

34 Entitlements and Capabilities

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34.1 Introduction

Among the important contributions of Amartya Sen are the capability approach and the entitlement framework. What is the relation between these, if any?

The capability approach provides a basis for assessing well-being that is freedom-based and not concerned merely with states that are achieved. It is also irreducibly plural in its concerns. However, its plural concerns are ultimately justified by their constitutive role in human flourishing, which is a single overarching idea. The capability framework provides a way of evaluating ‘how lives go’. It can undergird evaluative exercises of various kinds, related to the lives of persons considered individually and together. It is not a fully-fledged normative doctrine applicable to all aspects of evaluation, but rather an account of how to approach those aspects of normative reasoning specifically concerned with the assessment of lives, including the diverse aspects of well-being and the freedoms to achieve them. Contrary to one view,¹ it does not fit only with a certain view of justice, or of morality. It is possible to subscribe to an account of social justice in which there is no concern with capabilities (such as a libertarian theory centred on non-interference), while also subscribing to the view that the capability framework provides an appropriate way to assess how lives go. A theory of personal morality may or may not mandate a concern with promoting others’ capabilities; it is possible to subscribe to an account of morality in which there is no such demand (such as an account which requires non-interference with others but entails no obligations to promote their well-being), while also holding that the capability framework provides an appropriate way to assess how lives go.

Similarly, although the capability approach does not provide a complete account of how to undertake economic evaluation, it does provide one part of such an account, by helping to answer the question, ‘What should we value (when considering the effect of policies on human lives)?’ It may thus inform our specification of the ‘objective function’ to be employed in economic policy, and perhaps

¹ Pogge 2002.

also of the constraints, such as the respects in which policies must avoid harming people. However, it cannot in itself answer what specific form the objective function or the constraints should take. The focus on the space of capabilities does not in itself help to answer, for instance, questions such as that of how, if ever, to permit trade-offs across capabilities of different kinds or of different persons, or what place capabilities should have relative to other information that ought to play a role in social evaluation (to take one example, the history of past respect for rights). The focus on the capabilities of persons may give us a focus for evaluation, but it does not in and of itself help us to answer explanatory questions (what has caused the capabilities possessed by persons to be what they are, or what would be necessary to change them).

In contrast, the entitlement framework provides a way of analyzing the reasons that a person establishes command or fails to do so over specific commodities, and thus does answer an explanatory question. In Amartya Sen's (1981) foundational formulation, the focus in particular had been on command over food, needed for nutritional adequacy and indeed for survival. If a person establishes command over food, it must be in one way or another, and if a person fails to establish command over food it must be because she has failed to do so in all the different ways that she possibly could. As such, the entitlement framework is a tautology rather than a theory. However, it is an exceedingly helpful tautology as it provides an invitation to examine the different *specific* ways (own-production entitlements, exchange entitlements, entitlements to social transfers and so on) in which a person can establish sufficient command over food or fail to do so. It provides a language with which these pathways may be identified, and in this respect provides an explanatory framework, although not an explanatory theory. A disaggregated study of the various reasons for starvation, or indeed famine, and their proximate as well as ultimate causes, helps to overcome a simplistically unitary emphasis on a 'Food Availability Decline' perspective in explaining famine, and leads instead to the recognition that it may be the failure of purchasing power or other sources of individual command over food that play the crucial role in accounting for famine deaths (the most famous point associated with Sen's original exploration).² The force of entitlement analysis in its classical application derives from its focus on command over essential resources (foods) which are necessary for an integral aspect of human flourishing (adequate nourishment) and thus have self-evident evaluative significance. Despite this anchoring in an evaluative concern, the entitlement framework was presented primarily as an aid to causal analysis.

Assessing life circumstances is not the same as understanding how those life circumstances came to be what they are. The lack of identity between the two concerns is no embarrassment. On the contrary, recognizing the distinctness of the questions enables us to see that each framework provides a necessary complement to the other. Essential commodities are needed because they help to promote elementary capabilities, many, though not all of which are crucially dependent

² Daoud (2018a, b) attempts to clarify the relation between these approaches.

for their realization on command of adequate material resources of appropriate kinds. Understanding this helps to anchor the analysis of essential commodities (for example, by identifying thresholds of adequacy). The capability framework, in turn, highlights the reasons for concern with whether specific beings and doings are attainable, but cannot itself provide insight as to how they come to be attainable. For this, it must be complemented by an analysis of the different ways in which people establish command over the essential commodities needed for attaining the relevant capabilities – that is, an entitlement analysis.

