

Capabilities Equality

Basic issues and problems

Edited by
Alexander Kaufman

Routledge innovations in political theory

Capabilities Equality

In what sense should persons be judged to be equal or unequal as a matter of justice? The capabilities approach to equality, developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, seeks to answer this important question.

While capabilities theory has avoided many of the conceptual difficulties that have undermined competing accounts of egalitarian justice, recent criticisms have raised questions regarding the focus, structure and justification of the theory. In this volume, leading scholars present new and original essays that address these controversies. The authors connect issues of egalitarian justice to practical political concerns, identify the strengths and weaknesses of the capabilities account of egalitarian justice and finally seek to realize real progress in the understanding of distributive justice.

This accessible volume will be essential reading for all scholars with an interest in distributive justice, and for students and researchers studying moral philosophy, social theory and political theory.

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Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	ix
Introduction ALEXANDER KAUFMAN	1
PART I	
A sufficientarian approach?	15
1 Distributive justice and basic capability equality: “good enough” is not good enough RICHARD ARNESON	17
2 Capabilities as fundamental entitlements: Sen and social justice MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM	44
3 A sufficientarian approach? A note ALEXANDER KAUFMAN	71
PART II	
A clearly differentiated approach?	77
4 Capability versus opportunity for well-being PETER VALLENTYNE	79
5 Capability and gender inequality TIMOTHY HINTON	93

6 What goods do to (and for) people: duality and ambiguity in Sen's capabilities approach?	117
ALEXANDER KAUFMAN	
 PART III	
Issues in implementation	131
 7 Public debate and value construction in Sen's approach	133
SABINA ALKIRE	
 8 Sen and deliberative democracy	155
DAVID A. CROCKER	
 9 Attending to nature: capabilities and the environment	198
VICTORIA KAMSLER	
 10 Disability, capability, and thresholds for distributive justice	214
DAVID WASSERMAN	
 <i>Index</i>	235

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Introduction

Alexander Kaufman

In what sense should persons be judged to be equal or unequal as a matter of justice? Persons inherit differing endowments of goods and abilities; are born into differing social positions; and exercise differing degrees of power and influence. As a result, they enjoy differing degrees of opportunity to realize their abilities and experience different degrees of affluence or poverty. Accounts of egalitarian justice measure and characterize these differences. In order to perform these tasks, an egalitarian theory must, as G. A. Cohen notes, address two distinct questions (1994: 117). First, in what respect should persons be counted equal or unequal – what “currency of egalitarian justice” should be employed to measure the individual’s well-being? Second, how should the degree of existing inequality be measured; that is, how should we calculate the *degree* of inequality that exists in a given distribution of social goods?

The capabilities approach originated as a response to the first question. In “What Is Equality?”, Amartya Sen (1980) criticized two leading contemporary accounts of the currency of egalitarian justice. The first account, *equality of welfare*, argues that egalitarians are concerned most fundamentally with the welfare that a given distribution of goods produces, and not with the literal distribution of goods; while the second account, *equality of resources*, argues that egalitarians are most fundamentally concerned to assure that all members of society receive equal shares of resources.

Neither of these theories, Sen argued, provides a satisfactory account of fundamental egalitarian concerns. Egalitarians are not simply concerned with the distribution of *resources*, since persons vary in their efficiency in transforming resources into well-being. A person with a large body mass is not, for example, treated equally if he or she is provided with precisely the same share of food as a person with a much smaller body mass. Egalitarians are not, in fact, primarily concerned with the literal allocation of goods; rather, egalitarians are concerned with what goods do for persons. But this concern is not, Sen argued, well described by *equality of welfare*. What goods do for persons goes beyond the satisfaction of preferences or the generation of happiness. Tiny Tim may be happier and more satisfied

with his share of goods than Scrooge is with his share, but this fact should not lead an egalitarian to redistribute goods from Tiny Tim to Scrooge.

