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Reply to my Critics

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I am very grateful to Julian Culp, Pepi Patrón, Henry Richardson and Erik Schokkaert for their engagement with my book. The four critiques are in many ways very different, and that is probably what was to be expected, given that the book targets readers from different disciplines, and given that the capability approach is used by such a diverse group of students, scholars, and professionals working on social change outside academia. Interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary are processes to which much lip-service is paid in academia, and which many capability scholars value highly and try to practice. But it is very difficult to do, and even more difficult to do *well*, as I found out, once more, while writing this book.

Reply to Henry Richardson

Misunderstandings and disagreements between disciplines seem to play an important role in Henry Richardson's comment on my book. Richardson claims that “the concept of well-being can aptly be set aside, in favour of other, more precise and well-targeted concepts that pioneering work on the capability approach has brought to the fore” (Richardson 2019, 357). Richardson uses the classical philosophical account of well-being, which is “how well the life of a person is going *for that person*” (Richardson 2019, 357, original emphasis). Let us call this the “first-personal view on well-being”. However, in contrast to what Richardson suggests, in my book I am not accepting this definition as the one and only proper understanding of “well-being”. Instead, building on the helpful work of Anna Alexandrova (2013) I am arguing that this is how *philosophers* use this term, but that there are many other contexts (disciplines being one form of context) in which the term “well-being” is used *in a different way*. In fact, it is even more accurate to say that it is only a sub-group of philosophers who use the term in that way. But—and here multidisciplinary troubles kick in—other disciplines, including most of the social sciences, as well as the more applied streams in practical philosophy, use “well-being” not in this first-person view, but in a sense which is more relevant for reasoning from a societal or policy perspective; we could call this the “third-personal view”. Using functionings and/or capabilities to refer to *the latter* understanding of “well-being” is widespread in the capability literature, including in work of some colleagues that I hold in very high esteem (Alkire 2016; Burchardt

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2005; Chiappero-Martinetti 2000, among many others). Moreover, it is also a term prominently used by Amartya Sen—and not only when Sen refers to “well-being” in order to criticise that term for being too narrow for many evaluative or normative purposes, but also to develop broader accounts of wellbeing. Take his influential chapter “Capability and Well-being” (Sen 1993), in which he writes that “the claim is that the functionings make up a person’s being, and *the evaluation of a person’s well-being has to take the form of an assessment of these constituent elements*” (Sen 1993, 36–37, italics added). Hence Sen does see a role for the capability approach in conceptualising well-being, but *not* understood on the classical philosophical definition.

Perhaps the classical philosophers who would restrict the use of the term “well-being” strictly to the first-person view, would rather use for what others call “well-being” another term. The dispute could then be resolved by the following semantic move: What those outside classical philosophy are referring to when they use the term “well-being”, is what should be given another term, perhaps “the quality of life”. But this would come at a price that I would find unacceptably high, namely that the capability approach would no longer have the same connection to the huge literature on well-being in the social sciences and policy-relevant disciplines and literatures.

Richardson objects to this “even looser sense” of the term “well-being”, by invoking Bishop Butler who claimed that “everything is what it is and not another thing” (Richardson 2019, 360). In my view, this does not help to settle the matter, since the dispute is not about what X is, but rather about what term we use to refer to X, and what we should do if other scholars use the same term to refer to Y, being distinct from yet a close relative of X. In order to be able to make his claim, Richardson would have to argue that we should stick with the term “well-being” as classical philosophers use it, even if applied philosophers and social scientists use the same term in a different way. He doesn’t give such a reason, and I fail to see how it could be the case that one discipline, in this case classical philosophy, could dictate the proper use of terms.¹

Nevertheless, while I strongly disagree with the suggestion to drop “well-being” from the capability literature, Henry Richardson’s comment on my book is illuminating, since it is a very clear example of how difficult it is to advance a conversation between disciplines, and to build a genuine multi- and inter-disciplinary conceptual framework. What do we do when different terms are used in different disciplines, in a way that is not easily solved?

