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Turning Sen's capability approach operative thanks to Aristotle's ideas*

The capabilities approaches (CA) have been originated in the work of the economist Amartya Sen on inequality. Sen, born in India in 1933, is currently Emeritus Professor of Harvard University. He is still active in teaching and researching. He was always concerned with the problem of social justice, poverty and equality. This has led him to hold a broad notion and an ethical view of economics.

Driven by these concerns, Sen tackled the topics of inequality and quality of life, and during the 80s he formulated the capability approach. Sen's capability approach is a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being, development of countries, present socio-economic situation and social arrangements in order to implement right policies.

For Sen, human agency is a crucial element of human well-being in a broad sense that goes beyond utility and that is related to the quality of life. Human agency entails freedom: Freedoms are capabilities of performing some actions, called by him "functionings". These capabilities and functionings compose a good life. Capabilities, for Sen, are a better way of assessing well-being than utility or income (for a good survey, see e.g., Sen 1993 and Ingrid Robeyns 2005).

Nobody would deny that this is good news. A concern among scholars, however, has arisen about the operability of Sen's CA. Traits as the incommensurability of capabilities and their ambiguous definition (see Sen 1999: 76-7) are sufficient reasons for this concern. As Robert Sugden affirms, "it is natural to ask how far Sen's framework is operational" (1993: 1953). Some arguments for this lack of operability might be summarized in terms of the inexact or "vague" character of practical reason, the capacity that lies behind the whole CA (on the central role of practical reason within the CA see Nussbaum 1987: 47 and 1995a).

For Sen, indeed, the capabilities's ambiguity, both in their definition and in their election, is a positive feature because it reflects and respects the freedom and the differences of the persons (1993: 33-34): for him, asserting ambiguity

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and fuzziness is not a weakness but a strength. He calls this situation “the fundamental reason for incompleteness” (1992: 49). For Sen “the concentration on distinct capabilities entails, by its very nature, a pluralist approach” (1989: 54). Sen affirms: “there are many ambiguities in the conceptual framework of the capability approach” (1989: 45). He has recently stated in *Development as Freedom* that “the capabilities perspective is inescapably pluralist (...) To insist that there should be only homogeneous magnitude that we value is to reduce drastically the range of our evaluative reasoning (...) Heterogeneity of factors that influence individual advantage is a pervasive feature of actual evaluation” (1999: 76-7).

Thus, Sen seems to have good reasons to reject a precise determination of the capabilities individuals ought to have. Defined in such way, however, “capability” is a too wide umbrella that comprises very different kinds of realities: a very messy set. This position leaves us in a paralyzing situation. If first, individuals’ capabilities cannot be clearly determined and second, a priority or a hierarchical ordering of capabilities cannot be established, then there is little room for policy recommendation.

In another paper (Crespo 2008) I have shown the connection between Sen’s and Aristotle’s ideas thanks to the influence of the Aristotelian scholar Martha Nussbaum on the Indian thinker. The vagueness of Sen’s capabilities seems, at first glance, to be highly Aristotelian for its resemblance with practical rationality.

Aristotle, however, in *Politics* II complains about the vague character of Plato’s criterion for determination of the ideal amount of property in the cities: an amount “sufficient for a good life: this is too general” [*katbólou mallon*]. Thus Aristotle wonders “whether it is not better to determine it in a different—that is to say, a more definite—way than Plato” (*Politics* II 6 1265a 28-32).

In *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 7, Aristotle introduces the “*ergon* argument” also by complaining: “Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is still desired” (1097b 22-24). That is, Aristotle is conscious of the need of a more specific definition of the goods that are to be sought and of happiness.

In this paper, in line with the previous Aristotelian quotations, I will try to offer a definition of the specific goods that government should provide to the citizens. It is a task similar to Nussbaum’s (1987, 1990, 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 2003, 2006) and other scholars whose lists I will develop relying on Aristotle’s ideas. Economists are not used to thinking in terms of practical reasoning. We, philosophers, should accordingly try to provide them with concrete guidance. We should avoid, however, falling into an over-specification as criticized by Sen (1993: 46-47).