As an alternative to welfare or resources, Sen argues for *capabilities* as the currency of egalitarian justice. Capabilities are the person's freedoms to *be* or *do* certain fundamentally important things. A person's quality of life, Sen argues, is a function of what the person is able to be (e.g. well or poorly nourished) and do (e.g. perform more or less meaningful work). Sen refers to the various states of being and doing relevant to the assessment of a person's well-being as *functionings* (Sen 1985: 10). The combination of functionings that a person achieves constitutes the form of life that the person leads.

Capabilities are defined as the various combinations of functionings that the person can achieve (Sen 1993: 40). A person's capability set represents the alternative combinations of simultaneously attainable functionings that are available to the person. Sen argues that a capability set therefore reflects "the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another" (1992: 40).

Recent scholarship has extended the capabilities approach beyond an account of the currency of equality. Martha Nussbaum, in particular, argues for a political approach based on ideas of capability and functioning. Working from an account of the minimal conditions necessary for truly human functioning, Nussbaum argues for minimum capabilities guarantees that a just society should extend to its members (see Nussbaum 1988, 1990, 1995, 2000).

The capabilities approach thus can claim to expand the descriptive and analytic resources of egalitarian discourse. In fact, it has been the apparent success of this approach in addressing central egalitarian concerns that has helped to establish it as an important strand in contemporary egalitarian thought. Nevertheless, the approach faces important challenges. In particular, critics (i) object to the priority that the capabilities approach assigns to securing thresholds levels of basic capabilities; and (ii) argue that the view fails to present an account of egalitarian concerns that is clearly differentiated from competing accounts. In this introduction, I will describe (i) achievements of the capabilities approach in addressing egalitarian concerns; and (ii) the challenges to that approach raised and addressed by chapters in this volume.

Achievements: capabilities and responsibility

The recent egalitarian literature has focused on two fundamental concerns. The first reflects the intuition that the individual's share of social goods should not be determined by factors that are distributed according to a "natural lottery," and whose distribution is therefore "arbitrary from a moral point of view" (Rawls [1971] 1999: 72, 74). Such factors include endowments of wealth, social position and talent. Both equality of welfare

and equality of resources aim to neutralize or correct for the role of morally arbitrary factors in determining the distribution of goods. The second concern reflects the intuition that egalitarian justice should only correct for inequalities of condition for which it is inappropriate to hold the person responsible. Ronald Dworkin, for example, argues that persons should be compensated for welfare deficits deriving from their circumstances, but not from their choices; others adopting a similar view include Richard Arneson, G. A. Cohen, Matt Matravers, and John Roemer (see Arneson 1989, 2000; Cohen 1989, 1993; Matravers 2002; Roemer 1985, 1986). Elizabeth Anderson, Timothy Hinton, Alexander Kaufman, and Samuel Scheffler, among others, have disputed this view, arguing that such a focus on responsibility reflects an unattractive ideal of egalitarian justice (see Anderson 1999; Hinton 2001; Kaufman 2004; Scheffler 2003). Disagreement regarding the role that intuitions regarding responsibility for disadvantage should play in constraining the aspirations of egalitarian theory has thus complicated the task of designing an acceptable account of the currency of egalitarian justice.

Two questions regarding responsibility have proved especially problematic for contemporary egalitarians. First, to what extent is it reasonable to hold a person responsible for his or her tastes and preferences? Second, to what extent is it reasonable to hold a person responsible for his or her level of ambition? The failure of equality of welfare and equality of resources to provide persuasive responses to these questions has left both theories vulnerable to important objections. Moreover, neither of the two leading attempts to address this failing – equality of access to advantage and equality of opportunity for welfare – resolves these concerns in a satisfactory manner.

