of needs.

3. Synthesise, Reject or Supersede Needs v. Capabilities?

a. Synthesis

An intriguing possibility mentioned in passing by both capability and need theorists (e.g. Streeten in 1981; Sen 1984; Alkire 2004), is that, far from being conceptual alternatives for framing policy for helping action, needs and capabilities are equally valid and complementary. I would like to consider an even stronger hypothesis: that the concepts are interdependent, and indispensable.

A human need is necessarily a need *for* something (only God, the universe, eternally reproducing natural cycles and abstract entities have so far been thought to be possibly unconditionally necessary, that is, necessary not *for* anything, but *simpliciter*). Vital needs as needs-theorists characterise them are needs *for* avoiding harm as a human being.³ It is if we concentrate on what the need is *for*, that we see where the necessary interdependence arises. We cannot describe a need without saying what it is a need for; we cannot claim a need is morally important, without saying that what it is for is morally important; we cannot meet a need without helping that which it is a need for to be. If – and it is a big if, given doubts about the capability framework expressed above – vital needs are *for* general aspects of human life, then needs theory commits us to giving an account of those general aspects of human life (i.e., giving a capability theory); commits us to saying that capabilities are morally important; and commits us to helping human capabilities to be. Needs-theory, in other words, requires a capability theory. Does the converse hold?

It does. We cannot describe a human capability without thereby indicating what it requires in order to be (of course, we can only specify that quite generically and relatively until we know about the actual context) – that is, its requirements, necessities or vital needs. We cannot claim that a capability is morally important, without thereby claiming that the needs arising from it are morally important. We cannot help a capability to be without meeting the needs arising from it.

³ To repeat Wiggins' analysis very briefly: vital needs are grave needs (the harm of damaged life is very bad), urgent needs (the harm will ensue relatively rapidly, and may be irreversible), entrenched (they are determined by established and relatively unchangeable facts of nature) and not very substitutable (the standards can't be much shifted, and alternative forms of help aren't much use).

But this comparative exercise highlights some questions, and enables me to give more point to needs-theoretic doubts about the capability approach. First, there is the 'if' about capabilities. Do we really need to say that vital needs are *for* 'general aspects of human life'? Can't we avoid the fallible modularisation of capabilities talk, and speak in a simpler and more ordinary way of 'human life', leaving the individuation of aspects, functionings and capabilities (if they turn out to be necessary) where they belong, at the level of local specification for purposes of particular, concrete help? Second, there is the way the third reversal fails, because of an asymmetry between the two approaches. The capability approach aims at 'expanding capabilities', so, strictly, the third statement should have gone: 'We can't meet needs without expanding capabilities', and the reversal should have gone: 'We can't expand a capability without meeting needs'. But of course, although the first statement is an analytic necessary truth, the second statement is simply false. Where we expand capability above the threshold of need, we do not thereby meet needs. So to get the interdependence, I changed the verb to 'helping the capability to be'.

The verbs used in relation to need and to capability are different. We meet needs; we expand capabilities. The ethical difference may be important, and it may tip the balance in favour of needs for purposes of understanding helping action. In moral philosophy there is a long-standing see-saw debate between deontological theories which say the correct response to values is to respect them, and consequentialist theories, which say the correct response is to promote them (Pettit (1991)). Capability theory, in recommending 'expansion', has placed itself on the consequentialist side of the debate. To 'expand' is to increase, extend, make more of. But where does needs theory fall on the spectrum between detached respect and promotion? I submit that needs theory takes the correct moral response right off the respect/promotion seesaw. But it does this by bringing an ambiguity present at the level of practice up into the theory (as Sen recommends good theory should 1993 pp.33-4). To 'meet' needs is to do whatever is necessary to ensure that a lack is restored. This might involve respect, it might involve caring, it might involve challenging, it might involve a bit of coercion, it might involve a bit of motivation or temptation. We cannot say, without knowing more about the kind of needing being, their situation and their need, what will be involved in 'meeting' their need. But we can note that encapsulated in the metaphor of 'meeting' is the need in helping action to judge in every case their right level of involvement, where 'expansion' stipulates in advance the kind of help required.

The capability approach depends on the concept of need in a further way. Even if we concede that our task in helping action is to expand capability, we face further questions, and to answer them we have to consider needs. It is given that we can't maximally expand everybody's capabilities, so which capabilities do people need to have expanded, and to what level? And again,

to what extent can the needy expand their own capability, and at what point do they need help from us, and what help is it that they need? Here we see what Wiggins calls 'the indispensability of the need concept' in action. What the concept of need has evolved to do, is to distinguish help-requiring from help-neutral states of people around us. A state of occurrent vital need (given that need is multiply relative in the ways Wiggins spells out) demands help; having capabilities that are apt to be expanded does not. Most writers who have ever mentioned need have noticed the 'rhetorical power' of the concept. But they have tended to see this power as a social fact, as though talk of need is some appealing figure of speech which triggers warm feelings and a readiness to help. Wiggins' and others analyses have gone some way towards explaining how the demandingness of needs-statements arise from that it human life which it singles out, but we can go further. The concept has the rhetorical and philosophical power to obligate helping action, because that is what it was coined for. No other concept is the concept of a state of *requirement* of help. So talk of capability cannot specify required helping action without talk of need.