1. To look for the Good Life:

For Aristotle, it is clear that the good of man is the same of the good of the *polis*. This good is to achieve the Good Life that drives to happiness (e.g., “the best way of life, for individuals severally as well as for states collectively, is the life of goodness”, *Politics* VII, 1, 1323b 40-41; cf. *Politics* VII, 2, 1323a 5-8—the felicity of the state is the same of the felicity of the individual—; *NE* I, 2, 1094b 7-8).

“The polis,” Aristotle says, “is an association [*koinonía*] of freemen” (*Politics* III, 6, 1279a 16). What is the end of this association? He answers:

“It is clear, therefore, that a polis is not an association for residence on a common site, or for the sake of preventing mutual injustice and easing exchange. These are indeed conditions which must be present before a polis can exist; but the existence of all these conditions is not enough, in itself, to constitute a polis. What constitutes a polis is an association of households and clans in a good life [*eú zēn*], for the sake of attaining a perfect [*zōēs teléas*] and self-sufficing existence [*autárkeous*] (...). The end [*télos*] and purpose of a polis is the good life, and the institutions of social life are means to that end. A polis is constituted by the association of families and villages in a perfect and self-sufficing existence; and such an existence, on our definition, consists in a life of true felicity and goodness [*tò zēn eudaimónos kai kalós*]. It is therefore for the sake of good actions [*kalón práxeon*], and not for the sake of social life, that political associations [*politikēn koinonían*] must be considered to exist (*Politics* III, 9, 1280b 29-35 and 1280b 39 - 1281a 4). Thus, “the polis which is morally the best is the polis which is happy and ‘does well’ [*práttousan kalós*]” (*Politics* VII, 1, 1323b 30-1)¹.

Consequently, the task of the political community and of the related science—Politics—and of the authorities of society, is to induce and facilitate the good actions that allow all the citizens to live this life of true happiness and goodness. Three quotations on this task might be considered:

“political science spends most of its pains on making the citizens to be of a certain character, viz. good and capable of noble acts” (*NE* I, 9, 1099b 30-31). To have a character good and capable of noble acts is to be virtuous.

“There is one thing clear about the best constitution: it must be a political organization which will enable all sorts of men [e.g. the ‘contemplative’ as well as the ‘practical’]² to be at their best and live happily [*árista práttōi kai zōe makaríos*]” (*Politics* VII, 2, 1324a 23-25; quoted also by Nussbaum 1987: 2).

“The true end which good law-givers should keep in view, for any state or stock or society with which they may be concerned, is the enjoyment of partnership in a good life and the felicity [*zōēs agathēs ... kai ... eudaimonías*] thereby attainable” (*Politics* VII, 2, 1325a 7-10; quoted also by Nussbaum 1987: 3).

These last two quotations lead Nussbaum to affirm that “the task of political arrangement is both broad and deep” (1987: 6; 1990: 209). In effect, Politics according to Aristotle is concerned with the happiness of all sorts of men. This is a definition that goes beyond the usual scope of today political

¹In the original it is *state* instead of polis. I will not replace this term again in the following quotations, but I think that the word “state” has modern connotations that are not present in the original Greek “polis”. In this paper I use the expression “political community” or simply the Greek term “city”.

²Square brackets in the original are by Barker. If not specified, other square brackets are mine.

conceptions³. It is clear and relevant, but it is still too general. We need to provide greater specification for the economist.

2. The external goods needed for a Good Life:

For Aristotle, happiness needs a basis upon which it can be built; happiness needs “external goods” (*NE* I, 8, 1099a 31-32). He affirms in the *Politics* that “it is impossible to live well, or indeed to live at all, unless the necessary [property] conditions are present” (*Politics* I, 4, 1253b 24-25). “We have to remember, he also affirms, that a certain amount of equipment is necessary for the good life” (*Politics* VII, 8, 1331b 39-40).

These external goods have to be in harmony with the goods of the body and the goods of the soul: “all of these different ‘goods’ should belong to the happy man” (VII, 1, 1323a 26-27)⁴. But, Aristotle adds, “felicity belongs more to those who have cultivated their character and mind to the uttermost, and kept acquisition of external goods within moderate limits” (VII, 1, 1323b 1-3). In this way “the best way of life, for individuals severally as well as for states collectively, is the life of goodness duly equipped with such a store of requisites [i.e., of external goods and of goods of the body] as makes it possible to share in the activities of goodness” (*Politics* VII, 1, 1323b 40 - 1324a 1)⁵.

