

Human Nature and the Capability Approach

Laurent DEROBERT[†]

Stéphane LUCHINI[‡]

Miriam TESCHL^{‡?}

[†] GREQAM, Université Aix-Marseille III

[‡] GREQAM, IDEP, CNRS

August 2003

First Draft

Abstract

Amartya Sen defines capabilities as the various living conditions that we are able to achieve, but adds that the focus has to be put on valuation of capabilities, thus on what people have reason to value to be and to do. We argue in this article that the capability aspect of what a person can be and do is different from what a person has reason to value to be and to do. Indeed, dividing the analysis into two levels, we claim that the former aspect corresponds to a social level of analysis, whereas the latter to a personal level of capability analysis. We then show that Sen's capability approach as it is presented is first and foremost concerned with the second level of analysis, which consists in the evaluation of what an individual is substantively free to do within a society. We claim that as long as we do not consider any account of human nature, nothing can be said about the personal level of analysis, which consists in the evaluation of what people have reason to value to choose to be and to do. That is why we look at David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* and propose to fill Sen's concept with Hume's ideas such that we are able to link person's functionings, thus their states of being and doing, with their capabilities, that is, what they would value to achieve in being and doing.

[?] Corresponding author: Miriam Teschl, GREQAM, 15-19 Allée Claude Forbin, 13627 Aix-en-Provence, France. miriam_teschl@hotmail.com

“There is no question of importance, whose decision is not compriz’d in the science of man; and there is none, which can be decided with any certainty, before we become acquainted with that science.”

David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature* [2000: 4]

1. Introduction

Sen’s big contribution to the question of how to evaluate the quality of life was not only to propose a concept that enriched and modified the existing discussion, but also, as we suggest in the following article, to propose a concept that through its *formulation* affected lots of people’s minds and thoughts in different ways. He takes as “objects of value” in the assessment of people’s life “functionings”, and defines them as the various beings and doings that a person achieves or succeeds in living [1987: 29]. But he also considers a person’s capability, which refers to the alternative combinations of functionings that a person can achieve [1999: 75]. In other words, capability is the freedom to do the things or lead the kind of lives the individual has reason to value [1999: 18]. Even though Sen esteems that “[c]apability is not an awfully attractive word” [1993: 30], its definition in terms of being able to choose among what a person can be and do, refers to an awfully attractive and inspiring idea. The concept’s basic elements thus are *formulated* such that it enlivens people’s imagination and reflection about what effectively could be those functionings and capabilities, and the reason why they are valued. However, this enlivened imagination and reflection that follows the formulation creates, as we will argue, a kind of confusion of meanings of the respective associated concepts and definitions.

Thus, given these definitions, what are then functionings, and especially, what are capabilities¹? Already Bernard Williams [Williams 1987: 98] has put forward the question by wondering, if we can say that a capability has been created, when the new washing powder “Bloppo” has been put on the market. Sen replied to this critique that “[t]he question is not so much about ‘the identification of what a capability is’, but more about the valuation of different capabilities” [1987: 108]. Thus, the concern is directed towards valuable capabilities, but the questions still remain – what are these valuable capabilities and also, how to identify them? Williams himself suggested that this answers needs a “good deal of further theory” and proposed to see, for example, “what kinds of facts are presented by human nature” [Williams 1987: 102].

This is what we propose to do in the following article. We will try to assess Sen’s capability approach with inspirations taken from David Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1739/40 (2000)]. We are not saying that considerations of human nature must necessarily be those developed by David Hume. Other theories, and especially more current ones could be thought of. We chose his philosophical account because economists often refer to his work when tracing back the origin of the development of economic liberalism and of the concept of the classical economic agent². Furthermore, it is much in a “Senian” spirit, we guess, to go

¹ It appears that Sen uses the words “capability” and “capabilities” interchangeably, even though “capability” sometimes seem to refer more to the general freedom aspect of people’s choices, “capabilities” to certain explicit functionings, a person is free to choose (e.g. basic capabilities).

² See for example: Deleule, Didier [1979], Demeulenaere, Pierre [1996].

back to the *one* origin of economics³ that sees economic questions associated with ethics and political philosophy [1987a], and to reintroduce certain aspects of their theories that have been eliminated from contemporary economic reasoning – such as he did primarily with ideas taken from Adam Smith, and we will now do with Hume’s considerations on the human nature. And finally, even though Sen himself demonstrated little interest in Hume, we are still led to think that there exists a fruitful correspondence and complementation between these two intellectual oeuvres.

The next section [2] demonstrates, why indeed we think that what is missing in Sen’s approach, is a theory of the individual, thus an account of the human nature. Dividing the capability approach into two levels of analysis, a personal or individual, and social or institutional one, we are introducing our main claim, namely, *that the capability approach as it is presented only evaluates the second level of analysis by considering the success of a society in terms of what its members are able to be and to do*. Nothing can really be said about what people would have reason to be and to do, thus, how and what they consider their personal capabilities to be. The following section [3] then takes up Hume’s *Treatise* and confronts it with the capability approach. We will show why indeed the findings of section 2, that is, the capability approach intervenes only at the second level of analysis, is true in the light of Hume’s *Treatise*: We demonstrate that Sen’s capability approach is not linked to his considerations on agency. They are two important concepts, but the common articulation of the two is theoretically not embodied. This would only be possible through an account of the human nature, which would enable to link people’s functionings with their capabilities, i.e. people’s beings and doings with what they would have reason to choose to be and to do. But we will also show that the consideration of the philosophy and psychology of human nature will have practical consequences in relation to capabilities; the insights we get from human nature and its workings will indicate what people would have reason to value. These findings would impinge on the social level; would influence what kind of capabilities should be provided within and by the society. The general conclusion we can draw from this Sen-Hume juxtaposition is that because the capability approach lacks a pertinent theory of the agent, the capability-evaluation refers primarily to *what* an individual is and does, but does not take account of *who* the individual is and has reason to value to do, given his or her personal and social circumstances and intrinsic motivations. This shortcoming affects the effectiveness of the capability approach too, because adequate social opportunities will be established with regard to *what* the individual is and does only, sidestepping all aspects that have to do with *who* the individual is. If we know more about the human nature, we may be able to formulate a concrete program of functioning and capability expansion that interferes directly at a personal and interpersonal level and takes account of people’s reason to act. The conclusion [4] will summarise the main arguments and indicate some consequences and clarifications of Hume’s *Treatise* even for the social level of capability analysis.