Responsibility for tastes and preferences

If a person requires the satisfaction of exorbitantly expensive tastes in order to avoid a welfare deficit, must the egalitarian satisfy these tastes or compensate for the deficit? Must the egalitarian, as Kenneth Arrow suggested, satisfy the epicure's taste for prephylloxera claret and plover's eggs in order to secure a just distribution of goods (1973: 254)? This question has constituted a serious problem for equality of welfare. While equality of welfare's commitment to equalizing levels of subjective preference satisfaction is apparently well designed to eliminate the influence of morally arbitrary factors (e.g. class rank, wealth, talent) on the distribution of social goods, such an approach seems to require that egalitarians compensate Arrow's claret-lover even if his expensive tastes were formed willfully.¹

Symmetrically, equality of welfare appears to require no special compensation for persons whose preferences have been deformed by morally arbitrary cultural or contextual influences. If a "tamed housewife" is no

worse off than others in terms of preference satisfaction, despite living under conditions of inequality and domination, equality of welfare's concerns are satisfied.

In each case, equality of welfare fails to take proper account of the degree to which it is appropriate to hold the individual responsible for the content of his or her preference set. While it would seem reasonable to hold the person responsible for voluntary expensive tastes, welfare equality fails to do so and simply compensates for deficits in the satisfaction of such tastes. In the case of involuntary cheap tastes, where it would seem unreasonable to assign responsibility for preferences to the person, welfare equality refuses to compensate for welfare deficits, implicitly holding the person responsible for his or her distorted preference set.

Responsibility for ambition

Like equality of welfare, equality of resources aspires to neutralize the influence of morally arbitrary factors on the distribution of social goods. In order to avoid over-resourcing persons with expensive tastes, equality of resources argues that egalitarian theory must be ambition sensitive. That is, egalitarians should not compensate for inequalities deriving from choices to consume rather than invest, or to consume more expensively rather than less, or to work in less rather than more profitable ways.² Egalitarians should, however, compensate for inequalities deriving from the effects of morally arbitrary endowments of wealth, position, and talent. Thus, Ronald Dworkin argues, egalitarian justice should pair ambition-sensitivity with endowment-insensitivity. Equality of resources would therefore compensate individuals impoverished through a lack of talent, but not those impoverished through an expensive taste for leisure.

Equality of resources may, however, introduce the notion of responsibility into the egalitarian analysis too aggressively. Dworkin's discussion of the role of insurance in transforming differences in fortune from brute luck to option luck provides a representative example of resource equality's employment of the notion of responsibility. Assume, Dworkin suggests, that two victims of an accident had an equal chance of going blind and an equal opportunity to insure against going blind, but only one chose to insure. The uninsured victim could expect no compensation from the insured victim, even if the uninsured person were the only one blinded. The failure to insure would convert the difference in circumstances between the insured and uninsured victims from bad brute luck to option luck. By analogy, Dworkin argues, if everyone had the same risk of suffering such a catastrophe, knew the odds, and had adequate opportunity to insure, no victim could assert a legitimate claim to compensation against other members of society (2000: 77).

Uninsured victims could assert no legitimate claims for compensation, under such circumstances, because the choice not to insure transforms the

element of misfortune that distinguishes the victim's condition from that of his or her fellows into the product of his or her own choice. Equality of resources respects this choice and assigns responsibility for a person's condition to that person, Dworkin tells us, because the choice reflects the victim's preference for a certain form of life – a life that “contains, as an element, the factor of risk” (Dworkin 2000: 74). To redistribute resources to the victim would therefore deprive the victim of the form of life that he or she prefers (*ibid.*: 75).

But this claim appears to trade on an ambiguity in the notion of risk employed. Most persons, it seems reasonable to assume, are willing to assume a significant *economic* risk of downward mobility in order to preserve the possibility of upward mobility. The risk of seriously disabling injury, however, is of quite a different order; and Dworkin's claim that persons should be held responsible for the preference for risk in such a case highlights the degree to which equality of resources applies the idea of responsibility overly aggressively. In *Sovereign Virtue*, Dworkin argues that equality of resources appropriately assigns full responsibility to the individual, even while conceding that preferences are in many cases not voluntarily chosen, because tastes and preferences are constitutive of the individual's conception of the good life (2000: 289; see also Dworkin 1995: 293). It is incoherent, Dworkin suggests, to argue that a preference could be simultaneously constitutive of a conception of the good life and a limitation on the realization of that conception (2000: 293; see also Dworkin 1995: 295).

