

SEN'S CAPABILITY THEORY: SPINOZA BEYOND ARISTOTLE

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In this paper I would like to criticize the Aristotelian interpretation of Sen's theory of human capabilities, suggesting a Spinozistic approach to tackle the problems in Sen's theory and develop a new perspective on the questions of development. First of all I will discuss the effective assumptions and needs in Sen's theory, then I will analyse Nussbaum's Aristotelian interpretation and finally I will propose a Spinozistic approach.

Sen begins by criticizing the "economicistic" approach to problems of welfare economics and development economics. The failure of interpersonal comparison of well-being and utilities calls into question the real adequacy of a utility approach to understand a complex matter like well-being. Utility is not only an inadequate metrics because interpersonal comparisons are impossible, but also because utilitarianism as a general approach cannot grasp the multiplicity of human values and needs. Sen's revision of the concept of well being begins here: it takes into account various human dimensions, from the "simple" utility, to the manifold dimensions of human activity. The dimension of agency, in particular, cannot be introduced into the utilitarian approach. This philosophical criticism has also economic and social consequences. From the viewpoint of a right-based theory individual rights cannot be excluded by utility (we cannot accept the trade-off between the total social amount of utility and the individual rights); moreover, in this way we forget to take into account man as agent. Utility is morally relevant in its enjoyment, but also in the fact that, most of all, we achieve what we consider delightful, useful, necessary to our lives, appropriate to our characters and individualities through an active search, through efforts and autonomous choices. These blanks are common to the different utilitaristic theories: whether they are based on happiness or on preference. Well-being is a multidimensional concept: it concerns utility, affective life and human agency. This is the reason why there is a strict connection between agency and the real dynamism of human life: not only agency means freedom to choose rationally between different sets of goods, but it concerns deeply the concrete processes in which men live their lives.

The concepts of functioning and capability take effectively into account the fact of multiplicity and dynamism of human life. Functionings are all what we can be and have: the acquisition of goods, social positions, our sentimental life and personal skills; the concept of capability shows the degree in which we have freedom and independency to get all the functionings we want. The enjoyment of a good supplied by someone else is intuitively less valuable than the enjoyment of a conquered one. And there are indeed functionings that, if not chosen and obtained autonomously, no longer have the same meaning: to be compelled to walk many kilometres every day to go to school or work is not the same as running for leisure.

The endless search for different goals, of which human life is made, results from the interaction of agency and a plurality of human dimensions: a realistic theory of moral value of well-being must take into account this dynamism of human life.

Sen argues, like most moral theories, that morality means a claim for universality of justification and relevance. A moral theory must be inclusive not exclusive if it wants to take into account the claim for universality: this means that it must understand the fact of pluralism of human values, different cultures, religions and habits. The effort to join together the claim for universality and pluralism leads Sen to articulate the theory of functionings and capabilities: these concepts are abstract and general, but they are nevertheless really to concrete situations. The combination of universalism and pluralism lays the foundation of Sen's theory. People need different quantities of the same goods because people have different conversion functions¹. «The problem of converting goods into the achievement of ends, with which I am primarily concerned here, can be serious *even with* given ends. [...] To conclude, we *are* diverse, but we are diverse in *different ways*»².

So we have singled out the most relevant features of Sen's theory: universalism, pluralism and dynamism. Now we have to ascertain if Nussbaum's Aristotelian interpretation can support all of these claims.

Also M. Nussbaum advocates universality and pluralism, through an Aristotelian approach that tries to discover origins of universality in the assumptions of different cultures. Referring to H. Putnam, Nussbaum defines this method as an "internal realism". Aristotle does not try to define human nature *a priori* but analyses what is considered proper to human beings according to the common sense of culture. This method has the advantage of being realist and of adhering to the individual cultures. Nussbaum applies this method to our common beliefs by adopting a universal and critical viewpoint which gives a reasonable account of human nature. She provides a very strong and persuasive set of functions and needs to define what is properly human³. We know that in following the widespread opinions of his age Aristotle justifies slavery. He maintains that slaves are slaves by nature, and that women are inferior by nature as well⁴. Nussbaum adopts and renews this method, she attributes the responsibility of these ideas, intolerable for our common moral viewpoint, to the limits of past culture. Instead the method, for Nussbaum, would be fertile for our cultural needs too. Following this method we criticize these "wrong" assumptions⁵, but from a philosophical perspective that prescribes to evaluate them from an internal viewpoint. This method for Nussbaum could bring us to a kind of moderate progressivism, which obliges us to respect as human rights all the above mentioned needs and functions of human nature.