2. Sen’s Capability Approach and Hume’s Human Nature

Sen developed his capability approach primarily as an answer to the question ‘Equality of What?’ [1982] and thus as a critique of existing concepts of justice with their respective informational bases of evaluation of people’s quality of life. He criticised the personal utility approach among others for its purely subjective concern of a person’s well-being in terms of pleasure, happiness or desire fulfilment. The problem with that is that people may have

³ The *other* origin is referred to by Sen as the “engineering” one, and “connects with those studies of economics which developed from the technique-oriented analyses of statecraft” [1987a: 5].

adapted their happiness or desires to the prevailing situation in which they live, even though they objectively suffer from certain deficiencies [1987: 11]. To focus on functionings and capabilities would allow to diagnose those sufferings independently from the person's own evaluation: one recognises rather easily the ill-functioning of an undernourished person and thus evaluates his or her well-being correspondingly, even though this person esteems him or herself happy and healthy and consequently considers subjectively his or her well-being to be much higher. Sen also criticised approaches that consider as basis of evaluation the amount of income or the possession of commodities. This is because people may be very rich or possess many goods, though they are still not able to transform income or goods into valuable functionings because they suffer, for example, from certain bodily diseases or disabilities. Sen's capability approach focuses on the result of the transformation of income or goods into functionings and demands a public policy that focuses on appropriate institutional facilities such that people enjoy equal capabilities. However, Sen does not want to see people as "passive recipients" [1999: 11] of public aid programs or as "motionless patients" [1999: 137] who receive public assistance, but as agents, thus as individuals who can "[w]ith adequate social opportunities [...] effectively shape their own destiny and help each other" [1999: 11].

Looking closely at the preceding sentence, it might be argued that Sen's concern in relation to human capabilities goes over two major levels:

There is *first* the personal, individual level at which people act as agents and "shape their own destiny". This self-creation also happens in interaction with other people, who "help each other" or not. The examination of people's functionings or "states of the person" [1993: 31], and their capabilities, thus alternative functionings from which they can choose, is of major importance at this point. This "states" have also to be seen in the context of interaction with other people, as relations to other people may indeed reduce or augment achievements of living conditions and possibilities to achieve valuable outcomes. The capability approach is primarily an evaluative exercise, thus trying to identify those functionings and capabilities that people have and which are valuable for them and their self-realisation. Thus, at this individual level, we argue that the interest of theoretical and practical research goes directly to those reasons people may have to value certain aspects of their life in order to effectuate a proper evaluation of their quality of life in terms of those valuable functionings and capabilities.

The *second* level concerns the social or institutional one. Public policies must make sure to create "adequate social opportunities" for the development and realisation of people's functionings and equality of their capabilities. It is the level of social development in general, where the focus is laid on the expansion of human freedom, such as to live long, to be able to escape avoidable morbidity, to be able to find an interesting job or to live in crime-free areas [1999: 291]. Thus, at this social, institutional level, we argue that the interest of theoretical and practical research goes to the evaluation of people's access to institutional and social settings in terms of their resulting functionings and capabilities.

Hence, people's functionings and capabilities can be assessed and evaluated at these two levels of analysis. However, the capability approach does not stop at the "evaluation" of a person's quality of life, it also focuses on the motivational aspect of capabilities. This aspect Sen calls "effectiveness" and it refers to the idea that the establishment of substantive freedom, thus of capabilities, within the society is in itself "a principal determinant of individual initiative and social effectiveness" [1999: 18]. It is the idea that a greater freedom helps people to be and to do what they would value. It is a form of political and developmental engagement, a "capability-creation" that enters directly at the second level of analysis – via public policies or other institutional initiatives – but aims at reaching the other level indirectly by relying on the presupposition that people are agents of their own destiny.

“[...] The exercise of that enhanced freedom is ultimately a matter for the person herself” [1999: 289].

Thus, what the capability approach does, is to shift the “[...] primary attention away from *means* (...) to *ends* that people have reason to pursue, and, correspondingly, to the *freedoms* to be able to satisfy these ends” [1999: 90. His italics.]. Chief sentence again, as it is at this point, we claim, that confusion arises within the capability approach. We have to ask: Are capabilities the *ends* people have reason to pursue, or are they the *freedoms* they need to be able to achieve these ends? Do *freedoms* and valuable *ends* really correspond, such that they may both be called a person’s capabilities? It is said that the object of value in evaluating the quality of life is always a *person’s capability*. But is this object then a *person’s capability*, or the *capability* of a person? The former corresponds to the *ends* a person has reason to pursue, the latter to the *freedoms* he or she has to achieve valuable ends. The difference is a difference in the level of analysis. The former considers the personal level, the latter the social one. One time we are interested in knowing the capabilities a person has reason to value in order to evaluate if they are be achievable or not. Another time we consider the substantive freedoms, thus capabilities, a society offers its members via social institutions and opportunities. We see: The definition becomes different meanings; its “extensive” formulation appeals to different perspectives and levels of analysis. Or in other words, the definition – what a person can be and do (freedom-aspect) – separates itself from its *enhanced* definition – be able to be and to do what a person has reason to value (valuable ends-aspect). The formulation gives rise to more than one idea.

Of course one might say that given the respective democratic framework, what the society offers is what the people want⁴. Therefore, we may easily pass from one level of analysis to the next without much further ado and consider them as being the same. On the other hand, to offer what people want still requires to know what that is, thus the personal level comes, as it were, essentially before the social one. In that sense, the *ends* should become the *freedoms*. However, it might be claimed that society has to offer more than just what people want. Indeed, people’s reason to be and to do may conflict with each other, thus it must be the society that intervenes to solve these conflicts. The society is thus responsible for a system of justice that helps to organise the way in which people live together. Equally, society is responsible to offer adequate social opportunities and freedoms, which are necessary such that people learn to be able to live as responsible agents. “Responsibility *requires* freedom”, writes Sen [1999: 284]. In that sense, the social level implies the personal one; the *freedoms* become the *ends*.