Even if Dworkin argued persuasively that the choice not to insure reflected the uninsured victim's preference for a life that contains risk, however, he could not consistently assign a central role to such a preference in determining the nature of a just distribution. Dworkin defines brute luck as “a matter of how risks fall out that are not...deliberate gambles” (2000: 73). The inheritance of risk-seeking preferences therefore constitutes an instance of brute luck. In order to vindicate his constitutive commitment to neutralizing the influence of morally arbitrary factors, and in particular the influence of brute luck, on life chances, then, Dworkin must concede that the uninsured victim *can* assert a legitimate claim to compensation against other members of society.

Defining an acceptable standard of responsibility for preferences

Both *equality of opportunity for welfare* and *equality of access to advantage* attempt to resolve concerns regarding responsibility for preferences by attempting to identify a category of preferences that are free from morally arbitrary influences. G. A. Cohen's theory of *equality of access to advantage* offers a carefully circumscribed account of responsibility: individuals are to be held responsible for the consequences of preferences that they have not chosen freely only if the preferences “are so *intrinsically*

connected with [the individual's] commitments that their bearer would not choose to be without them" (Cohen 1989: 937).³ Even if such preferences are, in fact, affected by the contingent influence of context or genetic endowment, the intrinsic connection of these preferences to the individual's constitutive commitments can be understood to transform such choices from merely contingent to genuinely autonomous.

Yet this approach is no more successful than equality of resources in addressing the problem of involuntary cheap tastes. Indeed, as John Roemer notes, such an approach "would direct society *not* to redress the situation of the tamed housewife" (1996: 275; my emphasis). In fact, the tamed housewife appears to fit precisely G. A. Cohen's description of a person suffering a welfare deficit resulting from preferences intrinsically connected to the person's fundamental commitments. It is precisely because involuntary cheap preferences are intrinsically connected to the individual's commitments that such preferences are so problematic: the individual has, apparently, freely chosen to incorporate the preferences imposed upon her into her conception of the good life. The notion of an intrinsic connection between certain involuntarily formed preferences and the individual's constitutive commitments does not provide the basis for an adequate litmus test for identifying those preferences that are truly "genuine."

Richard Arneson's *equality of opportunity for welfare* rejects responsibility for preferences as an appropriate basis for the distribution of social goods.⁴ Instead, like welfare equality, equality of opportunity for welfare argues for equalizing preference satisfaction; but, like resource equality, opportunity equality also argues against disproportionate compensation for expensive tastes. In order to avoid such over-resourcing, opportunity equality limits compensation to the satisfaction of the individual's "ideally considered preferences," defined as "those [preferences] I would have if I were to engage in thorough-going deliberation about my preferences with full pertinent information, in a calm mood ... making no reasoning errors" (Arneson 1989: 82–83).

Yet it is not clear that opportunity egalitarianism avoids over-resourcing expensive tastes. While "ideally considered preferences" are the product of thoroughgoing deliberation, it is not clear whether such deliberation would persuade Arrow's claret-lover to modify her taste for luxury goods. It seems quite possible, in fact, that such deliberation would confirm and reinforce preferences for expensive but high-quality goods over goods that are inexpensive but prosaic.