¹ The formal definition of functioning, capability and conversion function is in chapters 2 and 4 of *Commodities and Capabilities*, North-Holland, Amsterdam 1985.

² A. Sen, *Justice: Means versus Freedom*, «Philosophy and Public Affairs», 19 (2), 1990, p. 120.

³ See M. Nussbaum, *Human Functioning and Social Justice. In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism*, «Political Theory», vol. 20, No. 2, 1992, pp. 216-223.

⁴ «Where then there is such a difference as that between soul and body, or between men and animals (as in the case of those whose business is to use their body, and who can do nothing better) the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master», Aristotle, *The Politics*, ed. by S. Everson, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, (1254^b16-21), p. 7. See also 1260^a12-14), p. 19.

⁵ «If we can separate Aristotle's philosophical principle here from its unpleasant and unjust application», M. Nussbaum, *Nature, Function and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution*, «Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy», suppl. vol., p. 166. Here we want to criticize not the obvious refusal of Aristotle's «unjust application», but the possibility to come to different conclusions using an Aristotelian approach.

Nevertheless Sen refuses to accept Nussbaum's list. «While the Aristotelian link is undoubtedly important, it should also be noted that there are some substantial differences between the way functionings and capabilities are used in what I have been calling the capability approach and the way they are dealt with in Aristotle's own analysis. Aristotle believes, as Nussbaum (1988 [*Nature, Function and Capability*, see below]) notes, 'that there is just one list of functionings (at least at a certain level of generality) that do in fact constitute human good living' (p. 152). That view would not be inconsistent with the capability approach presented here, but *not*, by any means, *required* by it»⁶. Sen here refuses the list of functionings necessary to characterize human nature in the name of a more general approach, one that is capable to take into account more conceptions of good and the interpersonal variability. Here I will suggest an other reason why, using Sen's capability approach, we should refuse the Aristotelian method and conclusions.

Suppose we have a definition of what is really human, like modes of nourishment, patterns of social relations, beliefs in something like a God, and so on. We have what we could define a natural set of qualities, something like a general and acceptable description of features that exercise on us an inevitable normative drive, even if we care not to introduce a normative turn. The concept of natural has always a potential normative drive. There is not only a shift from the "be" to the "ought". It's not only a matter of "Hume's law".

In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and in his *Politics* we find the definition of human nature, as we have established above, but with a more subtle normative shift. The definition of man in Aristotle is a mix of rational and 'desiderative' functions, which can be found only in the ancient Greeks (who considered themselves the right medium between courage and rationality). In the city this appropriate mix leads to exclude all the social parts who do not show these characteristics. If only the Greeks are really human in the city, only citizens can be defined properly human; only the virtuous men express in the best way the distinctive qualities of men. This implication means not only that *spoudaios* (the virtuous man) has social rights, but also that these rights are natural. The social exclusion of slaves, women and craftsmen from political activity is justified from a "natural" viewpoint. It is normal that aristocratic Greek men exercise political activities because they are by nature superior to other social groups. *Spoudaios* is an excellent man who is more human than other social groups. His excellence is the criterion to establish social rights based on social exclusion.