On the basis of a functioning-evaluation, the different levels of analysis do not seem to cause troubles. It suffices to look at the status quo, at the achievements of a person, at what she is and does. We may even formulate qualitative judgements by saying that, for example, a person has more or less functionings than another in relation to elementary aspects of life. The capability analysis is more challenging as we have just demonstrated. Confusion arises over the meaning of a capability. If at a personal level, capabilities are valuable ends, thus what a person has reason to choose to be and to do and concerns the evaluation if she is able to choose them or not, at a social level, capabilities are what a person can be and do and concerns the substantive freedom a society offers its members. Our claim now is *that even though the capability approach talks about the assessment of a person’s capability, what finally is evaluated are the freedoms a society offers its members* [1999:18]. Evaluating a *person’s capability* means really evaluating the *functioning of the society*: What the society is

⁴ In relation to functioning-evaluation of people’s standard of living, Sen describes two different sources of evaluation: either the person herself (self-evaluation) or according to some generally accepted standards (standard evaluation). Sen notes: “If contemporary standards are widely shared, [...] the self-evaluation approach would then tend to yield the same results as the standard-evaluation procedure” [Sen 1987: 31].

and does for its members. The capability approach, as it is presented, is essentially an analysis of the second level. It is evaluated what a person can be and do, but not what she has reason to value to be and to do. Capabilities are concerned about *freedoms*, and not about *ends*.

But did not Sen reply to Williams that “[t]he question is [...] more about the valuation of different capabilities” [1987:108], which would mean to find the *ends* people have? So what is going on? What is the question about? Is our claim true? Is the capability approach about *freedoms* or valuable *ends*?

We know the answer already: It is about *freedoms*, because “[...] the exercise of that enhanced freedom is ultimately a matter for the person herself” [1999: 289]. “[...] An approach to justice and development that concentrates on substantive freedoms inescapably focuses on the agency and judgement of individuals; they cannot be seen merely as patients to whom benefits will be dispensed by the process of development” [1999: 288]. Thus our claim again: *The capability approach deals with freedom, because people are agents who already evaluated their ends*. But here, another question comes to mind: How do we distinguish in the capability approach between *agents* and *patients*? Is it sufficient to suppose it, to focus on it without further account of what exactly agency means? Of course, Sen gives rich images, characterises extensively people’s beings and doings and concerns of life: They “self-examine” themselves by reflecting about how they should live [1987a: 2], are motivated by ethical thoughts and judge accordingly. They have a notion of what is just and what is not [1999: 253] and are able to contemplate the live of others [1999: 283]. Interested in promoting their own interest, they also rely on behavioural norms and reasoning to achieve what they wish to achieve [1999: 249]. People are committed to certain values that make them act in a specific way, irrespective of their own welfare [1977: 327]. They are sensitive to the development of their preferences and the norms that guide their behaviour in society [1999: 253]. Indeed, people are reflective creatures [1999: 283], analyse the values according to which they live [1999: 273] and engage in public discussion about the valuation of norms and traditional biases [1999: 287]. However, people may come into situation, where straightforward decision taking is not possible. The diversity of reasons to act in one choice situation may cause psychological and ethical conflicts that reflect themselves in a person’s emotional disequilibria [1987a: 69]. Under more favourable circumstances, they are motivated by constructive dissatisfaction [1999: 19], and will act in such a way as to achieve self-respect and creative fulfilment [1987a: 64]. Knowing that the past is irrevocable, people conceive that the future is theirs to make [1999: 249]. In a word, they are responsible agents, concerned about their own lives as well as about the world in which they live and know about their power to change and to help remedy where it is needed [1999: 283].

As was said, these are rich images, extensive characterisations of human beings. But does this change any thing in the account of the capability approach? How do these rich images connect with it? We now have a notion of what Sen *means* by agents, but do we know how an agent effectively evaluates the beings and doings he has reason to achieve? No, the capability approach remains silent on that account, has no theory of the individual, no account of the human nature that may help to understand how the individual values, in what relation he stands to his valuable ends, what might motivate his actions, and thus, what reasonably could be the capabilities he would want to achieve. The person remains a black box, describable only by a list of *what* he or she is and does, to whom is offered a range of substantive freedoms to be and to do. Thus we claim: *As long as we have no account of human nature, the capability approach remains first and foremost the evaluation of people’s functionings and an evaluation of the social opportunities and freedoms a society offers its members*. Nothing much can be said about the first level of analysis in relation to a *person’s* capability: This level bases their considerations on *who* a person is. That is, accounting for the fact that people are self-reflexive and conscious beings, interested in creating themselves and

integrating their lives into an “oeuvre of life”⁵. The capability approach does not tell us what the reasonable capabilities for a person *are*; we only might say what capabilities people *have* when they live in a given society. We don’t know *who* the individual is. But not knowing and analysing human nature, we neither perceive their motives for actions, nor their principles of reason, nor their features of the mind. Hence, we also know nothing about the way people relate to others, how they are concerned about each other, how they influence each other. But if we don’t know the principles of relation and communication with others, how can we understand the capabilities that are needed to intervene on the social level? How does it evolve, the “capability approach to justice” [1999: 58]? Which kinds of capabilities are necessary to guarantee that the person achieves what she might value to be and to do – which is quite distinct from the evaluation of “[...] the things a person is substantively free to do” [1999: 75]? On what basis do capabilities then lie? Which account of human nature builds their foundation?

To answer these questions, we propose to look at David Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature*. In the following sections, we will give a Hume-inspired idea of agency in relation to the capability approach. On this basis, we can repeat and visualise our claim that as long as an account of human nature is missing, the capability approach misses a lot of strength and focuses only on the evaluation of personal functionings and substantive freedoms a society is able to offer. As long as an account of human nature is missing, nothing much can be said about what a person has reason to choose to be and to do.