Although the goods of the soul should be more appreciated than the others, this is an “ontological” priority. The temporal priority is the inverse: “children’s bodies should be given attention before their souls; and the appetites should be the next part of them to be regulated. But the regulation of their appetites should be intended for the benefit of their minds —just as the attention given to their bodies should be intended for the benefit of their souls” (*Politics* VII, 15, 1334b 25-28). First, we need to have a body healthy and satisfied, then, we have to put our appetites in order, and, finally, we need the goods of the soul.

Even the man who lives a theoretical life needs external goods: “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation. But, being a man, one will also need external prosperity; for our nature is not self-sufficient for the purpose of contemplation, but our body must also be healthy and must have food and other attention” (*NE* X, 8, 1178b 34-35).

What are the goods that we, members of a city, need and that the city must have or provide? “The first thing to be provided is food. The next is arts and crafts; for life is a business which needs many tools. The third is arms: the members of a state must bear arms in person, partly in order to maintain authority and repress disobedience, and partly in order to meet any thread of external aggression. The fourth thing which has to be provided is a certain supply of property, alike for domestic use and for military purposes. The fifth

³ A vast majority of today political conceptions does not embrace a theory of the good; they are mainly procedural.

⁴ Barker adds the following insightful note on happiness: “The word ‘happy’ fails to give a just idea of the Greek. The word which Aristotle uses here (*makarios*) is perhaps even stronger than a similar word which he uses more frequently (*eudaimón*); but both words signify the supreme happiness which is of the nature of what we may call ‘felicity’ –the happiness springing from a full excellence (*arête*) of ‘mind, body and estate’, without which it cannot exist (p. 280).”

⁵ Square brackets in the original are by Barker.

(but in order of merit, the first) is an establishment for the service of the gods, or as it is called, public worship. The sixth thing, and the most vitally necessary, is a method of deciding what is demanded by the public interest and what is just in men's private dealings. These are the services which every state may be said to need" (*Politics* VII, 8, 1328b 5-16).

Food is basic for Aristotle: "none of the citizens should go in need of subsistence" [*trophés*: food] (*Politics* VII, 10, 1130a 2). He proposed a system of common meals funded by different contributions depending on the wealth of the different citizens. He also emphasizes the relevance of water: "this [provision of good water] is a matter which ought not to be treated lightly. The elements we use the most and oftenest for the support of our bodies contribute most to their health; and water and air have both an effect of this nature" (*Politics* VII, 11, 1330b 10-14).

For Aristotle, the best form of political regime "is one where power is vested in the middle class" (*Politics* IV, 11, 1295b 34-35). Thus, "it is therefore the greatest of blessings for a state that its members should possess a moderate and adequate property" (id., 1295b 39-40).

Aristotle, however, is against an "over-assistance" of people: "the policy nowadays followed by demagogues should be avoided. It is their habit to distribute any surplus among the people; and the people, in the act of taking, ask for the same again. To help the poor in this way is to fill a leaky jar... Yet it is the duty of a genuine democrat to see to it that the masses are not excessively poor. Poverty is the cause of the defects of democracy. That is the reason why measures should be taken to ensure a permanent level of prosperity. This is in the interest of all the classes, including the prosperous themselves (...). The ideal method of distribution, if a sufficient fund can be accumulated, is to make such grants sufficient for the purchase of a plot of land: failing that, they should be large enough to start men in commerce or agriculture. Notables who are men of feeling and good sense may also undertake the duty of helping the poor to find occupations —each taking charge of a group, and each giving a grant to enable the members of his group to make a start" (*Politics* VI, 5, 1320a 30 - 1320b 9).

According to Aristotle, external goods are needed to achieve happiness, but these external goods are not themselves happiness. "Clearly if we were to keep pace with his fortunes, we should often call the same man happy and again wretched, making the happy man out to be 'a chameleon, and insecurely based'. Or is this keeping pace with his fortunes quite wrong? Success or failure in life does not depend on these, but human life, as we said, need these mere addition, while virtuous activities or their opposites are what determine happiness or their reverse" (*NE* I, 10, 1100b 9-10).