Reply to Julian Culp

Julian Culp (2019) helpfully lays out two tales on the capability approach. The tale that I laid out in the book, maintains that there is a general capability approach that is only committed to a limited number of claims, and that the *outline* of this general approach can be found in work by Amartya Sen—that is, in those works where he is commenting and writing on the capability approach *as an approach*, rather than in his works that advance particular capabilitarian arguments or use the capability approach for applications. But the outlines are still very sketchy, and in my book, I try to further develop this general outline based on the very large literature that has emerged over the previous decades.

The other tale is the one Martha Nussbaum (2011) tells in her introductory book on the capability approach, in which she maintains that the capability approach comes in two versions: a strand focusing on measuring the quality of life and a strand focusing on theories of justice. Although the book is in many respects very important, there are several reasons why I think Nussbaum’s tale is wrong and not very helpful (Robeyns 2011, 2016). One reason is

that it doesn't do justice to the literature, since there is plenty of excellent work that doesn't fit either of those two strands. The other is that it is not very helpful in maximising the potential of the capability approach. There are plenty of PhD students and scholars who work in disciplines from technology studies to the study of sports, health or education who have an intuitive feeling that they could productively use the capability approach for their research questions, but Nussbaum's (2011) description of the general capability approach doesn't offer them much of a toolbox in how to proceed. The tale I tell, and especially the modular view that follows from this tale, has as one of its goals to give more guidance to those who want to use the capability approach in new areas. Culp's distinction between the two tales is putting the disagreement between Martha Nussbaum and I in very clear and sharp wording, which may help others to further investigate and make up their minds regarding which, if any, of those two tales is (most) plausible, or perhaps to construct their own tale that they believe to be better.

Culp argues that the problem with the tale I am telling is that it makes the general capability approach "appear a bit vacuous" and that some scholars may refrain from using the capability label (Culp 2019, 364). I can see the worry with the risk of becoming vacuous, but it might in practice not be such a big problem because there is also an existing capability literature to which new papers will have to relate, which could counteract the vacuousness. I do not see the problem if scholars would refrain from using the capability label: after all, it is just a tool to facilitate analyses. The capability approach is not an end in itself: if we can be more effective in creating valuable knowledge and using it to improve the world without using the term "capability", we should do so.

Culp, as well as Erik Schokkaert (2019, 347) believe it is a problem for my account that some of Sen's work cannot count as a capability application. But I do not see why this needs to be a problem. If the correct reading of Sen's account of justice is that he gives public reasoning priority over substantive claims, then his account of justice is indeed *not* a *specific* capability theory (as described in my book); rather, it is a procedural account of justice. In the procedures that are required, Sen thinks that there are good reasons for participants in the procedure to opt for the metric of capabilities—but he doesn't want to make that decision for these participants. The fact that a particular *work* by Sen is not a capability account, is not the same as saying that Sen is not a capability theorist; rather, he is a scholar who has produced a very large number of works, some of which, on my account, are capability theories and applications, and some of which are not. I fail to see the inconsistency, or indeed the problem, if one properly distinguishes between the author and the different strands of work produced by that author.

I am much more worried about Culp's interesting but unsettling claim that my account, in particular the claim of value-pluralism as an A-module, would lead to the rejection of Nussbaum's theory of justice as a capability theory. I can see two possible ways of solving this problem (though there may be more). The first strategy would be to remove "value pluralism" from the A-module. One could possibly question whether value pluralism should be an A-module. Note that I am very willing to accept that there could still be errors in the precise content of the different modules as well as their categorisations as A, B or C modules; my aim in the book was to give my best possible account, and see whether this survives critical scrutiny by other capability scholars. However, I would like to resist this strategy, since the multidimensional nature of the capability approach is precisely one of its hallmarks, and removing it would take away one of the features that has contributed to its distinctive success. The second strategy, which sounds much better to my ears, would be to rethink more carefully what "value pluralism" requires, and whether it is possible to have another master-value, such as human dignity, in a capability theory, while still maintaining "value pluralism". I am not quite sure what "value pluralism" would then,

exactly, entail, but it is a question that those of us interested in the foundations of the capability approach should investigate.