The entitlement framework highlights alternative explanations of how people come to have commodities or not, but cannot provide an account of why to focus on certain commodities, or why to value certain pathways to possessing them, rather than others. These are questions that must be answered by a suitable evaluative approach, such as the capability framework. For instance, food is valuable because it advances the capability of being adequately nourished (or differently conceived, because it advances the ability to live a long and healthy life).

Because of its recognition of the value of freedom, the capability approach helps us to make sense of the role of process considerations in defining and assessing entitlements. For instance, the focus on the ability to be adequately nourished rather than on actually being so enables one to make a distinction between fasting and starving. This is implicitly recognized in the entitlement framework, because of its focus on the ability to establish command over food (such as through adequate purchasing power) rather than on food intake, but the normative role of this distinction is left hidden.

Further, the capability framework can help us to understand the role of contextual and interpersonal variations in the appropriate application of the entitlement framework. Whether command over a particular bundle of commodities enables possession over capabilities depends on specificities shaped by such variations, which may be related to biology, environment and culture. To be employed at the level of individuals, the entitlement framework must take note of empirical regularities linking command over commodities to capabilities (for example, that all human beings need food in order to survive), but must also recognize relevant variations in order to explain when commodities suffice to attain capabilities for subgroups (such as for women rather than men, or for manual labourers rather than sedentary workers), or in particular contexts (such as in extreme weather conditions or, somewhat more controversially, when ambient norms which are thought deserving of recognition proscribe or prescribe certain foods).

In what follows, we elaborate on the complementary or ‘dual’ relation between the two ideas: the entitlement approach requires an evaluative perspective to make sense of its objects of concern and attention whereas the capability approach requires an explanatory framework in order to make sense of how and why people come to have the capabilities that they have. The capability approach provides the evaluative perspective and the entitlement framework highlights the possible explanations. In a generalized perspective (going beyond food to consider essential commodities or resources needed for elementary capabilities of various kinds) a

causal account of how a capability failure has taken place necessarily involves entitlement failure too.

34.2 Entitlement Analysis: Informed by the Capability Approach

The entitlement framework has been associated (in the writings of Amartya Sen, notably 1981, and those which followed) with analyses of how people establish – or fail to establish – command over food sufficient for their adequate nourishment. Although this question is of great importance, it is not the only question that can be asked. In a more general entitlement perspective, one may ask how people establish – or fail to establish – command over commodities sufficient for achieving human requirements of various kinds. For example, one may be concerned with how people establish – or fail to establish – command over housing sufficient for adequate shelter from the elements, or, for that matter, how they establish – or fail to establish – command over information sufficient for adequately participating in the life of one's society. A generalized perspective going beyond food entitlements is of broad interest, but we do not develop it here in order to focus on examples drawn from the *locus classicus* of the entitlement theory, namely food entitlements and their relationship to adequate nourishment. Restricting our examples to this well-known case in order to elaborate on the points made above can help to bring out the nature of the connection between entitlement analysis and the capability perspective.³

The entitlement framework is informed by the capability approach in at least four ways. First, the capability approach is useful in delimiting the domain of the entitlement framework. The capability approach makes sense of the focal objects of the entitlement framework. Why be concerned with food (as opposed to paintings, air tickets or beachfront properties)? Why be concerned with adequate nourishment at all? This question may appear in the particular case of food too obvious to be asked, but it can help us to understand the more general relationship between the two ideas. As noted in the previous section, the capability framework allows us to see certain commodities as having value *because* they contribute to valuable capabilities. Food has value because it contributes to the ability to be adequately nourished, which is a capability generally required for human flourishing, which is a value in itself. Once we place this idea at the core of the motivation, we also see why certain foods have more interest for an entitlement analysis than others. One reason might be that they are a source of nutrients of specific kinds: fruits and vegetables, for instance, are potentially valuable to be able to command as compared to sugar because they contain various desirable nutrients, and not only food energy. Another reason might be that they help to advance additional capabilities – for instance, that of participating in the life of one's society (which may require that

³ Focusing on the example of food can help to bring to the fore that we have, like Molière's bourgeois gentilhomme, all along been 'speaking prose without knowing it'.

we recognize the social, psychological or cultural significance of specific foods in determining what bundle of foods ought to count in order for food entitlements to be deemed adequate).

