The Capability Approach
An Interdisciplinary Introduction

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1 Introduction

1.1 Why the capability approach?

Many people who encounter the capability approach for the first time, find the ideas embedded in the approach intuitively attractive. The basic claim of the capability approach – that, when asking normative questions, we should ask what people are able to do, and what lives they are able to lead – resonates with widespread ideas on how to make policies, views about what social justice requires, or bottom-up views about the idea of development. Perhaps the most important contribution the capability approach makes, is to prompt us to ask different questions, and to focus on different dimensions when we make observations or when we gather the relevant data for making evaluations or judgements.

What is the capability approach? This book will answer that question in detail. But let us start with a first, preliminary description, taken from a quote by Amartya Sen, the contemporary initiator of the capability approach. Sen (2009a, 16) writes: The capability approach “is an intellectual discipline that gives a central role to the evaluation of a person’s achievements and freedoms in terms of his or her actual ability to do the different things a person has reason to value doing or being”. The capability approach is concerned with aspects of people’s lives, such as their health, the education they can enjoy, and the support they enjoy from their social networks; and it is also concerned with what people can do, such as being able to work, raise a family, travel, or be politically active. The capability approach cares about people’s real freedoms to do these things, and the level of well-being that they will reach when choosing from the options open to them. It is a rich, multidimensional approach.

Here’s an example illustrating the difference the capability approach makes. Everyone agrees that poverty needs to be combatted – but who are the people that suffer from poverty? Which conceptual and normative framework do we use when we identify the poor? Which definition of poverty do we use when we analyse the incidence of poverty in a country? As empirical research has shown, it does matter whether one uses the widespread income-based metric, or whether one takes a capability perspective and focuses on a set of thresholds of
basic functionings, the lack of which indicates a dimension of poverty. Caterina Ruggeri Laderchi (1997) used data from a Chilean household survey, to investigate the extent to which an income-based measure is able to capture some basic functionings that could arguably be seen as central to poverty analysis: basic education, health, and nutrition. She found that the income variable in itself is insignificant as a determinant of shortfall in health, schooling and child nutrition, and that the role that income plays is highly non-linear and depends on a number of other personal, household, and regional characteristics. In other words, looking at the income level in a household to determine whether the members of that household are poor, may be a poor indicator for the prevalence of poverty. The difference between, on the one hand, the income-based measurements and, on the other hand, measurements based on a selection of basic indicators that are reflecting how people are doing has also been confirmed by a large number of other studies in the last 25 years.\(^1\) And it is for that income-based approach that the capability approach wants to offer an alternative.

Yet while the capability approach has been used to identify the poor, it has also been used for many other purposes. And the use of the capability approach has not been restricted to empirical research only. Some of its purposes have been theoretical, such as the construction of theories of justice (Anderson 1999; M. C. Nussbaum 2000; M. Nussbaum 2006b; Claassen 2016), or the development of a riches-line, which allows us to identify the rich (Robeyns 2017). Other uses of the capability approach have combined theoretical and empirical research, such as Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit’s (2007) study of disadvantage. Over the last 25 years, the range of fields in which the capability approach has been applied and developed, has expanded dramatically, and now includes global public health, development ethics, environmental protection and ecological sustainability, education, technological design, welfare state policies, and many, many more.\(^2\)

\(^1\) (see, among others, Klasen 2000; Laderchi, Saith, and Stewart 2003; Qizilbash 2002; Reddy, Visaria, and Asali 2009; Alkire et al. 2015a).

\(^2\) See section 1.4 for a more detailed discussion of the scope of the capability approach, and some references to the various fields in which it is now applied and developed.
For all these endeavours, the capability approach asks: *What are people really able to do, and what kind of person are they able to be?* Do the envisioned institutions, practices and policies focus on people’s capabilities, that is, their opportunities to do what they value and be the kind of person they want to be? Do people have the same capabilities in life? Or do global economic structures, domestic policies or brute luck make people’s capabilities unequal, and if so, is that unfair and should we do something about that? Do development projects focus on expanding people’s capabilities, or do they have another public policy goal (such as economic growth), or are they merely serving the interests of a dominant group? The capability approach thus offers a different perspective than alternative approaches which are focussing on the accumulation of material resources, or the mental states of people, such as their overall satisfaction with life.

1.2 The worries of the sceptics

Although the capability approach appeals to many readers, others have wondered whether this theory is really any different from other more established theories, or whether the capability approach is promising as a theory with sufficient bite. For example, John Rawls (1999, 13), while acknowledging that the idea of basic capabilities is important, calls it “an unworkable idea” for a liberal conception of justice. John Roemer (1996, 191–93) has criticized the capability approach for

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3 Some capability scholars, in particular Martha Nussbaum, have extended the capability approach to include the functionings of non-human animals. In this book, I restrict the discussion to *human* functionings and *human* capabilities. This is not to deny that the functionings of non-human animals are important, nor that for some normative purposes we need to consider both humans and non-human animals. There is a literature that analyses whether the capability approach can plausible be extended to include non-human animals, which will not be discussed here, given the focus on humans (e.g. M. Nussbaum 2006b; Schinkel 2008; Cripps 2010; Wissenburg 2011; Holland and Linch 2016). Note that there is also a large literature on ‘the capabilities of firms’, which is not related to how the term ‘capabilities’ is used in the capability approach. In this book, the term ‘capabilities’ refers only to the capabilities of members of the human species.
being not sufficiently specified – a complaint that is also echoed in the critique of Pratap Bhanu Mehta (2009). Others have questioned the practical significance of the capability approach for policy making and empirical assessment. For instance, Robert Sugden (1993, 1953) has questioned the usefulness of the capability approach for welfare economics – a critique to which we will return in section 4.9. In addition, at seminars and other scholarly gatherings, an often-heard critique is that the capability approach is old wine in new bottles – it aims to do what the non-economic social sciences have been doing all along. If that is the case, then why should we bother?4

There are two types of answers to the sceptics. The first answer to the sceptic is conceptual or theoretical, and that answer will be given in the remainder of this book. In a nutshell, the reason the capability approach is worth our time and attention is that it gives us a new way of evaluating the lives of people and the societies in which these people live their lives. The attention is shifted to public values currently not always considered most important – such as well-being, freedom, and justice. It is an alternative discourse or paradigm, perhaps even a ‘counter-theory’ to a range of more mainstream discourses on society, poverty and prosperity. Moreover, it brings insights from several disciplines together, and gives scholars from several disciplines a common interdisciplinary language. Nevertheless, from this it doesn’t follow that the capability approach will always offer a framework that is to be preferred over other frameworks: as this book will show, the capability approach has something to offer, but we should be careful not to overplay our hand and believe that it can do a better job for all normative questions.

The second answer to the sceptic is empirical – it is showing the sceptic what difference the capability approach makes. The earlier mentioned study by Ruggeri Laderchi (1997), and dozens similar studies, do exactly that. In 2006, I provided a survey of the studies where the capability approach had been put in practice (Robeyns 2006b) – a task which I think is no longer feasible today in a single paper or chapter, given that the empirical literature of applications of the

4 Several additional more specific critiques on the capability approach will be discussed in Chapter 4.
capability approach has exploded. But in order to illustrate in somewhat more depth this line of answer to the sceptic, let us focus on one type of empirical application of the capability approach, namely how we perceive and evaluate our lives at a macro level, and how we evaluate the societal arrangements in which we live those lives.

1.3 A yardstick for the evaluation of prosperity and progress

For many decades, the dominant way to measure development has been to focus on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or Gross National Product (GNP) per capita. The more we produce, the more developed our country has been taken to be. Yet a large literature has emerged arguing and showing that GDP per capita is limited, and often flawed, as a measure of social and economic progress (Fleurbaey 2009; Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi 2010; Fleurbaey and Blanchet 2013; Coyle 2015).

In one of the very first empirical applications of the capability approach, Amartya Sen (1985a) used some very simple statistics to illustrate how deceiving GDP per capita can be as a measure of prosperity and progress. Sen showed that, in the early 1980s, the (roughly equivalent) GNP per capita of Brazil and Mexico was more than 7 times the (roughly equivalent) GNP per capita of India, China and Sri Lanka – yet performances in life expectancy, infant mortality and child death rates were best in Sri Lanka, and better in China compared to India, and better in Mexico compared to Brazil. Important social indicators related to life, premature death and health, can thus not be read off the average national income statistic. Another finding was that India performs badly regarding basic education but has considerably higher tertiary education rates than China and Sri Lanka. Thus, Sen concluded that the public policy of China and especially Sri Lanka towards distributing food, public health measures, medical services and school education have led to their remarkable achievements in the capabilities of survival and education. What did this application teach us about the capability approach? First, ranking of countries based on GNP per capita can be quite different from a ranking

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5 An even earlier empirical study in which the capability approach is referred to as the right evaluative framework, was done by Amartya Sen and Sunil Sengupta (1983).
based on the selected functionings. Second, growth in GNP per capita should not be equated with growth in living standards.

Sen has often made use of the power of comparing the differences in the ranking of countries when one compares them based on GDP per capita, compared with indicators of some essential functionings. Recently Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (2013, 46–50) used the capability approach to develop an analysis of India’s development policies. For example, as table 1.1. shows, they compared India with the 15 other poorest countries outside sub-Saharan Africa, in terms of development indicators.6

Table 1.1.: Selected Indicators for the World’s 16 Poorest Countries, Outside Sub-Saharan Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>India</th>
<th>Average for other poorest countries</th>
<th>India's rank among poorest countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GDP per capita, 2011</td>
<td>3,203</td>
<td>2,112</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(PPP Constant 2005 international $)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life expectancy at birth, 2011 (years)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant mortality rate, 2011</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(per 1,000 live births)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-5 mortality rate, 2011</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(per 1,000 live births)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total fertility rate, 2011</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(children per woman)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to improved sanitation, 2010 (%)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean years of schooling, age 25+, 2011</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy rate, age 15-14 years, 2010 (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of children below five years Who are undernourished, 2006-10 (%)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underweight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stunted</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child immunization rates, 2011 (%)</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPT</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Drèze and Sen (2013, 47).

6 Those other countries are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, Haiti, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Moldova, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Yemen.
Of those 16 countries, India ranks on top in terms of GDP per capita, but ranks very low for a range of functionings, such as life expectancy at birth, infant mortality, undernourishment, schooling, and literacy. Other countries, with fewer financial means, were able to achieve better outcomes in terms of those functionings. Once again, the point is made that focussing on income-based metrics such as disposable income at the household level, or GDP per capita at the national level, gives limited information on the lives people can lead.

This type of illustration of the power of the capability approach, whereby at the macro-level the quality of life in a country is compared with GDP per capita, is not restricted to poor countries only. For example, the capability approach has recently also been taken up by the ‘Better Life Initiative’ of the OECD. The aim of this initiative is to track well-being, also historically, by looking at 10 dimensions of well-being: per capita GDP, real wages, educational attainment, life expectancy, height, personal security, the quality of political institutions, environmental quality, income inequality, and gender inequality. Several of these dimensions can be conceptualized through a capability lens, and others (such as per capita GDP or real wages) are needed for a comparison between capability-dimensions and income-dimensions, or can be seen as core capability-determinants or capability-inputs. In a recent report, which reconstructed the outcomes on those dimensions between 1820 and 2000, it was found that some dimensions, such as education, and health outcomes, are strongly correlated with per capita GDP, but others are not - such as the quality of political institutions, and homicide rates and exposure to conflicts (Van Zanden et al. 2014).

Another example illustrating the difference that the capability approach can make, is the analysis of gender inequality, for which it is clear that we are missing out the most important dimensions if we only focus on how income is distributed. There are two main problems for an income-metric approach to gender inequalities. The first is that it is often assumed that income within households will be shared. Yet that assumption makes most of economic inequalities between women and men invisible (Woolley and Marshall 1994; Phipps and Burton 1995; Robeyns 2006a). Moreover, gender scholars across the disciplines have argued that one of the most important dimensions of gender inequality is the distribution of burdens between men and women (paid work,
household work, and care work) - and that the fact that women are expected to do the lion’s share of unpaid household work and care work makes them financially vulnerable and restricts their options. Any account of gender inequality that would want to focus on what really matters, should talk about the gender division of paid and unpaid work, and the capability approach allows us to do that, since both paid and unpaid work can be conceptualised as important capabilities (e.g. Lewis and Giullari 2005; Robeyns 2003, 2010; Addabbo, Lanzi, and Picchio 2010).

Moreover, for millions of girls and women worldwide, the most important capability that is denied to them, is extremely basic - the capability to live in the first place. As Amartya Sen showed in an early study, and has been repeatedly confirmed since, millions of women are ‘missing’ from the surface of the Earth (and from the population statistics), since newborn girls have been killed or fatally neglected, or female foetuses have been aborted – because they were female (Sen 1990b, 2003b, 1992d; Klasen 1994; Klasen and Wink 2003). In sum, tracking the gap between women’s achievements in income and wealth or labour market outcomes will thus not reveal some crucial dimensions of gender inequalities, whereas the capabilities approach draws attention to these non-income dimensions.

Using the capability approach when thinking about prosperity and social progress has another advantage: it will impede policy makers from using mistaken assumptions about human beings in their policies – how we live together and interact in society and communities, what is valuable in our lives, and what kind of governmental support is needed in order for people (and in particular the disadvantaged) to flourish. For example, in their study of disadvantage in affluent societies (in particular, in the UK and Israel), Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit discuss the effects of a government policy of clearing a slum by moving the inhabitants to newly-built tower blocks. While there may be clear material advantages to this policy – in particular, improving the hygiene in which people live – a capabilitarian analysis will point out that this policy damages the social aspects of people’s well-being, since social networks and communities are broken up, and cannot simply be assumed to be rebuild in the new tower blocks (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007, 168, 178–79). Since social relationships among people are key
to their well-being, this may well have additional derivate effects on other dimensions of people’s well-being, such as their mental health. Understanding and seeing people as beings whose nature consists of a *plurality* of dimensions, can help governments to think carefully through all the relevant effects of their policies.

### 1.4 Scope and development of the capability approach

The previous section provides one type of answer to those who are sceptical about the capability approach, namely by showing what difference it makes in practice. The other strand in answering the sceptic who asks “Why bother?” is to explain in detail how one should understand the capability approach as a conceptual and theoretical frame and how it differs from other theoretical frameworks. After all, a proper understanding of what the capability approach precisely is (and is not) should also help in making clear what difference it can make. While this book is not framed as an answer to the sceptic, implicitly the sceptic should be able to find further answers in the chapters to come.

Nevertheless, we should not simply assume that the added-value of the capability approach is equal across cases, fields and disciplines. In some areas, the difference between the capability approach and the dominant ways of thinking and evaluation is so significant, that we can rightly speak of a ‘counter-theory’. In other debates and discussions, the difference that the capability approach makes to the prevailing modes of analysis has been more limited. Moreover, the development of the capability approach itself is uneven between different disciplines.

In some specialised debates the capability approach has been so much studied, developed or applied, that we should no longer speak of “the potential of the capability approach” or “the promises of the capability approach”, since the work that has been done has made quite clear what difference the capability approach *actually makes*. The prime example is the literature and debate on the very idea of what development is. The capability approach has made a crucial foundational contribution to the development of the human development paradigm which is now well-known, especially through the work of the *Human Development Reports*, which are annually published by the United Nations.
Development Programme (UNDP). In addition, Sen’s book that is most well-known among the wider public is Development as Freedom, which uses the capability approach as a key element of his alternative vision on development (Sen 1999a). In economics, Sabina Alkire, James Foster, and their collaborators have made major contributions to the development of poverty measures based on the capability approach, with the development of the Multidimensional Poverty Index (Alkire and Foster 2011; Alkire et al. 2015b). In the area of development studies, the capability approach is no longer a new and emerging alternative (as it was twenty to thirty years ago), but rather one of the major established approaches or frameworks.7

Another area is philosophical thinking about the metric of distributive justice (that is: what we ought to compare between individuals when we make statements about whether certain inequalities between people are unjust). In this literature too, the capability approach has by now established itself as an important alternative.8 And while work on development and on justice perhaps stand out, there are now significant literatures on the capability approach in many fields, such as health economics and public health,9 technology,10 sustainability


analysis and environmental policy studies,\textsuperscript{11} disability studies,\textsuperscript{12} and the vast literature in educational studies working with the capability approach.\textsuperscript{13}

However, in other academic debates it is more disputed to what extent the capability approach has already shown to be able to make a real difference. For example, in ethical theories within the systematic/analytical strand of philosophy, the capability approach hasn't been much developed yet. Similarly, one can doubt whether the capability approach has contributed to a significant change in mainstream economic thinking. The state of development of the capability approach within different academic disciplines and discussions thus differs significantly, and the effect the capability approach has had on developing new policies also differs drastically between different policy fields.

In the debates where the capability approach is now well-established, the development of that literature has often raised new questions. For example, in philosophical theories of justice there are now enough convincing arguments that the capability approach makes a difference, but the very possibility of a capability theory of justice has also allowed us to be much more explicit about which questions remain unaddressed in case one wants to make a substantive theory of (distributive) justice (Freeman 2006; Robeyns 2016d). This is a ‘normal’ way for how a paradigm develops. It therefore shouldn’t be surprising that we do not have fewer questions on the capability approach then a few years ago. We may even

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} E.g. (Anand and Sen 1994, 2000; Robeyns and Van der Veen 2007; Scholtes 2010; Schlosberg and Carruthers 2010; Rauschmayer, Omann, and Frühmann 2012; Schlosberg 2012; Crabtree 2013; Vogt-Kleschin 2013, 2015; Schultz et al. 2013; Holland 2014).
\item \textsuperscript{12} E.g. (M. C. Nussbaum 2002a; Burchardt 2004; Zaidi and Burchardt 2005; Terzi 2005, 2007, 2008; Wasserman 2005; Mitra 2006; Qizilbash 2011; Harnacke 2013; Robeyns 2016c)
\end{itemize}
have more questions, but they are different ones than those that were raised ten or twenty years ago.

Whatever the unevenness in its uptake and development between disciplines, and independent of the new questions that the capability approach has raised, the current state of the literature which I will present in this book confirms that the capability approach is here to stay. It makes a difference in many debates. It is one of those rare theories that strongly connects disciplines, and that offers a truly interdisciplinary language. And it leads to recommendations on how to organise society and choose policies that are often genuine alternatives for prevailing views.

1.5 A guide to the reader

This book has an extremely simple structure. Apart from the introduction and the conclusion, it has only three chapters – although each of them quite long. In chapter 2 we start with a rather simple explanation of the capability approach, and then present a more detailed account of capability theories, focussing in particular on their structure and properties. I will present the capability approach by describing it as having a modular structure – whereby each specific capability theory combines the core modules with a range of non-core modules. This way to look at the capability approach helps those who want to apply the capability approach for a particular question of problem to see clearly which elements are needed for such an application, and also makes it very clear that the capability approach can be specified in diverse ways. One could see chapter 2 as trying to provide the anatomy of the capability approach – to try to see behind its skin, to detect what its various organs are, and how they interact, and which ones are essential whereas others may be more tangential.

In chapter 0 we discuss further details and try to clear up some misunderstandings. The capability approach is a field that is notoriously prone to misunderstandings, in part because of its interdisciplinary nature, but also because the terminology differs somewhat between different authors. Chapter 3 tries to present the literature as neutrally as possible, describing how it has been evolving.
Chapter 4 then zooms in on a range of critiques that have been made on the capability approach, such as the critiques that it is too individualistic, that it cannot properly account for power, or that it is a liberal theory. In this chapter, my own voice will be more prominent, as I will engage with those critiques, agreeing with some of them (and, as philosophers do, giving reasons why I agree), but also arguing against some other critiques. Here, it will become clear what the value is of the distinction between the general capability approach and more specific capability theories, which I introduced in a recent paper (Robeyns 2016b), and explain again in section 2.3. As it turns out, some of the critiques are valid against particular capability theories, but make no sense against the capability approach in general. I hope that the adoption of that distinction will clear the capability literature of many confusing and unnecessary critiques, so that we can devote our energy to those that are powerful and that we need to engaged with. Moreover, let us not forget that the capability approach is a tool and not an end in itself; we should master it as well as we can, perhaps also as efficiently as we can, and then move on to use it in the work that really matters.
2 Core ideas and the framework

2.1 Introduction

The capability approach is used in a very wide range of fields where it is believed that the capability approach has something valuable to offer in our current thinking about those issues. The previous chapter listed a range of fields where the capability approach has been taken up, and in chapters 0 and 4 we focus in more detail on how the capability can (or cannot) make a difference for thinking about well-being, social and distributive justice, human rights, welfare economics and other fields. This broad uptake of the capability approach across disciplines and across different types of knowledge production (from theoretical and abstract to applied or policy-oriented) is testimony to the success of the approach. But how is the capability approach understood in these different fields, and is it possible to give a coherent and clarifying account of how we can understand the capability approach across those different fields? In other words, how should we understand the capability approach as an overarching framework, that unites its more specific uses in different fields and disciplines?

This chapter gives an account of that general framework. It provides explanations and insights in what the capability approach is, what its core claims are, and what additional claims we should pay attention to. And this chapter will also answer the question: what do we mean exactly when we say that the capability approach is a framework, or an approach?

In other words, in this chapter, I will give an account (or a description) of the capability approach at the most general level. I will bracket additional details and questions on which disagreement or confusion exists; chapter 0 will offer

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14 In developing my account of the capability approach as presented in this book, I have started in an inductive way – by trying to generalize from how the capability approach has been used in the literature. However, that literature has been critically scrutinized, and in some cases I have come to the conclusion that some ideas on this broad ‘capabilities literature’ do not survive careful analysis, and should be rejected. Put differently, my methodology has been to be as inclusive as possible, but not at the cost of endorsing (what I believe to be) confusions or errors.
more detailed clarifications and chapter 4 will discuss issues of debate and dispute.Taken together, these three chapters provide my understanding of the capability approach.

The chapter is structured as follows. In the next section, we look at a preliminary definition of the capability approach. Section 2.3 proposes to make a distinction between ‘the capability approach’ and ‘a capability theory’. This distinction is crucial – it will help us to clarify various issues that we will look at in this book, and it also provides some answers to the sceptics of the capability approach which we encountered in the previous chapter. Section 2.4 describes, from a bottom up perspective, the many ways in which the capability approach has been developed in particular theories, and argues why it is important to acknowledge the great diversity within capability scholarship. Sections 2.5 to 2.10 present an analytic account of the capability approach, and shows what is needed to develop a particular capability theory, application or analysis. In 2.5, I propose the modular view of the capability approach. This way of looking at the capability approach allows us to distinguish between three different types of modules that make up a capability theory. The first, Module A, consists of those properties that each capability theory should have (section 2.6). This is the non-optional core of each capability theory. Modules B are a set of modules where the module itself is non-optional, but there are different choices possible regarding the content of the module (section 2.7). For example, we cannot have a capability theory or application without having chosen a purpose of that theory or application – yet there are many different purposes among which we can choose. The third group of modules, Modules C, are either non-optional but dependent on a choice made in B, or else are completely optional. For example, if the purpose you choose is to measure poverty, then you need to decide on some empirical methods in C; but if your aim is to make a theory of justice, you don’t need to choose empirical methods and hence the module in C for empirical methods is not relevant for your capability application (section 2.8). In the next section, 2.9, I discuss the possibility of hybrid theories – theories that give a central role to functionings and capabilities yet violate some other core propositions. Section 2.10 rounds up the discussion of the modular view by discussing the relevance and advantages of seeing the capability approach from this perspective.
Section 2.11 summarises the conceptual aspects that have been explained by presenting a visualisation of the conceptual framework of the capability approach. Section 0 uses the modular view to illuminate the observation, which has been made by several capability scholars, that the capability approach has been used in a narrow and in a broad sense, and explains what difference lies behind this distinction. In the broader use of the capability approach, supporting or complementary theories, or additional normative principles are added to the core of the capability approach – yet none of them is itself essential to the capability approach. These are choices made in modules B or C. The modular view of the capability approach that will be central to this chapter can thus help to formulate in a sharper manner some observations that have already been made in the capability literature. The chapter closes by looking ahead to the next chapter.

2.2 A preliminary definition of the capability approach

The capability approach has in recent decades emerged as a new theoretical framework about well-being, freedom to achieve well-being, and all the public values in which either of these can play a role – such as development and social justice. Although there is some scholarly disagreement on the best description of the capability approach (which will be addressed in this chapter), it is generally understood as a conceptual framework for a range of evaluative exercises, including most prominent the following: (1) the assessment of individual levels of achieved well-being and well-being freedom; (2) the evaluation and assessment of social arrangements or institutions\(^\text{15}\); and (3) the design of policies and other forms of social change in society.

\(^{15}\) Amartya Sen often uses the term ‘social arrangement’, which is widely used in the social choice literature and in some other parts of the literature on the capability approach. Yet this term is not very widely used in other disciplines, and many have wondered what ‘social arrangement’ exactly means (e.g. Béteille 1993). Other scholars tend to use the term ‘institutions’, in a broad definition – understood as the formal and informal rules in society, that structure, facilitate and delineate actions and interactions in society. ‘Institutions’ are thus not merely laws and formal rules such as those related to the system of property rights or the social security system, but also informal rules and social norms, such as social norms that expect women to be responsible for raising
We can trace some aspects of the capability approach back to, among others, Aristotle, Adam Smith, Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill.\textsuperscript{16} - yet it is the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen who pioneered the approach and a growing number of other scholars across the humanities and the social sciences who have significantly developed it – most significantly Martha Nussbaum, who has developed the capability approach into a partial theory of social justice.\textsuperscript{17} Nussbaum also understands her own capabilities account as a version of a theory of human rights.\textsuperscript{18} The capability approach purports that freedom to achieve well-being is a matter of what people are able to do and to be, and thus the kind of life they are effectively able to lead. The capability approach is generally conceived as a flexible and multi-purpose framework, rather than a precise theory (Sen 1992a, 48; Alkire 2005; Robeyns 2005b, 2016b; Qizilbash 2012; Hick and Burchardt 2016, 78). This open-ended and underspecified nature of the capability approach is crucial, but it has not made it easier for its students to understand what kind of theoretical endeavour the capability approach exactly is. How should we understand it? Isn’t there a better account possible then the somewhat limited description of the capability approach as ‘an open, flexible and multi-purpose framework’? Answering these questions will be the task of this chapter.\textsuperscript{19}

The open and underspecified nature of the capability approach also explains why the term ‘capability approach’ was adopted and is now widely used rather than ‘capability theory’. Yet as I will argue in section 2.3, we could use the terms ‘capability theory’ and ‘capability approach’ in a more illuminating way to the children and caring for the ill and elderly, or social norms that forbids members of different castes to work together or interact on an equal footing.