While this failure to deal decisively with the problem of voluntary expensive tastes is problematic, equality of opportunity for welfare seems even less well equipped to address the effects of involuntary cheap tastes. The problem is perhaps best illustrated by examining Arneson's attempt to operationalize the notion of ideal deliberation over preferences (1990: 163–164). In Arneson's example, individual X prefers beer to champagne,

but considers the possibility that his rational preference *should* be for champagne. Should X, after ideal deliberation, abandon or reaffirm his preference for beer? Arneson argues that X should reach his judgment by comparing, after ideal deliberation: (i) the pleasure he now derives from drinking beer; and (ii) the maximum pleasure he might be able to derive from champagne. If, after ideal deliberation, X concludes that he will derive the greatest pleasure from “drinking beer with unenlightened gusto,” then beer will remain the better option for him. Thus, X’s judgment should be determined by X’s “enlightened judgment of [his] perhaps unenlightened preferences” (ibid.: 164).

It is far from certain, however, that such ideal deliberation could adequately address the influence of involuntary cheap tastes on the tamed housewife or the discouraged worker. Suppose, for example, that a tamed housewife is considering a strategy designed to redefine her social role and status. Suppose, in addition, that redefining her role would cause a great deal of pain. Her relations with her husband, children, parents and extended family will be strained, perhaps to the breaking point. She has little confidence in her academic skills; yet she will need to return to school to acquire certain skills. Finally, her social conditioning has made her submissive, and she is terrified of provoking disapproval. Even when deliberating from a fully enlightened standpoint, she does not believe she can bear the stress, disruption, and disapproval necessary to redefine her role. Her enlightened judgment of her unenlightened preferences requires that she remain as she is.

Yet it is possible that she would weigh the costs and benefits of self-assertion differently when viewing them retrospectively, after, say, she has successfully completed medical training and is in practice. In retrospect, she may believe that the costs incurred are significantly outweighed by the benefits. Thus, her retrospective enlightened preferences may favor her choice to assert her independence.

Arneson does not ignore the possibility that ideally considered preferences may change over time. In order to incorporate the possibility of changes in ideally considered preferences in his account, Arneson “tentatively” suggests comparing the weighted sums of the sets of ideally considered preferences generated over a complete lifetime (“lifetime preference satisfaction”; 1990: 166). Each weighted sum would aggregate values assigned to sets of ideally considered preferences generated “moment by moment” over the full course of a person’s life. The weight to be assigned to each of the sets of preferences to be summed would be determined according to the importance the set of preferences would have for the (hypothetically rational) agent at the moment in which it was generated. The highest total sum would identify the agent’s ideally considered lifetime set of ideally considered preferences.

Yet Arneson’s procedure does not solve the problem. Suppose that, during her medical training, the woman in my example experienced all of

the evils she had anticipated. Her husband divorced her; she became estranged from her children and family; and the disapproval of her friends and family caused her constant discomfort. As a result, her sets of ideally considered preferences during the period of her training were colored by the (unrealizable) desire to undo her choice and restore her previous condition. The weight and intensity of these preferences far outweighed the weight and intensity of her later preference to endorse her choice to pursue medical training. Thus, the weighted sum of the lifetime set of ideally considered preferences that included her early preference to pursue medical training would not produce the highest possible sum, and would therefore be rejected under Arneson's procedure. Yet the woman's considered retrospective judgment endorsed her choice.

Retrospective endorsement of this choice does not, of course, demonstrate that the choice was objectively correct for the individual. It could plausibly be argued that present preferences to avoid pain should be privileged over anticipated future preferences that do not require such painavoidance. Equality of opportunity for welfare, however, would lead us to endorse the woman's prospective preferences without considering whether her retrospective preferences might provide a compelling countervailing consideration. Thus, the view contains a status-quo bias that would reinforce the influence of adaptive preferences, and thus arbitrary contingency, on the distribution of social goods.