Second, the capability approach draws our attention to the need to recognize relevant variations in necessary entitlements. For example, different quantities and compositions of food may be required for women and men or for children and adults to be adequately nourished. An entitlement framework tethered to the capability approach offers a straightforward basis for such a recognition, as the specification of requisite entitlements for individuals is *derivative* of the concern for capabilities, and the mapping from capabilities to commodities required to attain them may therefore be made interpersonally and inter-contextually variant in a suitable way. There can be both empirical and evaluative reasons for such variation. As already noted, there can be biological differences across persons in the food requirements of adequate nourishment. If the social, psychological or cultural aspects of adequate nourishment are to be taken note of, normative and empirical considerations will enter jointly into determining what bundle of foods suffices for adequacy, with some scope for variation across persons and communities.⁴

Third, the capability approach helps to make sense of the informational focus of the entitlement framework on abilities to achieve (for example, on budget sets defined by exchange entitlements). It draws our attention to the normative as well as explanatory reasons to focus on the *ability* to establish command over food rather than on food intake as such. Nutritionally inadequate food intake can result from the lack of *ability* to establish command over food, but can also arise because persons *choose* not to exercise the abilities that they have. In the latter case (fasting), there would not be an entitlement failure (starving) nor a capability failure, although there would be a failure to realize specific functioning (adequate nourishment). The focus in the entitlement framework on abilities to achieve rather than on achievements themselves can be given a rationale by placing it in the perspective of capabilities. The capability approach is ‘freedom-based’ (see, for example, Sen 1992) and thus values abilities to achieve rather than achievements. The focus in the entitlement framework on the ability to establish command over food or, in a generalized perspective, on other essential commodities, is in line with this freedom-orientation.⁵

Fourth, the capability approach can guide us in the appropriate application of the entitlement framework by recognizing interdependencies involved in furthering distinct capabilities. For example, it can enable us to understand why command over *certain* foods or establishing command over them in *certain ways* may be important not merely for their contribution to adequate nourishment, but for their contribution to other valued capabilities. Capabilities are of diverse kinds, but in all

⁴ Adequacy may be thought of here as a hybrid ethical concept in which empirical and normative concepts are ‘entangled’. See, e.g., Putnam 2002.

⁵ However, as we shall discuss briefly in the next section, the role of such freedoms in the entitlement framework is somewhat more qualified than in the capability approach.

cases gain their significance from their relationship to human flourishing. A person who has the ability to establish command over foods sufficient for nutritional adequacy only if she consumes foods that are socially stigmatized, or which can be acquired only by undergoing actions that are socially demeaning or which sacrifice long-term health, may possess food entitlements in a strict sense, but cannot be said to possess the conditions of a flourishing life, precisely because the ability to achieve capabilities of other kinds would be compromised by the attainment of nutritional adequacy in these ways. A persuasive application of the entitlement framework must take such interdependencies into account. The capability approach provides guidance as to how and why.

34.3 The Capability Approach: Informed by Entitlement Analysis

The capability approach provides a way of characterizing the content of human flourishing that recognizes and relates freedom and well-being within a pluralistic value framework – that is, one that recognizes the importance of diverse freedoms, including to achieve diverse aspects of well-being which cannot be reduced one to the other. However persuasive the capability approach is in this way, it cannot provide an explanation of how and why people come to have the capabilities that they do. Capabilities are abilities to achieve specific ‘beings and doings’. As such, they are conditioned by a wide range of empirical factors that shape abilities. These may include economic, social, political and institutional facts. As the capabilities that a person possesses are in part a consequence of the commodities and resources that she commands, whether through market or non-market means, an entitlement framework, concerned precisely with how and why such commodities are – or are not – commanded helps to provide the requisite account.

In the case of the capability of being adequately nourished, food entitlement analysis provides an account of how it is that persons establish command – or fail to do so – over food adequate for nourishment. More broadly, in the case of capability X , which requires command over resources or commodities Y in order to be possessed, generalized entitlement analysis provides an account of how it is that persons establish command – or fail to do so – over Y adequate for X . In principle, there could be diverse means of establishing the command over Y adequate for X . These could be market-based or non-market based, and could encompass the workings of economic, political and social institutions and processes of diverse kinds. If X can be achieved only through the ability to possess Y , then it is definitionally true that to possess X one must be able to establish command over Y in one or another way, and, obversely, that if one fails to possess X , it must be because one has not been able to establish command over Y in any of the possible ways. The extension of the focus from capabilities to the entitlements necessary to command the resources⁶ or commodities required to possess

⁶ We use the concept of resources here in order to recognize that not all of the requirements for capabilities to be possessed are reducible to goods and services. We might consider non-marketizable

these capabilities is an extension from the question of ‘what’ to those of ‘how’ and ‘why’.

The focus of entitlements is on the ability to establish command over relevant commodities or resources, *Y*. It is plausible to argue that the concept of establishing command entails the possibility of refusing that over which one has established command. Entitlements conceived in this way are fully congruent with the freedom-based aspect of the capability framework. On such an understanding, a person who is force-fed must be said not to have ‘established command’ over food, and therefore not to possess a corresponding food entitlement. It would follow that the force-fed individual would neither possess food entitlements (involving ‘command’) sufficient to avoid starvation nor starve to death. In order to avoid this linguistically unwieldy outcome, an alternative understanding would treat the force-fed individual as having ‘established command’ over the food taken in, but this seems both to involve a perverse understanding of ‘command’ and to bring about a cleavage between the entitlement framework and the ‘freedom-based’ capability framework (which, for its part, must permit the free choice to ingest food). It is not necessary to adjudicate this curiosum in order to recognize that more expansive entitlements sustain more expansive capabilities.