Excellence is the criterion to judge all other social events because the excellent and virtuous man, as *normal-and-natural*, is the internal criterion. The Aristotelian method prescribes to find the criterion of evaluation not in a ideal world like in Plato, but in the best expression of an empirical society. So the virtuous man (*spoudaios*) becomes the rule for other men. Furthermore excellence is the criterion for another reason rooted in Aristotle's metaphysics. Everything in Aristotle's cosmos has a right place and a proper function. Things are ordered according to the perfection of their proper functions, from material to rational ones. This metaphysical structure leads to establish the superiority of man, whose proper function is to develop his rationality. The natural teleology supports the sociological circuit of normal-normative and adds a natural character to the social structure. Only that which realizes the proper functions of human nature is really human.

So we can see that the Aristotelian one is an exclusive rather than inclusive method to determine anthropological concepts. The definition of what is natural is made following the historical character of a society whose traits, defining it as *natural*, become absolute and normatively justified. There is a short circuit in the concept of *natural*, in which descriptive

⁶ A. K. Sen, *Capability and Well-Being*, in *The Quality of Life*, M. Nussbaum and A. K. Sen (eds.), Clarendon Press, Oxford 1993, pp. 46-7.

and normative directions converge into a concept of justification and exclusion. According to this method, we cannot criticize something we find in our social situation; instead, we should justify this fact as natural. This method cannot be a progressive, rather a conservative and justifying one.

Furthermore in an Aristotelian approach we need a teleological structure, that would not be possible in Sen's theory. Sen uses the concept of functioning, Aristotle and Nussbaum use the concept of function. Functioning is what a person can do and be, without previous specifications; function, in an Aristotelian approach, is the proper activity and the place adequate for a human being or for a natural thing⁷. «Again, the state, as composed of unlikes, may be compared to the living beings: as the first elements into which a living being is resolved are soul and body, as soul is made up of rational principle and appetite, the family of husband and wife, property of master and slave, so of all these, as well as other dissimilar elements, the state is composed; and therefore the excellence of all the citizens cannot possible be the same»⁸.

Functioning is an inclusive concept, function an exclusive one. The dynamism of Aristotle's ethics is hindered by a concept of function that predetermines the forms and directions of development.

For all these reasons an Aristotelian approach cannot satisfy the needs for universality, pluralism and dynamism of the development capabilities theory. Now I want to propose a Spinozistic perspective on the capability approach. I will try to show that it can satisfy the needs for universality, dynamism and pluralism.

First of all, where is a theory of capabilities in Spinoza's philosophy? What is generally known is the theory of parallelism, which is the Spinozian solution to the gnoseological and metaphysical problems of the XVII century: a movement in the extension cannot cause an idea, but there is a perfect correspondence between ideas and bodies⁹. Less attention has been paid to the moral aspect of parallelism than to the gnoseological and strict anthropological implication of this theory. Spinoza tells us that he will focus on the mind, which is the domain of philosophy, leaving aside the dimension of the body¹⁰. So, the last two books of *Ethics* deal almost exclusively with the development of the mind's power (from the imaginative one, to the rational and intuitive kinds of knowledge). Many scholars have seen this theory as a pure praise of rationality and philosophy¹¹. But in this way we forget that with every state of the mind (positive or negative) there is a correspondent state of the body, one that reflects and not causes an isomorphic event. This theory derives both from the gnoseological refusal of innate ideas and from the refusal of a simple empirism. The moral meaning of parallelism lies in the fact that a modification of body or mind is a modification of the individual as a whole. «Whatever increases or diminishes, helps or hinders, our body's

⁷ «Aristotle goes on to identify humans' function with the development of their essential-and-distinctive properties, in particular, their rationality. We should confirm the presence in this passage of teleological concepts. Some commentators argue that "function" for Aristotle means "characteristic activity", and in part it does. But we must remember the context of Aristotle's metaphysics. [...] It is humans' function or purpose to develop their nature because it is the purpose of all living things to do so. Aristotle sees teleology as a primitive fact about nature», T. Hurka, *Perfectionism*, Oxford University Press, New York & Oxford 1993, p. 24.

⁸ Aristotle, *The Politics*, (1277^aI 5-11), pp.55-6. Here «excellence» stands for virtue and proper function, because the proper function of a part in a whole is its virtue and excellence.