Reply to Pepi Patrón

In her critique, Pepi Patrón describes my book as not providing “a new or different version of [the capability approach], but to organise it into a hierarchy” (Patrón 2019, 351). That is not how I would describe either my intention when I wrote this book, nor what I hope the book has achieved. Rather, the book has some other aims, including the following. Firstly, to provide an alternative for the tale about the capability approach that can be found in Nussbaum’s (2011) introductory book on the capability approach, as Julian Culp rightly pointed out. And, secondly, to provide an account of the capability approach at its most general level—or, as economists would put it, to provide a generalisation of the capability literature.

And it is here that Patrón takes issue—since she objects to the distinction I make between the general “capability approach” and particular “capability theories or accounts”, and believes that “the complementarity of both Sen’s and Nussbaum’s proposals is more enriching than splitting them into framework vs. theory” (Patrón 2019, 352). However, I am not sure I am able to respond to Patrón’s objections, since it doesn’t become clear to me why exactly she objects to the distinction. My proposal is primarily and most importantly a theoretical one, rather than one related to exegesis or interpretation of authors, and I am not sure that Patrón and I are proceeding on the same plane.

Perhaps a worry could be that making the distinction between the general capability approach and specific capability theories or applications would give a higher status to scholarly contributions to the development of the general capability approach and lower status to specific capability theories. But that is not the case and should not be the case; in fact, most progress happens because specific capability theories and applications are worked out. Hence, if Patrón’s rejection of the distinction is based on a worry that endorsing the distinction would lead to a lesser appreciation and valuation of Martha Nussbaum’s work, then my answer is easy: that doesn’t follow. Martha Nussbaum’s work is, also on my account, together with Sen’s work the most influential work on the capability approach. Moreover, Nussbaum is still contributing to the capability literature, while Sen has hardly written anything on the capability approach over the last few years. But this is all standing orthogonal on the *theoretical and conceptual* arguments I am unfolding in the book when I make the distinction between “capability approach” and “capability theories or accounts”. The claim I am making in my book is one concerning the *structure and typology* of the capability literature. It is the tale of the general capability approach and more specific capability theories and applications. This tale is a theoretical and epistemic claim, not an evaluative claim of particular contributions to that literature.

I would appreciate Patrón’s reaction to the reasons I give for rejecting the tale that Nussbaum advances. Patrón rehearses one element of Nussbaum’s tale, namely that Sen’s contribution would have been the strand of comparative quality of life assessments. However, it is a mistake of Nussbaum’s tale to limit Sen’s contributions to empirical work, since his 1979 Tanner lecture, which was clearly a philosophical work, introduced the capability approach in relation to a debate on utilitarianism as well as Rawls’s theory of justice (Sen, 1980). Similarly, how do Sen’s later philosophical papers on the capability approach, that were clearly not about comparative quality of life assessment, fit into the two-strands tale? In contrast, by having a general account of the capability approach, *all* of Sen’s theoretical work on the general capability approach, as well as his theoretical and empirical work on specific capability theories and applications, can be properly recognised. And, in fact,

the work by Nussbaum that is better not described as being about theories of justice, would also be more elegantly included. But, more importantly, the hundreds of papers and books by capability scholars who are neither engaging in comparative quality of life assessment or in constructing theories of justice, can also receive the recognition they are owed. As far as I am concerned, this is not just a “bonus” of the approach I present and a challenge that Nussbaum’s tale is facing, but it is a fundamental reason to reject the latter, as I argued in earlier work (Robeyns 2011, 2016). I would be very happy to have the generalisation that I provided in my book being replaced by another one, or an amended one, that can be shown to be better. But I am not willing to tell the tale of a capability approach that has two strands, since it does epistemic injustice to much interesting work and unduly limits the epistemic power of the capability approach. I fear that Patrón’s critique has not given me any reasons to change my mind on that matter.

Reply to Erik Schokkaert

Finally, let me respond to Erik Schokkaert’s paper. There are several substantive comments that will require further thinking for those who want to proceed with the modular structure of the capability approach, just like I indicated that we might have to reconsider “value pluralism” as an A-module in my response to Culp. For now, I will focus on his more general comments on my book and on the literature.