\textsuperscript{17} A partial theory of justice is a theory that gives us an account of some aspects of what justice requires, but does not comment on what justice requires in other instances or areas.

\textsuperscript{18} On the relationship between the capabilities and human rights, see section 3.14.

\textsuperscript{19} For earlier attempts to describe the capability approach, see amongst others (Gasper 1997, 2007; Alkire, Qizilbash, and Comim 2008; Qizilbash 2012; Robeyns 2005b, 2016b).
signify a more substantive difference, which will help us to get a better grip on the capability literature.

It may be helpful to introduce the term ‘advantage’ here, which is a technical term used in academic debates about interpersonal comparisons, and in debates about distributive justice. A person’s advantage are those aspects of that person’s interests that matter (generally, or in a specific context). Hence ‘advantage’ could refer to a person’s achieved well-being, or it could refer to her opportunity to achieve well-being, or it could refer to her negative freedoms, or to her positive freedoms, or to some other aspect of her interests. The term ‘advantage’ is used to postpone or temporarily put aside the choice which of those more specific and precise ideas would be the thing we should care about. It thereby allows us to move the arguments to a higher level of generality or abstraction, since we can focus, for example, on which conditions interpersonal comparisons of advantage need to meet, without having to decide on the content of ‘advantage’.

Within the capability approach, there are two different specifications of ‘advantage’: achieved well-being, and the freedom to achieve well-being. The notions of ‘functionings’ and ‘capabilities’ – which will be explained in detail in section 2.6.1 - are used to flesh out the account of achieved well-being and the freedom to achieve well-being. Whether the capability approach is used to analyse distributive injustice, or measure poverty, or develop curriculum design - - in all these normative projects the capability approach prioritizes certain of peoples’ beings and doings and their opportunities to realize those beings and doings (such as their genuine opportunities to be educated, their ability to move

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\footnotesize A ‘technical term’ is a term which is used in a specialist debate, and has a meaning that is defined within that debate. In many cases, the term refers to something else than what the term refers to in common sense language (that is, laymen’s use of language).

\[\text{\footnotesize\ref{21}}\]

\footnotesize Following Amartya Sen (1985c), some would say there are four different ideas of advantage in the capability approach: achieved well-being, freedom to achieve well-being, achieved agency, and freedom to achieve agency. Yet whether the capability approach should always and for all purposes entail an explicit commitment to give considerable weight to agency is disputed.
around or to enjoy supportive social relationships). This stands in contrast to other accounts of advantage, which focus *exclusively* on mental categories (such as happiness) or on the material means to well-being (such as resources like income or wealth).²²

Thus, the capability approach is a conceptual framework, which is in ost cases used as a normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and institutions, in addition to its much more infrequent use for non-normative purposes.²³ It can be used to evaluate a range of values that draw on an assessment of people’s well-being, such as inequality, poverty, changes in the well-being of persons or the average well-being of the members of a group. It can also be used as an evaluative tool providing an alternative for social cost-benefit analysis, or as a framework within which to design and evaluate policies and institutions, such as welfare state design in affluent societies, poverty reduction strategies of governments and non-governmental organisations in developing countries.

What does it mean, exactly, if we say that something is a normative analysis? A *normative analysis* is an analysis that entails certain value judgements, that is, includes a view (whether implicit or explicit) about what is good (‘goodness’) and what is bad (‘badness’). There are different types of normative analyses, and two are very important for the capability approach: evaluative analyses, and prescriptive analyses. An *evaluative* analysis conducts an evaluation of a state of affairs. It is normative because the choice of the dimensions (and indicators) of the evaluation are value-laden. A *prescriptive* analysis tells us what should be done. It is normative because prescriptions are also value-laden.

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²² Of course, it doesn’t follow that mental categories or the material means play *no role at all*; but the normative *priority* lies with functionings and capabilities, and hence happiness or material resources play a more limited role (and, in the case of resources, a purely instrumental role). The relations between functionings/capabilities and resources will be elaborated in 3.12; the relationship between functionings/capabilities and happiness will be elaborated in more detail in section 3.8.

²³ On the question whether the capability approach can be used for non-normative purposes, see section 3.10.
Evaluative analyses and prescriptive analyses are closely intertwined, and often we first conduct an evaluative analysis, which is followed by a prescriptive analysis, e.g., by policy recommendations, as is done, for example, in the normative analysis of India conducted by Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (2013). However, one could also make an evaluative analysis while leaving the prescriptive analysis for someone else to make, perhaps leaving it to the agents who need to make the change themselves. For example, one can use the capability approach to make an evaluation or assessment of inequalities between men and women, without drawing prescriptive conclusions (Robeyns 2003, 2006a). Or one can make a prescriptive analysis that is not based on an evaluation, because it is based on universal moral rules. Examples are the capabilities theories of justice by Martha Nussbaum (2000; 2006b) and Rutger Claassen (2016).

2.3 The capability approach versus capability theories

The above preliminary definition highlights that the capability approach is an open-ended and underspecified framework, which can be used for multiple purposes. It is open-ended because the general capability approach can be developed into a range of difference directions, with different purposes; and it is underspecified because additional specifications are needed before the capability approach can become effective for a particular purpose – especially if we want it to be normative (whether evaluative or prescriptive). As a consequence, ‘the capability approach’ itself is an open, general idea, but there are many different ways to ‘close’ or ‘specify’ this notion. What is needed for this specifying or closing of the capability approach will depend on the aim or purpose of using the approach, e.g., whether we want to develop it into a (partial) theory of justice, or use it to assess inequality, or conceptualise development, or use it for some other purpose.

This distinction between the general, open, underspecified capability approach, and its particular use for specific purposes is absolutely crucial if we want to properly understand it. In order to highlight that distinction, but also to make it easier for us to be clear when we are talking about the general, open, underspecified capability approach, and when we are talking about a particular use for specific purposes, I propose that we use two different terms (Robeyns
Let us use the term ‘the capability approach’ for the general, open, underspecified approach, and let us employ the term ‘a capability theory’ or ‘a capability analysis, capability account or capability application’ for a specific use of the capability approach, that is, for a use that has a specific goal, such as theorising poverty, or developing a capabilitarian cost-benefit analysis, or theorising about human rights, or developing a theory of social justice.

One reason why this distinction between ‘capability approach’ and ‘capability theory’ is so important, is that many theories with which the capability approach have been compared over time, are specific theories, not general open frameworks. For example, John Rawls’s famous theory of justice is not a general approach but rather a specific theory of institutional justice (Rawls 2009), and this has made the comparison with the capability approach at best difficult and tricky (Robeyns 2008b). The appropriate comparison would be Rawls’s theory of justice with a properly developed capability theory of justice, such as Martha Nussbaum’s *Frontiers of Justice* (M. Nussbaum 2006b), but not Rawls’s theory of justice with the (general) capability approach.

Another reason why the distinction between ‘capability approach’ and ‘capability theory’ is important, is that it can help providing an answer to the “number of authors [who] ‘complain’ that the capability approach does not address questions they put to it” (Alkire 2005, 123). That complaint is misguided, since the capability approach cannot, by its very nature, answer all the questions that should instead be put to particular capability theories. For example, it is a mistake to critique Amartya Sen that he has not drawn up a specific list of relevant functionings in his capability approach; that critique would only have bite if Sen were to develop a particular capability theory or capability application where a selection of functionings is a requirement.24

24 Yet even for capability theories, it is unlikely that Sen would agree that he has to draw up a list of capabilities, since he is a proponent to the procedural approach to selecting capabilities. At the beginning of this century, there was a fierce discussion in the capability literature on whether it was a valid critique on Sen’s work that it lacked a specific list (M. C. Nussbaum 2003a; Robeyns 2003; Sen 2004a; Qizilbash 2005). Luckily
In short, there is one capability approach and there are many capability theories, and keeping that distinction sharply in mind should clear up quite some misunderstandings in the literature.

However, if we accept the distinction between capability theories and the capability approach, it does naturally raise the question what these different capability theories have in common. Before addressing that questions, I first want to present a bottom-up description of the many modes in which capability analyses have been conducted. This will give us a better sense of what the capability approach has been used for, and what it can do for us.

2.4 The many modes of capability analysis

If the capability approach is an open framework, then what are the ways in which it has been closed into more specific and powerful analyses? Scholars use the capability approach for different types of analysis, with different goals, relying on different methodologies, with different corresponding roles for functionings and capabilities. Not all of these are capability theories; some are capability applications, both empirical as well as theoretical. We can observe that there is a rich diversity of ways in which the capability approach has been used.

Table 2.1 gives an overview of the different usages of the capability approach, by listing the different types of capability analyses.

Normative theorising within the capability approach is often done by moral and political philosophers. The capability approach is then used as one element of a normative theory, such as a theory of justice or a theory of disadvantage. For example, Elizabeth Anderson (1999) has proposed the outlines of a theory of social justice (which she calls “democratic equality”) in which certain basis levels of capabilities that are needed to function as equal citizens should be guaranteed to all. Martha Nussbaum (2006b) has developed a minimal theory of social justice in which she defends a list of basic capabilities that everyone should be entitled to, as a matter of human dignity.

that debate seems to be settled now. For an overview of the different ways in which dimensions can be selected in the capability approach, see section 2.7.2.
Table 2.1: Modes of capability analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Epistemic goal</th>
<th>Methodology/discipline</th>
<th>Role of functionings and capabilities</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normative theories (of particular values), e.g. theories of justice, human rights, well-being, sustainability, efficiency, etc.</td>
<td>Philosophy, in particular ethics and normative political philosophy</td>
<td>The metric/currency in the interpersonal comparisons of advantage which are entailed in the value that is being analysed.</td>
<td>(Sen 1993b; Anand and Sen 1994; Crabtree 2012, 2013; Lessmann and Rauschmayer 2013; Robeyns 2016c; M. Nussbaum 1992, 1997; M. C. Nussbaum 2000; M. Nussbaum 2006b; Wolff and De-Shalit 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative applied analysis, including policy design</td>
<td>Applied ethics (e.g. medical ethics, bio-ethics, economic ethics, development ethics ...) and normative strands in the social sciences.</td>
<td>A metric of individual advantage that is part of the applied normative analysis</td>
<td>(Alkire 2002; Robeyns 2003; Canoy, Lerais, and Schokkaert 2010; Holland 2014; Ibrahim 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare/Quality of life measurement</td>
<td>Quantitative empirical strands within various social sciences</td>
<td>Social indicators</td>
<td>(Kynch and Sen 1983; Sen 1985a; Kuklys 2005; Alkire and Foster 2011; Alkire et al. 2015b; Chiappero-Martinetti 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thick description / descriptive analysis</td>
<td>Qualitative empirical strands with various humanities and social sciences.</td>
<td>Elements of a narrative</td>
<td>(Unterhalter 2003b; Conradie 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the nature of certain ideas, practices, notions (other than the values in the normative theories)</td>
<td>Conceptual analysis</td>
<td>Used as part of the conceptualisation of the idea or notion.</td>
<td>(Sen 1993b; Robeyns 2006c; Wigley and Akkoyunlu-Wigley 2006; van Hees 2013)</td>
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</table>

Source: Robeyns (2005a), expanded and updated.
While most normative theorising within the capability approach has related to justice, other values have also been developed and analysed using the capability approach. Some theorists of freedom have developed accounts of freedom or rights using the capability approach (van Hees 2013). Another important value that has been studied from the perspective of the capability approach is ecological sustainability (e.g. Anand and Sen 1994, 2000; Robeyns and Van der Veen 2007; Lessmann and Rauschmayer 2013; Crabtree 2013). Efficiency is a value on which very limited conceptual work is done, but which nevertheless is inescapably normative, and it can be theorised in many different ways (Le Grand 1990; Heath 2006). If we ask what efficiency is, we could answer this by referring to Pareto optimality or x-efficiency, but we could also develop a notion of efficiency from a capability perspective (Sen 1993b). Such a notion would answer the question ‘efficiency of what?’ with ‘efficiency in the space of capabilities (or functionings, or a mixture)’. 

Quantitative social scientists, especially economists, are mostly interested in measurement. This quantitative work could serve different purposes, e.g. the measurement of multidimensional poverty analysis (Alkire and Foster 2011; Alkire et al. 2015b), or the measurement of the disadvantages faced by disabled people (Kuklys 2005; Zaidi and Burchardt 2005). Moreover, some quantitative social scientists, mathematicians, and econometricians have been working on investigating the methods that could be used for quantitative capability analyses (Kuklys 2005; Di Tommaso 2007; Krishnakumar 2007; Krishnakumar and Ballon 2008; Krishnakumar and Nagar 2008).

Thick description or descriptive analysis is another mode of capability analysis. For example, it can be used to describe the realities of schoolgirls in countries which may have formal access to school for both girls and boys, but where other hurdles (such as high risk of rape on the way to school, or the lack of sanitary provisions at school) mean that this formal right is not enough to guarantee these girls the corresponding capability (Unterhalter 2003b).

Finally, the capability approach can be used for conceptual work beyond the conceptualisation of values as is done within normative philosophy. Sometimes the capability approach lends itself well to providing a better understanding of a certain phenomenon. For example, we could understand
education as a legal right or as an investment in human capital, but we could also conceptualise it as the expansion of a capability. This would not only help us to look differently at what education is; a different conceptualisation would also have normative implications, for example related to the curriculum design, or to answer the question what is needed to ensure that capability, or how much education should be guaranteed to children with low potential market-related human capital (M. C. Nussbaum 2012; Robeyns 2006c; Walker 2012a; Walker and Unterhalter 2007; Wigley and Akoyunlu-Wigley 2006).

Of course, texts and research projects often have multiple goals, and therefore particular studies often mix these different goals and methods. Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen’s (1996, 2002, 2013) comprehensive analyses of India’s human development achievements are in part an evaluative analysis based on various social indicators, but also in part a descriptive analysis. Similarly, Nussbaum’s (2000) book Women and Human Development is primarily normative and philosophical, but also includes thick descriptions of how institutions enable or hamper people’s capabilities, by focussing on the lives of particular women.

What is the value of distinguishing between different uses of the capability approach? It is important because functionings and capabilities—the core concepts in the capability approach—play different roles in each type of analysis. In quality of life measurement, the functionings and capabilities are the social indicators that reflect a person’s quality of life. In thick descriptions and descriptive analysis, the functionings and capabilities form part of the narrative. This narrative can aim at reflecting the quality of life, but it can also aim at understanding some other aspect of people’s lives, such as explaining behaviour that might appear irrational according to traditional economic analysis, or revealing layers of complexities that a quantitative analysis can rarely capture. In philosophical reasoning, the functionings and capabilities play yet another role, as they are often part of the foundations of a utopian account of a just society, or they are part of the goals that morally sound policies should pursue.

The different roles that functionings and capabilities play in different types of capability analyses, has an important implication for the question how to select the relevant capabilities: each type of analysis, with their different goals, will require their own answer to this question. The selection of capabilities as social
indicators of the quality of life is a very different undertaking from the selection of capabilities for a utopian theory of justice: the quality standards for research and scholarship are different, the epistemic constraints of the research are different, the best available practices in the field are different. Moral philosophers, quantitative social scientists, and qualitative social scientists have each signed up to a different set of meta-theoretical assumptions, and find different academic practices acceptable and non-acceptable. For example, many ethnographers tend to reject normative theorising and also often object to what they consider the reductionist nature of quantitative empirical analysis, whereas many economists tend to discard the thick descriptions by ethnographers, claiming they are merely anecdotal and hence not scientific.

Let us consider two remarks before closing this section. First, providing a typology of the work on the capability approach, as this section attempts to do, remains work in progress. In 2004, I could only discern 3 main modes of capability analysis: quality of life analysis; thick description/descriptive analysis; and normative theories – though I left open the possibility that the capability approach could be used for other goals too (Robeyns 2005a). In her book Creating Capabilities, Nussbaum (2011a) writes that the capability approach comes in only two modes: comparative quality of life assessment, and as a theory of justice. I don’t think that is correct: not all modes of capability analysis can be reduced to comparative quality of life assessment, or to theorising about justice, as I have argued elsewhere in detail (Robeyns 2011, 2016b). The different modes of capability analysis described in table 2.1 provide a more comprehensive overview, but we should not assume that this overview is complete.

Second, it is important that we fully acknowledge the diversity of disciplines, the diversity of goals we have with knowledge production, and the diversity of methods used within the capability approach. At the same time, we need not forget that some aspects of its development might need to be discipline-specific, or specific for one’s goals. As a result, the capability approach is at the same time multi-disciplinary, interdisciplinary, but also forms part of developments within disciplines and methods. These different ‘faces’ of the capability approach all need to be fully acknowledged if we want to get a sufficiently nuanced and complete understanding of the capability approach.
2.5 The modular view of the capability approach

It is time to take stock. What do we already know about the capability approach, and which questions does the analysis so far raise? The capability approach is an open approach, and depending on its purpose can be developed into a range of capability theories or capabilitarian applications. It is focused on what people can do and be (their capabilities) and on what they are actually achieving in terms of beings and doings (their functionings). However, this still does not answer the question what kind of framework the capability approach is. Can we give an account of a capability theory (or a model, if one prefers that terminology) that is more enlightening regarding what exactly makes a theory a capabilitarian theory, and what doesn’t?

In this book, I present an account of the capability approach that, on the one hand, makes clear what all capability theories share, yet on the other hand allows us to better understand the many forms that a capability theory or capability account can take – hence to appreciate the diversity within the capability approach more fully. The modular view that I present here is a modified (and, I hope, improved) version of the cartwheel model that I published recently (Robeyns 2016b). The modular view shifts the focus a little bit from the question how to understand the capability approach in general, to the question how the various capabilities accounts, applications and theories should be understood and how they should be constructed. After all, students, scholars, policy makers and activists are often not concerned with the capability approach in general, but rather want to know whether it would be a smart idea to use the capability approach to construct a particular capability theory, application or account for the problem or question they are trying to analyse. In order to answer the question whether, for their purposes, the capability approach is a helpful framework to consider, they need to know what is needed for a capability theory, application or account. The modular view that will follow will give those who want to develop a capability theory, application or analysis a list of properties which their theory has to meet, a list of choices that need to be made but where several options regarding content are possible, and a list of modules that they could take into account, but which will not always be necessary.
In order to improve readability, I will speak in what follows of ‘a capability theory’ as a short-hand for ‘a capability account, or capability application, or capability theory’. A capability theory is constructed based on three different types of modules, which (in order to facilitate discussion) will be called module A, modules B and modules C. Module A is a single module which is compulsory for all capability theories. Module A consists of a number of propositions (definitions and claims) which a capability theory should not violate. This is the core of the capability approach, and hence entails those properties which all capability theories share. Modules B consists of a range of non-optional modules with optional content. That is, if we construct a capability theory, we have to consider the issue that the module addresses, but there are several different options to choose from in considering that particular issue. For example, Module B1 is the ‘purpose’ of the theory: do we want to make a theory of justice, or a more comprehensive evaluative framework for societal institutions, or do we want to measure poverty or inequality, or design a curriculum, or do we want to use the capability approach to conceptualise ‘social progress’ or ‘efficiency’ or rethink the role of universities in the 21st Century? All these purposes are possible within the capability approach. The point of seeing this as a module B is that one has to be clear about one’s purpose, but there are many different specific purposes possible.

Modules C are either contingent on a particular choice made in a B-module, or they can be fully optional. For example, one can offer a comprehensive evaluation of a country’s development path, and decide that as part of this evaluation, one wants to include particular accounts of the history and culture of that country, since this may make it more comprehensible why that country has taken this particular development path rather than another. The particular historical account that would be part of one’s capability theory would then be optional.25

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25 To say that the insertion of those theories is fully optional, is not the same as saying that capability theories that will be developed with different types of additional complementary theories will all be equally good. For example, historians are very likely to think that most theories, even normative theories, have to be historically informed, and hence the relevant historical knowledge will need to be added to a capability theory.
Given this three-fold structure of the modular view of capability theories, let us now investigate what the content of the compulsory module A is, as well as what the options within modules B and modules C are.

2.6 Module A: the non-optional core properties of all capability theories

What, then, is the content of module A, which all capability theories should share? Table 2.2 presents the 8 propositions of module A.

Table 2.2. The content of the compulsory module A

| A1: Functionings and capabilities as core concepts |
| A2: Functionings and capabilities are value-neutral categories |
| A3: Conversion factors |
| A4: The distinction between means and ends |
| A5: Functionings and/or capabilities form the evaluative space |
| A6: Other dimensions of ultimate value |
| A7: Value pluralism |
| A8: Normative individualism |

2.6.1 A1: Functionings and capabilities

Functionings and capabilities are the core concepts in the capability approach. They are also the dimensions in which interpersonal comparisons of ‘advantage’ are made (this is what property A5 entails). They are the most important distinctive features of all capabilitarian theories. There are some differences in the usage of these notions between different capability theorists, but these differences are not affecting the essence of these notions: capabilities capture what people are able to do and to be, and functionings point to the corresponding achievements.

But these are matters of dispute that have to be debated, and cannot be settled by narrowing down the definition of a capability theory.

26 See section 2.2 for an explanation of the technical term ‘advantage’.

27 For some core differences in the way Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen use the terms ‘functionings’ and ‘capabilities’, see section 3.2.
Capabilities are real freedoms or real opportunities, which do not refer to access to resources or opportunities for certain levels of satisfaction; rather, they refer to what a person can do and to the various states of being of this person. Capabilities refer to both what we are able to do (activities) as well as the kind of person we can be (aspects of our being). These ‘beings and doings’, that is, the various states of human beings and activities that a person can engage in, are referred to as (human) functionings in the capability approach. Examples of the former (the ‘beings’) are being well-nourished, being undernourished, being sheltered and housed in a decent house, being educated, being illiterate, being part of a supportive social network; these also include very different beings such as being part of a criminal network and being depressed. Examples of the latter category of functionings (the ‘doings’) are travelling, caring for a child, voting in an election, taking part in a debate, taking drugs, killing animals, eating animals, consuming great amounts of fuel in order to heat one’s house, and donating money to charity.

Capabilities are a person’s real freedoms or opportunities to achieve functionings. Thus, while travelling is a functioning, the real opportunity to travel is the corresponding capability. A person who does not travel may or may not be free and able to travel; the notion of capability seeks to capture precisely the fact of whether the person could travel if she wanted to. The distinction between functionings and capabilities is between the realized and the effectively possible, in other words, between achievements, on the one hand, and freedoms or valuable opportunities from which one can choose, on the other.

Functionings are constitutive of human life. At least, this is a widespread view, certainly in the social sciences, policy studies, and in a significant part of philosophy – and I think it is a view that is helpful for the interdisciplinary, practical orientation that the vast majority of capability research has.

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28 See also section 3.3 which discussed in more depth the kind of freedoms or opportunities that capabilities are.

29 The exceptions are those philosophers who want to develop normative theories while wanting to steer away from any metaphysical claims (that is, claims about how things are when we try to uncover their essential nature). I agree that the description of
means that one cannot be a human being without having at least a range of functionings; they make the lives of human beings both lives (as opposed to the existence of innate objects) and human (in contrast to the lives of trees or animals). Human functionings are those beings and doings constituting human life and that are central to our understandings of ourselves as human beings.

It is hard to think of any phenomenological account of the lives of humans – either an account given by a human being herself, or an account from a third-person perspective – which does not include a description of a range of human functionings. Yet, not all beings and doings are functionings; for example, flying like a bird or living for 200 years like an oak tree are not human functionings.

In addition, some human beings or doings may not be constitutive but rather contingent upon our social institutions; these, arguably, should not qualify as ‘pure functionings’, - that is, universal functionings no matter the social circumstances in which one lives- but are rather ‘context-dependent functionings’ – functionings that are to a significant extent dependent on the existing social structures. For example, ‘owning a house’ is not a pure functioning, yet ‘being sheltered in a safe way and protected from the elements’ is a pure functioning. One can also include the capability of being sheltered in government-funded housing or by a rental market for family houses, which is regulated in such a way that it does not endanger important aspects of that capability.

Note that many features of a person could be described either as a being or as a doing: we can say that a person is housed in a pleasantly warm house, or that this person does consume lots of energy to keep her house warm. Yet other functionings are much more straightforwardly described as either a being or a doing, for example ‘being healthy’ (a being) or ‘killing animals’ (a doing).

A final remark. Acknowledging that functionings and capabilities are the core concepts of the capability approach generates some further conceptual questions, which have not all been sufficiently addressed in the literature. An important question is whether additional structural requirements on the relations ‘functionings’ and ‘capabilities’ in this section makes metaphysical claims, but I think they are very ‘minimal’ (in the sense that they are not wildly implausible, and still leave open a wide variety of theories to be developed).
between various capabilities should be imposed on the capability approach in general (not merely as a particular choice for a specific capability theory). Very little work has been done on the question of the conceptual properties of capabilities understood as freedoms or opportunities and on the question of the minimum requirements of the opportunity set that make up these various capabilities. But it is clear that more needs to be said about which properties we want functionings, capabilities, and sets of capabilities to meet. One important property has been pointed out by Kaushik Basu (1987), who argued that the moral relevance lies not in the various capabilities each taken by themselves and only considering the choices made by one person. Rather, the moral relevance lies in whether capabilities are truly available to us given the choices made by others.