3. Other requirements for a Good Life: Institutions, Law and Education

Elsewhere (Crespo 2007: 376) I have explained the classical Aristotelian distinction between a) ends that can be considered only as means, only pursued for the sake of something else (first-order or instrumental ends), b) ends that are desirable in themselves and also pursued for the sake of the final end (sec-

ond-order ends), and c) ends which are only desirable in themselves (third-order or final ends: usually known as “happiness”). There I provided the following example: we study for an exam (i.e. a means to an instrumental end) in order to achieve graduation (a second-order end), in order to be happy (a final end) according to our plan of life (designed by practical reason). Practical rationality harmonizes the complex set of second-order ends in order to achieve a plan that will make us happy. But this does not engender specific indications for the economists, because the conclusions of practical rationality are inexact and ambiguous, relative to each person.

What are, according to Aristotle the second-order ends that contribute to a happy life? In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he mentions honour, wisdom and pleasure (I, 6, 1096b), and then he adds reason (*noûn*) and every virtue (I, 7, 1097b 2). In the *Rhetoric* he lists “good birth, plenty of friends, good friends, wealth, good children, plenty of children, a happy old age, also such bodily excellences as health, beauty, strength, large stature, athletic powers, together with fame, honour, good luck, and virtue” (*Rhetoric* I, 5, 1360b 19 ff). Does this mean that a person of, e.g., a short stature cannot be happy? No, this list is a list of the things that may contribute to happiness, not a list of necessary constituents of it. What determines happiness is virtue: as “virtuous activities or their opposites are what determine happiness or their reverse” (*NE* I, 10, 1100b 9-10).

The virtuous man, the man who rightly exercises his practical reason, knows how to combine the elements that are at hand, even when something is lacking, in order to be happy. Therefore practical reason and virtue are the keys of happiness. The *polis* has the aim of achieving happiness of the citizens. Also, “The true end which good law-givers should keep in view, for any state or stock or society with which they may be concerned, is the enjoyment of partnership in a good life and the felicity (*zōês agathês ... kai ... eudaimonías*) thereby attainable” (*Politics* VII, 2, 1325a 7-10). Thus, those law-givers have to worry about the development of virtue of the citizens. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he affirms: “legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator, and those who do not effect it miss their mark, and it is in this that a good constitution differs from a bad one” (II, 1, 1103b 3-6).

For Aristotle, law-givers have two indirect ways of fostering citizens’ virtues: education and law. Virtues, law and education constitute a virtuous circle that makes people happy, that ensure the achievement of themselves—law, education and virtue—and the stability of the political regime. Laws are obeyed by virtuous people. People are not virtuous if they have not been educated since their youth; but education has to be supported by laws.

“The law bids us practice every virtue and forbids us to practice every vice. And the things that tend to produce virtue taken as a whole are those of the acts prescribed by the law which have been prescribed with a view to education for the common good” (*NE* V, 2, 1130b 23-27).

It seems that laws have priority. But virtue is necessary to enact good laws.

“Now some think that we are made good by nature, others by habituation, others by teaching. Nature’s part evidently does not depend on us, (...); while argument and teaching, we may suspect, are not powerful with all men, but the soul of the student must first have been cultivated by means of habits for noble joy

and noble hatred, like earth which is to nourish the seed (...) But it is difficult to get from youth up a right training for virtue if one has not been brought up under right laws; for to live temperately and hardily is not pleasant to most people, especially when they are young. For this reason their nurture and occupations should be fixed by law; for they will not be painful when they have become customary. But it is surely not enough that when they are young they should get the right nurture and attention; since they must, even when they are grown up, practice and be habituated to them, we shall need laws for this as well, and generally speaking to cover the whole of life; for most people obey necessity rather than argument, and punishments rather than the sense of what is noble. This is why some think that legislators ought to stimulate men to virtue and urge them forward by the motive of the noble, on the assumption that those who have been well advanced by the formation of habits will attend to such influences; and that punishments and penalties should be imposed on those who disobey and are of inferior nature, while the incurably bad should be completely banished. (...) the law has compulsive power, while it is at the same time a rule proceeding from a sort of practical wisdom and reason" (*NE* X, 9, 1179b 20 - 1180a. 22).