⁹ «The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things», *Ethics*, II, proposition 7, ed. by G. H. R. Parkinson, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000. [= E].

¹⁰ See E, V, preface, p. 287.

¹¹ An interesting, deep and concise interpretation of Spinoza's capabilities theory is maintained by J. Buzaglo, *Capabilities: From Spinoza to Sen and Beyond. Part I: Spinoza's Theory of Capabilities*, «Post-autistic economic review», 20, June 2003. I'm in debt with Buzaglo for the idea of parallelism-theory as starting point.

power of acting, the idea of that same thing increases or diminishes, helps or hinders, our mind's power of thinking» (E, III, prop. 11).

Considered in itself, Spinozistic body can be seen as a Cartesian body, conceived not like a machine but ruled only by physical and mechanical laws. But body is only one dimension of an individual with a parallel dimension in the mind: body and mind are attribute of reality in which individuals express themselves. (We can normally conceive only extension and thought, but if we gain the intuitive knowledge we can grasp individuals as individualities). In order to explain both extension and thought Spinoza uses mechanistic terms and laws, nevertheless he has in mind a kind of organic theory of the individual. Every thing, from the inanimate things to men, endeavours to continue in its own life. Every thing has a *conatus in sese perseverandi*. This endeavour is the strength driving the continuation of life and it provides the energy to resist to the other bodies in the world and to express their proper individuality. (This is the most important difference between the Spinozistic concept of *conatus* and the Hobbesian one). Moreover the *conatus* is the essence of an individual, his proper form and the *principium individuationis*.

For Spinoza the collective concepts are wrong and misleading¹²; essence is an essence always of an individual, never of a genus, or of a nation¹³. Because of his strong refusal of the gnoseological value of collective concepts, D. J. Den Uyl has maintained that Spinoza was the forerunner of the Scottish methodological individualism¹⁴. This interpretation is excessive but we can say certainly that Spinoza refuses the Aristotelian method that establishes essences for collective concepts. Final causes are only a human illusion: «what is called a 'final cause' is simply human appetite, in so far as it is conceived as if it were a principle, i.e. a primary cause of some thing» (E, IV, preface, p. 226). For Spinoza only individual essences are the measure for individuals driven and defined by their *conatus*.

In the same preface Spinoza speaks of «an exemplar of human nature towards which we may look» (E, IV, pref., p. 227). According to that exemplar we could establish what is good for human beings and what is the end and the right direction. This is not an abstract teleological concept, already refused by Spinoza; it is rather a pragmatist device through which human beings direct their first effort, before they know their own individual utility, way and nature. It has no strong gnoseological value and, except in this preface, it has no place in *Ethics*. So Spinoza does not betray his commitment not to use teleological concepts.

The endeavour to «persevere in being» is a natural fact that has a moral result too. If an individual succeeds in increasing his (or her) own power of body and mind, the individual as a whole also increases his power of existing (*potentia existendi*)¹⁵, which is the fundamental measure and value for individuals. Individuals cannot be compared to each other because the essences are individual and, in so far as they are qualities, they are incommensurable. In themselves essences are qualities; in the sphere of existence they are endeavour and energy; and in mutual relationships they are relative quantities of power. Every

¹² In the appendix of 1st book of *Ethics* Spinoza criticizes the teleological and moral use of abstract concepts: they express only the man's utility not the truth.

¹³ «But surely it is not peoples but individuals that nature creates, and individuals are only divided into people by diversity of language, laws and customs; and the two last, i.e. laws and customs, are the only factors which can give a people a particular temperament, a particular nature, and lastly a particular beliefs», *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, in Benedict de Spinoza, *The political works*, ed. and trans. by A. G. Wernham, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1958, chap. XVII, p. 181.

¹⁴ See D. J. Den Uyl, *Power, State and Freedom. An Interpretation of Spinoza's political Philosophy*, Van Gorcum, Assen 1983, p. 64 and fol.