2.6.2 A2: functionings and capabilities are value-neutral categories

*Functionings and capabilities are defined in a value-neutral way.* Functionings can be valuable, but not all functionings necessarily have a positive value. Instead, some functionings have no value or even have a negative value, e.g., the functioning of being affected by a painful, debilitating and ultimately incurable illness or of engaging in acts of violence. In those latter cases, we are better off without that functionings outcome, and the functionings outcome has a negative value. Functionings are constitutive elements of human life – which consist in both well-being and ill-being. The notion of functionings should, therefore, be value-neutral in the sense that we should conceptually allow for the idea of ‘bad functionings’ or functionings with a negative value (Deneulin and Stewart 2002, 67; M. C. Nussbaum 2003a, 45; Stewart 2005, 190; Carter 2014, 79–81).

There are many beings and doings that have negative value, but they are still ‘a being’ or ‘a doing’ and, hence, a functioning. Nussbaum made that point forcefully when she argued that the capability to rape should not be a capability that we have reason to protect (Nussbaum 2003: 44–45). A country could *effectively* enable people to rape, for example, either when rape is not illegal (as it is not between husband and wife in my countries), or when rape is illegal, but never leads to any punishment of the aggressor. If there is a set of social norms justifying rape, and would-be rapists help each-other to be able to rape, then would-be rapists in that country effectively enjoy the capability to rape. But
clearly, rape is a moral bad, and a huge harm to its victims; it is thus not a capability that a country should want to protect. This example illustrates that both functionings as well as capabilities can be harmful or have a negative value, as well as be positive or valuable. ‘Functionings’ and ‘capabilities’ are thus in themselves neutral concepts, and hence we cannot escape to decide which ones we want to support and enable, and which ones we want to fight or eliminate. Frances Stewart and Séverine Deneulin (2002, 67) put it as follows:

“[...] some capabilities have negative values (e.g., committing murder), while others may be trivial (riding a one-wheeled bicycle). Hence there is a need to differentiate between "valuable" and non-valuable capabilities, and indeed, within the latter, between those that are positive but of lesser importance and those that actually have negative value.”

The above examples show that some functionings can be univocally good (e.g. being in good health) or univocally bad (e.g. being raped). In those cases, there will be unanimity on whether the functionings outcome is bad or good. But now we need to add a layer of complexity. Sometimes, it will be a matter of doubt, or of dispute, whether a functioning will be good or bad – or the goodness or badness may depend on the context and/or the normative theory which we endorse. An interesting example is giving care, or ‘care work’.30 Clearly being able to care for someone could be considered a valuable capability. For example, in the case of child care, there is much joy, and many parents would like to work less so as to spend more time with their children. But care work has a very ambiguous character if we try to answer whether it should be considered to be a valuable functionings from the perspective of the person who does the care. There is also lots of care being performed primarily because there is familial or social pressure put on someone (generally: women) to do so, or because no-one else is doing it (Lewis and Giullari 2005). There is also the hypothesis that care work can be a

30 On the complex nature of ‘care’, and what the need to care and be cared for requires from a just society, see e.g. (Tronto 1987; Kittay 1999; M. Nussbaum 2006b; Folbre 1994; Folbre and Bittman 2004; Engster 2007; Gheaus 2011; Gheaus and Robeyns 2011)
positive functioning if done for a limited amount of time, but becomes a negative functioning if it is done for many hours. Hence, from the functionings outcome in itself, we cannot conclude whether this is a positive element of that person’s quality of life, or rather a negative element; and in fact, sometimes it will be an ambiguous situation, which cannot easily be judged (Robeyns 2003).

Many specific capability theories make the mistake in defining functionings as those beings and doings that one has reason to value. But the problem with this definition is that it collapses two aspects in the development of a capability theory into one: the definition of the relevant space (e.g., income, or happiness, or functionings) and, once we have chosen for functionings and capabilities, the normative decision regarding which of those capabilities will be the focus of our theory. We may agree on the first issue and not on the second and still both rightly believe that we endorse a capability theory—yet this is only possible if we analytically separate the normative choice for functionings and capabilities from the additional normative decision of which functionings we will regard as valuable and which we will not regard as valuable. Collapsing these two normative moments into one is not a good idea; instead, we need to acknowledge that there are two normative moves being made when we use functionings and capabilities as our evaluative space, and we need to justify each of those two normative moves separately.

Note that the value-laden definition of functionings and capabilities, which defines them as always good and valuable, may be less problematic when one develops a capability theory of severe poverty or destitution. We all agree that poor health, poor housing, poor sanitation, poor nutrition and social exclusion are dimensions of destitution. So, for example, the dimensions chosen for the Multidimensional Poverty Index developed by Sabina Alkire and her colleagues – health, education and living standard – may not elicit much disagreement.31 But

31 The Multidimensional Poverty Index is developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, under the leadership of Sabina Alkire. See http://www.ophi.org.uk/multidimensional-poverty-index/ for a clear introduction the Multidimensional Poverty Index. For scholarly papers on the multidimensional poverty
for many other capability theories, it is disputed whether a particular functionings outcome is valuable or not. The entire field of applied ethics is full with questions and cases where these disputes are debated. Is sex work bad for adult sex workers, or should it be valued as a valuable capability? Is the capability of parents not to vaccinate their children against polio or measles a valuable freedom? If employees in highly competitive organisations are not allowed to read their emails after working hours, is that then a valuable capability that is taken away from them, or are we protecting them from becoming workaholics and protecting them from pressures to always work, including in evenings and weekends? As these examples show, we need to allow for the conceptual possibility that there are functionings that are always valuable, never valuable, valuable or non-valuable in some contexts but not in others, or where we simply are not sure. This requires that functionings and capabilities are conceptualised in a value-neutral way, and hence this should be a core requirement of the capability approach.

2.6.3 A3: Conversion factors
A third core idea of the capability approach is that persons have different abilities to convert resources into functionings. These are called conversion factors: the degree to which a person can transform a resource into a functioning. This has been an important idea in Amartya Sen’s version of the capability approach (Sen 1992a, 19–21, 26–30, 37–38) and scholars influenced by his writings. Resources, such as marketable goods and services, but also goods and services emerging from the non-market economy, including household production, have certain characteristics that make them of interest to people. For example, we may be interested in a bike not because it is an object made from certain materials with a specific shape and colour, but because it can take us to places where we want to go, and in a faster way than if we were walking. These characteristics of a good or commodity enable or contribute to a functioning. A bike enables the functioning of mobility, to be able to move oneself freely and more rapidly than walking. The relation between a good and the achievement of certain beings and doings is

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index, as well as other work done by the scholars in OPHI, see http://www.ophi.org.uk/resources/ophi-working-papers/

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captured with the term ‘conversion factor’: the degree in which a person can transform a resource into a functioning. For example, an able-bodied person who was taught to ride a bicycle when he was a child has a high conversion factor enabling him to turn the bicycle into the ability to move around efficiently, whereas a person with a physical impairment or someone who never learnt to ride a bike has a very low conversion factor. The conversion factors thus represent how much functioning one can get out of a good or service; in our example, how much mobility the person can get out of a bicycle.

There are several different types of conversion factors, and the conversion factors discussed are often categorized into three groups (Robeyns 2005b, 99; Crocker and Robeyns 2009, 68). All conversion factors influence how a person can be or is free to convert the characteristics of the resources into a functioning, yet the sources of these factors may differ. Personal conversion factors are internal to the person, such as metabolism, physical condition, sex, reading skills, or intelligence. If a person is disabled, or if she is in bad physical condition, or has never learned to cycle, then the bike will be of limited help in enabling the functioning of mobility. Social conversion factors are factors stemming from the society in which one lives, such as public policies, social norms, practices that unfairly discriminate, societal hierarchies, or power relations related to class, gender, race, or caste. Environmental conversion factors emerge from the physical or built environment in which a person lives. Among aspects of one’s geographical location are climate, pollution, the proneness to earthquakes, and the presence or absence of seas and oceans. Among aspects of the built environment are the stability of buildings, roads, and bridges, and the means of transportation and communication. Take the example of the bicycle. How much a bicycle contributes to a person’s mobility depends on that person’s physical condition (a personal conversion factor), the social mores including whether women are socially allowed to ride a bicycle (a social conversion factor), and the available of decent roads or bike paths (an environmental conversion factor). Once we start to be aware of the existence of conversion factors, it becomes clear that they are a very pervasive phenomenon. For example, a pregnant or lactating woman needs more of the same food than another woman in order to be well-nourished. Or people living in delta regions need protection from flooding if they want to enjoy the same
protection against flooding as people living in the mountains. And there are an infinite number of other examples illustrating the importance of conversion factors.

The three types of conversion factors all push us to acknowledge that it is not sufficient to know the resources a person owns or can use in order to be able to assess the well-being that he or she has achieved or could achieve; rather, we need to know much more about the person and the circumstances in which he or she is living. Differences in conversion factors are one important source of human diversity, which is a central concern in the capability approach, and will be discussed in more detail in section 3.5.

2.6.4 A4: The means-ends distinction

The fourth core characteristic of the capability approach is the means-ends distinction. The approach stresses that we should always be clear, when valuing something, whether we value it as an end in itself, or as a means to a valuable end. For the capability approach, when considering interpersonal comparisons of advantage, the ultimate ends are people’s capabilities (there could be other ends as well; see 2.6.6). This implies that the capability approach evaluates policies and other changes according to their impact on people’s capabilities as well as their actual functionings; yet at the same time it needs to ask whether the preconditions – the means and the enabling circumstances – for those capabilities are in place. It asks whether people are able to be healthy, and whether the means or resources necessary for this capability, such as clean water, adequate sanitation, access to doctors, protection from infections and diseases, and basic knowledge on health issues, are present. It asks whether people are well-nourished, and whether the means or conditions for the realization of this capability, such as having sufficient food supplies and food entitlements, are being met. It asks whether people have access to a high-quality education system, to real political participation, and to community activities that support them, that enable them to cope with struggles in daily life, and that foster caring friendships. Hence we do need to take the means into account too; but we can only do so, if we first know what the ends are.

Much of the critique that capability theorists have advanced against alternative normative frameworks, can be traced back to the objection that
alternative approaches focus on particular means to well-being rather than the ends. The main reason why the capability approach holds that we have to start our analysis from the ends rather than the means, is that people differ in their ability to convert means into valuable opportunities (capabilities) or outcomes (functionings) (Sen 1992b, 26–28, 36–38). Since ends are what ultimately matters when thinking about well-being and the quality of life, means can only work as fully reliable proxies of people’s opportunities to achieve those ends if all persons have the same capacities or powers to convert those means into equal capability sets. This is an assumption that goes against a core characteristic of the capability approach, namely claim A3 – the interindividual differences in the conversion of resources into functionings and capabilities. Capability scholars believe that these inter-individual differences are far-reaching and significant, and hence this also explains why the idea of conversion factors is a core notion in the capability approach (see 2.6.3). Theories which focus on means only run the risk of downplaying the normative relevance of not only these conversion factors, but also on the differences in structural constraints that people face (see 2.7.5).

One could argue, however, that the capability approach does not focus entirely on ends, but rather on the question whether a person is being put in the conditions in which she can pursue her ultimate ends. For example, being able to read could be seen as not an ultimate end in itself, since people’s ultimate ends will be more specific, such as reading street signs, the newspaper, or the Bible or Koran. It is therefore somewhat more precise to say that the capability approach focuses on people’s ends in terms of beings and doings expressed in general terms: being literate, being mobile, being able to hold a decent job. Whether a particular person then decides to translate these general capabilities in the more specific capabilities A, B or C (e.g. reading street signs, reading the newspaper, or reading the Bible), is up to them. Whether that person decides to stay put, travel to the US or rather to China, is not normatively relevant for the capability approach: the

32 This is a critique that the capability approach shares with the happiness approach, which also focusses on what it considers to be an end in itself – happiness. Still, capability scholars have reasons why they do not endorse the singular focus on happiness, as the happiness approach proposes. See section 3.8.
question is rather whether a person has these capabilities in more general terms. Another way of framing this is to say that the ends of policy making and institutional design is to provide people with general capabilities, whereas the ends of persons are more specific capabilities.33

Of course, the normative focus on ends does not imply that the capability approach does not at all value means such as material or financial resources. Instead, a capability analysis will typically focus on resources and other means. For example, in their evaluation of development in India, Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (2002, 3) have stressed that working within the capability approach in no way excludes the integration of an analysis of resources, such as food, or other resources. In sum, all the means of well-being, like the availability of commodities, legal entitlements to them, other social institutions, and so forth, are important, but the capability approach presses the point that they are not the ends of well-being, only their means. Food may be abundant in the village, but a starving person may have nothing to exchange for it, no legal claim on it, or no way of preventing intestinal parasites from consuming it before he or she does. In all these cases at least some resources will be available, but it will still leave that person hungry and, after a while, undernourished.34

Nevertheless, one could wonder: wouldn’t it be better to focus on means only, rather than making the normative analysis more complicated and more informationally demanding by also focusing on functionings and capabilities? Capability scholars would respond that starting a normative analysis from the ends rather than means has at least two advantages, in addition to the earlier mentioned fundamental reason that a focus on ends is needed to appropriately capture inter-individual differences.

First, if we start from being explicit about our ends, the valuation of means will retain the status of an instrumental valuation rather than risk taking on the nature of a valuation of ends. For example, money or economic growth will not be valued for their own sake, but only in so far as they contribute to an expansion of

33 On the distinction between general capabilities and specific capabilities, see 3.2.4.
34 The relationship between means and capabilities is analysed in more depth in section 3.12.
people's capabilities. For those who have been working within the capability framework, this has become a deeply engrained practice – but one only needs to reed the newspapers for a few days to see how often policies are justified or discussed without a clear distinction between means and ends.

Second, by starting from ends, we do not a priori assume that there is only one overridingly important means to those ends (such as income), but rather explicitly ask the question which types of means are important for the fostering and nurturing of a particular capability, or set of capabilities. For some capabilities, the most important means will indeed be financial resources and economic production, but for others it may be a change in political practices and institutions, such as effective guarantees and protections of freedom of thought, political participation, social or cultural practices, social structures, social institutions, public goods, social norms, and traditions and habits. As a consequence, an effective capability-enhancing policy may not exist in increasing disposable income, but rather fighting a homophobic, ethnophobic, racist or sexist social climate.

2.6.5 A5: Functionings and capabilities as the evaluative space

If a capability theory is a normative theory (as is often the case), then functionings and capabilities form the entire normative space, or are part of the normative space. A normative theory is a theory that entails a value judgement: something is better than or worse than something else. This value judgement can be used to evaluate two things (as in inequality analysis) or can be used to judge one course of action as 'better' than another course of action (as in policy design). For all these types of normative theories, we need normative claims, since concepts alone cannot ground normativity.

35 It is also possible, but only seldom done in practice, to use the notions of 'functionings' and 'capabilities' for non-evaluative purposes (see section 3.10). In that case, the basic notions from the core are all that one takes from the capability approach; one does not need this normative part of the core. I will suggest in the concluding chapter 5 that non-normative applications of the capability approach are part of how the capability approach could be fruitfully further developed in the future.
The first normative claim which each capability theory should respect is thus that functionings and capabilities form the ‘evaluative space’. According to the capability approach, the ends of well-being freedom, justice, and development should be conceptualized in terms of people’s functionings and/or capabilities. This claim is not contested among scholars of the capability approach; for example, Sabina Alkire (2005, 122) described the capability approach as the proposition “that social arrangements should be evaluated according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve functionings they value.” However, if we fully take into account that functionings can be positive but also negative (see 2.6.2), we should also take into account that our lives go better if they contain less of the functionings that are negative, such as physical violence or stress. I would therefore extend Alkire’s proposition, by adding “and to promote the weakening of those functionings that have a negative value.”

However, what is relevant is not only which opportunities are open to us each by themselves, hence in a piecemeal way, but rather which combinations or sets of potential functionings are open to us. For example, suppose you are a low-skilled poor single parent who lives in a society without decent social provisions. Take the following functionings: (1) to hold a job, which will require you to spend many hours on working and commuting, but will generate the income needed to properly feed yourself and your family; (2) to care for your children at home and give them all the attention, care and supervision they need. In a piecemeal analysis, both (1) and (2) are opportunities open to me, but they are not *both together* open to me. The point about the capability approach is precisely that we must take a comprehensive approach, and ask which *sets* of capabilities are open to us, that is: can you simultaneously provide for your family and properly care for and supervise your children? Or are you rather forced to make some hard, perhaps even tragic choices between two functionings which both reflect basic needs and basic moral duties?

Note that while most types of capability analyses require interpersonal comparisons, one could also use the capability approach to evaluate the well-being or well-being freedom of one person at one point in time (e.g. evaluate her situation against a capability-yardstick), or to evaluate the changes in her well-being or well-being freedom over time. The capability approach could thus also be
used by a single person in her deliberate decision-making or evaluation processes, but these types of uses of the capability approach are much less prevalent in the scholarly literature. Yet all these normative exercises share the property that they use functionings and capabilities as the evaluative space – the space in which personal evaluations or interpersonal comparisons are made.

2.6.6 A6: Other dimensions of ultimate value

However, this brings us straight to another core property of module A, namely that *functionings and/or capabilities are not necessarily the only elements of ultimate value*. Capabilitarian theories might endorse functionings and/or capabilities as their account of ultimate value but may add other elements of ultimate value, such as procedural fairness. Other factors may also matter normatively, and in most capability theories these other principles or objects of evaluation will play a role. This implies that the capability approach is, in itself, incomplete as an account of the good since it may have to be supplemented with other values or principles.36 Amartya Sen has been a strong defender of this claim, for example, in his argument that capabilities capture the opportunity aspect of freedom but not the process aspect of freedom, which is also important (e.g. Sen 2002a, 583–622).37

At this point, it may be useful to reflect on a suggestion made by Henry Richardson (2015) to drop the use of the word ‘intrinsic’ when describing the value of functionings and capabilities – as is often done in the capability literature. For non-philosophers, saying that something has ‘intrinsic value’ is a way to say that something is massively more important than something else, or it is used to say that we don’t need to investigate for this object what it’s effect are on another object. If we think that something doesn’t have intrinsic value, we would hold that it is inly desirable if it expands functionings and capabilities; economic growth being a prominent example in both the capability literature and in the human development literature. Yet in philosophy, there is a long-standing debate on what

36 For example, if Henry Richardson (2007) is right in arguing that the idea of capabilities cannot capture basic liberties, than one need not reject the capability approach, but instead could add an insistence on the basic liberties to one’s capability theory, as Richardson (2007, 394) rightly points out.

37 This distinction, and its relevance, will be discussed in more detail in section 3.3.
it means to say of something that it has intrinsic value, and it has increasingly been
contested that it is helpful to speak of ‘intrinsic values’ given what we generally
would like to say when we use that word (Kagan 1998; Rabinowicz and Rønnow-
Rasmussen 2000).

In philosophy, the term ‘intrinsic’ refers to a metaphysical claim;
something of which we claim that it is intrinsically valuable only derives its value
from some internal properties. Yet in the capability approach, this is not really
what we want to say about functionings (or capabilities). Rather, as Richardson
rightly argues, we should be thinking about what we take to be worth seeking for
its own sake. Richardson prefers to call this ‘thinking in terms of final ends’; in
addition, one could also use the terminology ‘that what has ultimate value’ (see
also Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2000, 48). This has the advantage that
we do not need to drop the widely used, and in my view very useful, distinction
between instrumental value and ultimate value. Those things which have ultimate
value are the things we seek because they are an end (of policy making, decision
making, evaluations); those things that do not have ultimate value, hence that are
not ends, will be valued to the extent that they have instrumental values for those
ends.

Of course, non-philosophers may object and argue they are using ‘intrinsic
value’ and ‘ultimate value’ as synonyms. But if we want to develop the capability
approach in a way that draws on the insights from all disciplines, we should try to
accommodate this insight from philosophy into the interdisciplinary language of
the capability approach, especially if there is a very easy-to-use alternative
available to us. We can either, as Richardson proposes, speak of the selected
functionings and capabilities as final ends; or we can say that the selected
functionings and capabilities have ultimate value – that is, they have value as ends
in themselves and not because they are useful for some further end. It is of course
very well possible for a capability to have ultimate value and for the corresponding
functioning to have instrumental value. For example, being knowledgable and

38 “... the relevant values can be said to be ‘end-point values’, insofar as they are not
simply conducive to or necessary for something else that is of value. They are ‘final’,
then, in this sense of being ‘ultimate’.” (Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2000, 48).
educated can very plausibly be seen as of ultimate value, but is also of instrumental value for various other capabilities, such as the capability of being healthy, being able to pursue projects, being able to hold a job, and so forth.

2.6.7 A7: Value pluralism

There are at least two types of value pluralism within the capability approach. One type are the other objects of ultimate value, which was briefly addressed in the previous section.

The second type of value-pluralism relates to what is often called the multidimensional nature of the capability approach. Functionings and capabilities are not ‘values’ in the sense of ‘public values’ (justice, efficiency, solidarity, sustainability, etc.) but they are objects of ultimate value – things that we value as ends in themselves. Given some very minimal assumptions about human nature, it is obvious that these dimensions are multiple: human beings value the opportunity to be in good health, to engage in social interactions, to have meaningful activities, to be sheltered and safe, not be subjected to excessive levels of stress, and so forth. Of course, it is logically conceivable to say that for a particular normative exercise, we only look at one dimension. But while it may be consistent and logical, it nevertheless makes no sense - for at least two reasons.

First, the very reason why the capability approach has been offered as an alternative to other normative approaches is to add informational riches – to show which dimensions have been left out of the other types of analysis, and why adding them matters. It also makes many evaluations much more nuanced, and allows the evaluations to reflect the complexities of life as it is. For example, an African-American lawyer may be successful in her professional life in terms of her professional achievements and the material rewards she receives for her work, but she may also encounter disrespect and humiliation in a society that is sexist and racist. Being materially well-off doesn’t mean that one is living a life with all the capabilities that one should be entitled to in a just society. Only multidimensional metrics of evaluation can capture those ambiguities and informational riches.

Second, without value pluralism, it would follow that the happiness approach is a special case of the capability approach – namely a capability theory
in which only one functioning matters, namely being happy. Again, while this is
strictly speaking a consistent and logical possibility, it makes no sense given that
the capability approach was conceived to form an alternative for both the income
metric and other resourcist approaches on the one hand, and the happiness
approach and other mental metric approaches on the other hand.

In conclusion: in order to make the capability approach a genuine
alternative to other approaches, we need to acknowledge several functionings and
capabilities, rather than just one.

2.6.8 A8: Normative individualism, or each person as an end
A final core property of each capability theory or application is that each person
counts. Martha Nussbaum calls this principle “the principle of each person as an
end”. Throughout her work she has offered strong arguments in defence of this
principle (M. C. Nussbaum 2000, 56):

“The account we strive for [i.e. the capability approach] should preserve liberties and
opportunities for each and every person, taken one by one, respecting each of them
as an end, rather than simply as the agent or supporter of the ends of others. … We
need only notice that there is a type of focus on the individual person as such that
requires no particular metaphysical position, and no bias against love or care. It arises
naturally from the recognition that each person has just one life to live, not more than
one. … If we combine this observation with the thought … that each person is
valuable and worthy of respect as an end, we must conclude that we should look not
just to the total or the average, but to the functioning of each and every person.”

Nussbaum's principle of each person as an end is the same as what is also known
as ethical or normative individualism in debates in philosophy of science. Ethical
individualism, or normative individualism, makes a claim about who or what
should count in our evaluative exercises and decisions. It postulates that
individual persons, and only individual persons are the units of moral concern. In
other words, when evaluating different social arrangements, we are only
interested in the (direct and indirect) effects of those arrangements on
individuals.

As will be explained in more detail in section 4.5, the idea of ethical
individualism is often conflated with other notions of individualism, such as the
ontological idea that human beings are individuals who can live and flourish
independently of others. However, there is no such claim in the principle of ethical
individualism. The claim is rather one about whose interests should count. And
ethical individualism claims that only the interests of persons should count. Ultimately, we care about each individual person. Ethical individualism forces us to make sure we ask questions about how the interests of each and every person are served or protected, rather than assuming that because, for example, all the other family members are doing fine, that the daughter-in-law will be doing fine too. If, as all defensible moral theories do, we argue that every human being has equal moral worth, then we must attach value to the interests of each and every one of the affected persons. Thus, my first conclusion is that ethical individualism is a desirable property, since it is needed to treat people as moral equals.

But ethical individualism is not only a desirable property, it is also an unavoidable property. By its very nature the evaluation of functionings and capabilities is an evaluation of the well-being and freedom to achieve well-being of individual persons. Functionings are ‘beings’ and ‘doings’: these are dimensions of a human body, and (apart for the cases of the unborn child and the pregnant mother, or the case of a Siamese twin) bodies are physically separated from each other.\(^{39}\) We are born as a single human being, and we will die as a single human being, even if we die holding hands with our lover at the moment we die. That human being, that lives its life in an embodied way, thus has functionings that are related to her body, to her person. It is with the functionings and capabilities of those persons that the capability approach is concerned.\(^{40}\) However, as I will explain in detail in section 4.5, from this it does not follow that the capability approach conceptualises people in an atomistic fashion, and thus that the capability approach is ‘individualistic’—meant in a negative, pejorative way. And it also does not imply that a capabilitarian evaluation could not also evaluate the means (including social institutions, structures, and norms), as well as conversion

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\(^{39}\) As Richardson (2016, 5) puts it, “... all capabilities... are dependent on the body. Without relying on one’s body there is nothing one can do or be.”

\(^{40}\) Some have argued in favour of what they call ‘collective capabilities’, which I will discuss in section 3.6.
factors, as well as non-capabilitarian elements of value – as long as we are clear what the role or status of each of those elements is.41

2.7 Modules B: non-optional modules with optional content

I believe that the best way to understand the capability approach is by taking the content of module A as non-optional. All capability theories need to endorse the content of module A (ideally in an explicit way), or at a very minimum do not have properties that violate the content of module A. But there are also properties of a capability theory where the module is non-optional, yet there is choice involved in the content of the module. This doesn’t mean that ‘anything goes’ in terms of the choice of the content, but it does mean that within each module, there is a range of options to choose from. These are modules B, each of which contains a range of possible content, of which the capability theorist can decide what content to adopt. However, it doesn’t follow that as far as the content goes, ‘anything goes’; the range of content of the modules B is restricted to the content that does not contradict module A. The following table lists the non-optional B-modules with optional content.