Arneson, in his most recent work, modifies his argument, asserting that egalitarians should give priority to assisting those who are badly off and, in particular, those who "are not substantially responsible for their condition" (2000: 340). The basic character of his theory, however, remains the same. The apparently novel element in his recent work is provided by the priority to be assigned to the needs of those who are badly off and "not substantially responsible" for their disadvantage. Yet this element was characteristic of Arneson's earlier theory as well. In that work, Arneson divided the world into (i) those who *were not* responsible for disadvantage experienced (that is, who had not been provided with equal opportunity to realize their ideally considered preferences); and (ii) those who *were* responsible for disadvantage (those who had been provided with such equal opportunity); and he assigned priority to the claims of the persons who were not responsible for their disadvantage (Arneson 1989). Arneson's recent work does not provide a new standard of responsibility to guide egalitarian judgment in determining when a person should be viewed as "substantially responsible" for his or her condition.

Thus, equal opportunity for welfare, like equal access to advantage, fails to incorporate intuitions regarding responsibility for disadvantage successfully into an acceptable account of egalitarian concerns. Both theories attempt, ultimately unsuccessfully, to identify a set of ideally considered – or genuine – preferences that have escaped the influence of arbitrariness.

The capabilities approach

The capabilities approach does not attempt to identify a set of preferences that are free from the influence of arbitrary factors; as a result, the approach avoids many of the problems that entangle opportunity and access equality. Rather, the capabilities approach argues for a distinctly practical object of egalitarian fundamental concern: egalitarian policy is to assess the ability of individuals to *be* and *do* certain things. The approach is distinct from equality of resources in arguing that egalitarian theory should focus on the *effects* of distributions of resources rather than on the distribution of resources *per se*; and from equality of welfare in arguing for a focus on the ability to function rather than end-states measured in terms of well-being. Most significantly, the theory argues for a positive account of the interests and needs essential to purposive agency.

The capabilities approach appears to address successfully the problems concerning responsibility for preferences and choices that undermined welfare, resource, access, and opportunity egalitarianism. This approach avoids allowing the distribution of social resources to be determined by preferences that are determined or affected by the contingent effects of genetics or context, since the distribution of social goods is to be grounded in a positive account of interests and needs. In addition, the capabilities approach does not impose an excessively strict standard of responsibility, since the approach is committed to assuring the capability to act effectively, regardless of the choices made by the individual.

Finally, as Elizabeth Anderson argues, the capabilities approach “conceives of equality as a relation among people rather than merely as a pattern in the distribution of divisible goods,” and therefore “offers a superior way to understand the expressive demands of justice – the demand to act only on principles that express respect for everyone” (1999: 336–337). Samuel Scheffler suggests that “questions about egalitarian distributive norms must be controlled by some broader understanding of equality” (2003: 23), and the capabilities approach offers an attractive broader understanding to perform such a role.

Controversies

Recent criticism in the philosophical and theoretical literature has raised fundamental questions regarding the character and justification of the capabilities approach. One set of objections focuses on what critics describe as the sufficientarian nature of the approach. Critics who offer such objections argue that a capabilities approach would: (i) overcompensate persons whose disadvantage is the product of voluntary choice; and (ii) undercompensate anyone else requiring assistance by aiming to ensure too modest a threshold level of functioning to too large a class of persons (see Arneson 2000; Dworkin 2000). A second objection suggests that the view fails to

present a clearly differentiated account of egalitarian concerns; capabilities equality, it is suggested, collapses into either equality of resources or equality of welfare, because the theory in fact reflects a fundamental concern either with resources or with the welfare derived from resources (Dworkin 2000: 106–143).

The chapters of this book address these concerns. Chapters in Part I examine the objection that the capabilities approach is sufficientarian; chapters in Part II examine the objection that the capabilities approach is not a clearly differentiated view; and chapters in Part III address various issues and problems arising in the context of efforts to implement the capabilities approach.

Part I: “A sufficientarian approach?”