34.4 A Unifying Conceptual Structure

Is there a unifying conceptual structure that relates the entitlement framework and the capability approach?

We may note that many, though not all, capabilities, are dependent on command over the resources and commodities that in turn generate the functionings that together constitute the capabilities. This is true of the capability of being adequately nourished, the ability to be sheltered from the elements or, for that matter, the ability to appear in public without shame. As already signalled, there may be social, cultural, psychological, environmental and biological considerations that cause variation in these requirements across contexts and persons. Both evaluative and empirical considerations will be involved in specifying them.

As before, we focus on the ‘classical’ example of the ability to be adequately nourished in order to fix ideas. For this ability to be given content in an empirical application one must specify what adequate nourishment means – for example, in terms of food necessary for health, the conduct of daily activities and so forth. A resulting idea of the relevant beings and doings, which is more concrete than the idea of adequate nourishment as such, can provide the basis for specifying the

and immaterial requisites of a flourishing life, including relational ones, such as the ability to feel loved, cared for or respected. For instance, when considering in what home to place an adoptive child, the resources offered by a prospective family might take an immaterial form, but nevertheless be essential to assess. Such examples call for going beyond a focus on material commodities. They do, however, also raise other deep-seated questions, in particular, of whether the language of ‘establishing command over resources’ is adequate for them, given features such as their freely given nature.

particular commodity (food) requirements, which are entailed, with allowance for appropriate variation according to individual and context.

Operationally, it is necessary to specify a concept of adequacy at an intermediate level involving the *attributes* of the commodities (or resources) that would suffice for them to attain the capability adequacy that is sought. For example, in the case of the ability to be adequately nourished, the food which is commanded must suffice in terms of relevant features such as food energy, proteins, carbohydrates or other nutrients, and micronutrients of various kinds. One way to conceive of these attributes of the commodities is in terms of the concept of ‘characteristics’ of commodities, of which the nutritional contents just mentioned are examples.⁷

A three-level framework results, involving capabilities, characteristics of commodities or resources, and the set of commodities or resources possessing these characteristics, such that the set of commodities or resources jointly suffices to promote the forms of capability adequacy that are under consideration. Such a formulation is very flexible in that it provides for market or non-market processes and institutions of different kinds help to establish command over the commodities that possess the characteristics necessary to achieve adequacy of the specified capabilities. Taking note of pertinent variations in the mapping from the capability adequacy set to the commodity adequacy set (through a characteristics adequacy set) across persons and contexts is quite essential.⁸ A focus on adequacy of specific invariant capabilities permits parametric variation to enter at two stages, namely in defining the mappings from the capability adequacy set to the characteristics adequacy set and, in turn, from the characteristics adequacy set to the commodity adequacy set. The mapping links capabilities to entitlements insofar as entitlement sets are reflections of capability adequacy sets in the commodity space.

The result is a single lens with which to understand the relationship between capabilities and entitlements. Entitlements appropriately motivated and conceived are nothing other than the means of establishing command over the commodities and resources needed to achieve valuable capabilities.

34.5 A Way Forward

An integrative theory, evaluative and empirical, suitable for assessing the manner in which economic and social systems function to bring about human requirements or not, is possible. Such a theory can be based on recognizing the relation between capabilities and entitlements. The capability approach helps to evaluatively anchor, and to guide the application of, the entitlement framework, whereas the entitlement framework provides the

⁷ The idea of characteristics of commodities is associated with Kelvin Lancaster 1966.

⁸ See, e.g., Asali, Visaria and Reddy 2009 for a brief discussion, as well as the proposals for capability-based global income poverty assessment made, inter alia, in Reddy 2004 and 2013.

causal and explanatory account of how and why it is that people have adequate resource and commodity-dependent capabilities or not. A recognition of the complementary nature of the two perspectives reveals the underlying unity in the thought of Amartya Sen, in different phases of the development of his ideas. Although we have employed adequate nourishment as an example, we have also argued that a much broader range of questions in which ideas of adequacy are involved and in which there is implicit or explicit dependence on command of commodities and resources can be the subject of a generalized entitlement analysis. Employing the entitlement framework and the capability approach in tandem can help both better to make sense of existing literature and to develop new understandings of when, how and why societies best promote flourishing lives.

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