Table 2.3. Modules B: non-optional modules with optional content.

| B1: The purpose of the capability theory |
| B2: The selection of dimensions |
| B3: An account of human diversity |
| B4: An account of agency |
| B5: An account of structural constraints |
| B6: The choice between functionings, capabilities, or both |
| B7: Meta-theoretical commitments |

41 However, the question remains whether the capability approach is fully compatible with indigenous world views and normative frameworks. This is a question that doesn’t allow for a straightforward answer, and requires more analysis. For some first explorations of this question, see (Bockstael and Watene 2016; Watene 2016; Binder and Binder 2016).
2.7.1 B1: The purpose of the capability theory

The first module which is itself non-optional, but where the content can be chosen, is the purpose of the theory. Here, various options are possible. For example, one could use the capability approach to construct a theory of justice, to develop a cross-country empirical comparison, to reform an educational curriculum, to develop an alternative welfare economics, or to evaluate the effects of laws on people’s capabilities. Questions of scope and reach also need to be addressed in this module. For example, is a theory of justice a political or a comprehensive theory? Is such a theory domestic or global? Other questions that need to be addressed are the intended audience. Is one constructing an academic theory where great attention is given to detail and even the smallest distinctions are taken as relevant, or is one addressing policy makers or societal organisations where not all the details matter and time to think and read may be much more constrained, and accessibility of the presented ideas is much more important?

Of course, one could argue that B1 is not specific to capability theories, and also holds for, say, deontological theories, or utilitarian theories, or theories that use care ethics as their basis normative foundation. While that is true, there are two reasons to highlight B1, the purpose of the capability theory, in the account that I am developing. The first is that it will help us to be explicit about the purpose. There are plenty of pieces published in the capability literature where the purpose of the application or theory is not made explicit, and as a consequence it leads to people based in different disciplines or fields talking alongside each other. Second, it seems that the need to be explicit about the purpose (including audience) of one’s capability theory or application is stronger in the capability literature than in other approaches, because in comparison to those other approaches it has a much more radically multidisciplinary uptake.

2.7.2 B2: The selection of dimensions.

The second B-module is the selection of capabilities. We need to specify which capabilities matter for our particular capability theory. This is a deeply normative question, and touches the core of the difference that the capability approach can make. After all, the dimensions that one selects to analyse will determine what we
will observe – and also, equally important, what we will not observe since the dimensions are not selected.

There is, by now, a large body of literature discussing the various ways in which one can make that selection, including some overview articles that survey the different methods for particular purposes (e.g. Alkire 2002; Robeyns 2005a; Byskov forthcoming). There are two crucial factors determining which selection procedure is suitable. The first is the purpose of the capability theory (hence the choice made in B1). If we develop an account of well-being for thinking about how our lives are going, we are not constrained by questions such as the legitimate scope of government intervention, whereas a theory of political justice would need to take that distinction into account. Another example is if we would like to use the capability approach for thinking about what is universally demanded by moral principles, hence develop the capability approach into a theory of morality: there the selection may be constrained by a method of moral justification for categorically binding principles, which is much more demanding than a method that justifies principles which we offer to each other as rationally defensible proposals in the public realm. At the empirical and policy level, similar questions arise. For example, one could take the international human rights treaties as reflecting a given political consensus, and use those to select capabilities (Vizard 2007). Or, one’s main goal may be to analyse which difference the capability approach makes for poverty or inequality analysis in comparison with income-metrics, in which case one may opt for a method that makes the normativity explicit but nevertheless stays close to existing practices in the social sciences, assuming the epistemic validity of those practices (Robeyns 2003).

The second factor determining which selection procedure is suitable, are the constraints one takes as given in the normative analysis one is making. In an ideal world, one would always cooperate between scholars with different disciplinary expertise, who would understand each other well, and who would be able to speak the disciplinary language of the other disciplines that are involved in the capability theory that is being made. In an ideal world, there would also be no time constraints on the amount of time one has to develop a capability theory, and no financial constraints on the data gathering, or social, psychological or political constraints on the type of questions one can ask when conducting a
survey. One would be able to always conduct one’s own fieldwork if one would want to, one would have access to all empirical knowledge that one needs, and one would not be constrained in gathering the information that one wants to gather. Clearly, the methods for such an ideal world will be very different from the methods that are used in practice – where database-driven selection may be the best one can do.

Still, whichever method one uses, what remains always important, and very much in the spirit of the capability approach, is to not act in a mechanical way, and see the question of the selection of dimensions as a technocratic exercise. Even if one cannot, for example, collect certain data, one could nevertheless still mention the dimensions that one would have wanted to include if it had been possible, and perhaps provide some reasonable ‘speculation’ on what difference the inclusion of that dimension would have made.

2.7.3 B3: Human diversity

Within the capability approach, human diversity is a core characteristic, and indeed a core motivation for developing the capability approach in the first place. Yet the account of human diversity that one endorses can reasonable differ. For example, scholars with a background in structuralist sociology or Marxism often believe that the social class to which one belongs is a very important factor of human diversity, which has great influence on which options lie open to a person, but also how a person’s character and aspirations are formed. For those scholars, class outweighs all other identity aspects. For others, such as libertarian, these differences are not so important. They would not attach much (normative or explanatory) importance to one’s gender, ethnicity, race, social class, and so forth: everyone is, first and foremost, an individual whose personal ambitions and projects matter. Yet, whether one is a Marxist or a libertarian or one of the many other positions one can endorse, one always, either implicitly or explicitly, endorses a view on human nature and on human diversity. That choice should be made in capability theories, since the capability approach rejects the usage of an implicit, unacknowledged, account of human diversity. Hence this makes the

\[ \text{42 For an introduction to libertarianism, see Vallentyne (2008).} \]
account of human diversity belonging to Modules B: one has to have an account of human diversity, but, as long as one is willing to defend one's account of human diversity and the account survives critical analysis, there are several accounts that one can opt for.

Note that if one puts all the modules A, B and C together, a picture will emerge about the great importance attached to human diversity in the capability approach; this will be analysed in more detail in section 3.5.

2.7.4 B4: Agency
Another B-module is the acknowledgement of agency. Applications of the capability approach should endorse some account of agency, except if there are good reasons why agency should be taken to be absent. Note that, similar to the acknowledgement of structural constraints, there is no agreed-upon or standard claim on how much agency, or what particular type, should be assumed; the claim is minimalistic in the sense that, as with the structural constraints, agency cannot simply be ignored and must be accounted for. One can give agency a key role in a capability theory (e.g. Crocker 2008; Claassen 2016) or a more restricted role, perhaps also using different terminology—but, in all cases, some acknowledgement of agency will be needed.

2.7.5 B5: Structural constraints.
The fifth B-module is the account of structural constraints. Differences in the structural constraints that people face, can have a great influence on their conversion factors, and hence on their capability sets. For example, if relationships between people of the same sex are criminalised, then gay people may have all the means and resources they would wish, but they will still not be able to enjoy a happy family life. Or, if coloured people face explicit or implicit discrimination on the labour market, then they will not be able to use the same labour-market resources (their degrees, training, experience) to generate the same levels of

43 Martha Nussbaum explicitly refrains from integrating the notion of ‘agency’ in her capability theory (M. C. Nussbaum 2000, 14). However, this does not mean that there isn’t an account of agency in her theory (even though it is framed without using that word).
capabilities in the professional sphere of life, compared with groups that face no (or less) discrimination.

In addition, structural constraints also play a role in the shaping of people’s capabilities which do not have resources as capability inputs. If one group of people is, for cultural, historical or religious reasons stigmatized as outcasts, then they will be treated with disrespect by other groups in society. The same holds for all groups that suffer from stigma, such as, for example, people with psychiatric disorders or other mental health issues. These structural constraints will also affect the capabilities that do not rely on resources directly, such as opportunities for friendships or for a healthy sense of self-confidence.

Which of those structural constraints will be important for a particular capability analysis, will depend on the context. For example, in her study of the living standard of waste pickers, scavengers, and plastic recycling and scrap trading entrepreneurs in Delhi, Kaveri Gill (2010) showed that caste plays a very important role in the capability sets of different castes. For example, those at the very bottom of the hierarchical ladder of waste workers – the waste pickers - have no opportunities for upward mobility due to social norms and societal discrimination related to their caste. In this study social norms related to caste were key as a structural constraint; in other studies it may be the anatomy of 21st Century capitalism, or gender norms in gender-stratified societies, or some other set of structural constraints.

In sum, structural constraints can have a very important role in shaping people’s capability sets, and therefore have to be part of capability theories. Caste, class, the structure of the economic systems, ethnicity, colour of skin, age, gender, sexual orientation, (dis)abilities, are among the structural constraints that may have an influence on people’s capability set (and in most cases also do have that influence). Having an account of structural constrains is therefore non-optional: every capability theory has an account of structural constraints, although sometimes this account will be very implicit. For example, I will argue in section 4.9 that part of the critique on mainstream welfare economics is that it has a very weak or minimal account of structural constraints. Heterodox welfare economists who are embracing the capability approach are not only doing so because they think the endorsement of the capability account of well-being is better than the
preferences-based accounts that are dominant in mainstream economics, but often also because they hope that the minimal account of structural constraints in welfare economics can be replaced by a richer account that is better informed by insights from the other social sciences and from the humanities.

### 2.7.6 B6: The choice between functionings, capabilities, or both

In developing a capability theory, we need to decide whether we think that what matters are capabilities, functionings, or a combination of both. The core proposition that functionings and capabilities form the evaluative space (A5), was not decisive regarding the question whether it is only functionings, or only capabilities, or a mixture of both, that form the evaluative space.

There are various arguments given in the literature defending a range of views that only capabilities matter; or that primarily secured functionings matter; or that for particular capability theories it is impossible to only focus on capabilities; or that we sometimes have good reasons to focus on functionings. These various claims and arguments will be reviewed in section 3.4; as will be argued in that section, there are good reasons why people could reasonably disagree on whether the capability analysis they are conducting should focus on functionings or capabilities or a mixture. Hence it follows that a choice must be made, but that there are various options to choose from.

### 2.7.7 B7: meta-theoretical commitments

Finally, each capability theory will embrace some meta-theoretical commitments. Yet often, these meta-theoretical commitments are shared commitments within one’s discipline or one’s school within that discipline, and as a graduate student one has become socialised in accepting these meta-theoretical commitments as given. As a consequence, it often happens that scholars are not even aware that there are such things as meta-theoretical commitments. For example, if one wants to conduct a measurement exercise (a choice made in Module B1), then one may be committed to the methodological principle of parsimony (to build a model with as few assumptions and as elegantly as possible) or, instead, to providing a measurement that is embedded into a rich narrative description aimed at a better understanding. Or, if one wants to construct a theory of justice (a choice made in Module B1), then one may aim for an ideal or non-ideal theory of justice, or for a
partial or a comprehensive account of justice. Or one may espouse certain views about the status of theories of justice or meta-ethical claims related to, for example, the role that intuitions are permitted to play as a source of normativity. Some debates within the capability approach, but also between capability scholars and those working in other paradigms, would be truly enlightened if we made the meta-theoretical commitments of our theories, accounts and applications more explicit.

2.8 Modules C: contingent modules

In addition to the compulsory content of the core module A, and the optional content of the non-optional modules B, a capability theory could also add a third type of modules, which I will call the contingent modules. These are either modules that need to be taken on board due to some choices that have been made in a B-module, or else they are entirely optional, independent of what one has chosen in the B-modules. The following table gives an overview of the contingent modules.

Table 2.4 Modules C: contingent modules

| C1: Additional ontological and explanatory theories |
| C2: Weighing dimensions |
| C3: Methods for empirical analysis |
| C4: Additional normative principles and concerns |

2.8.1 C1: Additional ontological and explanatory theories

Two capabilitarian thinkers could each aspire to make a theory of justice yet embrace very different views on human nature and on the degree to which certain outcomes can be explained solely by people’s choices or are also affected by structural constraints. This can matter a lot for the particular capability theories that one develops.

For example, in earlier work, I showed that the capability approach’s answer to whether there is anything wrong with the traditional gender division of labour depends a lot on the social ontological claims related to ‘gender’ that are (implicitly) endorsed as well as the explanatory views of how that division of labour came about (Robeyns 2008c). If one believes that the fact that women end
up doing most of the unpaid and care work while men end up most of the paid labour market work, is a result of differences in talents, dispositions and preferences, then one would judge that the different functionings outcomes that men and women within households end up with, are providing them with maximal levels of well-being given the formal institutional background that they face. But if one endorses a feminist explanation of this division of labour between men and women within households, then one is likely to stress power differences, the role of societal expectations and social norms in decision making, and so forth (e.g. Okin 1989; Folbre 1994). The same observed functionings outcomes in households with a traditional gender division of labour would then be evaluated differently.

Similarly, Miriam Teschl and Laurent Derobert argue that a range of different accounts of social and personal identity are possible, and this may also impact on how we interpret a person forfeiting a capability which we would all deem valuable (Teschl and Derobert 2008). If we believe that our religious identities are a matter of rational deliberation and decision-making, then we will judge the choice to physical self-harm because of one’s religion differently than if we have an account of identity where there is much less scope for choice and rational deliberation regarding our religious affiliation or other group-memberships.

In short, different ontological and explanatory options are available in Module C1, and they may have effects on various other elements or dimensions of the capability theory that are being constructed. However, we should be careful and not mistakenly conclude that ‘anything goes’ when we add additional ontological theories, since there should not be any conflicts with the propositions of module A – and, in addition, some ontological and explanatory accounts are much better supported by critical analysis and empirical knowledge.

2.8.2 C2: Weighing dimensions
For some capability theories, the prioritising, weighing or aggregating of dimensions (functionings and capabilities) may not be needed. For example, one may simply want to describe how a country has developed over time in terms of a number of important functionings, as a way of giving information about the
evolution of the quality of life that may give different insights than the evolution of GDP, as in, e.g. (Van Zanden et al. 2014). Weighing dimensions is therefore not required for each capability theory or capability application - in contrast to the selection of dimensions, which is inevitable.

However, for some other choices that one can make in B1, the capabilitarian scholar or practitioner needs to make choices related to the weighing of the different dimensions. If that is the case, then there are different methods for how one could weigh. When considering which weighing method to use, the same factors are relevant as in the case of selecting the dimensions: the purposes of one’s capability theory, and the constraints one has to take into account when choosing a method.

In contrast to the overview works that have been written on how to select dimensions (e.g. Alkire 2002; Robeyns 2005a; Byskov forthcoming), there is less literature on which methods one could use to decide on the weights given to each dimensions, specifically focussing on functionings or capabilities as the dimensions. Still, enough has been said in order to guide those who need to weigh the dimensions in their capability theory (Alkire 2016; Alkire et al. 2015b, chapter 6; Robeyns 2006b, 356–58)

First, the selection of weights for the capability approach is structurally similar as for other multidimensional metrics (in the case of evaluations) or decision-making procedures (in the case one needs to decide which capabilities to give priorities in policies or collective decision making). Hence one should consult existing discussions, in other debates where multidimensionality plays an important role. Let us first look at the group of applications where the capability approach is used to make decisions about what we, collectively, ought to do. That may be in an organisation, or at the level of a community who needs to decide whether to spent the tax revenues on investing more in public green spaces, or in social services for particular groups, or in taking measures to prevent crime, or in anything else that can likely be understood as leading to positive effects on our capabilities. In those cases, we can learn from social choice theory, and from
theories of democratic decision making, how we could proceed. Decisions could be made by voting, or by deliberation, or by deliberation and/or voting among those who are the representatives of the relevant population.

Second, the applications of the capability approach that involve a multidimensional metric of well-being or well-being freedom, could use (most of) the weighing-methods that have been discussed for multidimensional metrics in general. Koen Decancq and Maria Anna Lugo (2013) have reviewed eight different approaches to set weights for multidimensional metrics, which they categorize in three classes: data-driven weights where the weights are a function of the distribution of the various dimensions in the population surveyed; normative approaches where either experts decide on the weights, or the weights are equal or arbitrary; and hybrid weights are in part data-driven but in addition depend on some normative decision. Note that in the data-driven and hybrid approaches, the selection of dimensions and the weights tend to be done through a process where the selection of dimensions and the determination of the weights goes hand in hand. One example is the proposal by Erik Schokkaert (2007) of using happiness as the master-value by which we weigh the various capabilities that together form the multidimensional account of well-being. In this proposal, if the functionings do not contribute to one's happiness, they are given a zero weight and hence no longer count in the well-being index. In methods such as this one, there are two rounds of the selections of the dimensions: the first before one collects the data, and the second when one uses econometric techniques to determine the contribution that the various functionings make to the master-value (here: life-satisfaction) and uses those as weights; those functionings that will make no contribution will receive a weight of zero, which is the same as being deleted as a dimension in the well-being index.

44 In the case of democratic theory, the discussion is often about which laws to implement, but the same insights apply to policy-making. Both the literature on democratic theory (e.g. Dryzek 2000; Gutmann and Thompson 2004) and social choice theory (e.g. Arrow, Sen, and Suzumura 2002, 2010, Sen 1999c, 2017; Gaertner 2009) are vast and will not be further discussed here.
Third, for non-empirical applications, we can categorize methods to determine weights in the same way as we could categorise methods for the selection of dimensions. Morten Fibieger Byskov (forthcoming) distinguishes between ad-hoc methods (such as the data-driven methods discussed by Decancq and Lugo), procedural methods, or foundational methods. A theoretical capability application could include answers to all B-modules (including the selection of dimensions) yet decide that the weighing of those dimensions should be done in a procedural way, e.g. via a democratic decision-making process. Alternatively, one could introduce one master-value which will determine which capabilities are relevant, and also what weights they should be given. For example, in Rutger Claassen’s capabilitarian theory of justice, the selection and weighing of capabilities is done based on their contribution to that person’s ‘navigational agency’ (Claassen 2016).

2.8.3 C3: methods for empirical analysis.

If in B1 one chooses for an empirical study, one needs to know which methods to use. This is the task of Module C3. For example, it could contain choices about which multivariate analysis tools to use or whether certain existing data sets are capturing functionings, capabilities, or merely rough indicators. In Module C3, we also make methodological choices related to empirical analysis: does a particular capability issue require quantitative analysis, qualitative analysis, or a combination?

For empirical capability applications, these are of course huge methodological questions that need to be answered. These empirical methods questions may be particularly challenging for the capability approach for two reasons. First, because it is a radically multidimensional approach, and multidimensional analysis is by its very nature more complicated than a one-dimensional analysis. Second, in many cases, the relevant dimensions will include dimensions on which the collection of data is difficult, or on which no data are available – such as the quality of our social networks, the degree to which we do not suffer from excessive levels of stress, or our mental health. Nevertheless, as Sabina Alkire (2005, 129) rightly points out in her discussion on what is needed for the empirical operationalisation of the capability approach, one has to connect
to the best existing empirical research (and its methods) that exist, and either master those new techniques that have been developed in other fields, or else engage in collaborations. Hick and Burchardt (2016, 88) raise the related point that there is a need for capability scholars to reach out and engage with related fields where similar themes and problems are faced. Only after that route has been travelled, can we know the limits of empirical analyses of the capability approach.

2.8.4 C4: Additional normative principles and concerns

Finally, Module C4 provides room for additional normative concerns or moral principles that capability scholars aim to add to their capability theory. For example, in a particular capability theory, a principle of non-discrimination may play a role or, alternatively, one may want to work out a capabilitarian theory that subscribes to the non-domination principle as it has been defended by Republican political theory (Pettit 2001, 2009). Again, there are many items from Module C4 that could be added to a capability theory.

2.9 Hybrid theories

In the previous sections, we have seen which modules are core in a capability theory, which ones need to be addressed but have optional content, and which ones may or may not be necessary to add to a particular capability theory. One question that this modular view raises, is what we should think of a theory or an application that uses the addition of normative principles that are in contradiction with a property of module A. For example, suppose one would want to add the normative principle that institutions and personal behaviour should honour the traditions of one’s local community. There may be aspects of those traditions that are in tension with the principle of ethical individualism, for example, because women are not given the same moral status in those traditions as men. What should we then say? Would such a theory no longer be a capability theory, even if the bulk of the theory is trying to think about the quality of life and desirable institutions in terms of the enhancement of functionings and capabilities?

Another example are theories that we discussed in the previous section, where functionings and capabilities play an important role, yet in the theory construction those functionings and capabilities turn out to be not of ultimate value, but rather to be instrumental for some further end that is normatively prior
to the functionings and capabilities themselves. There is, in those cases, a master-value that determines how important (if important at all!) those capabilities are: capabilities for which we could give reasons that they are valuable, but which do not contribute to the master-value, will then not be given any ultimate value.

What are we to make of such theories? Are these still capability theories, or not? I think the best way to understand these views is to regard them as *hybrid* theories – they use the notions of ‘functionings’ and ‘capabilities’ yet do not endorse all propositions in module A. Let me stress that categorizing these theories as ‘hybrid’ entails no value judgement, whether positive or negative; rather, it is only a matter of clarifying the possibilities of having capability theories but in addition also hybrid theories which use part of module A yet also insert elements from other ethical frameworks that go against some propositions in module A. Thus, appreciating the possibility of hybrid views enlarges the diversity of theories that are possible.

Can we give an example of such a hybrid theory? Perhaps surprisingly, an example may be Amartya Sen’s theorising about justice. According to the interpretation by Antoinette Baujard and Muriel Gilardone (2017), Sen’s (2006, 2009c) recent work on justice does not endorse functionings and/or capabilities as the metric of justice, but should rather be seen as a procedural or democratic account of justice, where the idea of having functionings and capabilities as the evaluative space is merely a suggestion, that should be put to the public who eventually, in a process of public reasoning, has to decide what justice is about. If that interpretation is correct, then Sen is unwilling to commit to proposition A5 (‘functionings and capabilities form the evaluative space’) when theorising about justice, since that is something to be decided by a process of public reasoning.45

45 Note that for other capability applications or capability theories, such as making quality of life assessment studies, Sen has no problem endorsing proposition A5. Moreover, one could also ask whether regarding his earlier publications on justice it would be implausible to interpret Sen’s writings as an endorsement of A5. In my view (and pace Baujard and Gilardone’s interpretation), Sen has made several statements in earlier work that could be seen as an endorsement of all propositions of module A for the case of theorizing about justice (e.g. Sen 1980, 1990a, 2000).
Clearly, when Sen theorises about justice, he has certain meta-theoretical commitments (module B7) that make it inconsistent for him to endorse A5, namely the meta-theoretical commitment that what justice is, will be decided by a democratic process. Whether that is a plausible meta-theoretical position, has been subject of debate in the capability literature (e.g. Claassen 2011; Byskov 2017), but need not concern us here. The point that is relevant here, is that Sen’s theorizing about justice could be seen as a public reasoning-capabilities theory of justice.

2.10 The relevance of the modular view

Understanding the capability approach as having a modular structure leads to a number of insights. Let me highlight three important ones: countering the risk of inflation, whereby we have no criterion for deciding when a theory is or is not a capability theory; appreciating the diversity of capability theories that are possible; and getting a better sense of how Sen’s and Nussbaum’s work on the capability approach relates to each other.

First, the modular view can help us to contain the risk of the inflation of theories being labelled as a capability theory. The modular view of the capability approach which I presented gives us a description that includes all the work in the capability approach that should legitimately be included. There are, of course, other descriptions of the capability approach available in the literature. Yet to my mind most of these descriptions (including my own previous attempts at describing the capability approach) were insufficiently detailed and illuminating. If a description is too vague, we run the risk of inflation: too many things will be labelled as belonging to the ‘capability approach’, whereas they do not meet the essential characteristics of Module A.

For example, one could aim to work on multi-dimensional poverty analysis and highlight the fact that we should be interested in the combination of achievements that people are able to have. This would point at two important insights in the capability approach – namely its multidimensional character, as well as focussing on opportunity sets rather than on outcomes. But if the opportunities one focusses on are not capabilities, but rather opportunities to access certain bundles of commodities, then it would be an unjustified inflation to
call this a capability application; rather, it would be another type of opportunity-based multidimensional inequality measure.

Second, to understand that capability theories have a modular structure is crucial in understanding the diversity of capability theories that are possible. Let me try to illustrate this. Module C4 states that additional normative principles may be part of a capability theory, and property A6 that functionings and capabilities are not necessarily all that matters in a capability theory. From this it does not follow that all capability scholars have to endorse each and every capability theory. Surely there will be capability theorists who will take issue with the normative principles that are added in module C4 by other capability theorists when they design their theory. That is perfectly fine, as long as both theorists recognise that (i) the capability approach entails the possibility to add such additional normative principles in Module C4, and (ii) the normative principles they have added in Module C4 are not thereby required for each and every other capability theory.46

An example is the following. One may defend a political theory of disadvantage which states that no-one should live in poverty, no matter whether people have, in part, caused themselves to end up in that situation. Such a theory would endorse a principle (in Module C4) that there should be, at the level of outcomes (and hence not at the level of opportunities) institutionally enforced solidarity via redistribution. Let us call those who endorse this principle the S-theorists (S from solidarity). This is a strong normative claim: many other normative political theories rather defend that everyone should have a genuine opportunity to live a decent life, but still attribute some responsibility to all persons for realising that life. Let us call these theorists the O-theorists (O from opportunity). Both the S-theorists and the O-theorists can agree that we should understand people’s well-being in terms of functionings and capabilities. The S-
theorists and the O-theorists are both capabilitarians. They have to acknowledge that the other group’s theory is a capability theory, without having to endorse the other theory. In other words, a capability theorist can agree that the normative position or theory that someone else is defending is a capability theory, without having to endorse that specific theory. There is absolutely no inconsistency in this situation.