Richard Arneson’s chapter (Chapter 1) extends and develops his ongoing critique of the capabilities approach. Arneson focuses on the approach’s commitment to securing threshold levels of basic capabilities. The centrality of this commitment, he argues, establishes that the theory is sufficientarian – that is, the theory aims to assure that everyone has access to a *good enough* level of functioning. What happens beyond this “good enough” level, Arneson asserts, is a “don’t care” from the standpoint of the capabilities account of justice. The problem with such an approach is that a sufficiency doctrine goes wrong in suggesting that one can nonarbitrarily pick out some level of capability whose achievement should take strict priority over the achievement of further gains for those above that level. No sufficiency threshold, he notes, could justify absolute priority over other questions of distributive justice. Moreover, sufficiency accounts of social justice become increasingly plausible as they are progressively modified *to weaken or eliminate their sufficientarian character*. The most reasonable approach, Arneson concludes, is to abandon sufficientarianism.

Martha Nussbaum’s chapter (Chapter 2) offers a defense of the capabilities approach’s focus on defining and protecting a definite set of basic capabilities. In order to fulfill its potential as a basis of a normative account of social justice with critical potential for gender issues, Nussbaum argues, the capabilities approach requires an account, for political purposes, of what the central capabilities are. Such an approach, she asserts, is both justified, on the basis of politically liberal arguments grounded in shared ideals of humanity; and essential for the identification and analysis of unjust conditions.

Alexander Kaufman’s note (Chapter 3) disputes the view that the character of the capabilities approach is unqualifiedly sufficientarian. In fact, Kaufman suggests, the approach neither limits its attention to securing threshold levels of capabilities nor assigns absolute priority to the goal of securing such thresholds.

Part II: “A clearly differentiated approach?”

Vallentyne, in Chapter 4, argues that the capabilities approach does not define an account of egalitarian concerns that is distinct from the view – favored by Arneson, Cohen, and Roemer – that justice is concerned with something like the distribution of opportunities for well-being. Rather, Vallentyne argues, although some versions of the capability view are incompatible with some versions of the opportunity for well-being view, the most plausible version of the capability view is identical to a slight generalization of the opportunity for well-being view.

Timothy Hinton’s chapter (Chapter 5) develops the basis for a response to Vallentyne’s argument in the context of an exploration of the capabilities approach’s treatment of gender. Hinton critiques and proposes an extension of Nussbaum’s analysis of gender inequality: in focusing so carefully on inequalities in the treatment of women, Hinton suggests, Nussbaum overlooks the inequalities in social power that generate this unequal treatment. Hinton begins to develop a response to Vallentyne by distinguishing the *social* ideal animating the capabilities approach from the *distributive* ideal that motivates opportunity accounts of equality. The capabilities approach aspires to sustain a society of free political equals, Hinton notes, while opportunity conceptions of equality aim to guarantee people (access to) equally worthwhile lives.

Alexander Kaufman in Chapter 6 examines a second feature that distinguishes the capabilities approach from opportunity accounts of equality in the context of responding to G. A. Cohen’s argument that the capabilities approach suffers from confusing duality in its account of fundamental egalitarian concerns. Sen’s pluralistic view of those fundamental concerns, Kaufman argues, undermines neither the coherence nor the practical value of the capabilities approach. In adopting such a pluralistic view, as opposed to the monistic views (identifying the distribution of welfare or midfare as the sole fundamental concern of distributive justice) favored by opportunity accounts of equality, Kaufman argues that the capabilities approach in fact expands the descriptive and analytic range of egalitarian thought.

Part III: “Issues in Implementation”

The chapters by Sabina Alkire, David Crocker, Victoria Kamsler, and David Wasserman address questions relating to the implementation in policy of the commitments of the capabilities approach.

Alkire, in Chapter 7, argues that implementation of the policies required to ensure adequate opportunity to realize fundamental capabilities in the context of a democratic political culture characterized by reasonable pluralism requires sustained and substantive participation by members of society in ongoing deliberations regarding the commitments

of distributive justice within a democratic society. Her chapter explores the potential that “forms” of participatory discussion have for enabling communities to identify common value judgments and priorities.

