

BOOK REVIEW

Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined, Ingrid Robeyns. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2017, 256 pages.

doi:[10.1017/S0266267119000154](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266267119000154)

Ingrid Robeyns begins *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined* by explaining that ‘one way to read this book is to see it as an attempt to tame the proliferation of scholarship about the capability approach’ (3). Robeyns succeeds in this attempt by providing a very good road map of the capability approach – what it is, what it has achieved, and what is open for it to do going forward. She does this by weaving her way through interpretations and critiques that do not always hit the mark in capturing the capability approach, sometimes use it in ways that claim to capture the whole of what it can do but actually reflect but one aspect/path of the approach, or promote an exclusive direction that ends up limiting what the capability approach can achieve. The book is a welcome resource for theorists, teachers, policymakers, and practitioners – making use of the capability approach for different purposes. I have used Robeyns’s work to help students gain a better understanding of the capability approach and of the differences in the accounts developed by Sen and Nussbaum (e.g. Robeyns 2005). I am now assigning chapters of her book for a PhD core course and recommend the book to graduate students whose research projects engage with (or ought to engage with) the capability approach.

One way to appreciate Robeyns’s contribution is to understand the book as bypassing the impulse many of us have had over the years to take sides on which version of the capability approach is best, Martha Nussbaum’s or Amartya Sen’s – the central issue between them being delineating a universal list of capabilities (Nussbaum) or rejecting the need for such a list (Sen). Or at least if one is inclined to take sides, reading the book will have them do so with a better understanding of the aims and purposes to which Sen and Nussbaum each use the approach. Departing somewhat from earlier work, Robeyns uses Sen and Nussbaum to shape a strategy of distinguishing the capability approach (Sen) from capability theory (Nussbaum). She then uses this distinction between the approach and theories to create a typology of ‘modules’. Module A delineates what constitutes the capability approach (non-optional features). Modules B and C specify many of the purposes, aims and choices that have been and can be used by capability theories and applications. Though it takes a good deal of work to fully understand the ins and outs of the typology with its three modules and their respective components, I found the project immensely useful for sorting through the vast literature to determine what may or may not be a (proper) use of the capability approach.

As broad as her typology is meant to be, Robeyns is clear that ‘some ideas in this broad “capabilities literature” do not survive careful analysis, and should be rejected. Put differently, my methodology has been to be as inclusive as possible, but not at

the costs of endorsing (what I believe to be) confusions or errors' (21, footnote 1). Robeyns returns repeatedly to her account of 'the capability approach at the most general level' (22) to determine which accounts miss the mark in claiming to theorize about or use the capability approach. Exclusions would include pure consequentialist or social contract theories where the evaluative space is not on what people can do and be, their functionings and capabilities. If one wants to get an overview of the capability approach itself as a general framework from which multiple applications and theories have been developed, then this book is the one to study and use. I proceed with a brief overview of the book's first three chapters and then discuss just a few (interrelated) critiques of the capability approach that Robeyns addresses in Chapter 4.

In Chapter 1, Robeyns states that the core of the capability approach is to critically examine 'what people are able to do and what lives they are able to live' (7). Capturing the significance of the concepts in the book's main title, Robeyns adds that the capability approach shifts the attention 'to public values currently not always considered most important – such as wellbeing, freedom and justice. It is an alternative discourse or paradigm, perhaps even a "counter theory" to a range of more mainstream discourses, on society, poverty, and prosperity' (10). Chapter 2 sets out the 'Core Ideas and the Framework'. The core idea is that Sen and Nussbaum are engaged in different projects. Somewhat surprisingly, Robeyns makes the bold claim that Nussbaum wrongly characterizes her own approach as a version of the capability approach (79). Robeyns insists throughout that Sen's work fits the capability approach and that Nussbaum's is a capability theory (not a capabilities approach as Nussbaum claims). This is because Nussbaum selects to use the capability approach to formulate a partial theory of social justice, one that generates a universal list of capabilities held up for governments to adopt and implement (Nussbaum 2011).

As bold as the counterclaim against Nussbaum's description of her own project is, it is important for the reader to stick with it and follow through on what Robeyns does with the three modules she identifies in Chapter 2. Module A delineates eight elements that identify the non-optional core in the capability approach and that shape all capability theories emerging from the core (38–59). The bottom line with Module A is that beings and doings (functionings and capabilities) are core concepts and form the evaluative space. Module A is a 'flexible and multipurpose framework, rather than a precise theory' (24). That it is general, open-ended and under-specified means that capability theories and applications emerge from the approach through options in modules B and C.¹ Module B identifies non-optional modules with optional content (59–67). One could, for example, delineate the purpose of the capability theory one defends (Nussbaum's partial theory of social justice) or provide theoretical accounts of central concepts such as human diversity (e.g. Sen 1999), or agency (e.g. Crocker 2009), or structural constraints (e.g. Folbre 1994). Module C lists contingent modules, some of which depend on choices made in the B-Module and some of which are

¹Robeyns says that her 'typology' remains a 'work in progress' (35) and that she leaves it to others to expand the uses and purposes to which the capability approach has been or can be used (36). The summary table of the modules can be found on p. 74.

optional and independent of B-module choices. The contingent modules include weighing particular dimensions such as gender or identifying methodological approaches for empirical analysis (67–73). Modules B and C help capture the range of purposes in using the capability approach: ‘whether we want to develop it into a (partial) theory of justice, or use it to assess inequality, or conceptualise development, or use it for some other purpose’ (29). The modules also help explain Robeyns’s claim that ‘the capability *approach* cannot, by its very nature, answer all the questions that should instead be put to particular capability *theories*’ (30, her emphasis).