Thirdly, the modular view of the capability approach endorses the view that Martha Nussbaum’s work on the capability approach should be understood as a capability theory, that is, a theory in which specific choices are made regarding the modules. It is not, as Nussbaum (2011a) suggests in her *Creating Capabilities*, a version of the capability approach structurally on a par with Amartya Sen’s more general capability theory. What Sen has tried to do in his work on the capability approach, is to carve out the general capability approach, as well as to give some more specific capability applications. Still, Sen’s work would have benefited from a more systematic description of how he saw the anatomy of the capability approach. To my mind, that has been missing from his work, and that is what I have tried to develop here and in an earlier paper (Robeyns 2016b). Yet everything put together, I do agree with the understanding of Mozaffar Qizilbash, who concludes an analysis of the difference between Nussbaum’s and Sen’s work on the capability approach by saying that “On this reading [...] Nussbaum’s “capabilities approach emerges as one particular application or development of Sen’s original formulation of the approach...” (Qizilbash 2013, 38). It is a mistake to understand the capability literature as a field with two major thinkers who have each proposed one version of the capability approach, which have then inspired the work by many other scholars. Rather, there is one capability approach which we can distil from the original work of Amartya Sen, yet which needed further development on issues where Sen had been silent. This general approach can be applied or used to construct theories in many different ways, and Nussbaum’s work has been some of the most influential in the area of theory construction. But we need to be clear that Nussbaum’s work is not one of two general versions of the capability approach, but rather one more specific capability theory, even if it is the capability theory that is by far the most influential capability theory among philosophers.
In sum, there is much pluralism within the capability approach. Someone who considers herself a capabilitarian or capability thinker does not need to endorse all capability theories. In fact, it is impossible to endorse all capability theories, since different choices made in Module C1 (ontological and explanatory theories that are endorsed) and Module C4 (additional normative principles) can be in conflict with each other. It is presumably coherent to be a Marxist capabilitarian, and it is presumably also coherent to be a libertarian capabilitarian, but it is not coherent to endorse the views by those two positions, since they are incompatible.

2.11 A visualisation of the core conceptual elements

We have now covered enough ground in understanding the core concepts of the capability approach to make a visualisation of the core concepts. Figure 2.1 below gives a graphical representation of the capability approach.

Economics and the quantitative empirical social sciences have traditionally focussed on material means only: either income and wealth, or else on the consumption that these financial means (or unpaid production) generated. One important lesson learnt from feminist economics is that about half of economic production happens outside the market and the formal economy, which is the reason why the box at the far left in Figure 2.1 also includes non-market production (Folbre 2008; Folbre and Bittman 2004).

Both the resources and the consumption could be conceptualised as capability inputs: they are the means to the opportunities to be the person one wants to be, and do what one has reason to value doing. The means do not all have the same power to generate capabilities; this depends on a person’s conversion factors, as well as the structural constraints that she faces. Those structural constraints can have a great influence on the conversion factors as well as on the capability sets directly.
Figure 2.1: Stylized visualization of the core concepts of capability theories

Source: based on (Robeyns 2005b), updated and expanded.
From their capability sets, a person can then make a choice. ‘Choice’ is used here in a very thin (or, as philosophers say, ‘weak’) version: it is not assumed that elaborate thinking and weighing is done before we decide which capabilities to use and realise into functionings. In fact, we have ample evidence from psychology that there are many other factors that influence the decisions we make, including how hungry or tired we are, the people in our company, or the amount of time we have to make a decision (Ariely 2010; Kahneman 2011).

Finally, the achieved functionings will generate mental states, such as degrees of unhappiness or happiness, and satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one’s functionings levels. Some scholars believe that this is actually what really matters: overall happiness and satisfaction. For now, we will concentrate on deepening our understanding of the capability approach itself, but in section 3.8, we will engage in more depth with the question whether we should look at functionings and capabilities, rather than happiness.

2.12 The narrow and broad uses of the capability approach

We have now reached the end of the discussion of the modular view of the capability approach. Yet before closing this chapter, let us pause to use this modular view to clarify something that has been noted by several capability scholars, namely that the capability approach has been used and can be used in narrower or more limited ways on the one hand, and more broader or richer ways on the other hand (e.g. Alkire, Qizilbash, and Comim 2008, 4–5; Crocker and Robeyns 2009; Qizilbash 2012). The exact way in which that distinction has been described has been slightly differently presented by different authors, but the general gist in their analyses has been that the capability approach can either be seen as offering something limited, or else be seen as much more ambitious and wide-reaching:

“... several interpretations of the scope of the capability approach are used in the wider literature [...]. These can be charted between two poles: one narrow and broad, with the broad subsuming the narrow. [...] The narrow interpretation sees the approach primarily as identifying capability and functionings as the primary informational space for certain exercises. The broad interpretation views the capability approach as providing a more extensive and demanding evaluative
framework, for example by introducing human rights or plural principles beyond the expansion of capabilities—principles which embody other values of concerns such as equity, sustainability or responsibility.” (Alkire, Qizilbash, and Comim 2008, 4–5)

In the narrow way, the capability approach tells us what information we should look at if we are to judge how well someone’s life is going or has gone; this kind of information is needed in any account of well-being or human development, or for any kind of interpersonal comparisons. Since the capability approach contends that the relevant kind of information concerns human functionings and capabilities, the approach provides part of what is needed for interpersonal comparisons of well-being.

The modular view presented in this chapter can help to make sense of this observation that there is both a narrower and a wider use of the capability approach. In the narrow use of the capability approach, the focus is often strictly on the evaluation of individual functioning levels or on both functionings and capabilities. If we look at the narrow use of the capability approach through the lens of the modular understanding of the approach, we can see that the narrow view chooses interpersonal comparisons as the purposes of the capability theory (module B1); and that it will have to make a selection of dimensions (module B2) and make a choice between functionings or capabilities (module B6); its choice for human diversity (module B3) will be reflected in the choices it makes in B2, but also in which groups (if any) it will be comparing. Its meta-theoretical commitments (B7) are likely related to limiting research to those things that can be measured. The narrow use of the capability approach will most likely not have much to say about agency (B4) and structural constraints (B5) but adopt the implicit theories of agency and structural constraints that are used in the empirical literatures on interpersonal comparisons. Finally, the narrower view must decide on how to weigh the dimensions (module C2) and which methods for empirical analysis (module C3) to make.

In its broad uses, the capability approach not only evaluates the lives of individuals (as in the narrow use), but also includes other considerations in its evaluations, which are ‘borrowed’ from other approaches or theories. For example, the broader use of the capability approach often pays attention to other
normative considerations and other values than only well-being, such as efficiency, agency, or procedural fairness.

The broad view would, in most cases, have a more ambitious purpose for its use of the capability approach, such as societal evaluation or policy design. It would also have (either implicit or explicit) richer theories of human diversity, agency and structural constraints, and – most importantly – add several additional ontological and explanatory theories (module C1) and additional normative principles (module C4). The narrow view does not include modules C1 and C4, and this can make a huge difference to the kind of capability theory that emerges.

An example of the broad view is David Crocker’s (2008) book on development ethics, where he has extended the capability approach with accounts of agency, democratic deliberation and participation into a more detailed account of development ethics. Yet Crocker acknowledges that not all versions of the capability approach are embracing agency so explicitly. The capability approach proper need not endorse a strong account of agency, but there are several scholars who have developed particular capability theories and applications in which agency plays a central role (e.g. Claassen and Düwell 2013; Claassen 2016; Trommlerová, Klasen, and Leßmann 2015).

Why is this difference between the narrow and the broad uses of the capability approach relevant and important? There are several important reasons. First, to assess a critique of the capability approach, we need to know whether the critique is addressing the capability approach in its narrow use, or rather a specific version of its broad use. Second, we need to be clear that many of the additional normative commitments in the broad use of the capability approach are not essential to the capability approach: rather, they are optional choices made in modules B and, especially, module C1 (additional ontological and explanatory theories) and module C4 (additional normative principles and concerns). This insight will also be important when we will address the question, in section 4.8, of whether we can simply talk about ‘the capability approach’ and ‘the human development paradigm’ as the same thing.
2.13 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to give a comprehensive explanation of the capability approach: what is it trying to do, what are the many ways in which it has been used, what are the properties that all capability theories share, and what is the structure that we can detect in the construction of capability theories and applications? In order to get a helicopter-view, I have deliberately put aside a number of additional distinctions and details. They will be the focus of the next chapter, whereas critiques and areas of contestation and debate will be discussed in chapter 4.
3 Clarifications

3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to deepen our understanding of the capability approach, by analysing and clarifying a range of questions that a student of the capability approach may have. My aim has been to include the most frequently asked questions of clarification which are raised by students of the capability approach, as well as a few cases which, in my view, are currently leading to confusion in the literature. The questions and issues which are much more a matter of debate or contestation have been collected in chapter 4. Admittedly, that distinction – between questions that require clarification on the one hand, and issues of debates and critiques on the other hand – is not a neat distinction. But that should not bother us: nothing much hangs on whether a topic is included in chapter 3 or rather in chapter 4; what matters is that students of the capability approach are able to find answers to the questions they have.

In this chapter, the follow topics are clarified and analysed: How do the terminologies used by Sen and Nussbaum differ, and which additional terminological refinements have been proposed in the literature? (section 3.2) Can ‘capabilities’ properly be described as freedom, and if so, which type of freedoms are capabilities? And is it always a good idea to speak of capabilities in terms of freedoms? (section 3.3). Which considerations should play a role in making the relevant choices in module B6 – the choice between functionings or capabilities (or both) for one’s capability theory? (section 3.4). How exactly does the capability approach account for human diversity, and why is human diversity given so much importance in the capability literature? (section 3.5). What does the notion ‘collective capability’ refer to? (section 3.6). Which notion of well-being does the capability approach give us? (section 3.7). How does the capability approach differ from the happiness approach, and what are the reasons that capability scholars do not adopt the happiness approach? (section 3.8) To what extent – and how- can the capability approach deal with adaptive preferences? (section 3.9). Can a capability theory also be an explanatory theory, or is that not possible? (section 3.10). And can the capability approach be used to study all normative questions, or is it not a suitable framework for some normative
questions? (section 3.11). The capability approach is often positioned as an alternative for resourcist theories – but what exactly is the role of resources in the capability approach? (section 3.12). Finally, we consider how the capability approach relates to two established literatures: theories of justice and theories of human rights. How does the capability approach relate to the literature on theories of justice? Which choices in module B and module C are needed in order to construct a capability theory of justice? (section 3.13). And how do capabilities and human rights relate to each other? (section 3.14).

3.2 Refining the notion of ‘capability’ and ‘functioning’

While at a very introductory level, the terms ‘functionings’ and ‘capability’ seem to be easy and straightforward, the terminology used in the literature is, alas, not always clear. There has been quite considerable confusion in the use of the terminology, although --if one takes a meta-disciplinary helicopter view-- it is possible to discern that some use of terms is more dominant than others. The confusion has several sources. First, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have used somewhat different terminology, and since most capability scholars are more influenced either by Sen or else by Nussbaum, the use in the wider literature is also not everywhere exactly the same way. Moreover, both Sen and Nussbaum have changed their use over time, without making that always very explicit. Thirdly, there are differences in terminological choices that can be traced back to established differences in different disciplines, which are having their effect on the different disciplinary streams in the capability literature.

There are at least four terminological issues that need to be noted: (1) ‘capability’ understood as a singly opportunity versus ‘capability’ understood as an opportunity set; (2) Nussbaum’s more complex terminology; (3) the quite different meanings given in the literature to the term ’basic capabilities’; and (4) additional refinements – both some that have been proposed in the literature, as well as a proposal that I will put on the table, namely to take the robustness of a capability into account. Let’s look at these four issues in turn.

3.2.1 Capability as an opportunity versus capability as an opportunity set

Let us first look at Sen’s original terminology. The major constituents of the capability approach are functionings and capabilities. Functionings are the 'beings
and doings’ of a person, whereas a person’s capability is “the various combinations of functionings that a person can achieve. Capability is thus a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person’s freedom to lead one type of life or another” (Sen 1992b, 40). According to Sen, a person has only one capability (or capability set), which consists of a combination of possible, reachable functionings.

A person’s functionings and her capability are closely related but distinct, as the following quote illustrates:

“A functioning is an achievement, whereas a capability is the ability to achieve. Functionings are, in a sense, more directly related to living conditions, since they are different aspects of living conditions. Capabilities, in contrast, are notions of freedom, in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead” (Sen 1987, 36).

Sen thus used the term ‘a capability’ for what we could also call ‘a capability set’. The advantage of each person corresponds to one capability (hence ‘a person’s overall freedom to do the things they want to do and be the person they want to be’). In the original terminology, each person had one capability, and the use of the word ‘Capabilities’ therefore had to refer to the capabilities of various persons.

In Sen’s original terminology, a person’s capability would consist of a range of potential functionings, out of which a particular combination of functionings could be chosen. Functionings could therefore be either potential or achieved. This kind of language is most familiar to social choice scholars and scholars in formal welfare economics, where the focus of much of the analysis is on the opportunity set.

However, many other scholars working in the capability paradigm, including Martha Nussbaum, have labelled these potential functionings ‘capabilities’, and only use the term ‘functioning’ for an outcome. In that terminology, the capability set consists of a number of capabilities, in the same way as a person’s overall freedom is made up by a number of more specific freedoms. One does not find this usage of capabilities (as being the separate elements of one person’s capability set) in Sen’s earlier writings, and in his later writings he (perhaps reluctantly) uses both usages of the word capability interchangeably.
What, then, is the terminology that is now predominantly used? As was explained in chapter 2, a functioning is a state of one’s being (such as being healthy or ill), or something one is doing (such as going on a trip or raising children). The real opportunity to such a functioning is the corresponding capability. Hence if my sister goes on a trip and invites me along, but I decide to stay home because I want to do something else, then I have the capability to go on a trip, but I chose not to have the corresponding outcome—the functioning. Each functioning corresponds to exactly one capability.

This plural use of capabilities is widespread in the contemporary literature on the capability approach—with the exception of those working in social choice theory, formal welfare economics, and related fields. The terminology as used by the broader group of scholars working on the capability approach seems to be more straightforward and less technical, but when reading Sen’s (earlier) work it is important to know that the term ‘capability’ started with a different definition.⁴⁷

### 3.2.2 Nussbaum’s terminology

In *Women and Human Development*, her first book-length work on her capabilities theory, Martha Nussbaum used the following terminology, which she still uses in her recent book on the capability approach (M. Nussbaum 2011a, 20–25). *Human capabilities* are “what people are actually able to do and to be” (M. C. Nussbaum 2000, 5). From those human capabilities, Nussbaum identifies a list of ten ‘central capabilities’ which have the status of rights: they “may not be infringed upon to pursue other types of social advantage” (M. C. Nussbaum 2000, 14). According to Nussbaum’s minimal account of social justice, these central capabilities have to be protected up to a certain threshold level.

Nussbaum helpfully distinguishes between three further notions to unpack the concept of ‘human capabilities’: basic capabilities, internal capabilities, and combined capabilities (M. C. Nussbaum 2000, 84–85). *Basic capabilities* refer to “the innate equipment of individuals that is necessary for developing the more advanced capabilities”, such as the capability of speech and language, which is

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⁴⁷ For a seminal analysis of the differences between Nussbaum’s and Sen’s conceptual and terminological apparatus, see the twin paper by David A. Crocker (1992, 1995).
present in a new-born but needs to be fostered before it can develop into a true capability. *Internal capabilities* are “the matured conditions of readiness” – the internal aspect of the capability. If I have the skill and meet the physical preconditions of walking, then I may or may not be able to go for a walk – depending, for example, on whether as a woman I am legally allowed to leave the house without a male relative, or whether there is not currently a hurricane posing a real danger if I were to leave my house. If those suitable external conditions are in place, we can speak of *combined capabilities*.

Finally, a functioning is an “active realisation of one or more capabilities. ... Functionings are beings and doings that are the outgrowths or realizations of capabilities” (M. Nussbaum 2011a, 25). Hence, in Nussbaum’s terminology, a functioning stands to a capability as an outcome stands to an opportunity.

While the substantive distinctions that this terminology refers to are very helpful, the specific words chosen may be not ideal. There are two problems. First, for many capability scholars, the reference to the term ‘capability’ refers to the real opportunity to do something or be the person one wants to be; ‘internal capabilities’ are not fitting that category. They are, starting from that perspective, simply not a capability, but rather necessary elements of a capability, or a precondition for a capability. It would have been better to call ‘internal capabilities’ simply ‘internal characteristics’ or else ‘skills, talents, character traits and abilities’. Such a terminology would also make the link with various other behavioural and social disciplines much easier. What Nussbaum calls ‘combined capabilities’ could then simply be called ‘human capabilities’, which consist of the presence of those skills, talents, character traits and abilities, together with suitable external conditions and circumstances. Second, Nussbaum uses the term ‘basic capability’ after it had already been taken for two other meanings, as the next section will show. Why not simply call these ‘innate human characteristics’?

### 3.2.3 What are ‘basic capabilities’?

The way readers from different disciplines use terminology differently, is clearly exemplified by the different interpretations of the term ‘basic capabilities’.

One interpretation is Nussbaum’s. As was mentioned before, Nussbaum (2000, 84) uses the term ‘basic capabilities’ to refer to “the innate equipment of
individuals that is necessary for developing the more advanced capabilities”, such as the capability of speech and language, which is present in a new-born but needs to be fostered. Yet of the four ways in which the term ‘basic capabilities’ is used in the literature, this one may be the least prevalent.

Amartya Sen (1980) mentioned the term ‘basic capability’ as his first rough attempt to answer the ‘equality of what?’ question, but changed his terminology in subsequent work (what he called ‘basic capability’ would later become ‘capability’). In later work, Sen reserved the term ‘basic capabilities’ to refer to a threshold level for the relevant capabilities. A basic capability is “the ability to satisfy certain elementary and crucially important functionings up to certain levels” (Sen 1992b, 45 fn 19). Basic capabilities refer to the freedom to do some basic things considered necessary for survival and to avoid or escape poverty or other serious deprivations. The relevance of basic capabilities is “not so much in ranking living standards, but in deciding on a cut-off point for the purpose of assessing poverty and deprivation” (Sen 1987, 109).

A third way in which the term ‘basic capabilities’ can be used, is as it has been used in analytical political philosophy, where some philosophers have used the term ‘basic’ to refer to essential (moral and/or political) entitlements that signify a higher level of moral urgency. For example, Rutger Claassen, who has been developing an agency-based capability theory of justice, has been using the term ‘basic’ in that sense (Claassen 2016).

A fourth way to use the term ‘basic capability’ has been proposed by Bernard Williams. Yet this has, to the best of my knowledge, not been taken up by anyone. Williams has argued that it is important to distinguish between the capability to choose yet another new brand of washing powder from, say, Adam Smith’s often referred to capability to appear in public without shame. Williams rightly notes that “what you need, in order to appear without shame in public, differs depending on where you are, but there is an invariant capability here, namely that of appearing in public without shame. This underlying capability is more basic” (Williams 1987, 101). I agree with the need for the distinction that Williams makes, but I would rather call these underlying capabilities the general capabilities, so as to avoid confusion with Sen’s use of basic capabilities. I will turn
to the discussion of ‘general versus specific capabilities’ in section 3.2.4, but first want to ask the question: how should we interpret the term ‘basic capability’?

My reading is that, within the capability literature, the most widespread (and hence dominant) use of ‘basic capabilities’ is Sen’s use – hence referring to poverty or deprivation. Hence, while the notion of capabilities refers to a very broad range of opportunities, ‘basic capabilities’ refers to the real opportunity to avoid poverty or to meet or exceed a threshold of well-being. Basic capabilities will thus be crucial for poverty analysis and in general for studying the well-being of large sections of the population in poor countries, or for theories of justice that endorse sufficiency as their distributive rule. In affluent countries, by contrast, well-being analysis would often focus on capabilities that are less necessary for survival and the avoidance of poverty. It is important to acknowledge that the capability approach is not restricted to poverty- and deprivation analysis but can also serve as a framework for, say, project or policy evaluations or inequality measurement in non-poor communities. Sen’s and Nussbaum’s extensive writings on the capability approach in the context of poverty alleviation and development questions have misled some of their readers into thinking that the capability approach is about poverty and development issues only. Yet as has been absolutely clear from the description and account of the capability approach presented in chapters 1 and 2, there is conceptually or normatively no reason to restrict its scope in this way. The term ‘basic capabilities’ is helpful since it can signal to the reader when the capability approach is specifically used for this context.

3.2.4 Conceptual and terminological refinements

Over the years, several proposals have been made to refine the notions of ‘functioning’ and ‘capability’, or to add additional qualifications which may be helpful in capability analyses.

The first refinement –which is straightforward but still very helpful– is the distinction between general and specific functionings and capabilities (Alkire 2002, 31). Suppose we are concerned with questions about what is needed for people not to be socially excluded. Sen has repeatedly referred to Adam Smith’s example that, in order to be able to appear in public without shame, one needed
(in the time and place when Smith lived) a linen shirt. Yet in other countries one would need a sari, or a suit, or something else. We all know that in every specific time and place, there are certain types of cloths one shouldn’t wear if one doesn’t want to be frowned upon or be seen as inappropriately dressed. We could say that for women in place A, being able to wear a sari is important, and for men in another place being able to wear a suit is important, in order not to be excluded. ‘Being able to wear a sari’ and ‘being able to wear a suit’ are specific capabilities; ‘being able to wear the clothes that are considered appropriate’ is the more general capability. Thus, if we formulate the relevant capabilities at a higher level of generality, it will be easier to reach agreement on what those are, then if we focus on more specific capabilities (Sen 1992b, 108–9). General capabilities are thus the more generic and more abstract capabilities. The idea of general versus more specific functionings and capabilities is also entailed by Nussbaum's idea of the multiple realisability of capabilities that are under scrutiny: the selected capabilities “can be more concretely specified in accordance with local believes and circumstances” (M. C. Nussbaum 2000, 77).

A second conceptual refinement to consider, is the concept of ‘refined functioning’. Sen (1987, 36–37) has proposed the concept of ‘refined functioning’ to designate functioning that takes note of the available alternatives. Sen (1992b, 52) notes: “fasting as a functioning is not just starving; it is choosing to starve when one does have other options.” The aim of this proposal is to try to bridge the choice between functionings and capabilities by a conceptual move. That is, one could focus on achieved functionings levels but – where appropriate – include the exercise of choice as one of the relevant functionings (Fleurbaey 2002). This allows us to stay within the realm of (observable) achievements, but because the act of choosing is included, one can derive from that functioning relevant information on whether one had options or not.

A third conceptual refinement –this time a qualification or property that we can attribute to a functioning or a capability- has been proposed by Avner De-Shalit and Jonathan Wolff. They have argued that what is relevant for the most disadvantaged persons is not so much whether they have any functionings, but rather whether those functionings are secure (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007, 2013). The idea here is that we are not only interested in the functionings that people can
achieve, but also in the prospects that a person has to sustain that level – that is, the risk and vulnerability of losing that functionings achievement should be taken into account, even if the risk never materialises. The objective fact of risk and vulnerability itself should be seen as having an influence on how we normatively judge a functionings achievement (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007, 63–73).

Another qualification that we could add to capabilities is its robustness – referring to the probability of a capability being realisable. The standard definition of a capability is that it is a genuine option: if we have the capability and we choose to opt for this opportunity, then we should also enjoy the outcome – the functioning. But this presents us with a very dichotomous view on our options: either we have an option with a 100% probability, or else, if the probability is significantly less, it is implied that we do not have the capability. That is, arguably, a rather unhelpful way of thinking about real life processes. For example, the problem with women’s opportunities in advanced economies is definitely not that women have no capabilities to achieve professional success; rather, the problem is that, given a variety of mechanisms that are biased against female professionals, the robustness of the capabilities they are given is weaker. If an equally talented man and woman both want to succeed professionally, they may, in a liberal society, both have that capability – but the probability that the man will be able to succeed will be higher than the woman’s. She does have some opportunity, but that opportunity is less robust. Probabilities of success if one were to want to exercise that capability, would be a way to express that. In the above gender case, the source of the different probability is in the social and environmental conversion factors. But the source of the difference in robustness could also lie in internal factors. For example, a person with a psychiatric condition may have some opportunities for finding a job, but those opportunities may be much more precarious than would be if she didn’t have those psychiatric challenges.

3.3 Are capabilities freedoms, and if so, which ones?

Amartya Sen (1990c, 460) has described capabilities as

“the freedom[s] to achieve valuable human functionings, which can vary from such elementary things as being well-nourished and avoiding escapable morbidity and mortality, to such complex achievements as having self-respect, being well-
integrated in society, and so on. Capabilities thus reflect the actual freedoms that people respectively enjoy in being able to lead the kind of lives they have reason to value”.

But several philosophers and social scientists have questioned the understanding (or, for philosophers: ‘conceptualisation’) of capabilities in terms of freedoms, asking whether capabilities could plausibly be understood as freedoms, whether Sen was not overextending the use of freedom, whether freedom is all there is to the capability approach, and whether it is wise to use the terminology of freedom for the goals of the capability approach (e.g. Cohen 1993; Gasper and Van Staveren 2003; Hill 2003; Okin 2003, 291–92). Let us therefore clarify and analyse the conceptualisation of capabilities as freedom by answering three questions. First, capabilities have been described as positive freedoms; but how should we understand that notion, and is that the best way to describe what kind of freedoms capabilities are? (section 3.3.1) Secondly, is there a better conceptualisation of freedom that captures what capabilities are? (section 3.3.2) Thirdly, if it is the case that capabilities can coherently be conceptualised as freedoms, are capabilities then best understood as freedoms, or is it better to avoid that terminology? (section 3.3.3).