3. The personal level of capability analysis

“[E]conomics is supposed to be concerned with real people” writes Sen in his important text that represents an appeal to economists to take ethical considerations seriously, especially as an element that affects people’s behaviour and judgement [Sen 1987a: 9]⁶. This concern makes reading Sen so delightful and pleasant. His thoughts inspire to think “broadly” on issues concerning *real* human lives; he takes the reader along to the practical life of people in destitute situations even though he considers theoretically their problems. With one chief element and concern: what a person is and does and his or her ability to choose the kind of life the person has reason to value. But what is and does a person, thus, what are his or her functionings, and what is the kind of life a person can choose, i.e. what are his or her capabilities?

Sen gives some concrete examples. Functionings most often cited by Sen are being in good health and adequately nourished as well as escaping premature mortality; having a shelter and living in a crime-free and peaceful area; being educated and having a worthwhile job; being socially integrated and taking part in the life of the community, appearing in public without shame and having self-respect. Capabilities, according to Sen, would then be the ability to achieve these functionings.

Arguably, these functionings do not only refer to aspects of people’s *life*, but to the *person* who leads that life. Ask any person the question “what are you?” and “what do you do?”, he or she will indeed answer with a list of functionings that will describe this person. There is an intrinsic relationship between functionings and the people who have this functionings. Thus, functionings, in that sense, are the primary element of knowledge we have of people. All what follows in Sen’s approach is based on functionings.

⁵ Leroux [1995: 35].

⁶ Sen does not deny, though, the important contributions made by the “engineering” approach of economics in certain areas such as economic logistic issues [Sen 1987a: 8-9].

David Hume's *Treatise* starts with introducing his basic elements, namely impressions and ideas. Impressions, and more accurately impressions of sensations are those sensations that appear at first on people's mind and produce pain or pleasure. Ideas are the representations of these impressions in thinking and reasoning. Impressions of sensation and ideas then give birth to impression of reflection. Thus, we form original impressions, or impressions of sensation such as hunger and thirst, heat and cold, that give us pain or pleasure. Of these impressions we form ideas and these ideas, when they come upon the mind again, produce secondary impressions or impressions of reflection [11]. Yesterday, for example, I was running home when it was pouring down. This gave me the impression of wet and uneasiness. Today I remember, thus I have the idea of, my wet clothes sticking on my body and this produces a strong feeling of aversion and hope never to experience that again. Impressions of reflections are all the passions and emotions. They may be divided into calm and violent ones and may arise directly following some impression of sensation or idea, or indirectly, by passing by a double relation of impressions and ideas [181-2]. Thus, Hume's account is based on a mental world and the immediate objects the mind is able to perceive.

But to these impressions and ideas, also called people's perceptions, Hume focuses on a second main ingredient in the constitution of the mental world. And this is the principle of relation or association among impressions and ideas [12ff]. It is insofar of major importance, as Hume divides impressions into simple and complex ones, which respectively give rise to simple and complex ideas [8]. Simple impressions are those that are not separable anymore, the smallest unit of perception possible, such as perceiving a colour or a taste. Complex impressions are then the combination of different simple ones. But especially in relation to ideas, thus the "faint images" of impressions in thinking and reasoning [7], how can different simple ideas be associated among themselves? It is because of the principle of association, of the natural relations of resemblance, contiguity and causation. By resemblance, a picture of somebody let us immediately think of the person whose picture is taken. By contiguity it comes that mentioning the Eiffel Tower let us immediately think of Paris. And by causation it is that when we think of Prince Charles, we immediately carry our thought to Queen Elisabeth as there is a causal relation between son and mother. Thus, these three types of relations produce a union among the different ideas and make them appear as if they were naturally associated. These associations make it possible that the thought passes easily from one idea to the other. Indeed, Hume claims in the *Abstract* to his *Treatise* that if there is anything that allows him to be named an innovator, than it is exactly this principle of association. "[T]hese are the only links", so he states, "that bind the parts of the universe together, or connect us with any person or object exterior to ourselves". As they are the only ties of the thought, "they are really *to us* the cement of the universe and all operations of the mind must, in a great measure, depend on them" [417]. The mind, thus, is nothing else than an idea, a chain of idea made possible through the principle of association. The removal of this principle would cause the ruin of human nature [148]. The mind is what is given, the ideas that the human being accumulates through experience and observation.

A person has two major faculties: memory and imagination [11]. Whereby memory stores experiences and brings upon the mind passed impressions and ideas in the right order of their appearance, it is imagination that has the liberty to expand into the future. Imagination is able to dissolve complex ideas into their simple ones, and to form new ones by putting them together as it wishes. If it is for the imagination alone, the mind would be able to form any fiction it wants, to create fantastic figures such as "winged horses, fiery dragons, and monstrous giants" [12]. But because of the principle of association, the imagination becomes constant and regular, the mind unites ideas that are contiguous, resembling and cause and effect of each other. The imagination is an accumulation of ideas, a chain of thought that carries the reasoning far beyond the perceptions that the mind sees or remembers. But it does

not go in any direction whatsoever, it is always linked to us through “the authority either of memory or senses”, without which “our whole reasoning wou’d be chimerical and without foundation” [59]. Any thread of thought that ends in some action must be stimulated by an impression that comes to the mind. This is the Humean agent, a person activated by an impression or feeling, a person put into motion by her present experiences. A collection of ideas has become a subject⁷. A subject who develops a positive emotion to do actions that promise pleasure, and a feeling of aversion to avoid doing painful ones [266]; a subject who may also enjoy the pursuit of an activity as such, without focusing on any pleasurable end in the first place [288].