Crocker argues in Chapter 8 that recent work in the deliberative theory of democracy appropriately supplements Sen’s capabilities approach to international development and enriches Alkire’s efforts to apply Sen’s theory with a value-oriented conception of participation to micro-projects. His chapter first sketches four different levels of governmental and non-governmental fora in which public deliberation and deliberative democracy might reasonably play a role. Second, Crocker examines Sen’s capabilities approach to international development and argues that this approach requires democracy and would benefit from explicit adoption of a version of deliberative democracy. Third, as resources to strengthen the social choice dimension of the capabilities approach, Crocker discusses the theory and practice of deliberative democracy and draws on several useful theoretical versions and institutional experiments. Finally, Crocker argues that a version of deliberative democracy also enriches Sabina Alkire’s effort to “operationalize” the capabilities approach for use in improving the theory and practice of participation in small-scale, grassroots development initiatives.

Kamsler’s chapter (Chapter 9) considers the way that capability lists enable the inclusion of environmental issues in a theory that is anthropocentric in its standard formulation. Do we add environmental issues to the list of human capabilities, or revise the basic understanding of capability to make it inclusive of other forms of flourishing? Recently, Martha Nussbaum has sought to extend the account of capabilities to the flourishing of individual non-human animals. Kamsler considers the significance and limitations of this approach.

Wasserman’s contribution (Chapter 10) examines the implications of the capabilities approach for policies to address the needs of people with major sensory, motor, and cognitive impairments. Nussbaum, Wasserman notes, has modified her initial account of core capabilities in two important ways: (i) broadening the individuation of the core capabilities to accommodate a significantly wider range of ways they can be acquired and exercised; and (ii) holding that justice requires the acquisition not of equal, but only of minimum levels of each capability, achievable by almost all human beings, while continuing to reject trade-offs among capabilities in assessing justice and well-being. These features allow Nussbaum to recognize the possibilities of flourishing for people with severe impairments, while maintaining that justice demands the resources and environmental modifications necessary for them to achieve minimum levels.

Wasserman’s chapter endorses the first modification but questions the second. It argues that achieving minimum levels of each capability is more difficult than Nussbaum assumes and that justice may require trade-offs among individuals and capabilities that leave some people below the

mimima for some capabilities – even if they could achieve them with sufficient resources and accommodation. This argument for the moral necessity of trade-offs converges in several respects with Arneson’s critique of the priority Nussbaum accords to the acquisition of minimum levels of each capability, an approach he characterizes as “sufficientarian.”

Notes

- 1 The problem of expensive tastes, in fact, constitutes merely one dimension of a deeper issue. In order to equalize preference satisfaction, the welfarist will need to tie distributive decisions to a variety of given tastes and preferences. For example, a literal reading of the welfarist approach would seem to require the fine-tuning of emergency energy subsidies to the propensity for discomfort of the recipient. As G. A. Cohen notes, “[p]eople vary in the amount of discomfort which given low temperatures cause them” (1989: 920). But a propensity to discomfort, like a preference for rare burgundy, is affected, if not determined, by morally arbitrary natural endowments and cultural influences. Thus, welfare egalitarians wish to equalize the satisfaction of subjective preferences that are themselves, in significant part, arbitrarily distributed.
- 2 This paraphrases Dworkin’s claim that egalitarians should not be concerned with inequalities deriving from different attitudes to the questions of whether “to invest rather than consume, or to consume less expensively rather than more, or to work in more rather than less profitable ways” (1981: 311).
- 3 Equality of opportunity for welfare operationalizes this commitment by providing access to sufficient information, varied perspectives, and counselling to allow individuals to revise their choices, so that individuals may reasonably be deemed to identify with the choices they make.
- 4 “[I]t is far from clear why ... affirming [one’s preferences and values] and identifying them as essential to one’s self precludes demanding or accepting compensation for these preferences in the name of distributive equality” (Arneson 1989: 81).

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