¹⁵ In Spinoza's thought the concept of power (*potentia*) is a basilar element: power is the complex sum of what a thing can do by its nature. It is distinct from the political power (*potestas* or *imperium*) that is a collective power transferred into a legal entity.

thing in itself is perfect and can be forced by something more powerful¹⁶. Differences of power are the criterion to assess the external relationships among individuals and the criterion to value changes within the individual too. Every relationship an individual has with the environment causes a variation of power of existing, according to the compatibility of the external thing with the individual *conatus*. «No thing can be bad through that which it has in common with our nature; but in so far as a thing is bad for us, to that extent it is contrary to us» (E, IV, prop. 30) Only variations of power (*potentia existendi*) must be valued as morally and existentially relevant.

An individual succeeds not only in surviving but also in expressing his (or her) own nature when, by increasing the power of mind and body, the individual expresses his nature and is adequate, in a Spinozistic sense. «I say that we act when something occurs either in us or outside us of which we are the adequate cause; that is (by the preceding Definition), when there follows from our nature, either in us or outside us, something that can be understood clearly and distinctly through that nature alone. Conversely, I say that we are passive when something occurs in us, or when something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause» (E, III, definition 2).

The end of ethical life is to express¹⁷ the individual nature and increase power, a process through which a man becomes free. Spinoza denies the possibility of free will (as *arbitrium indifferentiae*), because the only possible freedom is becoming more adequate and autonomous. Freedom is not an hypothesis about men in general, instead it is gained through a process of affirmation of one's individual nature. This means becoming more rational, developing the power of the body, developing manual and intellectual skills and searching for utility. Too often the attention has been paid to the development of rationality, but for Spinoza rationality is not only theoretical knowledge (the third kind of knowledge is the intuition of individual things in themselves), it also means the capacity to know what is really useful for one's body, to seek and attain it. A really rational person does not search for pleasure in contrast with his entire utility.

In order to be adequate we must know our individual nature, develop it properly and reach what is really useful for us. But we cannot know our individual nature before being rational. This is not a vicious circle, in so far as Spinoza invites us implicitly to experience different things in order to check if they are really useful and to learn many skills and capabilities that make us increase our power of existing. There is a fundamental link between capabilities and increase of power because we become more adequate if we have a manifold nature, that can agree with more kinds of things. «In so far as some thing agrees with our nature, to that extent it is necessarily good» (E, IV, prop. 31). A complex individual is not passive towards people and external things, because he has something in common with many things. This property refers to an individual whose nature is endowed with many capabilities, that are the active part of a individual. In expressing our nature we increase the power (*potentia*) of existing: this is the process of becoming more free.

Following these arguments we utilise this Spinozian approach to better understand some problematic questions inside Sen's theory. The problems in Sen's theory are not in the

¹⁶ «There exist no particular thing in the universe such that there does not exist another thing which is more powerful than it, but given any particular thing there exists another which is more powerful than it and by which it can be destroyed» (E, IV, axiom).

¹⁷ G. Deleuze interprets Spinoza's philosophy with the concept of *expression*, whose ethical importance is based on the natural *conatus*, that endeavours to express his individual nature. See G. Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris 1968, passim.

concept and in the solutions of basic capabilities theory, which is more intuitively acceptable and that can provide a good set of formal and quantitative analyses. More problematic is to account for the development in industrialized countries beyond the sphere of basic capabilities. Sen has the problem to evaluate the possibilities of choice and the functionings achieved by people¹⁸. It is clear that not all that is obtained is good for a person and Sen tries to solve this problem by distinguishing between simple and refined functionings. This kind of solution respects individual autonomy and is not paternalistic, but it is not definitely a good criterion to evaluate if these functionings lead to a real development: we know that in many situations what is chosen is dependent on restrictions in resources and consequently in expectations (often the “path-dependence” of individual history is on the border of opportunity and deprivation). So we need a concept which evaluates the goodness of functionings, does not violate the pluralism of conceptions of good and does not impose a priori what is real development for a man.