All passions are felt in us, and some have a particular relation to ourselves as they convey specially the idea of ourselves. Passions either are productive, that is, natural instincts and impulses that produce pleasure and pain in us, to which count the desire of happiness of our friends, the punishment of our enemies, but also hunger and lust and other bodily appetites [281]. Or they are responsive passions, which may be direct, that is, directly following pleasure and pain or any of their expectations. These may be desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope and fear [281]. Otherwise, responsive passions are indirect, depending on a double relation of impressions and ideas [188]. These are especially pride and humility, love and hatred. Take the example of pride. “By pride I understand that agreeable impression, which arises in the mind, when the view either of our virtue, beauty, riches or power makes us satisfy’d with ourselves” [194]. Thus, pride has an object and a cause. The object of pride is always the individual who is feeling it, whereas the causes are the things in which we take pride. The double relation now means that if a person looks at her, say, beautiful house, it gives her a pleasure because of its beauty. But because of the relation of resemblance of impressions, it also brings upon the mind the pleasure of pride. However, given the fact that she owns it, the house brings to mind the idea of herself. Thus, the association of impressions and the associations of idea produce together the passion of pride. Love is produced in a similar manner as pride, with the difference that the object of love is another person [214]. Also contrary to pride, which is a “pure emotion in the soul, unattended with any desire” [237] and “without any direction or tendency to action” [246], love is not completed within itself, but carries the mind to further passions such as benevolence for example. “Love is always follow’d, or rather conjoin’d by a desire of the happiness of the person belov’d, and an aversion to his misery” [237]. This produces a whole tendency, one passion following the other for the same reasons as impressions and ideas do follow each other. When we experience joy, then we are naturally inclined to love, be generous, feel pity, have courage and experience pride [186]. Human conduct is not capricious, and desires are not inconstant. But changeableness is essential to human nature.

These feelings, thus, open us towards other people. Their force and vitality will of course depend upon the original constitution of the mind, upon the qualities that describe the personal character: “meekness, beneficence, charity, generosity, clemency, moderation, equity” [370] and others. But there is no passion in human beings such as a general love of mankind: “In the original frame of our mind, our strongest attention is confin’d to ourselves; our next is extended to our relations and acquaintances; and ‘tis only the weakest which reaches to strangers and indifferent persons” [314]. Human beings are selfish, but more than that are they partial⁸. They are self-interested, but this includes their concern for family and friends. “Do you not see, that tho’ the whole expence of the family be generally under the direction of the master of it, yet there are few that do not bestow the largest part of their fortunes on the pleasures of their wives, and the education of their children, reserving the smallest portion for their own proper use and entertainment?” [313]. And still may the sight of

⁷ Deleuze [1953: 8]

⁸ Deleuze [1953: 24]

a stranger excite some feelings in us, we are affected by “a very powerful principle in human nature” [393-4]: The principle of sympathy or communication [273]. Sympathy is not so much a feeling as the propensity to receive via communication the sentiments and inclinations of others [206]⁹. The principle of sympathy means that facial expressions and other external signs in the behaviour and voice of others first affect us, and these perceptions consequently raise in us an idea of their passions and emotions. This idea is then before long converted into an impression in ourselves so that we finally feel the same emotion as the other person. Because the “impression of ourselves is always intimately present with us, and [...] our consciousness gives us so lively a conception of our own person”, it happens that “whatever object, therefore, is related to ourselves must be conceiv’d with a like vivacity of conception” [206]. By the association of ideas and impressions, the imagination passes quickly from one to the other and enables us to perceive as others do. Furthermore, nature made that human creatures resemble each other; hence, we will always find in others some parallels to ourselves. “Accordingly we find, that where, beside the general resemblance of our natures, there is any peculiar similarity in our manners, or character, or country, or language, it facilitates sympathy” [207].

However, not only that a subject’s thought has been stimulated, put into motion, such that her imagination passes easily from one idea to the other, the person also has reason to expect that certain things are going to happen or not, she forms beliefs about consequences of actions and events, and of causes that made them happen. That is, the human subject passes over and above what is given in her mind, overtakes experience, and believes certain things that she has not yet seen, felt, tasted¹⁰. The belief is a lively idea, related to a present impression [67]. When a person observes and experiences that a certain impression always gives rise to another, the mind perceives constantly and uniformly the same cause and effect. From this constant conjunction, the mind infers the custom or habit that at the appearance of a certain impression, a certain idea must follow. The manner, in which the mind conceives this idea, makes the difference between belief and the fictions of imagination. The idea feels differently and has a superior force and vivacity than fictitious ideas. Indeed, these beliefs become “the governing principles of all our actions” [68]. But even if they are the governing principles of actions, it is clear that we never will have an absolute certainty in predicting any future actions. ‘One wou’d appear ridiculous, who wou’d say, that ‘tis only probable the sun will rise to-morrow, or that all men must dye; tho’ ‘tis plain we have no farther assurance of these facts, than what experience afford us” [86]. Concerning human beings, what we do though is to attribute a power of exercise to them. Indeed, “we consider a person as endow’d with any ability [of performing some action] when we find from past experience, that ‘tis probable, or at least possible he may exert it” and “we may farther observe, that this satisfaction [i.e. the pleasure one perceives when a good becomes possible or probable] increases, when any good approaches in such a manner that it is in one’s *own* power to take or leave it, and there neither is any physical impediment, nor any strong motive to hinder our enjoyment” [204]. Thus, Hume distinguishes two situations: One in which we receive pleasure from somebody else’s actions that we judge possible or probable according to the experience of having them constantly observed to happen in a given situation. The other is the pleasure we receive from our own actions, whereby the prospect of being able to do certain actions already conveys the same lively satisfaction as actually doing it. Admittedly, people may be victim of “an *illusion of the fancy*” [205] and judge the ability to do a certain action greater as it is. But the illusion Hume means arises by imagining a counterfactual action that could be done, but will never be done according to experience. But just thinking about this counterfactuality procures pleasure. A miser will never spend his money. A person who has

⁹ See for this aspect of sympathy the *Editor’s Introduction* to Hume [2000]; p. 155.

¹⁰ Deleuze [1953: 4].

no money to spend would in that sense be in the same situation as the miser. However, the miser still can experience the feeling of pleasure by imagining spending his money. The poor person cannot experience that pleasure. That is, the miser is effectively in the situation to exercise the power of spending money, but he does not do so, because he is a miser [205].