3.3.1 Capabilities as positive freedoms?
Amartya Sen has often uses the distinction between positive and negative freedoms, thereby describing capabilities as positive freedoms. For example, Sen (1984a, 315) has stated that he is trying “to outline a characterization of positive freedoms in the form of capabilities of persons.” In some discourses, especially in the social sciences, the term ‘positive freedoms’ is used to refer to access to certain valuable goods, such as the freedom to affordable high quality health care or education. Positive freedoms are contrasted to negative freedoms, which refer

48 Other statements equating capabilities with positive freedoms can be found in Sen (1982, 6, 38–39, 1984b, 78, 86, 1985c, 201, 2008, 18 among other places). In his 1979 Tanner lecture in which Sen coined the term ‘capability’, he did not refer to freedoms, but did use other terms such as ‘ability’ and ‘power’.
to the absence of interference by others, such as the freedom to own a gun. Yet these are by no means standard understandings of positive and negative freedom.

In making the claim that capabilities are positive freedoms, Sen often approvingly refers to Isaiah Berlin’s canonical distinction between positive and negative freedom, but unfortunately doesn’t explain in detail how we should read Berlin. This is potentially confusing, since Berlin’s use of the term ‘positive freedom’ is far from crystal clear.

Let us start from the clearest concept in Berlin – his notion of negative freedom - which Berlin (1969, 122) defines as follows: “I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity.” The opposite of having negative freedom is being coerced - the deliberate interference of other persons in an area of my life in which I could, without the interference, act. Negative freedom thus corresponds to freedom as non-interference, and Berlin speaks approvingly of this kind of freedom: “[...] non-interference, which is the opposite of coercion, is good as such, although it is not the only good. This is the ‘negative’ conception of liberty in its classical form.” (1969, 128).

On positive freedom, there is much less clarity in Berlin’s work. Berlin first introduces positive freedom as the freedom to be one’s own master:

“I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other’s men’s, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside. I wish to be a somebody, not nobody, a doer—deciding, not being decided for; self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them.” (Berlin 1969, 131).

Berlin argues that the metaphor of self-mastery historically developed into the idea that a person has two selves, a dominant self which is identified with reason and a ‘higher nature’, and a ‘heteronomous self’ which follows desires and

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49 According to Sen (2009c, 282) this is the understanding of positive and negative freedom in welfare economics.
passions and needs to be disciplined. Berlin continues that the first self, the ‘real self’, may become seen as wider than the individual,

"as a social whole of which the individual is an element or aspect: a tribe, a race, a church, a state, the great society of the living and the dead and the yet unborn. This entity is then identified as being the ‘true’ self which, by imposing its collective, or ‘organic’ single will upon its recalcitrant ‘members’ achieves its own, and therefore their ‘higher freedom’. (Berlin 1969, 132)

Put differently, men are “coerced in the name of some goal (let us say, justice or public health) which they would if they were more enlightened, themselves pursue, but do not, because they are blind or ignorant or corrupt” (132-133). Berlin acknowledges that one could, in principle, develop the same justification of tyranny starting from the definition of negative freedom, but continues to argue that that is easier with the positive conception of freedom, since that conception entails that man is divided and has therefore two parts – a dominant part, which needs to control the non-disciplined part. Yet Berlin offers primarily a historical analysis and interpretation for arguing that the idea of positive freedom has led to tyranny in the realm of politics, whereby everything can be justified in the name of some true or higher self which needs to master other impulses and desires.

It is not difficult to see that positive freedom in Berlins sense is not the kind of freedom that capabilities are, especially not when understood against the historically tyrannical realisations that this ideal (according to Berlin) took. Capabilities are not about people's internal attitudes towards what they should do with their lives. At the political level, the capability approach would advocate that we should organise our political life in such a way as to expand people's capabilities, whereby the capability approach will judge that both had the same initial equal freedom if both of them had the same initial set of valuable options from which to choose. The capability approach is thus not strongly perfectionist and teleological, as the positive freedom doctrine in Berlin's sense is. In sum, capabilities are thus very different from Berlin's notion of positive freedom, and Berlin's understanding of positive freedom is not the best way to capture the kind of freedoms that capabilities are.
In later work, Sen acknowledged the potential for confusion that his equation of capabilities with positive freedoms and his endorsing references to Berlins' work had made, and provided a clearer description of his own understanding of positive freedom. In his Arrow lectures, Sen (2002a, 586) wrote:

“...positive freedom has also been variously defined, varying on one side from the general freedom to achieve in general, to the particular aspect, on the other side, of freedom to achieve insofar as it relates to influences working within oneself (a use that is close to Berlin’s conceptualization of positive freedom. In my own attempts in this field, I have found it more useful to see “positive freedom” as the person's ability to do the things in question taking everything into account (including external restraints as well as internal limitations). In this interpretation, a violation of negative freedom must also be—unless compensated by some other factor—a violation of positive freedom, but not vice versa. This way of seeing positive freedom is not the one preferred by Isaiah Berlin.”

This quote also draws attention to another drawback of defining capabilities in terms of positive freedom. Violations of negative freedoms will, according to Sen, always lead to violations of positive freedoms; yet for Berlin this need not be the case. In a totalitarian state which espouses a doctrine of positive freedom, in which the state will help the citizens to ‘liberate their true selves’, a violation of a range of negative freedoms, such as the freedom of expression or of the freedom to hold property will not violate positive freedom; on the contrary, within the parameters of that doctrine violations of such negative freedoms may even enhance the state-aspired positive freedom.

So where does all this lead terminological exegesis leads us? It has often been remarked that there are many available definitions of negative and positive freedom. Berlin’s conceptualisations are canonical, but his definition of positive freedom is very different from Sen's. Moreover, as Charles Taylor (1979, 175) rightly pointed out, the debate on negative and positive freedoms has been prone with polemic attacks on caricatures of the views of both sides. One therefore wonders what is to be won by describing capabilities in terms of positive freedoms – at least if one is aware of the philosophical background to this term. Perhaps it may be wiser to look further for an alternative conceptualisation which is less prone to creating misunderstandings?
3.3.2 Capabilities as opportunity or option freedoms?

Luckily, in other parts of Amartya Sen’s writings we can find the answer to the question what kind of freedoms capabilities are (if any at all). Although Sen’s first descriptions of capabilities were couched exclusively in terms of positive freedoms, he soon offered an alternative description in terms of opportunities. In his 1984 Dewey Lectures, Sen (1985c, 201) defended a conceptualisation of well-being freedom in terms of capabilities, and defined well-being freedom as:

“whether one person did have the opportunity to achieving the functioning vector that another actually achieved. This involves comparisons of actual opportunities that different persons have.”

Similarly, in Inequality Reexamined, Sen (1992b, 31) writes:

“A person’s position in a social arrangement can be judged in two different perspectives, viz. (1) the actual achievement, and (2) the freedom to achieve. Achievement is concerned with what we manage to accomplish, and freedom with the real opportunity that we have to accomplish what we value.”

Given Sen’s descriptions of the freedoms that the capability approach is concerned with in terms of opportunities, it seems a natural suggestion to investigate whether the concept of ‘opportunity freedom’ better captures the nature of capabilities.

Charles Taylor, in his discussion of Berlin’s distinction between negative and positive freedom, has argued that beneath the distinction between positive and negative freedom lies another set of distinctions, namely between an exercise concept of freedom and an opportunity concept of freedom. The exercise concept of freedom refers to an agent being free “only to the extent that one has effectively determined oneself and the shape of one’s life”, whereas on the opportunity concept of freedom “being free is a matter of what we can do, of what is open to us to do, whether or not we do anything to exercise these options” (Taylor 1979, 50).

50 In fact, even this is not entirely correct, since in his earlier work and especially in his work written for economists, Sen did not speak of ‘capabilities’, but rather of ‘capability sets’ and thus also of ‘opportunity sets’ (see section 3.2.1).
According to Taylor, theories of negative freedom can be grounded on either an exercise or an opportunity concept, but theories of positive freedom can never be grounded merely on an opportunity concept. Taylor’s goal is arguing for the exercise concept of freedom, and showing that the crude view of negative freedom (which he argues Berlin is defending) is untenable. Taylor (1979, 177) describes the opportunity concept of freedom as “being free is a matter of what we can do, of what it is open to us to do, whether or not we do anything to exercise these options. [...] Freedom consists just in their being no obstacle. It is a sufficient condition of one’s being free that nothing stand in the way.”

Is Taylor’s opportunity concept of freedom the kind of freedom we are searching for in our attempt to understand the nature of capabilities? Taylor’s opportunity concept comes close, but it is narrower than the conception of freedom in the idea of capabilities. The reason is that for Taylor only external obstacles count in the definition of negative freedom (Taylor 1979, 176, 193; Kukathas 2007, 688). He holds that the acknowledgement of internal obstacles to action, including the action to choose between different opportunities, merges an element of the exercise concept of freedom into the opportunity concept. The notion of opportunity in Taylor’s concept of opportunity freedom thus resembles more a formal notion of opportunity rather than a substantive notion.

Here’s an example to illustrate the difference between Taylor’s opportunity-concept of freedom and the notion of ‘capabilities’. If in a patriarchal community men have all the power, and in a verbally aggressive manner they teach girls and remind women that their place is inside the house, then surely these women do not have the same opportunity freedom to find employment in the nearest city where women from more liberal communities are holding jobs. In formal terms, the women from both communities may be able to work outside the home since there are jobs available to women in the city, they are able bodied and are able to commute to the city. Yet the women from the patriarchal community would face much bigger costs and would need to collect much more courage and resist the subtle working of social norms, before they could effectively access this formal opportunity. Put in capability terms, we would say that the first group of women has a much smaller capability to work outside the home than the women living in less patriarchal communities. If the costs and burdens for women from
strongly patriarchal communities to work in the city are excessive, we could even conclude that this capability would be virtually nonexistent.

Luckily, more recent debates in political philosophy have further developed this discussion, in a way that is helpful in answering the question how capabilities should be understood. Philip Pettit (2003) has argued that the philosophical debate on social freedom could benefit from being clear on the distinction between option-freedom and agency-freedom. While option-freedom is a property of options, agency-freedom is a property of agents. Options are the alternatives that an agent is in a position to realize. Pettit argues that option freedom is a function of two aspects: the character of access to options, and the character of options themselves. First, option freedom is a function of the character of the agent’s access to the options. Some philosophers would hold that the physical possibility of carrying out an option is sufficient for access, and thus would make us conclude that the agent has option freedom. Alternatively, one could defend the position that access to an option does not only depend on the physical possibility to carrying out the option, but that non-physical barriers are relevant too. Pettit distinguishes two possibilities: either an agent is objectively more burdened than another agent in accessing an option, whether by difficulty or by penalty, or an agent is subjectively burdened in the sense that he believes that access to an option is not possible. The second aspect of option freedom is the character of the options. Here a wide range of views exist, such as the number of options that are accessible, their diversity, and whether they are objectively significant or subjectively significant (Pettit 2003, 389–92).

Capabilities are precisely this kind of option freedoms. What counts in the capability approach is indeed the access that a person has to a wide range of valuable alternative options. In sum, capabilities can be understood as opportunity or option freedoms, but are broader than Taylor’s rather narrow opportunity concept of freedom. We can therefore conclude that it is conceptually sound to understand capabilities as freedoms of this sort.

3.3.3 Are capabilities best understood as freedoms?
The detailed analysis in the previous section doesn’t settle all questions, though. It may well be the case that it is coherent to see capabilities as freedoms, but that
there is another notion, such as human rights, basic needs, or something similar, that much better captures what capabilities are.

I think that the answer to that question has to be contextual in the following sense. The capability approach is a deeply interdisciplinary approach, yet not all disciplines have the same associations when using certain terms. Philosophers may well have very different associations with the word ‘freedom’ than, say, anthropologists or development sociologists. Similar remarks can be made when the capability approach is being applied for policy and political purposes, since the term ‘freedom’ has in some countries a particular historical connotation, or is being claimed by extreme right or extreme left political parties, in the sense that if they were to come to power, they would use that power to drastically curtail the capabilities of (some sections of) the population. However, one should also not forget that the word ‘capabilities’ is non-existent in many languages, and may itself also lead to mistaken connotations, for example with skills or capacities in its French translation (capacité).

When developing a particular capability theory or capability application, should we frame the capability approach in terms of freedoms? My suggestion would be to answer this question in a pragmatic fashion. If the context in which the capability approach is applied makes it likely that the use of the term freedom will make the application to be misunderstood, then I would suggest to define, describe and illustrate the word ‘capabilities’ and introduce that term. Yet for moral philosophers and political theorists who are eager to further develop the capability approach into a coherent political theory, a clear understanding of capabilities as option freedoms may pave the way for work that lies ahead. Pettit’s analysis of option freedoms, and the established literature to which he is referring in his analysis give the capability scholar a neat overview of the choices that need to be made if one wants to turn the underspecified capability approach into a well-specified moral or political capability theory. For the political philosopher, there is therefore less reason to be worried about being misunderstood when referring to capabilities as option freedoms, or as opportunity freedoms.
3.4 Functionings or capabilities?

We now move to examine the issue that is central to module B6: should we, when developing a capability analysis or capability theory, focus on functionings, capabilities, or a mixture of both? After all, this question is not settled. It is one of the core features of the capability approach that it uses ‘functionings’ and ‘capabilities’ as core notions (property A1, as discussed in 2.6.1) and that every capability analysis endorses the claim that functionings and/or capabilities form the evaluative space (property A5, as discussed in 2.6.5). But this still leaves the question unanswered whether we should focus on functionings, or on capabilities, or on a combination of functionings or capabilities. Perhaps we have good reasons to sometimes focus on functionings, and sometimes on capabilities, for example for different types of applications, or for different groups of people?

Luckily, this question is not new to the capability literature, and there is by now a lively debate with many different types of arguments on whether the appropriate well-being metric should be capabilities or functionings, hence opportunities or achievements. What reasons or considerations have been argued to be relevant for this choice?51

The first consideration concerns anti-paternalism. It is a normative consideration: by focusing on capabilities rather than functionings, we do not force people into a particular account of good lives but instead aim at a range of possible ways of life from which each person can choose. Thus, it is the liberal nature of the capability approach, or an anti-paternalist commitment, that motivates a principled choice for capabilities rather than functionings. Obviously, the strength of this argument depends on how bad one takes paternalism to be. There may be good reasons to believe that some paternalism is unavoidable, or even desired (M. C. Nussbaum 2000, 51–56; Robeyns 2016b). Moreover, some scholars have argued that some amount of paternalism in the capability approach may well be unavoidable. One reason is that the protection of the capacity to choose from one’s capability set requires certain functionings, such as mental

51 General discussions surveying different reasons to choose for functionings, capabilities or both, can also be found in Robeyns and Van der Veen (2007, 45–99, 76–78), Hick and Burchard (2016, 79–82) and Robeyns (2016b).
health and education, to be promoted as achievements, rather than merely as freedoms (Gandjour 2008). Another reason is that the protection of certain specific capabilities requires either previously certain functionings-levels, or else requires certain levels of achievement of other capabilities, or requires that enough other people have functionings achievements on those capabilities. (e.g. Robeyns and Van der Veen 2007; Claassen 2014; Robeyns 2016b). Rutger Claassen has identified five different types of mechanisms where capability-protection leads to the promotion of functionings, and has concluded that “any capability theory will have to confront the issue of paternalism” (Claassen 2014, 72).

As this literature shows, there are many reasons why one can reasonably decide to sometimes promote functionings, rather than capabilities. Here, I will only give one example, namely limits to our capacities to make informed choices in a voluntary, autonomous way. Let us start with an uncontested case: infants and the severely cognitively disabled. The concept of functioning has particular relevance for our relations to those human beings who are not yet able to choose (infants), who will never be able to make complex choices (severely mentally disabled individuals), or who have lost this ability through advanced dementia or serious brain damage. Whether or not these persons can decide to be well nourished and healthy, it is generally held that we (through families, governments, or other institutions) have the moral obligation to promote or protect their nutritional and healthy functioning. All capability theorists agree that in these cases, we should focus on functionings rather than capabilities. The implicit underlying assumption in the claim that capabilities have normative priority over functionings is that we assume the presence of a sufficient level of agency in the individuals who will be given the power to make their own choices from their capability sets. If we have strong reason to believe that such agency cannot be attributed to a person, we should not let the person herself decide on which options to choose; however, we should find ways of compensating for that lack of agency—either by having a steward make the choices for her or by guiding her in the choice-making process. Thus, we will shift our normative concern from capabilities to functionings for those who are incapable of deciding for themselves. In empirical research, this implies, for example, that it is fine to study
the quality of life for small children by focussing on a range of functionings (e.g. Phipps 2002).

But the paternalism claim is not limited to the case of infants and the severely cognitively disabled: one could also apply this argument—at least to some extent and in some areas—to all adults. Adults, too, often make systematically irrational or mistaken choices. We are often not able to choose what is best for us simply because of our psychological makeup; many of our choices are the result of the impulsive, unreflective, habit-driven part of our brain rather than the deliberative and reflective part. There has been mounting empirical evidence on our systematic failures in choice making, that we are influenced by a large number of arbitrary factors in making choices, and that we often harm our own interests in a non-deliberate and non-intentional ways (e.g. Ariely 2010; Kahneman 2011). It is entirely consistent for a capability theory to argue that we have strong reasons to protect people against their own systematic irrationalities.

Summing up, we have here a first normative consideration that can help us to decide whether some (limited or fuller) focus on functionings rather than capabilities is acceptable, namely question whether there are mechanisms that justify paternalism.

A second normative consideration in the choice between only capabilities and functionings stems from the importance given to personal responsibility in contemporary political philosophy. If one believes that the moral aim should be to establish equality of opportunity, then it follows that one should, at least as an ideal, favour equality of capability over equality of functionings. If equality of capability becomes the ideal, then each person should have the same real opportunity (capability), but once that is in place, each individual should be held responsible for his or her own choices. It is important to stress, however, that philosophers and social scientists working on issues of social justice do not at all agree on whether equality of opportunity (capabilities) should be the goal, rather than equality of outcome (functionings). On the one hand, the responsibility-sensitivity principle is widely endorsed not only in political philosophy but also in the mathematical models being developed in normative welfare economics. If one wants to endorse and implement this principle of responsibility-sensitivity, then specifications and applications of the capability approach should focus on
capabilities, rather than functionings. On the other hand, scholars have objected to the weight given to personal responsibility, both at the highly abstract theorising about ideals, as well as when thinking about more applied and practical issues. At a highly abstract theoretical level, philosophers disagree on whether we should endorse responsibility-sensitivity in developing the capability approach (Fleurbaey 2002; Vallentyne 2005; Wolff and De-Shalit 2007). Moreover, for applied work, serious epistemological hurdles may ultimately lead us to drop the responsibility-sensitive principle for practical reasoning about the actual world: in practice, it is often impossible to know what the causal factors were that led someone to make decisions that lowered her achieve well-being, and hence it is difficult or even impossible to know whether the causal factors are those for which one could be held morally responsible or not.

Thirdly, there may be institutional considerations that have an influence on whether we choose for functionings, capabilities, or a mixture (Robeyns 2016b). Take the example of a government that has, with broad support of the population, set up a welfare state arrangement, which includes certain welfare rights. Then this government may demand from citizens who want to be part of this societal arrangement that they pro-actively aim to master, secure, or maintain certain functionings, such as being able to read and write, or to speak a language that does not exclude one from holding a job. A welfare state arrangement that offers citizens relatively generous welfare rights can legitimately induce or perhaps even force citizens and legal residents to choose certain functionings that are needed in order to justly reciprocate in that welfare state arrangement. Put differently, an outcome-oriented theory of justice needs to be bolstered with an account of what justice requires from the institutional design for a state or coalition of states. Reasons of reciprocity, feasibility, and stability may justify a focus on functionings rather than merely on capabilities.

Fourthly, there are pervasive cases of interdependence between people’s capabilities that may prompt us to look beyond the capability of a single person. One important type of cases are those in which a capability is available to a person but only if other people do not also want to realize that capability (Basu 1987, 74). For example, two spouses may each have the capability of holding demanding jobs which are each on their own incompatible with large caring responsibilities.
However, if these spouses also have infants or relatives with extensive care needs, then at best only one of them may effectively realize that capability. Another type of cases are those where the capability of one person is only possible if enough other people have chosen for to realise the corresponding functioning (Claassen 2014, 67–68). Take the example of being protected against dangerous infectious diseases such as polio or measles by way of a vaccine. In order to genuinely have that capability, one does not only need access to a vaccination, but enough other people need to choose to be vaccinated, since protection requires that a certain minimal number of people are vaccinated. In other words, my child’s capability to be protected from the debilitating effects of polio or the measles, depend on your choices to exercise that capability and opt for the functioning – that is, to vaccinate your children.

Since capability sets may thus include freedoms that are conditional (because they depend on the choices of other people), it might be better to focus both on the individual’s capability set and also on what people have been able to realize from their own capability sets, that is, their functionings or well-being achievements. The question of who decides or should decide this sort of spousal question highlights the importance of agency and procedural fairness, which are often additional normative commitments included in the capability theory that is developed.

Finally, note that in many empirical applications, an analysis of functionings is used as a proxy for an analysis of the capability set. In the case of comparison of inequalities between groups, it has been argued that group-inequalities in functionings should be taken to reflect group-inequalities in capabilities, except if a plausible reason can be offered for why the members of those groups would systematically choose differently (Robeyns 2003; Kukly and Robeyns 2005). Tania Burchardt and Rod Hicks have stressed that if inferences about capabilities based on information about functionings are made, one should be explicit about the underlying assumptions, and that three different situations could occur, namely

“(1) situations in which all difference in outcomes might reasonably be attributed to differences in capabilities (such as where a person is assaulted); (2) situations where differences in preferences may result in differences in outcomes, but where
for the purposes of public policy it may be possible to assume that any differences are a result of differing levels of capabilities; and (3) situations in which additional evidence may be needed in order to determine whether differences in outcomes are genuinely a result of differences in capability” (Hick and Burchardt 2016, 80).

What is the upshot of all these considerations? In my view, there are sound reasons why one would limit oneself to capabilities, there are sound reasons why one would rather focus only on functionings, and there are sound reasons why one would prefer a mixture. The choice depends on the purpose of the capability theory, but also on the additional ontological choices one endorses (e.g. one’s idea of human nature – are we fully rational or not, and what, if anything should be the consequences for policy making and institutional design), on the normative principles one adds to the core of the capability approach when developing a capability theory (e.g. endorsement of neutrality or not), and on practical constraints one is facing. We cannot say in general that the capability approach should focus exclusively on capabilities, or exclusively on functionings. It all depends on additional theoretical choices and normative commitments which can be made in modules B and C, when developing a capability analysis.52

3.5 Human diversity in the capability approach

In the previous chapter, it was already highlighted that diversity among human beings is a key motivation as well as conceptual characteristic of the capability approach (Module B3). Given how central human diversity is to the capability approach, it is good to say a few more words on the role of human diversity in the capability approach. There are two important points to make: first, the mechanisms that the capability approach has at its disposal to account for diversity, and second, the attention given to diversity within the existing capability literature.

The capability approach takes account of human diversity in at least two ways. First, by its focus on the plurality of functionings and capabilities as

52 I therefore think that Nussbaum’s (2011a) claim that it is a core property of the capability approach that it focussed on capabilities rather than functionings, is mistaken (Robeyns 2011, 2016b; see also Claassen 2014).
important evaluative spaces. By including a wide range of dimensions in the conceptualization of well-being and well-being outcomes, the approach broadens the so-called ‘informational basis’ of assessments, and thereby includes some dimensions that may be particularly important for some groups but less so for others. For example, in standard outcome assessments, women as a group virtually always end up being worse off than men. But if the selection of outcome dimensions is shifted to also include the quality and quantity of social relations and support, and being able to engage in hands-on care, then the normative assessment of gender inequality becomes less univocal and requires much further argument and normative analysis, including being explicit about how to aggregate different dimensions (Robeyns 2003, 2006a).

Secondly, human diversity is stressed in the capability approach by the explicit focus on personal and socio-environmental conversion factors that make possible the conversion of commodities and other resources into functionings, and on the social, institutional, and environmental context that affects the conversion factors and the capability set directly. Each individual has a unique profile of conversion factors, some of which are body-related, while others are shared with all people from her community, and still others are shared with people with the same social characteristics (e.g. same gender, class, caste, age, or race characteristics). In the account of the capability approach presented in chapter 2, this is made very explicit by having Module A3 focussing on the conversion factors, which is an important source of interpersonal variations (the other sources is how structural constraints affect people differently). As Sen (1992b, xi) has argued, interpersonal variations should be of central importance to inequality analysis:

"Investigations of equality –theoretical as well as practical- that proceed with the assumption of antecedent uniformity (including the presumption that ‘all men are created equal’) thus miss out on a major aspect of the problem. Human diversity is no secondary complication (to be ignored, or to be introduced ‘later on’); it is a fundamental aspect of our interest in equality"

Indeed, if human beings would not be diverse, then inequality in one space, say income, would more or less be identical with inequality in another space, like
capabilities. The entire question of what the appropriate evaluative space should be, would become obsolete if there wasn’t any interpersonal difference in the mapping of outcomes in one space onto another. If people where all the same, had the same needs and abilities, then the capability approach would lose much of its force and significance, since resources would be excellent proxies for our well-being and well-being freedom. But as it happens, human beings are very diverse.

However, we also need to acknowledge that there is significant scholarly dispute on the question which dimensions and parameters of human diversity are salient, and which are not. Scholars embrace very different accounts of human diversity, which is the reason why we have Module B3 in the capability approach. One’s account of human diversity can often be traced back to the ontological accounts one has of diversity-related factors, as well as to the role of groups in explanatory accounts. An example of the former is the account of ‘gender’ or ‘race’ that one embraces. If one holds a theory of ‘gender’ or ‘race’ that regards this as rather superficial phenomena, that do not have an important impact on people’s behaviour and opportunities in life, then the attention given to diversity in a capability application or capability theory will be rather minimal. This is logically consistent with the structure of capability theories (as laid out in chapter 2), but it is also a view that has not been widely embraced in the capability literature. Instead, the capability approach attracts scholars who endorse accounts of dimensions of ‘gender’, ‘race’, and other dimensions of human diversity that are much richer. Presumably, these scholars recognise the ways in which the capability approach can account for human diversity, and hence this may explain why most capability scholars endorse rich accounts of human diversity.