Schokkaert’s worry is that the “cautious and oecumenical” approach I adopt suggest that “anything goes”, and that this “leaves too much leeway for undisciplined thinking” (Schokkaert 2019, 348). He would have preferred an account of the capability approach that has no B- and C-modules, but that instead would have bitten all bullets. But this would have required the capability approach to take a stance on several ontological questions, such as the nature of social structures such as gender, race and disability, or an account of agency. A quick look at the relevant literatures shows that scholars working on those questions disagree (sometimes deeply) on those matters. One of my aims in this book was to make capability scholars aware that they *are* making conceptual and ontological choices when filling in the B and/or C-modules when constructing a capability application or theory. In the philosophy of the social sciences and economics, a common line of argumentation is to show how such choices are made, yet scholars are not always aware of those choices, and do not properly defend them. Similarly, the open structure of the general capability approach I have put forward should help to make our critiques of specific capability applications and theories easier and more transparent, since we now have an account of the anatomy of capability theories and applications.

Schokkaert also advocates that the capability literature should be willing to interact more with non-capability scholars, and be more willing to import insights and ideas from outside the CA. He gives as an example of what the capability approach could learn from welfare economics. I totally agree on this matter, but again, this was not what this book was aiming to do. I believe (though the future will show whether I was right or wrong about this) that a book of the kind I have written helps capability scholars and especially the many students of the capability approach, to better and more effectively understand the anatomy of the approach, and to see at which points disciplinary interests play out and potentially clash on the capability terrain. I believe these issues need to be sorted out first before one can start to incorporate insights from other disciplines.

The fact that the section on welfare economics is called “Can the capability approach change welfare economics?” is very deliberately chosen, because in the capability literature many economists and philosophers studying the influence of economics on the other sciences and on the world hold the view that (welfare) economics needs to be broadened,

and thus, changed. This was one (not the only!) of the earliest motivations of capability scholars, and hence it seemed apt to devote a section to what progress, if any, has been made on this front. I certainly agree with Schokkaert that one should also ask the question “Can insights from welfare economics contribute to the development of the capability approach?”, and would applaud it if a welfare economist who knows how to write for a multidisciplinary audience would write such a paper.

At the end of his paper, Schokkaert claims that the capability approach is operating in “splendid isolation”, and expresses the worry that this book could contribute to that unfortunate condition. I think this claim is false. Perhaps this idea of “splendid isolation” is a correct impression one gets if one looks at the capability approach from the perspective of welfare economics, but it certainly doesn’t hold for the interaction of the capability approach with other disciplines, such as development studies, applied ethics, health studies, education, sociology of work, social policy, technology studies, and many other fields. So the frame of “splendid isolation” of the capability approach is not true, and it is not clear to me how the book would worsen the situation. I am not sure whether it contributes to building more bridges, but one would hope that if it sheds clarity on what the capability approach is, it would make it easier for other approaches and disciplines to engage in a conversation.

Let me close by once again expressing my sincere gratitude to Julian Culp, Pepi Patrón, Henry Richardson and Erik Schokkaert, and to the symposium editors David Clark, Rebecca Gutwald and Morten Fibieger Byskov. Book reviews and critiques are an important way to further a discussion in a scholarly field, because they are a much more flexible format in which to raise a worry, criticism or suggest an amendment or put forward an interpretation—many of which do not easily find their place in full-fledged scholarly paper. It is clear from the four reviews here that different types of readers have different worries and expectations—not just about the arguments I advanced in my book, but also about the capability literature in general. I hope we can keep this conversation going and extend it to disciplines other than philosophy and welfare economics, and especially further develop the capability approach to deliver research that will help to better understand our social world and improve it.

Notes

1. There is another example that I analyse in the book in which precisely the same clash between the disciplinary uses of terms occurs, when I discuss the claim by Richardson (2015) that we should drop the term “intrinsic” in relation to functionings and capabilities (Robeyns 2017, 53–55). There, too, we are confronted with a clash between how different disciplines use a certain word. My response to why we cannot simply drop the term “well-being” from the capability approach in this paper, has the same structure to my response in the book to the claim that capability scholars should drop the term “intrinsic”.

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