We start recognising the correspondence and relevance of Hume's *Treatise* to Sen's capability approach. But this is not only concerning the issue of power and exercise. It starts much earlier:

"In Hume, we assist at an unequal development of two very different inspirations" [Deleuze 1953: 9]. One is *atomism*, that is, the world of experience and first knowledge being reduced to the simple elements of impressions and ideas. The other is *associationism*, linking perceptions together, developing, as it were, a "psychology of the tendency", a "psychology of the human nature" [*ibid.*]. Because the principle of association exists, we are able to talk about human nature; it gives constancy to the imagination; binds the parts of the universe together. Now we see why Sen's approach is missing an account of human nature. We also see why Sen's approach does not consider the first level of analysis, that is, personal capabilities, what a person has reason to choose to be and to do, his or her valuable ends. Sen's approach is primarily *atomistic*. The basic element of knowledge about people is a list of functionings. This is what is given. But how do these functionings relate to each other? How do these functionings become a subject, a self? How becomes *what* a person is and does *who* he or she is? That is, how can be surpassed what is given, gone over and above it, projected into the future, delineated the tendencies of action? In other words, how does functionings create capabilities? To cut a long story short, Sen's approach misses *associationsim*. Without it, the first level of analyses remains meaningless. Without it, nothing can be said about what a person has reason to choose to be and to do.

But reasons for actions were always one of Sen's concerns. He made important contributions to economic theory by criticising the narrow conception of human beings as egoists, as self-interested individuals. The economic man is represented as a "rational fool" who includes all levels of evaluation in one single preference ordering only [1977]. But people sympathise with others [1977: 326] and are committed to some groups or social classes [1977: 337], are motivated by a sense of duty [1977: 327], have their own morals [1977:329]. Thus, more than egoism is part of human behaviour – and taking that into account would have major consequences for economic modelling [1977: 341].

Motivation eventually affects evaluation. If people want to achieve happiness and pleasure, than their well-being will be assessed according to their level of happiness. If people want to best satisfy their desires, then the desire satisfaction is a tool of evaluation. As we have seen, Sen formulated cunning critiques against these approaches that see well-being as mental characteristics. The "underdog" adapts to his circumstances, feels happy at lower levels, satisfied with less. Moreover, evaluation in terms of happiness and desire fulfilment is one thing, the fineness of the underlying theory of value another. Does automatically all what we value give pleasure? Do we value what we desire or desire what we value, Sen asks purposefully [1987: 10]. Obviously, evaluation should affect motivation. Thus, to counteract the problematical use of subjectivism in utilitarian theories, to propose a plurality of valuable aspects in leading one's life instead of some exclusive use of some mental characteristics, Sen develops his capability approach. He "pushes" in more objective directions [1987: 14]; focuses on the life one leads and could lead. By doing this, he cuts motivation from evaluation, which is what he wants to do; but also evaluation from motivation, which is what he does not want to do. Evaluation becomes objective atoms; motivation a story, rich images of sympathising and committed people as described above, but unconnected to the atoms. To "push" towards objective directions of evaluation pulled subjective motivation out of the

considerations. But without motivation, the list of functionings remains as such and cannot be associated to its capabilities; what is given will not be activated and put into motion.

Supposing agency is no remedy if we don't know how agency associates with well-being in the sense of achieving what one values to achieve. That agency and well-being are two different distinctions, relating to each other but not being identical, both of major importance in the assessment of the quality of life, is a matter of fact, brought plainly forward thanks to Sen. But agency alone does not substitute the missing *associationism*; agency alone does not explain people's imagination and beliefs about projections into the future based on their experiences, does not delineate tendencies of action; agency alone does not make the *what* to the *who* and constitute an account of human nature that renders visible the passage from functionings to capabilities.

Considerations of human nature are not to be confounded with subjectivism. As the *Treatise* demonstrates, the empirical and naturalist view of human nature does not foreclose an objective account of people's psychology, a characterisation of the functionings of the mind, an account of an activated self or subject. Sen criticises subjectivism and fears that agency might be taken as a subjectivist view of ethics [1987a: 41], claims that objectivity is not shut out with it, and argues that attributing importance to agency "[...] does not entail accepting whatever a person happens to value as being valuable (i) unconditionally, and (ii) as intensely as it is valued by the person" [1987a: 42]. Agency always requires reflection; agency always necessitates a responsible individual who makes "a careful assessment", an evaluation of aims and objectives. Thus, "[t]he issue of objectivity relates to the interpretation of that 'careful assessment' – as to what *kind* of an exercise it is taken to be" [*ibid.*]. Surely an important point, but it shows the damage done to a truly reflective individual: By pushing back subjectivism, subjectivity has been lost with it. At its place comes a story, the rich images of agency; but in the capability approach as such, the individual remains a list of functionings. No bridge is built. Objectivity has been opposed to subjectivism, even though objectivism would have been sufficient: It would have saved the subject. Because before we can tell what a "careful assessment" is, we must know by whom it is done.

Even a subject can be objectively looked at and this in a double sense: Once we look at human nature, observe it in general, such as Hume has done in his *Treatise*. Then, having this observance in mind, we go out and look at real people in specific situations to evaluate their quality of life, such as Sen is doing in his capability approach. The result of these "observations" is an understanding of how and what a person values to be and to do, how she carefully assesses her choice-options. From a Humean perspective can we tell by observation and experience that a cause will have an effect, an effect always a certain cause. We could tell that given certain functionings, specific capabilities will be wanted to achieve. By a constant and uniform union of impressions, we are able to infer and to predict the consequence of what just happened. Observing similar functionings in similar circumstances, we may be able to tell what the capabilities are that are most valued in that situation. Why should the changes of our body from infancy to old age be more regular than those of our sentiments, actions, and passions, asks Hume [258]. Indeed, "our actions have a constant union with our motives, tempers, and circumstances" [258]. If we consider these latter aspects, *moral evidence* arises as to what conclusion we should draw concerning our actions [260]. We must have this moral evidence, otherwise could we not live together. We expect the other to do certain things, because we experienced in the past that she had constantly done so. A superior gives an order to her employees and expects their compliance. "In short, as nothing more nearly interests us than our own actions and those of others, the greatest part of our reasonings is employ'd in judgments concerning them" [260]. Thus, there is a passage from functionings to capabilities. Seen from an objective standpoint, we can tell – or believe – what kind of bundle of functionings will lead to what sort of capabilities. And we may tell what functionings are

missing to achieve certain capabilities and act accordingly to provide them: Here there are, first and second level of analysis combined, the former implying the latter.