A strong acknowledgement of human diversity has therefore become a hallmark of the capability approach as that literature has developed. Its criticism of other normative approaches is often fuelled by, and based on, the claim that human diversity among people is insufficiently acknowledged in many normative framework and theories. This also explains why the capability approach is often favourably regarded by feminist scholars, global justice scholars, scholars interested in race or class relations, or scholars concerned with care and disability issues. One of the main complaints of these scholars about mainstream philosophy and mainstream economics has precisely been the relative invisibility of the fate
of those people whose lives do not correspond to that of an able-bodied, non-dependent, caregiving-free individual who belongs to the dominant ethnic, racial and religious group.

3.6 Collective capabilities

Several scholars have proposed the introduction of a category of ‘collective capabilities’ or ‘community capabilities’ (Evans 2002; Ibrahim 2006, 2009, 2017; Schlosberg and Carruthers 2010; Murphy 2014). The idea of ‘collective capabilities’ is used in different ways in the literature, and not always spelled out very carefully. So I will try to make a reconstruction of what ‘collective capabilities’ could mean, and then discuss to what extent these are different from human capabilities tout-court.

It is instructive, first, to see in which contexts different authors introduce the idea of ‘collective capability’. Here are a few typical examples from the literature. Solava Ibrahim (2006, 2009, 2017) argues for the importance of collective capabilities from the perspective of the work done by self-help groups of poor people fighting to overcome their poverty, which is an issue also discussed by Stewart (2005). David Schlosberg and David Carruthers (2010) argue for the importance of the idea of collective capabilities to understand the struggles of indigenous people for ecological justice. And Michael Murphy (2014) argues that political self-determination (of an indigenous group) should be considered to be a collective capability which should be a central aim for development.

What is shared in those cases, and what makes the idea of ‘collective capability’ plausible, is that a group or collectively is needed to engage in collective action in order to reach the capability that the members of that group find valuable.

Sen (2002b) pointed out that we should be careful not to confuse this with a capability that he calls “socially dependent individual capability” – a person’s capability, which that person enjoys, but for which the person is dependent on others to have that capability realised. Perhaps we should not use the term ‘individual capability’ but rather ‘personal capability’, since for many defenders of ‘collective capabilities’ the word ‘individual’ evokes pejorative images of persons living by themselves on an island. There are no such human creatures; we all live
interpedently, and none of us could grow up without intense care of others, or, as adults, have a decent chance of surviving and living a minimally adequate live. Human beings are, just as other mammals, animals who live in groups. Although philosophers are used to work with terms outside their everyday use, and most philosophers (especially those with an analytical training) will not have these pejorative connotations when the hear the term 'individual capabilities', I will proceed with the term 'personal capabilities' in order to facilitate the discussion in this section.

Now, if we are very strict in our terminological distinctions, then collective capabilities are also personal capabilities, since only persons are the ones who can enjoy the capabilities that become secured. Still, there are two justifications to proceed with the term ‘collective capability’ – one fundamental one, and one additional one which is especially weighty from a practical point of view.

The fundamental reason to keep and use the term ‘collective capability’ is that we may want to make a distinction between capabilities that are only realisable with the help of others, versus capabilities that require a group or collective to act in order to secure a capability for the members of that group. An example of the former would be learning a foreign language. It is impossible to do that without the help of others; one needs a teacher, or at the very least books and audio-tapes/internet lessons that help one with self-study. Still, that doesn’t suffice to say that learning a language is a collective capability. There is no group involved, and no collective action of that group is necessary in order to achieve the functioning. A different case is acquiring the capability to vote in elections for groups that are not yet given suffrage. Fighting for that capability is not possible on one’s own. One needs collective action – e.g. the first wave women’s movement, or the civil rights movement in the USA, or the anti-apartheidsmovement in South Africa -- to act collectively so that the group is granted the capability, and all persons who belong to that group can enjoy the newly won freedom.

The second reason to accept the notion of ‘collective capability’ is because it is already present in the practice of certain justice movements, whose demands fit very well with the capability approach, for example because they embody claims of diversity or because the fight for a notion of the good life or justice which goes beyond a narrow materialist or economistic view on what is valuable.
Examples are the disability movement, the women’s movement, and indigenous struggles.

So the idea of a collective capability can be made sense of and can be justified. Nevertheless, two warnings are in order, which may be needed to avoid conceptual confusion as well as an overuse or inflation of the notion. The first comment is that all that has been said so far does not permit one to conclude that one has personal (individual) capabilities and collective capabilities as two mutually exclusive categories. Rather, collective capabilities are a subset of personal capabilities, namely those personal capabilities that require for their realisation action by a group or a collectively. Secondly, we should be very careful to be clear to keep our concepts distinct and correct when developing a capability theory. The modular account of the capability approach has ample conceptual and theoretical space to account for collective processes, the social embedding of persons, the influence of social structures on our choices and opportunities, a proper acknowledgement of social processes of preferences formation as well as the crucial role of social institutions and norms in shaping a person’s capability set. But if we want to account for a social process, we shouldn’t just jump to the claim that we have now found a collective capability. Rather, we should use the quite complex and multi-layered framework that was presented in figure 2.1., and be clear when something is a social structure that is shaping our capabilities, rather than being a capability. Means to the ends (capabilities) and the ‘capability determinants’ (the social structures, social norms, institutions, etc.) can all be part of our evaluation – we just need to keep in mind which parts of what we evaluate are the means, and which are the ends, and why we evaluate a certain dimension. In the case of the evaluation of the means, one important reason could be to see how that means has changed over time, as well as whether there is any scope to improve the contribution that that particular means can make to the increase of capability sets.

3.7 Which notion of well-being in the capability approach?

The capability approach is closely related to notions of well-being and the quality of life. Sometimes it is assumed that the capability approach is a theory of well-being, which cannot be quite right since the capability approach can be used for
many purposes, such as the construction of a theory of justice, poverty measurement or policy evaluation. Yet on the other hand, with its proposition that interpersonal comparisons be made in terms of functionings and/or capabilities, the capability approach is clearly also involved in offering us an account of well-being (Sen 1984b, 1985c, 2009a; Alkire 2016; Qizilbash 2013). But what, exactly, is the nature of the account of well-being in the capability approach? I will argue in this chapter that the more precise formulation is that the capability approach entails several slightly different accounts of well-being, which can be used for different purposes. Different capability theories have different purposes (module B1) and different meta-theoretical commitments (module B7), and the choices made in those modules will require different accounts of well-being for such capability theories.

When one looks at the accounts of well-being in the various disciplines where the notion of ‘well-being’ plays a central role, one quickly notices that there are a range of quite different accounts proposed in different paradigms or disciplines, and that there is very limited discussion between those fields (Gasper 2010). In particular, there is surprisingly little interaction between the very large philosophical literature on well-being (Crisp 2013; Fletcher 2015) and the (theoretical and empirical) literature in psychology and economics, or the uses of the term well-being in particular fields, such as development studies or medical care. There are a few scholars who have tried to grasp this discrepancy, as well as explain why the philosophical and theoretical literatures, as well as the debates in different disciplines, are so little connected (e.g. Alexandrova 2013; Rodogno 2015b, 2015a). This is the background against which we must try to understand the place of the capability approach in thinking about well-being, and try to understand the accounts of well-being used in capability theories. I therefore believe that it is helpful to first try to grasp that scholarly context in somewhat more detail (section 3.7.1). Then we will briefly look at the standard typology of well-being theories (section 3.7.2), before analysing the question which account (or rather, accounts) of well-being are entailed in the capability approach (section 3.7.3).

Before we start, one further clarification may be helpful. Recall that the capability approach includes a notion of achieved well-being (focussing on
functionings) as well as a notion of well-being freedom, represented by one’s capability set (Sen 1985c, 1993a). The distinction between achieved well-being and well-being freedom is virtually absent from the well-being literature. In contemporary philosophy, most philosophical accounts focus on how well a life is going for a person, hence on achieved well-being. But clearly, for policy purposes, we will often focus on well-being freedom, since other values, such as respect for personal autonomy or even human dignity, may refrain us from having a specific well-being outcome as a legitimate policy goal. When in the capability approach the term ‘well-being freedom’ is used, it refers to what philosophers elsewhere would call ‘opportunities for well-being’. This notion is especially relevant in moral theories where we try to balance a concern for well-being with a concern for individual freedom to choose: the term ‘well-being freedom’ tries to bring together and integrate those two values (well-being and freedom to choose).

3.7.1 The aim and context of accounts of well-being

Philosophical discussions of well-being typically start out from a rather general definition of well-being, stating that well-being is about how well the life of a person is going for that person. The addition ‘for that person’ is important, since it means that in the philosophical literature well-being is generally conceived as, what we could call, a personal value, or a first-person value, rather than an institutional value – a value that we have to consider when we think about how to organise our collective life. While this demarcates ‘well-being’ from other public values such as ‘justice’ or ‘efficiency’, this is still a very general notion that can be elaborated in many different ways. Moreover, if we look at the debates in contemporary philosophy of well-being, we notice that there is hardly any relation with the empirical discussions in policy studies and the social sciences (with the exception of the relatively recent boom in subjective well-being analysis, which will be discussed in section 3.8).

Anna Alexandrova (2013) argues that the diversity in scholarship on well-being can be explained by the fact that the meaning of the use of the term ‘well-being’ differs depending on the context in which it is used. If the word ‘well-being’ is used by a medical doctor, or a policy maker, or a sociologist, or an adolescent reflecting on her options between future plans of life, they are all using the term
'well-being' for different purposes and in a different context. I would like to add that, in particular, the aim or the purpose of our use of the term ‘well-being’ is crucial. That is, the term ‘well-being’ is never used in a vacuum; each use of that term plays a role in either explanatory or else normative projects. Normative projects always have a purpose, that is, something to judge, evaluate or recommend, which is precisely the choice that has to be made in module B1 in the account of the capability approach presented in chapter 2. Depending on whether we use the term ‘well-being’ for policy making, or for purely descriptive work, or for deciding what we owe to each other as fellow citizens, the term well-being will play a different function.

Most work on well-being in contemporary analytical philosophy is concerned with answering the question "What would be the best for someone, or would be most in this person’s interests, or would make this person’s life go, for him, as well as possible?" (Parfit 1984, 493). This is especially the case for the literature since the publication of Derek Parfit’s typology of theories of well-being. While Parfit’s typology is arguably crude, it has been very influential, and still serves an important function in the first attempt that philosophers will make to classify accounts of well-being.

In the next section, we will consider how (if at all) the capability approach fits in Parfit’s typology. But it is important to note that this, highly abstract, very detailed and analytical strand in philosophy is only to a very limited degree concerned with (a) empirical applicability and measurement or (b) practical consequences, in the sense of action-guidance such as normatively sound policy-making or the question which social arrangements we should want. The dominant contemporary philosophical literature on well-being is concerned with philosophical investigation, in the sense of finding truths, and typically focussed on the entire lives of people from their own, first-person, perspective. That literature is much less concerned with well-being as an institutional value, with asking which account of well-being would be best when deciding what institutions we should implement -- a question that can only be answered after taking feasibility considerations into account, or what would be best of ethically sound policy-making. However, as Alexandrova (2013, 311) rightly points out, “the context of an all-things-considered evaluation of life as a whole privileged by
philosophers is just that: one of the many contexts in which well-being is in question.” Since most uses of the term ‘well-being’ in other debates, e.g. in applied philosophy or other disciplines, are concerned with overall evaluations of states of affairs and/or policy making, it shouldn’t surprise us that there is very little cross-fertilisation between those philosophical debates and the policy-oriented and empirical literatures in other disciplines. This will have an influence of how we will, in the next section, answer the question how the capability approach fits into the standard typology of theories of wellbeing used in philosophy.

3.7.2 The standard taxonomy of philosophical well-being accounts

In Appendix I of his influential book Reasons and Persons, the philosopher Derek Parfit (1984, 493) suggests to make a distinction between three types of philosophical well-being theories.

On Hedonistic Theories, what would be best for someone is what would make his life happiest. On Desire-Fulfilment Theories, what would be best for someone is what, throughout this life, would best fulfil his desires. On Objective List Theories, certain things are good or bad for us, whether or not we want to have the good things, or to avoid the bad things.

In interdisciplinary conversations, hedonistic theories are today better known under the label ‘happiness theories’. Interpreted from the perspective of the capability approach, hedonistic theories or the happiness approach entail that the only functioning that matters is happiness. The capability approach stresses what people can do and be (module A1); and ‘happiness’ or one’s hedonic state at best refers to one aspect of one’s being, not at the various aspects of what we can do. Although he capability approach and the happiness approach do share some common characteristics, such as the focus on what these two approaches take to be of ultimate value, they are different in the exclusive choice for a mental state (happiness approach) versus the focus on a plurality of aspects of our lives (the capability approach). It is therefore not plausible to see the happiness approach, or hedonism, as a specific case of the capability approach. However, more can be said about the precise relation between the capability approach and hedonistic or happiness approaches, which will be done in section 3.8.
How about the desire-fulfilment theories, or the objective list theories? Can the notion of well-being embedded in the capability approach plausibly be understood as either of those? Let us first very briefly describe the two types of theories, and then ask how the capability approach fits in.

*Desire-fulfilment theories of well-being* claim, essentially, that well-being is the extent to which our desires are satisfied. These desires could be our current, unquestioned desires. In philosophy, that is a view that cannot count on many defenders, since it is very easy to think of examples of current desires that are harming us in the near future, or else desires to something that is, arguably, not good for us, such as a desire for excessive amounts of food or alcohol. Philosophers have therefore proposed more sophisticated views of desires, called ‘informed desires’ (e.g. Sumner 1996). Those are desires that meet additional conditions, and different proposals have been made what those conditions should be. Examples of such additional constraints are not being ignorant of facts, but also not being deceived, or not suffering from the mental adaptation – ranging from having adapted one’s aspirations to one dire circumstances, to having adapted one’s desires to one’s extremely affluent circumstances, to – more generally - ‘preference adaptation’ which applies to all of us in societies with social norms and the widespread use of advertisement.

For a philosophical theory of well-being, which merely asks the metaphysical question *what well-being is for the person who is living that life*, and which has no consequences for the choice of social arrangements or policy making, the informed desire theory has a very important attraction: in deciding what would make her live go better, it gives the authority to make that decision to the person whose well-being we are investigating. We also see this account of well-being being helpfully put at work in various other contexts. For example, if the daughter of a family-owned business has no interest at all in continuing that business, and argues that her strongest desire in life is to become a medical doctor, then her parents may, regretfully, decide that it is indeed better for her to study medicine, since that is what she really wants. They may perhaps urge her to talk to a friend who is a medical doctor to get a better understanding of what that profession precisely entails (that is, to ‘test’ whether her preferences are properly
informed). Yet in such a context, the desire-fulfilment theory of well-being seems apt and appropriate.

The problems with the informed desire fulfilment theory of well-being are especially relevant in other contexts where an account of well-being is needed for policy making or social change. The most important one is that our desires are moulded, not fully informed, and subject to social norms and other forms of societal pressures and expectations. For example, critics of capitalism argue that advertisement by profit-seeking companies form our preferences, and make us want things we would be better off without. There are many subtle forms of manipulation possible. Students of marketing learn that the products put at eye-height are more often taken by customers shopping in a supermarket. At the macro-level, the culture of late-modern capitalism tells us to find happiness in material success and in trying to achieve higher status in the dominant status order. We are socialised into these patterns, often not even aware of their existence. But why would those desires give us the highest level of well-being?

Another interesting case is standards of beauty which women are expected to meet, which will make them more attractive and ultimately happier. Dominant norms of beauty put a huge pressure on women (and increasingly also on men), leading to anxieties, low self-esteem, and even unhealthy conditions and illnesses such as anorexia (Lavaque-Manty 2001). What if we could “reset” our cultural and social norms, which would lead to less pressure, stress and fewer anxieties? Some alternative views of living, such as those advanced by deep ecology thinkers (e.g. Naess 1973, 1984), are based on the view that with a different set of desires, and a different appreciation of certain experiences and values, we would be able to live not only in an ecologically sustainable way, but also have higher levels of well-being. In sum, the desire fulfilment theory is interesting and arguably plausible at the individual level, and at the third-person general level also as a theoretical approach to well-being which can make ample use of counterfactual and hypothetical thinking and conditions. But it is much trickier for thinking about well-being from a macro or third-person perspective in the world as it is, in which we don’t have information on how each person’s preferences have been formed and influenced.
How is the objective list theory faring? *Objective lists theories* are accounts of well-being that list items making our lives go better, independent of our own view on this. The claim of objective list theories is that there is an *irreducible plurality* of issues that make up well-being; well-being is plural and cannot be reduced to a single thing. Secondly, those items are *objectively* good for us, that means, whether or not we attach any value (or desire) those items. Hence issues such as being healthy or having friends, or feeling well, are all good for us, whether we personally value them or not.

What are some of the main strengths and weaknesses of the objective list theories? Objective list theories are generally criticised for not respecting persons’ own views about their own lives, and hence taking away the authority in deciding how well lives are going from the agents leading those lives. Objective list theories are therefore often criticized for being paternalistic. Who is to decide that, say, having social relations is good for us? Now, this seems a very valid critique if we use an objective list theory for purely descriptive and first-personal truth-seeking purposes, as the vast literature in philosophy does. But if one uses accounts of well-being for policy or political purposes, the public nature of the dimensions of well-being is rather important. This relates to what political philosophers have called ‘the publicity criterion’: if well-being is used for purposes of institutional design or policy making, those principles used need to be capable of being known by all to be satisfied in society (Rawls 2009; Anderson 2010, 85).

Indeed, this directly relates to an advantage of objective list theories, being that many of the items that have been proposed by objective list theories have been translated into indicators – either by detailed elements within particular disciplines such as health or social policy, or else overall assessments have been made that can be used for an entire population. The long-standing literature on social indicators can be situated in this tradition (Boelhouwer and Stoop 1999; Boelhouwer 2002; Hagerty et al. 2001).

3.7.3 The accounts of well-being in the capability approach

So how does the capability approach fit in this standard taxonomy? The capability approach is often categorised as being an objective list theory, since functionings and capabilities are plural and the selection of dimensions gives us a list of items...
which are judged to be valuable for persons. However, in my view there is *not merely one* well-being account in the capability approach, but several well-being accounts.

So why is there not one, but several accounts of well-being in the capability literature? As was mentioned in the introduction to this section, the reason is that there are a variety of capability theories in the general capability literature, and those theories need different accounts of well-being. If a capability theory is used for a first-person perspective, for example by an adolescent contemplating on what to do with her life, she may ask herself what she really wants: to study hard and work hard and become a medical doctor? Or does she have a stronger desire to build a family and search for a job that makes it possible to spend enough time with her children? Does she want to devote her life to fighting for a good cause? In this personal deliberation, the account of well-being she is then using can be seen a desire-fulfilment account in which the desires all refer to functionings.

In the design of institutions, there is also often implicitly a desire-fulfilment account, by trying to create valuable options (capabilities) for citizens, but by not forcing them into those outcomes (functionings). But making policies can’t be done by trying to enlarge a non-specific general account of freedoms to realise one’s desires: how would that look like? In policy making, we often assume that what we owe to each other are *specific* freedoms, not a general vague notion of overall freedom (Anderson 2000b). Therefore, at the policy level we can often see that the implicit account of well-being is the desire-fulfilment whereby it is assumed that the desires refer to particular functionings (such as being able to enjoy higher education or leisure activities in green spaces in cities), or, alternatively, policies provide the resources (money, and sometimes time) that are inputs for a wide range of desires that people may have.

If a capability theory is made for macro-level poverty analysis, then the researchers will select a number of functionings for which they have reason to believe that those functionings are good for people, such as their health, educational outcomes, and the kind of shelter in which they can live. The notion of achieved well-being entailed in this normative exercise is an objective good account, although one could also reason that one has good reasons to assume that these are dimensions of the quality of life that people would want themselves
(hence their desires) and that, given that one is working with very large numbers, it is a safe assumption to proceed this way.

There are at least two interesting things to notice. First, for policy making we often have to choose either to go for a resourcist approach, which cannot account for differences in conversion factors between people, or else the policy makers try to provide a range of options to us, where ideally the policy makers assumes that these options are things that many people want. Second, the often-heard view that the account of well-being in the capability approach is an objective list theory, doesn’t seem to be true. Rather, depending on the kind of capability theory one is pursuing (in particular, the choice in B1), it is more accurate to see this as a desire-fulfilment or an objective list account.

3.8 Happiness and the capability approach

In section 3.7.2, we encountered hedonist theories of well-being as on important subgroup of theories of well-being. The debates about hedonism and the happiness approach are closely related. Hedonism is the philosophical view that well-being can be captured by the balance of pleasures over pains. The core aspect is the exclusive focus on mental states, and on subjective assessments of their own mental states. In recent decades, this approach has been revitalised in ‘the happiness approach’, although empirical scholars prefer the term ‘subjective well-being’ (SWB). The happiness and SWB literatures have in recent years gone through a revival.

On the empirical front, significant progress has been made in the last few decades by an international network of economists and psychologists, such as Andrew Clark, Ed Diener, Ada Ferrer-i-Carbonell, Bruno Frey, Richard Layard, Andrew Oswald, David Schkade, Bernard van Praag, and Ruut Veenhoven. Many of these scholars have concluded that sufficient scientific progress has been made for public policies to focus on subjective well-being. The measures of subjective well-being have been tested and refined, and much is supposed to be known about

\[ \text{SWB} \]

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the determinants of happiness that the government can influence. The happiness and SWB approach are strongly focussed on empirical analysis and policy design, and hence that will therefore also be the main lens that will be used in the comparison with the capability approach, although we will also very briefly discuss the comparison between the theoretical happiness approach, and the capability approach.

From the perspective of the capability approach, the happiness approach raises three questions: First, what is the happiness approach, exactly? Second, what are its strengths and weaknesses? Third, what role can happiness play in the capability approach?54

3.8.1 What is the happiness approach?

The happiness approach is based on the assumption that well-being (or the quality of life) coincides with the subjective experiences of a person, expressed in terms of utility, happiness, or satisfaction. Satisfaction can be expressed in terms of overall satisfaction with life, or satisfaction on particular domains, such as income, health, family relationships, labour, and so forth.

In the happiness approach, life satisfaction is understood as a concept that combines two components: how we normally feel in everyday life – the affective, or ‘hedonistic’ component – and how we judge the degree to which our preferences and aspirations in life have been realised – the cognitive component. In order to find out how 'happy' a person is, respondents are asked, for example, to rate how satisfied they are with their life on a scale from 1 to 10. In another method, the respondents are asked to imagine the worst possible life and to give that life a value of 0, to imagine the best possible life and give that a value of 10, and then to rate their own life on a scale from 0 to 10.

The view in the happiness literature is that overall life satisfaction should be adopted as the official ‘policy guide’, and the task of the government is to aim for the highest possible average level of life satisfaction (Hagerty et al. 2001; Layard 2011). For comparisons in the long term, Ruut Veenhoven also proposes

54 This section draws on, yet also modifies and expands, the analysis presented in (Robeyns and Van der Veen 2007, 33–42).
to measure the quality of life based on 'happy life expectancy'. This is an index obtained from multiplying life expectancy in a country with average overall life satisfaction (Veenhoven 1996).

Is the happiness approach, or the SWB approach, the best basis for thinking about well-being and the quality of life, especially against the background of policy design? The happiness approach certainly has a number of attractive features. Firstly, it puts the human being central stage, rather than focusing on the means that human beings use to improve their quality of life. Hence the approach satisfies the core criterion from Module A that means and ends should not be conceptually confused. Secondly, in considering the means to happiness, the subjective approach is not limited to material means, which is the major shortcoming of the dominant economic empirical methods. Income has only a limited (but not unimportant) role to play in generating happiness.

In conclusion, the happiness approach does have some significant strengths. But there are also some concerns with the happiness approach. We will briefly discuss the main theoretical worry, and then look into more detail at the worries raised for empirical research and policy making.

3.8.2 The ontological objection
The theoretical worry is an ontological worry, that is, it asks what wellbeing is, and questions that this can be captured by mental states only. This objection was forcefully made by Robert Nozick (1974, 42–45) when he introduced the ‘experience machine’ thought experiment. Nozick ask us to imagine that we would be invited to be plugged into a machine, which would stimulate our brain and make us feel as if we were having a range of experiences which we could ourselves choose beforehand; all the time, we would be floating in a tank with electrodes attached to our brain. Would we choose such a life? Nozick claims we would not, and interestingly enough the arguments he gives for why we would not choose to be hooked up the experience machine, refer to our functionings and capabilities.55 According to Nozick, three things matter to us in addition to our experiences. First,

55 Obviously, Nozick didn’t use the terminology of the capability approach, but his account of what is valuable in life could nevertheless be seen as capabilitarian.
we do not only want to have the experience of doing certain things (which we could have by sitting and taking drugs), but we also want to do certain things. Second, “we want to be a certain way, to be a certain sort of person” (Nozick 1974, 43) Third, we don’t want to limit our experiences to a man-made reality (the experience machine) but also to have the opportunity to be in contact with deeper significance. The insight from Nozick’s thought experiment is, thus, that what makes our lives go well cannot be reduced to mental states, but must also contain some genuine activities and states of being. According to Nozick (1974, 43), “someone floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob”, not a human being to whom we can describe human well-being. There is thus more to human well-being than merely feeling happy. If decent labour, knowledge, appreciating art and culture, and intimate relationships are to be valued only, or even primarily, because of their contribution to overall or specific life satisfaction, then we could want to say this is a misrecognition of the contribution they make to how well our lives go. Phenomenologically speaking, this is an implausible account of well-being.