Aristotle also discusses whether education has to be public or private. For him private education "has an advantage over public, as private medical treatment has; for while in general rest and abstinence from food are good for a man in a fever, for a particular man they may not be; and a boxer presumably does not prescribe the same style of fighting to all his pupils. It would seem, then, that the detail is worked out with more precision if the control is private; for each person is more likely to get what suits his case" (*NE* X, 9, 1180b 7-12).

Nevertheless, for Aristotle, the legislator must be concerned with education; parents must try to educate their children when the city does not do it and also the reverse. He also describes the contents of a good education: reading and writing, drawing, gymnastic, music, relating these disciplines with the development of virtues (*Politics* VIII, 3 and ff.). He even proposes different stages (five) with specific contents and aims of the education of children (*Politics* VII, 17).

Political institutions are designed to achieve the happiness of the people. "The end and purpose of a polis is the good life, and the institutions of social life are means to that end" (*Politics* III, 9 1280b 39-40). Aristotle extensively develops the different ways of electing assemblies, magistracies, courts and the participation of people in it (*Politics* IV, 14 and ff.). These institutions can be called into account by the citizens (*Politics* VI, 4, 1318b 29).

The way of preserving these institutions is by education: "The greatest, however, of all the means we have mentioned for ensuring the stability of constitutions—but one that nowadays is generally neglected—is the education of citizens in the spirit of their constitution. There is no profit of the best of laws, even when they are sanctioned by general civic consent, if the citizens themselves have not been attuned, by the force of habit and the influence of teaching, to the right constitutional temper" (*Politics* V, 9, 1310a 12-18). Friendship and unanimity (concord—*omónoia*—) also hold cities united (*NE* VIII, 1, 1155a 22-26; IX, 6, 1167b 2).

Summing up, law and education foster the development of virtues and a life of virtues produces happiness, which is the aim of the political community.

4. The Aristotelian role of a government:

I have examined Aristotle's definition of the goods —external and internal— that are necessary for the Good Life that makes us happy. For him, this life is only possible for us within the city. The list of goods can help us to comply with the objective of this paper, and offer a definition of the specific goods that the government should provide the citizens. What will follow is not an "Aristotelian economic policy" or an "Aristotelian political program", but only a few "principles" that I think stem from Aristotle's ideas here presented.

According to these ideas:

- i. The best political regime is an egalitarian one, "a general system of liberty based on equality" (*Politics* VI, 2, 1317b 16-17); thus, government should concern itself with maintaining a certain equality, but not through confiscatory measures; "the magistrate (...) is the guardian of justice, and, if of justice, then of equality also" (*NE* V, 6, 1134b 1). People have to participate in some way in Politics.
- ii. Specifically, an Aristotelian policy would not distribute funds directly to people with the exception of funds that serve to start jobs;
- iii. Thus, a great concern of government should be to avoid unemployment, and promote business and exchange;
- iv. In extreme cases, the government should provide food;
- v. The government should also worry about the health of the population and about some necessary conditions for health (as good water and unpolluted air);
- vi. Education is another great field of concern of the government, providing the institutions and necessary funds for it, whether it were public or private;
- vii. Another great field of concern of government is the provision and execution of good laws and courts also providing the institutions and necessary funds;
- viii. Government should foster all kinds of intermediate organizations that promote family, education, friendship, care of children and of old people, creation of work, sports, arts, religion, charity and, specially, virtues of all kinds;
- ix. When there are no institutions to defend children and old people the government has to undertake this care.

These are only general principles. Each government of every society should look for the best specific means to comply with them in order to allow for the happiest possible life of its citizens. The citizens must take advantage of these means in order to perform the functionings that make them happy.

The approach of this paper has been normative. It is interesting to briefly add that positive conclusions of the literature on economics and happiness are greatly in coincidence with these Aristotelian principles. According to this literature, once basic needs are met, things as family relations, community and friends, personal freedom and personal values, health and work highly influence on people's happiness (cf. Layard 2005: 63 and *passim*).

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