So we can answer difficult questions such as “[...] if we do not have the courage to choose to live in a particular way, even though we *could* live that way if we so chose, can it be said that we do have the freedom to live that way, i.e. the corresponding capability?” [1993: 33]. It is not in Sen’s purpose, so he says, “[...] to brush under the carpet difficult questions as this” [*ibid.*], but he finally did. And this for a good reason, as without a theory of the agent, these questions are not easy to respond. We can say that at a first level of analysis, we do not have this specific capability; at a general second level, we do. To a person who does not have the courage to live in a particular way, we do not attribute the power to exercise the corresponding capability. From experience we judge, that this choice will not be taken. The person is not endowed with this ability; we have no reason to believe that it is probable or at least possible that she chooses this action. On the other hand, if this choice concerns some, say, professional preference that will not be selected because of lack of courage, but the society would offer this career-possibility on principle, then, the cowardly person would have this capability too. A finer analysis though would imply to get to know the impediment to the realisation of what he or she would value to be and to do, and to offer those social and institutional freedoms that help this person to achieve what he or she wants.

If the capability approach is concerned about “the valuation of different capabilities” [1987: 108], then it has to look at people’s power to exercise certain actions. This is the evaluation aspect of the capability approach. Considering the effectiveness aspect, thus using the capability approach as a mean to social development, it should focus on people’s *empowerment*, that is, augmenting the probability or at least possibility that people actually are and do in a certain manner. It becomes obvious: *augmenting the freedom to be and to do is substantially different from empowering people to live the freedom to be and to do*. One is a general second level of analysis, assessing what the society is able to offer its members. The other is a first level of analysis transposed into the second, or in other words, the second founded upon the first, assessing if the society is able to offer what the person would have reason to be empowered to be and to do.

Interestingly, Hume discusses the issue of power and exercise in his section “Of property and riches” [202-6]. But this does not need to suggest that we are back at commodity-based approaches to evaluate the quality of life. Quite to the contrary. By property Hume means what we actually possess, “houses, equipage, furniture, cloaths, horses, hounds” [202]. They produce pleasure by their “utility, beauty, or novelty” [203] and are the source of pride by the double relation of ideas and impressions between the cause of pride, our possession, and its subject, which is ourselves. Riches are the means to get these properties; riches are the power of acquiring what pleases [203]. And even these riches, though as objects themselves of no further worth, give rise to pride. The emotions are raised by the imagination of our probable and at least possible exercise. I feel the pleasure of pride, incited by the pleasure that produces wealth, based on the experience that being wealthy enabled me to buy pleasurable goods. And the idea of myself arises because they are my riches, which closes the double relation.

Thus, property produces pride, a passion that “conveys an elevated and sublime sensation to the person” [383], a passion, related to ourselves. Property is what we have, and let us carry the thought a bit further, what we do and are. Indeed, a bit later, Hume states that we are “possess’d of” essentially three goods: “the internal satisfaction of our mind, the external advantages of our body, and the enjoyment of such possessions as we have acquir’d by our industry and good fortune” [313]. The functionings are our property. Functionings convey to us the sense of ourselves; produce pride in us. The perception, reflection, evaluation of what we possess in terms of beings and doings, of the life we succeed in living, is what puts us in motion, makes the bundle of functionings a subject or a self, the *what* to the *who*. It affects the

functionings and projects them into the future, delineates future actions, it perceives the power that functionings have as means to achieve certain capabilities. Thus, riches, the power of acquiring what pleases, lies within our functionings, *as well* as in what is offered to us by the society in which we live and which we have to incorporate in our lives. First and second level united again. A person's functioning, put into motion, will forecast her capabilities. Functionings are property and riches; and a person constituted by these functionings will experience a sense of herself by the pride they arise, and be empowered by the probability and at least possibility of action to achieve what she has reason to value to be and to do. 'For the same reason, that riches cause pleasure and pride, and poverty excites uneasiness and humility, power must produce the former emotions, and slavery the latter' [205]. Hume thought hints at Sen's concerns: it is not only about the possession of goods, it is also about the possible translation of these goods into functionings and capabilities; it is not only about property, but also about the power that the riches give ourselves to be and to do certain things. To have this power makes us pride and happy, not to have this power makes us to slaves, says Hume. "Power or an authority over others makes us capable of satisfying all our desires; as slavery, by subjecting us to the will of others, exposes us to a thousand wants, and mortifications" [205]. We can easily perceive that we first of all have to have the power over ourselves, otherwise we would be a prey of external circumstances. And what is true, is that our power equally affects the others: Our "*mind, body or fortunes*" [391] either create *advantages* or convey *pleasure* – or their contraries – to us and to those who live with us [383].

4. Conclusion

Our point of departure was the question of what we can say that capabilities are. Sen proposes as definition that capabilities are what people are able to be and to do, adds however, that valuation of capabilities, what people value to be and to do, is of major importance. This gave rise to our claim that what people are substantively free to be and to do is different from knowing what people would value to choose to be and to do. The former refers to what we called the social or institutional level of capability analysis (2nd level of analysis), evaluating what the society is able to offer its members to be and to do; the latter refers to the personal or individual level of capability analysis (1st level of analysis), specifying a person's capability, that is, what valuable ends this person would want to achieve. Our aim was than to demonstrate that Sen's capability approach is first and foremost an analysis of the second level; he does not specify any theory of agency, any account of human nature that would allow getting a notion of what personal capabilities would be. The idea is that if we have an explicit picture of the agent who underlies the theory in our mind, a definite understanding of her ways to reason, to attain knowledge or to be motivated, than we are better off at situating the person in her specific context and to delineate the capabilities she would value to achieve. We then introduced some major ideas of David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* and developed a Hume-inspired analysis of Sen's capability approach at the end of which we confirmed that major concerns of human nature were not undertaken in the capability approach; that Sen's approach was atomistic and lacked the associationism, main ingredient for the constitution of a subject, of a self. But by taking functionings as primary element of knowledge of a person, we showed that we would be able to introduce an account of human nature into the capability approach, able to adapt Humean ideas to Senian concepts: We could link the agent to his functionings, pass from the *what* to the *who*, from given functionings to people's capabilities. Indeed, the concept of functionings and capabilities is so broadly constituted and defined that it is easily possible to extend it by introducing other findings on

the human nature and its psychology, which allows to foresee what a person has reason to value to do and to be.