Chapter 3 does the work of providing additional clarifications and answering (some) questions, work that is continued in Chapter 4 about which Robeyns tells the reader that her ‘own voice will be more prominent’ (19) in addressing a range of critiques made against the capability approach. Chapter 3 provides surveys, insights and guidance in understanding concepts and topics that capability theorists have explored. Some of the clarifications that I found particularly useful include work Robeyns does in refining the notions of ‘capability’ and ‘functioning’ (given that Nussbaum and Sen have used the terms somewhat differently); in exploring whether capabilities are freedoms (surveying accounts of what is meant by positive freedoms); in clarifying the use of human diversity (in analysing gender or race, for example); in defending collective capabilities (capabilities that require group or collective action to realize); in exploring the capability approach and adaptive preferences (importance of contextual details); and in surveying the capability approach and theories of justice. These clarifications are useful in helping readers weave their way through the broad range of capability theories and their connections with other theories and concepts.

What emerges from Robeyns’s analyses, descriptions, explanations and mapping of modules reflects features of the capability approach that I have highlighted in my own work over the years. The capability approach is flexible, complex, context sensitive, multi-dimensional, multi- and inter-disciplinary. These features rightly capture the detailed complexity of what people are able to do and be in real-world contexts of injustices and inequalities of all sorts within and across borders (Koggel 2003, 2013a, 2013b). In the end, Robeyns’s book prompted me to think about how my own work fits into Robeyns’s capability framework.

Chapter 4, as mentioned earlier, is where Robeyns speaks in her own voice. I will focus on three (interrelated) questions that Robeyns addresses in Chapter 4 by starting with a question she asks in Chapter 3: whether the capability approach can answer *all normative* questions. Robeyns’s answer to this is ‘no’, but I wonder if there are normative questions that *should* be asked and answered by the capability approach. Are there some theories that *should* be included; namely, those that provide accounts of structures of oppression that hinder what people can be and do? I explore this question by raising some challenges to Robeyns’s answers to the following interrelated questions in Chapter 4: ‘Is the capability approach too individualistic?’; ‘Does the capability approach pay sufficient attention to groups?’ and ‘Can the capability approach deal with the significance of power and political economy?’

To answer the first question, Robeyns makes use of an important distinction between ‘ethical or normative individualism on the one hand and methodological and ontological individualism on the other’ (184). Ethical or normative individualism ‘makes a claim about who or what should count in our evaluative

exercises and decisions. It postulates that individuals, and only individuals, are the units of *ultimate* moral concern' (184). Methodological and ontological individualism, by contrast, make claims about the nature of human beings: 'society is built up from individuals only' and/or 'all social phenomena can be explained in terms of individuals and their properties' (185). Robeyns argues that the capability approach's 'commitment to normative individualism is not incompatible with an ontology that recognizes the connections between people, their social relations, and their social embedment. Similarly, a social policy focussing on and targeting certain groups or communities can be perfectly compatible with normative individualism' (185).

Robeyns goes on to provide examples of where Sen, for example, discusses the role and impact of social structures on individuals (members of groups, particularly women, whose beings and doings are affected by those structures). She admits that capability theorists tend not to acknowledge the full effects of social relations and concludes, 'we can say that the capability approach acknowledges some non-individual structures, and for the various more specific capability theories, the degree to which they move away from methodological or ontological individualism depends on the choices made in modules B and C' (186). Robeyns makes a similar move in answering the second question by concluding that it isn't that capability theorists *cannot* pay attention to groups – rather they may not pay *sufficient* attention to groups. Here too she goes on to cite capability theorists, herself included, who have worked on relevant items in Modules B and C (B3: accounts of human diversity; B5: accounts of structural constraints; C1: ontological and explanatory theories) (187–88). She then encourages capability theorists to 'engage more intensively in a dialogue with disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history, and gender and cultural studies' to have those who choose to work on modules B3, B5 and C1 produce more 'accurate' accounts (188).