But does the dependence work the other way? If our moral task is to meet needs, must we talk of capabilities? We will certainly have to say, in the course of negotiation of which needs are genuine, which have priority and why, what the needs are needs *for*, and in some cases it may be helpful to talk about 'a general aspect of life that risks being blighted'. But in the light of the discussion above about the complex holism of human life to which vital needs refer, it seems to me quite unlikely that we will need to introduce this difficult level of discourse.

b. Rejection

The basic needs approach and the capability approach to human development have in common that they are products of what we might call 'the western global justice concepts industry'. The basic needs approach culminated in the publication of a book about basic needs, which provided a framework for policy for international helping action, with the explicit aim of 'halving world poverty by the year 2000'. The year 2000 has come and gone; poverty is as entrenched and pervasive as ever, and now has the added horror of an AIDs epidemic that is slaughtering millions of people in Africa. The capability approach emerged out of the basic needs approach in response to doubts about the basic needs approach expressed not just by western academics in the concepts trade, but also by recipient communities.

The Millennium Development Goals are not very different in kind from the goals advanced by Paul Streeten *et al* in *First Things First* more than twenty years ago: top of the list is the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. Whereas capability theorists may want to argue that the distinct lack of progress in reducing extreme deprivation is the result of the use of an inferior

conceptual framework, viz. the basic needs approach, other explanations with rather more alarming implications need urgently to be considered.

Most troubling is a simple, alarmingly plausible Marxist explanation. In the West, levels of well-being are already high – and very high amongst academics and others competent to play a role in the development of international development policy. These privileged people need jobs (because there is no industry and internal services are already oversubscribed). Thinking about poverty in foreign countries, developing conceptual frameworks for understanding and reducing poverty, delivering the help that such frameworks imply is needed, provides enough jobs to keep many thousands of otherwise redundant Westerners in beer and skittles. But because there is no market for this help – no mechanism for recipients to vote with their spending power or their feet, and take their demand for help to a more efficient supplier, there is no pressure on the global justice concepts industry to improve its performance.

Employee demand, and the willingness of governments elected by those employees to supply funding, will lead to keep more and more research and development of more and more policy, more and more fallible interventions and returns to the drawing board. There is no pressure on performance. Seen in this light, the capability approach – and the institutions, jobs, trips, conferences, aid schemes etc it generates – looks even more troubling than the basic needs approach (since it came later, and should have seen and responded to these deep concerns). From this perspective, the capability approach wasn't invented to improve on the needs approach; it was invented because a new move was needed in the game of inventing new approaches. Both concepts are equally products of a decadent Western industry which pays big salaries, and invents new concepts to justify its existence every few years, designed to maintain the illusion of helping whilst actually doing no more than measuring the flames of poverty while they burn.⁴

c. Supersession

Both the basic needs approach and the capability approach presuppose a model of help in which a need-free, knowledgeable, capable, detached agent helps a needy, less-capable and invested other. This model of helping action might be an artefact of Western assumptions about power, agency and help which have themselves to be dismantled before proper helping action can take place. We might see the capability approach in this light, as reflecting

⁴ Another potentially worrying explanation, thankfully a little less plausible, is one in terms of personal politics. What drives international development aid policy is not need, nor yet rational conceptual evolution, but personality. Amartya Sen was an extremely charismatic young economist, with a great deal of 3rd-world credibility mixed in with the authority of his first-world education and status; Martha Nussbaum added the extra imprimatur of an Aristotelian basis for the approach. The charisma of capability theorists, and not any innate conceptual superiority, is what allowed the capability approach to supersede the needs approach.

the beginnings of a recognition that the needy need to be empowered to define their own needs, to meet them and otherwise to decide how they are to be met. But in the background, the assumption of a capable, detached agent of help remains unchallenged. The hope of capability theorists like Alkire, that the need for participation and freedom are built into the very concept of capability, but lacking in the concept of need is vain.

How else might helping action be conceived? A starting point, which gains impetus from the Marxist worry above, might be to shift the focus away from the recipients of help and the help provided, to the providers. Rather than thinking of the providers as capable and detached, we might think about what they need, what is at stake for them in seeking to help. We might go on to re-conceive helping action as an essentially mutual process, in which the helper is as implicated and affected as the helpee, in which the helper has needs, vulnerabilities and agendas that must inevitably shape the process, the outcome and its durability. Just as we need a theory of what help people need and why, so we need a theory of why people help, and how they change and develop in the process. One heartening possibility, is that helping action is community-creating activity. Far from transferring some quantity from helper to helpee, or trying to produce happiness or capability in them, or doing something to them whilst remaining unaffected, what helping does is to create relationships, with their interwoven fibres of mutual recognition, interest, concern, concrete readiness to do for each other, and a readiness to enjoy the mutual enrichment of all sorts of different future interactions.

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