A Spinozistic concept of adequateness can provide us with a good approximation to the solution. We do not know what is good for men in general, because it depends on the individual natures. When something increases its power of existing, the individual is adequate; when the individual expresses his nature or learns new capabilities he becomes more adequate and more free. This concept is particularly interesting in situations of failure of development in affluent societies. When an abundance of resources does not produce human and social development (on the contrary, it can be even an obstacle), we should explain this failure. We could say that the increase of resources does not lead to development if persons and resources do not work together producing really vital opportunities. If people are not adequate in consumption, work or general activity, they do not express their individual nature, probably because they have not found it, or because they have not learnt new skills and increased their personal capabilities, that are the substantial aspects of freedom.

There is a further problem in Sen’s capability approach: in many cases a set of ‘compensating abilities’ arises «as a response to difficulty and deprivation»¹⁹. In these cases it would be difficult to say that these abilities bring real development, both if we consider them as an achievement by compensation of restriction and as a kind of supererogative strain to manage deprivation. If the abilities act as a compensation we can say, following Sen, that there has not been an act of choice and real development with refined functionings. If the abilities act as a supererogation, we can say that a person can sometimes reach great abilities through deprivation, but we cannot assume that this is the only way, since, from a moral viewpoint, we should minimize the suffering. We cannot morally accept the idea that pain produces enhancement of “capabilities” because, by accepting this idea, we are forced to accept it as general perspective. As consequence, we should prescribe or justify suffering, instead of regarding it as an empirical and unfortunately inevitable possibility.

Spinoza’s perspective is helpful once again. It maintains that real development and individual increase of power have a visible affective result, *laetitia*, that is an increase of well-

¹⁸ «Comparisons of freedom raise interesting issues of evaluation. The claim is sometimes made that freedom must be valued independently of the values and preferences of the person whose freedom is being assessed, since it concerns the ‘range’ of choice a person has – *not* how she values the elements in that range or what she chooses from it. I do not believe for an instant that this claim is sustainable [...]. How can we judge the goodness of a ‘range’ of choice independently of – or prior to – considering the nature of alternatives that constitute that range?», A. Sen, *Capability and Well-Being*, p. 34.

¹⁹ The concept of ‘compensating abilities’ is worked in by M. Qizilbash, *A Weakness of the Capability Approach with Respect to Gender Justice*, «Journal of international development», Vol. 9, No. 2, 1997. The following quotation is from D. Gasper, *Sen’s Capability Approach and Nussbaum’s Capability Ethics*, «Journal of international development», Vol. 9, No. 2, 1997, p. 287.

being, including physical pleasure and happiness²⁰. True development is seen through the modification of affects. *Laetitia* is not happiness by satisfaction of preferences because it involves always an increase of power or a positive modification. A preference based approach of evaluation has the problem of adaptive preferences²¹; instead the concept of *laetitia* has always a dynamic and active value.

The concept of adequateness to a personal nature provides a mediation between utility and agency. In Spinoza's conception, utility does not mean passive enjoyment; instead it always has a strong active quality. In his search for utility, man becomes more powerful and active. Utility and agency are parts of a positive (or negative) feedback, which entails an increase or decrease of power and freedom. This is the process of life.

A passive man has not a developed rationality. If a person is not adequate, he is passive, and this affects his body and mind. He cannot do what would be good for his individual nature because he probably does not know it. This idea is similar to Sen's concept of adaptive preferences. It also articulates further the relation between effective capabilities, rationality and expectations, and it better explains the role of rationality in enhancing the capabilities and freedom of a person.

This dynamic aspect of Spinoza's theory is particularly useful in a perspective that wants to be both normative and realistic. In this Spinozistic interpretation of Sen's capability theory dynamism, universality and pluralism continue to function as starting needs.

²⁰ Parkinson translates *laetitia* with pleasure, but this word for us is concerned with body, while Spinozian *laetitia* is a modification and increase of the individual as whole.

²¹ This concept is a thread inside all the production of Sen's theories, we can find it for example in *On Ethics and Economics*, Blackwell, Oxford 1987, pp. 45-6. This idea requires the need for change of cultural self-restriction, besides the need for change of policies.