On the third question of power and political economy, Robeyns admits that economics, as an area/discipline distinct from philosophy, has paid little attention to social and cultural constraints emerging from and embedded in inequalities in power. She thinks that, unlike economists (Sen is both an economist and philosopher), capability theorists are interested in unpacking the effects of economic structures and opportunities on what people are able to be and do. She provides the example of the gendered division of labour to argue that modules B3 (human diversity), B4 (agency) and B5 (structural constraints) can attend to issues of power and political economy. She also encourages capability theorists to 'integrate a feminist account of gender relations, which includes an account of power' (192) and to include 'a rich account of power that is supported by research in anthropology, sociology, and other social sciences' (193). Yet because the typology allows *choices* in modules B and C of what capability theorists can work on, she allows that conservatives who hold that the gendered division of labour is written into the nature of things are using the capability approach in a legitimate way (192). Robeyns recognizes that there are accounts that are more *accurate* (by feminists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and so on) at the same time as she stops short of saying that capability theorists are wrong in not providing more accurate accounts.

Given the typology that sets out the core of the capability approach (module A) and then lists choices that capability theories and applications can work with (modules B and C), consistency demands that Robeyns allow the full range of what capability theorists come up with that fits into using and applying the capability approach. Yet I am not happy with the upshot of Robeyns's answers to the three questions: *encouragement* to take up options of working on issues of ontology, structures, and power by using insights from other disciplines to provide more 'accurate' accounts. One problem is that Robeyns takes the critique of individualism to come mainly from communitarian philosophies (183). In my view, this misses the work of feminist relational theorists who are committed to ethical/normative individualism in taking the unit of *ultimate* moral concern to be individuals (not communities), but who can be said to take the beings and doings of individuals to be more clearly and accurately revealed when the focus is on relationships as the 'unit of moral *analysis*'.

Using the lens of relationships can better capture (from the start) the effects of oppressive structures and of power on individuals and groups. It isn't that individuals disappear from the analysis. Rather a relational approach moves immediately to the normative *and ontological* implications of our being embedded in networks of relationships at all levels – of the personal, public, institutional, national and global. Feminist relational theorists thereby uncover the role of norms, structures and power to generate theories about their effects on what individuals can be and do. I am not sure what this feminist relational critique of Robeyns on normative individualism means for me or for her project of delineating non-optional components in module A (the capability approach) and optional components in the B and C modules. Nor is it clear, according to Robeyns's framework, how my own work on feminist relational theory fits with or can emerge from the capability approach. If the way to determine this is to stick to characterizing the capability approach as taking the individual to be the unit of *ultimate* moral concern without the possibility of tying normative individualism to the ontological/methodological lens of relationships, then my work is not an easy fit.²

Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice defines, clarifies and addresses questions and critiques raised about the capability approach – in the context of building on the work Robeyns has done on the capability approach over the years. An important lesson learned from Robeyns is that beginning with a 'general helicopter view of the approach' (4) and then identifying a range of options for what has been and can be done with the approach is all to the good in generating a fuller, richer and more complex and complete account of where we are and where we are going – some several decades after Sen's initial work on the capability approach. The re-examination promised in the subtitle of Robeyns's book can better allow theorists using the capability approach across disciplines and fields to move ever forward in coming to grips with living in a world of injustices and inequalities that hamper

²I use the example of the gendered division of labour to argue that taking relationships to be the unit of moral analysis uncovers the role of norms and of power in structuring institutions that then shape inequalities and injustices not easily discerned in Sen's capability approach (Koggel 2019).

what people can be and do. It is all to the good that reviewing the book has allowed me to puzzle through how my own work fits in.

Christine M. Koggel
christinekoggel@cunet.carleton.ca

References

- Crocker D.** 2009. *Ethics of Global Development: Agency, Capability, and Deliberative Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Folbre N.** 1994. *Who Pays for the Kids? Gender and the Structures of Constraint*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Koggel C.M.** 2003. Globalization and women's paid work: expanding freedom? *Feminist Economics, Special Issue on the Ideas and Work of Amartya Sen* **9**, 163–183.
- Koggel C.M.** 2013a. Is the capability approach a sufficient challenge to distributive accounts of global justice? *Journal of Global Ethics* **9**, 145–157.
- Koggel C.M.** 2013b. A critical analysis of recent work on empowerment: implications for gender. *Journal of Global Ethics* **9**, 263–275.
- Koggel C.M.** 2019. Expanding agency: conceptual, explanatory, and normative implications. In *Agency, Democracy, and Participation in Global Development*, ed. L. Keleher and S. Kosko, pp. 155–177. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum M.** 2011. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Robeyns I.** 2005. Selecting capabilities for Quality of Life Measurement. *Social Indicators Research* **74**, 191–215.
- Sen A.** 1999. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Christine M. Koggel is Professor of Philosophy at Carleton University in Ottawa. Her main areas of research and teaching are in moral and political philosophy with specific interests in development ethics, feminism, and relational theory. She has authored, edited and co-edited more than fifteen books, collections, and special issues and has numerous publications in journals and edited collections. She has held offices with the Canadian Society for Women in Philosophy, the International Development Ethics Association, and is co-editor of *Journal of Global Ethics*.