An old book on *Dream Analysis* [Freeman Sharpe 1951 (1937)] states in Chapter One, first sentence: “Dreaming is a universal psychical functioning, common alike to primitive and cultured peoples. It is a psychical activity inseparable from life itself, for the only dreamless state is death” [p. 13]. It is in our human nature to dream and to imagine, to pass over what is given and to attempt to create *what* and *who* we would like to be. In our course of life, we are put in motion by the evaluation of ourselves, and the perception of objects that agitate our spirits. “On the appearance of such objects [the mind] awakes, as it were, from a dream: The bloods flow with a new tide: The heart is elevated: And the whole man acquires a vigour, which he cannot command in his solitary and calm moments” [Hume 2000: 228]. Certain functionings will give rise to certain capabilities. In some cases, the transition will be more difficult: one time, the capabilities may socially not be achievable even though the person himself would have the power of producing them; another time, the person has the possibility to achieve certain capabilities, but misses a personal power to acquire them. The interaction with other people, and the society has their part to play in creating and solving these difficulties. Objects that agitate our spirits and placed at our disposal can improve our capabilities.

Reciprocity between the two levels of analysis is thus evident. First level will influence the second; the second level will affect the first. The way we define the human nature will shape ethics and morals; ethics and morals will form the agent. In Hume’s *Treatise*, justice is, as we know, an artificial virtue, founded upon the convention that self-interested and partial people who live in specific communities entered to stretch out their sympathies towards others and to better achieve what they would like to achieve at the level of society. As Sen is interested into a “capability approach to justice” [1999: 58], we can once again prolong Hume’s idea to Sen’s approach and claim that on a social level, capabilities are artificially constructed. People have to communicate with each other and to establish their “convention” of capabilities, which they would value to achieve according to their experience and personal lives. People’s life in community will be formed by the conflicts that might arise because of different interests among people or families: “For while each person loves himself better than any other single person, and in his love to others bears the greatest affection to his relations and acquaintances, this must necessarily produce an opposition of passions, and a consequent opposition of actions” [313]. In consequence, reason will intervene to correct “what is irregular and incommensurable in the affections” [314], not by acting against this passion but by changing its direction such that a better achievement of their original passion given other people’s passions comes about. People’s self-interest is directed to recognise that it is in their proper interest to enter the convention. The convention then gives rise to the ideas of justice [315].

Here we plainly recognise the reciprocity. People’s functionings and capabilities will certainly influence the social and institutional level of capability provision. But this will not be enough, as conflicts may arise between the different aspirations of people’s functionings and capabilities. At this point intervenes the *artifice*, capabilities are to be provided that allow the better achievement of sometimes conflicting personal capabilities. Nature and culture complete themselves¹¹: People by their human nature necessitate certain personal capabilities; people by living in community have to create and shape the social capabilities that integrate their different partial sympathies. Indeed, here we see that we can call capabilities universal if their essence derives from human nature. It is true that by nature arrives conflict, thus, there is a universal necessity to create capabilities at a social or institutional level that permit to

¹¹ Deleuze [1953: 34]

balance conflicting interests: It is a universal capability to organise and integrate social life, the way it is done will be the result of culture. “Nature arrives at its ends only by means of culture [...]” [Deleuze 1953: 33]. The valuable *end* is universal and indeed, here it is the *freedom* to be and to do, it is to achieve one’s own capabilities within society; the mean to achieve the end is the artifice, how this *end* or *freedom* is provided is a question of culture. So is, say, democracy a universal capability for people within society, but how democracy is put in action, will depend on specific circumstances. First level of analysis gives the second; the second level provides the first.

The result, the *end*, the *freedom* depends on the detail of its realisation; and the detail will depend on the account of human nature we adopt: Do we see in human nature people motivated by their selfishness, society has to intervene to limit this selfishness’ reach; do we see in human nature people motivated by their partial sympathies, society has to intervene to extent and to integrate these sympathies to a total¹².

We argued that the capability approach as it is presented concerns first and foremost the second level of capability analysis. The first level has no meaning and content if it is not sustained by an account on human nature. Now we will end by extending our previous claim: *Even a capability approach to justice, thus the second level of analysis, will not be able to ignore a proper reflection of the humans’ nature.* Even at the social or institutional level of capability analysis, where one looks at what the society is able to offer its members, a theory of the agent would be of importance to evaluate if what is offered from society corresponds to what is valued by the people. In that sense, we will have to leave the last word to David Hume who closes his *Treatise* by saying: “And thus the most abstract speculations concerning human nature, however cold and unentertaining, become subservient to *practical morality*; and may render this latter science more correct in its precepts, and more perswasive in its exhortations” [395].

Bibliography

- Deleule, Didier. 1979. *Hume et la naissance du libéralisme économique*. Aubier Montaigne.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1953 [1998]. *Empirisme et subjectivité*. PUF.
- Demeulenaere, Pierre. 1996. *Homo Oeconomicus: Enquête sur la constitution d’un paradigme*. PUF.
- Freeman Sharpe, Ella. 1937 [1951]. *Dream Analysis*. The Hogarth Press.
- Hume, David. 1739/40 [2000]. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by D. F. Norton and M. J. Norton. Oxford University Press
- Leroux, Alain. 1995. *Retour à l’idéologie*. PUF.
- Sen, Amartya. 1977. "Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioural Foundations of Economic Theory". In *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6(4). pp. 317-344.
- Sen, Amartya. 1982. *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*. Blackwell.
- Sen, Amartya. 1987. “The Tanner Lectures: The standard of living”. In: Hawthorn, Geoffrey (ed.). *The Standard of Living*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sen, Amartya. 1987a. *On Ethics and Economics*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

¹² Deleuze [1953: 26]

- Sen, Amartya. 1993. "Capability and Well-Being". In: Nussbaum, Martha; Sen, Amartya. *The Quality of Life*. Clarendon Press.
- Sen, Amartya. 1999. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 1987. "The Standard of Living: Interests and Capabilities". In: Hawthorn, Geoffrey (ed.). *The Standard of Living*. Cambridge University Press.