3.8.3 Mental adaptation and social comparisons

How about the worries related to empirical research and policy making? The first worry at this level, is raised by processes of mental adaptation and social comparisons. Our satisfaction is to some extent influenced by mental adaptation problems which emerge from comparisons with the situation of others. This can have problematic implications for public policies aiming at the highest happiness for the greatest number. Take the mental adaptation processes first. How do these emerge? First of all, there can be shocks in our lives that have a major effect on our well-being, such as immobility after an accident. Persons confronted with a major setback in health and mobility through such an impairment will first experience a strong deterioration of their subjective well-being, but after a while this effect will weaken. Obviously, this adaptation to circumstances is good for the disabled, since they do not remain deeply unhappy for the rest of their lives due to their limited abilities to move around without pain. However, the question is what this implies for policies. A utilitarian will say that the government has to limit itself to creating provisions such that the disabled can return to an acceptable level of life
satisfaction, taking into account the corresponding welfare costs for others. But
one could also argue that a cost-sensitive policy has to try to reach an acceptable
level of functioning for these people, even if this makes little difference in their
subjective judgement about their well-being, after adapting to the accident.
Subjective indicators focus automatically on the first goal, but this may imply that
these quality aspects that relate to the things a person still can do after the
accident remain out of sight.

Secondly, people can adapt to an objective disadvantage that is not caused
by an external shock, but that shows a more stable pattern. This is the problem of
‘adaptive preferences’, which is particularly relevant for the happiness
approach. Amartya Sen has pointed out repeatedly that people living at the very
bottom of the social ladder (such as ‘exploited labourers’ or ‘oppressed
housewives’) adapt to their situation and come to suffer less intensely. Another
example is the effect of racism. If a society becomes gradually less tolerant
towards cultural minorities, and increasingly accepts racist practices, then
cultural minorities might get used to a racist social climate. Perhaps they will
change their behaviour, in order to avoid contact with openly racist people. By
changing their behaviour and mentally preparing for racist practices, it is possible
that after a while the negative well-being effect of racism on minority groups will
be partially wiped out. However, a policy that anticipates such adaptation
processes is problematic from a democratic perspective: racism should not be
tolerated in society, even if were not to have a significant impact on the subjective
well-being of its victims. In order to judge that racism is not morally permissible
and hence that policies should try to minimize racism, we don’t first need to
investigate whether racism makes its victims less happy: that’s simply beside the
point. Even if the victims of racism acted stoic and didn’t let racism affect their
happiness levels, that wouldn’t make racism any less undesirable.

Another form of mental adaptation which is relevant for the government is
the adjustment response to income changes. Subjective well-being judgements
about income have been shown to adapt asymmetrically to income changes.

56 Yet the phenomenon of ‘adaptive preferences’ can also potentially create problems for
some capability theories, as we will analyse in section 3.9.
Income increases go together with higher aspirations for the future, with only one third of the increase being reflected by improvements of subjective well-being (Frey and Stutzer 2002). Panel-analysis over a period of ten years shows that we adapt strongly to an increase in income, but much less so to a drop in income (Burchardt 2005). Thus, if people change positions in an income distribution which itself remains unchanged, then aggregate satisfaction of the population will decrease. The people who move up the ladder will be more satisfied for a short time, but quickly adapt to the new situation, whereas people who move downwards experience larger drop in satisfaction – and this effect lasts longer as well. Tania Burchardt (2006) argues that due to similar phenomena of adaptation, people’s positions in the distribution of income, health and marital status should preferably remain immobile, according to utilitarianism. Clearly this is a policy conclusion that goes against the principle that people should receive equal opportunities, even if the effect of one person’s upward social mobility is not compensated by the effect of another person’s downward social mobility.

How serious are these problems of mental adaptation for the subjective approach? In part, the response to this question depends on our normative judgements about the counter-intuitive and sometimes perverse policy implications of a policy that single-mindedly aims at promoting maximal average utility. It also depends, however, on the empirical question how strong these mental adaptation processes are in reality. According to Veenhoven, overall life satisfaction is primarily determined by the affective component, and therefore it is much less vulnerable to the effects of mental adaptation then satisfaction in particular domains, which he judges to be much more vulnerable to adaptation. However, the work of Kahneman and Krueger (2006, 17–18) shows that mental adaptation processes are clearly present even when predominantly affective measures of overall happiness experiences are adopted.

There are additional concerns related to the subjective well-being findings in particular domains, such as income or education. Recall the literature reporting on the findings that subjective well-being is also strongly influenced by social comparisons with reference groups. In particular, the well-being effect of income, but also of education, is affected by the levels reached by members of the reference groups to which individuals compare their own situation. As a consequence,
increases in income, or additional educational credentials, contribute less to satisfaction in these domains, the more income or educational progress is achieved within the reference groups. Apparently, these resources have a stronger positional component than other resources do, in particular leisure time, where the comparison effect appears to have a much weaker impact on well-being obtained from an additional unit of free time.

In conclusion, there seems to be little consensus in the subjective well-being literature on the question whether and to what extent phenomena of mental adaptation and reference groups cause problems for the measurement of overall life satisfaction. However, all researchers do acknowledge that satisfaction on some domains is susceptible to these phenomena, and this may result in the counter-intuitive policy implications we mentioned earlier.

### 3.8.4 Comparing groups

The second worry about the happiness or SWB-approach, concerns the effect of group-differences, and hence will be a problem if we need an account of well-being to compare well-being levels between groups. The subjective well-being approach focuses on the affective and cognitive responses of people to how their lives go overall, or in particular domains. If groups differ on average in their responses to a situation, then this may cause problems for policies, if those differences correlate with the objective circumstances that one would intuitively judge as important. There are two symmetric possibilities: (1) groups who are in the same objective situation have different levels of life satisfaction, or (2) groups with the same level of life satisfaction are in different situations, whereby it is clear that one situation is worse than the other independently of subjective well-being.

Research has indeed shown that the average level of life satisfaction between demographic groups differs systematically. In other words, if we control for the relevant factors, then some groups are significantly less satisfied with their lives than others. For example, recent Australian research (Cummins et al. 2003) shows that women report a higher level of overall life satisfaction than men, after
taking a number of control-variables into account. The researchers cannot pinpoint the exact causes of this finding, but they do not exclude the possibility that women are ‘constitutionally’ more satisfied than men. This may have a biological explanation, but it may also be the consequence of processes of adaptation that men and women experience differently over their lifetimes.

If the aim of the account of well-being is to inform public policy, then the question is how government should deal with these findings. From a utilitarian perspective, it would be efficient to develop a policy that is advantageous to men. For example, if due to unemployment men experience a larger drop in happiness than women, as reported by Frey and Stutzer (2002, 419), then a policy that gives men priority on the labour market will minimise the average well-being damage in terms of happiness. But the fact that one demographic group (women, the worst off, the elderly, and so forth) are made less unhappy due to a certain event than other groups, can cause perverse policy implications if life satisfaction is declared to be the guideline for policies. Fundamental political principles such as non-discrimination and equality of opportunities for all citizens are thereby put into jeopardy. This would also be true in the symmetric case where the average level of life satisfaction of discriminated or marginalized groups does not differ significantly from the average level of a group that is not faced with these disadvantages. I do not want to claim here that the subjective well-being approach will always lead to such injustices. But I do think that a central focus on subjective well-being will make policies less sensitive to signalling and combating these injustices. Hence Burchardt (2005, 94) is right in pointing out that “... satisfaction – the best proxy we have for the concept of utility- is unsuitable for assessing current well-being, justice or equality.”

3.8.5 Macro analysis
A third worry concerns the applicability of the subjective well-being approach at the national or regional levels of policy making. One may agree that the happiness approach can be very helpful when it can advise persons with low affect (negative

57 A similar strong and significant gender-effect has been found by (Eriksson, Rice, and Goodin 2007).
moods and feelings) concrete strategies on how they may change that, such as engaging in mindfulness training and practice. Yet what about policy making? Are the happiness indicators sufficiently refined and sensitive for policy at lower levels of aggregation than the level of a country? In their discussion of the criteria that an index of the quality of life should meet, Hagerty and his co-authors (2001, 2) include the criterion that the index must help policy makers to develop and evaluate policies at all levels of aggregation. Thus, the index should not only be useful for the national government, but also for governments in cities, communities, and regions. As Robert van der Veen and I argued in earlier work, overall life satisfaction does not satisfactorily meet this criterion (Robeyns and Van der Veen 2007). This indicator is too crude for these purposes. Life satisfaction is less suitable for the evaluation of specific policy interventions (Cummins et al. 2003). The effect of one policy measure such as improved child care facilities will hardly or not at all be reflected in reported overall life satisfaction, even if such policies have significant effects on the real opportunities of parents to organise their lives as they think is best – hence on their capabilities. Overall ‘happy life expectancy’ is, by contrast, well-suited for comparing the effects of fundamental political and economic institutions on subjective well-being. This emerges clearly from the work of Veenhoven (1996), which concentrates on studies whereby the unit of analysis is the country. In other words, Veenhoven mainly uses happy life expectancy as an indicator for macro-analysis. The variables that emerge as the determinants of happy life expectancy are therefore typically system-variables such as the degree of political freedom, or the presence of rule of law. But the quality of life in a micro-situation (say, living in a particular community or neighbourhood) is also influenced by many other variables.

3.8.6 The place of happiness in the capability approach

The previous sections argued why happiness can’t be taken to represent a person’s well-being for many purposes for which we need an account of happiness, including policy purposes. Yet it would also be deeply counter-intuitive to say that happiness doesn’t matter at all for a person. It may be the right concept
of well-being for other aims. How, then, can happiness be given a proper place within the capability approach?

The first possibility is to see happiness, or some more specific capabilities that are closely related to the affective component of subjective well-being, as one important dimension to be selected. In fact, Amartya Sen has for many years argued that we could take ‘feeling happy’ as one of the functionings to be selected. For example, Sen (2008, 26) wrote:

“happiness, however, is extremely important, since being happy is a momentous achievement in itself. Happiness cannot be the only thing that we have reason to value, nor the only metric for measuring other things that we value, but on its own, happiness is an important human functioning. The capability to be happy is, similarly, a major aspect of the freedom that we have good reason to treasure. The perspective of happiness illuminates one critically important element of human living.”

Including indicators of happiness is already done, for example by including dimensions of mental health in capability applications. Certain specific functionings which make up an overall ‘mental health’ functioning already contain such affective items, whether, over the last week, the respondent has felt down or worthless, or whether one is free from worry.

Second, in so far as one wants to capture the cognitive aspect of happiness, one may ask for different capabilities, or indeed for a person’s capability set, how satisfied she is with that outcome, and compare that with the objective outcomes in the domains of functionings or capabilities. For example, the absence of criminality is a valuable functioning. But while, according to Dutch studies analysing the incidence and impact of criminality have concluded that crime has gone down, studies also show that the Dutch population is more worried about crime than before (refs needed). The discrepancy between objective outcomes and subjective perception is instructive here; it may imply, for example, that the government should communicate more effectively about its success in reducing

58 Perhaps criminals would disagree.
crime, so as to make the satisfaction and subjective perception more in line with the objective reality.

Third, capability scholars would, of course, hope that an enlarging of people’s functionings and capabilities would, as a further effect, increase them feeling happy and satisfied, and serve as a (sometimes rough) indicator of the satisfaction of people with their functionings and capabilities (Sen 2008, 26–27). But not all functionings will lead to people becoming happier, yet their lives may still be better, in the sense of more flourishing, or more meaningful, or with a higher quality of life, or with a high freedom that could be realised. An interesting example is the case of procreative capabilities – having and raising children. Recent empirical studies show that begetting and raising children at best does not increase one’s happiness, but, worse, seems to be making parents less happy. So why do people then have children? Putting aside the cases of not having access to contraceptives and of being subject to severe procreative social norms, parents opt to have children because of the meaning it brings to their lives. The capability approach can capture this – parenting can plausibly be conceptualised as a general functioning (consisting of a set of more specific functionings) that we may want include in our capability analyses, including in our capabilitarian theories of well-being for public policies.

I would thus defend the position that various roles for happiness are potentially possible within capability theories, and that it depends on the exact purpose and scope of the capability theory or application, as well as the aim that well-being plays in that capability theory, what the best role (if any) for both the affective and cognitive aspects of happiness would be.

3.9 The capability approach and adaptive preferences

As we saw in the previous section, a widely voiced reason offered for rejecting the happiness approach as an account of well-being, is the phenomenon of adaptive preferences, which has been widely discussed in the literature (e.g. Elster 1983; Sen 1985c, 3, 1992b; M. C. Nussbaum 2000; Teschl and Comim 2005; Burchardt 2009; Khader 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013; Conradie and Robeyns 2013). Phenomena of mental adaption are a problem if we take happiness or desire-satisfaction to be our account of well-being. Yet we also concluded in section 3.7.3 that the capability
approach sometimes boils down to a desire-fulfilment account of well-being. Hence we need to ask: how do processes of adaptation affect the desire-fulfilment view of well-being, and what are the implications for the capability approach?

In most general terms, preferences formation or adaptation is the phenomena whereby the subjective assessment of one’s well-being are out of line with the objective situation. Two persons who find themselves in the same objective situation will have a very different subjective assessment, because one is happy with small amounts of ‘objective goods’, whereas the other is much more demanding. In the capability literature, the general concern is with deprived persons who, over time, adapt to their objectively poor circumstances, and report a level of subjective well-being which is higher than the objective circumstances warrant.

The idea of adaptation can take different forms. The conceptualisation of Jon Elster (1983) referred to one particular type of adaptation, namely where not being able to fulfil a preference or realise an aspiration leads one to ultimately no longer wanting to have that preference or aspiration. This phenomenon is known as ‘sour grapes’: the fox who cannot pick the grapes because they are hanging too high for him, starts telling himself that they are sour anyway, and no longer desires to eat them. On Elster’s account, adaptation occurs at a non-conscious level, as a reaction to the painful process of cognitive dissonance that a person who can’t fulfil her unreachable desires or aspirations feels. Elster’s notion of adaptive preferences only refers to a process, and makes no reference to an objective notion of well-being. These psychological aspects of adaptation are echoed in Sen’s reference to this phenomenon, when he writes that “considerations of ‘feasibility’ and of ‘practical possibility’ enter into what we dare to desire and what we are pained not to get” (Sen 1985a, 15). Adaptive preferences are a reason for Sen to reject a focus on mental metrics, such as utility or happiness, as the metric of well-being. After all, someone who is in an objectively dire situation may have adapted to that situation and learnt to be pleased with little. As Sen (1985c, 21) puts it, “A person who is ill-fed, undernourished, unsheltered and ill can still be high up in the scale of happiness or desire-fulfilment if he or she has learned to have ‘realistic’ desires and to take pleasure in small mercies”.

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Serene Khader (2011) has argued that not all cases that we tend to consider as cases of adaptive preferences fit Elster’s conceptualisation. Khader believes that an account of adaptive preferences must make reference to an objective notion of flourishing, even if that notion remains vague and only focusses on basic flourishing (since there is more intercultural agreement on what basic flourishing entails). She develops the following definition:

An adaptive preference is a preference that (1) is inconsistent with a person’s basic flourishing, (2) was formed under conditions nonconductive to her basic flourishing, and (3) that we do not think a person would have formed under conditions conductive to basic flourishing (Khader 2011, 51).

A similarly perfectionist, but much less systematically worked out account of adaptive preferences can be found in Martha Nussbaum’s work. She understands adaptive preferences as the preferences of people not wanting to have items of her list of capabilities, whereby these preferences are deformed due to injustices, oppression, ignorance and blind habit (M. C. Nussbaum 2000, 114).

What questions do adaptive preferences raise for the capability approach? At the very minimum, it raises the following questions: First, why would adaptive preferences pose a problem for capability theories? Second, do we have any evidence about the prevalence of adaptive preferences? And third, how can capability scholars deal with adaptive preferences in their capability theories and applications?

Let us start with the first of these questions. Why would adaptive preferences pose a problem for capability theories? There are at least two reasons. The first reason lies in Module B2, the selection of dimensions. If that selection is done in a participatory or democratic way, then the selection may be vulnerable to adaptive preferences. A group that is systematically socialised in having low aspirations and low ambitions, will perhaps not put certain capabilities on its list, thereby telling themselves that they are unachievable, whereas objectively speaking they are achievable, albeit perhaps only after some social changes have taken place. The second reason is that a person with adaptive preferences may objectively have access to a certain capability, but may believe that either this capability is not available to her, or else that she should not choose it, and hence
she may pick from her capabilities set a suboptimal combination of functionings. If we are then assuming that this person (or a group) has non-adaptive preferences, then we will wrongly interpret the choice not to exercise certain capabilities as a matter of personal agency, which a capability theory that focusses on capabilities rather than functionings, should respect. The capability approach by default regards adults as agents rather than patients, but this may be problematic in the case of adaptive preferences.

So we can conclude that adaptive preferences can pose a problem for capability theories in which the choice of dimensions is made democratic, or in which we focus on capabilities rather than functionings. But a critic may raise the question: do we have any evidence about the prevalence of adaptive preferences? Is this not a theoretical problem invented by philosophers who like complex puzzles, or by western scholars who pity the lives of poor people in the global South?

There are at least two answers to be given to this question. The first is that there are indeed good reasons to be very careful with the conclusions we draw when studying adaptive preferences, especially in a context in which one is not familiar. Serene Khader (2011, 55–60) provides a nuanced and convincing discussion of the various mistakes that can be made when we try to identify whether a person or group of persons living under unjust conditions expresses adaptive preferences. There are at least three ‘occupational hazards’ that those trying to identify adaptive preferences may make: we run the risk of psychologizing structural constraints, of misidentifying possible trade-offs between various dimensions of well-being that a person makes, or we may be unable to recognise forms of flourishing in very different culture or class settings. All this shows that thinking about adaptive preferences needs to be done with great attention to contextual details and in a very careful manner; it is not an analysis that can easily be done by applying a rigid formula. Scholars should therefore be very careful before concluding that someone or a group shows adaptive preferences, and carefully investigate alternative interpretations of what they observe, since otherwise they run the risk of seeing adaptive preferences where there are none.
Having said this, it is clear from the literature that adaptive preferences are a genuine phenomenon. For example, Serene Khader (2011) discusses in her work on adaptive preferences real cases of groups of women who had adaptive preferences. Tania Burchardt analysed the 1970 British Cohort Study and found that "among those able to formulate agency goals, the aspirations expressed are conditioned by their socio-economic background and experience" (Burchardt 2009, 13). She also found evidence that adaptation may play a role in the selection of functionings from one's capability set, since among the 16-year old who have the capability to continue full-time education, the choice whether or not to do so is highly influenced by past deprivation and experiences of inequality. Burchardt rightly concludes that if the influence on people's choices is so systematically related to previous experiences of disadvantage, that this is a case of injustice. Hence the need, also for capability theorists and not just for those endorsing the happiness approach or the desire-fulfilment theory of well-being, of taking processes of adapted preferences and adapted aspirations seriously. On the other hand, as David Clark (2009, 32) argued in the context of development studies, it may not be as widespread as some capability theorists make it to be: "the available evidence only provides limited support for the adaptation argument and is not always easy to interpret". Given the ‘occupational hazards’ that those trying to identify adaptive preferences face (Khader 2011, 55–60), it is important not to ‘see’ adaptive preferences where there are none. In conclusion, the capability scholar will have to balance the tricky tasks of neither ignoring processes of adaption, nor to make the adaptation problem bigger than it in reality is.

This brings us to the last question: can the capability approach deal with adaption? Given that capability theories and applications can be very diverse, we will need different methods to handle the issue of adaptive preferences for different capability theories and applications.

In the context of action-research, small-scale projects, and grassroots strategies, what is above all required is deliberation and interaction with people of whom one may be worried that their preferences may show signs of adaption, as Ina Conradie did in her project with women in a South African township (Conradie 2013; Conradie and Robeyns 2013). Serene Khader (2011) has developed ‘a deliberative perfectionist approach to adaptive preference intervention,’ in which
a practitioner who suspects that a group of people has adaptive preferences, will first attempt to understand how the suspected preferences affect the basic flourishing of the people. This must be done via deliberative processes – a strategy that we also see in Conradie’s research. If the practitioner has good reasons to suspect that some of the preferences are adapted, she can involve the people with the alleged adaptive preference in a discussion and together search for a strategy for change. Note that there is an interesting parallel here with the grassroots-based development model that has been proposed by Solava Ibrahim (2017), in which ‘a conscientization process’ is an integral part of the development process. In this process, a person reflects critically on her life, develops aspirations for better living conditions, and makes a pan of action to bring about the desired change (Ibrahim 2017, 206). While, as Ibrahim rightly notes, adaptive preferences and aspirations may provide a challenge for this conscientization process, they are also very likely to be challenged and hence changed via such a process.

What about capability applications that involve the empirical analysis of large-scale datasets? How can adaptation be dealt with in those applications? Here, the capability approach needs to use insights from the disciplines that have built most expertise on large-scale adaptation processes, such as sociology and social policy studies. Based on the insights from those disciplines, we know what are likely candidates of dimensions of adaption – such as social class, caste or gender. We can then use indicators of those dimensions to study whether preferences and aspirations systematically differ, as in the earlier mentioned study by Tania Burchardt (2009). But it is clear that this can only help us to identify adapted preferences or adapted aspirations, but will not always tell us whether for each application it is possible to ‘launder’ the data so as to clean them from processes of unjust adaptions.

3.10 Can the capability approach be an explanatory theory?

In almost all capability applications and theories, the capability approach is developed for conceptual and normative purposes, rather than for explanations. If it is used for conceptual work, then capability theories do not explain poverty, inequality, or well-being, but rather help us to conceptualize these notions. If
capability analyses are used for normative work, then they help to evaluate states of affairs and prescribe recommendations for intervention and change.

Nevertheless, the notions of functionings and capabilities in themselves can be employed as elements in explanations of social phenomena, or one can use these notions in descriptions of poverty, inequality, quality of life, and social change. In those cases, the properties A1 to A4 from Module A would still hold, but characteristics A5 (functionings and capabilities as the evaluative space), A6 (other dimensions of intrinsic values can be important for normative analyses) and A7 (normative individualism) are not applicable.

To the best of my knowledge, there is little work that uses the capability approach in this way. Probably this should not be surprising, since it may perhaps not be for this type of work that the capability approach makes a significant difference. Still, there are parallels with existing work. For example, there is a large literature on the social determinants of health (e.g. Marmot 2005; Marmot and Wilkinson 2007; Marmot et al. 2008). The goal here is a set of functionings related to the general functioning of being healthy – and the determinants are investigated so that social interventions are possible. The same is done for other functionings – not surprisingly, since explaining the determinants of valuable social states is one of the main aims of social scientists.

This raises the question whether the capability approach should aspire to do this kind of explanatory capabilitarian analyses. Whether that is the case, depends on the answer to the question whether the capability approach would have any added-value in conducting explanatory capability analyses. If not, then it is unclear why this should be part of the capability approach, since there seems to be very little value in doing what others are already doing successfully.

But this pessimistic dismissal of the potential of explanatory capability analyses may be too quick. Perhaps the capability approach has a role to play in synthesising and connecting these field-specific lines of explanatory research; since it is a strongly interdisciplinary approach, it may perhaps also have a role to play in bringing different disciplines within the social and behavioural sciences together. Another very important task of the capability approach is to reach out to those disciplines in order to make bridges between the normative and the
explanatory analyses – one important element of the truly post-disciplinary agenda to which the capability approach aims to contribute.

3.11 A suitable theory for all normative questions?

The capability approach is primarily a normative theory. But are there also restrictions on which normative questions it can help address? Or is it suited for all normative questions?

In order to answer that question, it is helpful to remind us of the key distinction in philosophical ethics between the right and the good. Questions about the good focus on what makes life valuable and include discussions about well-being, autonomy, freedom, and love. Questions about the right focus on how we should act in order for that act to be morally sound as well as questions of how institutions and policies should be designed so as not to violate universal moral rules. Here, the central issues are questions about avoiding to harm, fairness, and respect. Different moral theories give different answers to the question how the good and the right relate to each other.

In philosophical ethics, if we say that an issue is a moral issue, that implies that we have duties to comply with the moral norm, no matter how we feel about it. These are very stringent and universal duties. An example is: do not kill an innocent person; or: respect the human dignity of all persons. Normative questions are much broader, and can also entail other values, such as prudential value (well-being). Questions about the right are questions about morality, whereas for most ethical frameworks questions about the good are questions about other areas of normativity, but not morality straight.59

The modular view that has been presented in Chapter 2 has in the core module A only normative properties related to the good. Properties A1 and A2 define functionings and capabilities, and property A5 claims that a person’s advantage should focus on functionings and capabilities: this gives the capability

59 An influential exception are utilitarians and other consequentialists, who define the morally right as that which maximizes the (non-moral) good (Driver 2014; Sinnott-Armstrong 2015).
approach the core of its theory of the good. The complete theory of the good may be extended by additional choices made in module C4.

What does the core of the capability approach (module A) have to say about the right? The only property related to the right is normative individualism. There are no additional claims related to the right included in module A. Hence, the only conclusion we can draw is that the capability approach would claim that, *if and whenever* rightness involves a notion of the good, one should use the theory of the good as entailed by the core characteristics of the capability approach. Hence, if we believe that the right thing to do is to prioritize the lives of the worst-off, then a capabilitarian version of this claim would say that we should prioritize the functionings and/or capabilities of the worst-off rather than their happiness or their command over resources.

Yet many claims concerning the right make no reference to an account of the good. The core of the capabilities approach is, thus, orthogonal to other aspects of the theory of the right, except for ethical individualism, which is only a very small part of a theory of the right. The fact that the capability approach has, at its very core, more to offer in terms of the theory of the good than in terms of the theory of the right has an important implication, namely that *the capability approach is not very suitable for ethical issues that only concern question about the right*. For example, the capability approach is not a very helpful theory when analysing the morality of abortion since so much of that ethical debate is about issues of the right rather than about issues of the good. That is, most of the philosophical debates on the ethics of abortion concern the moral status of the foetus, notions of personhood, or questions about the autonomy and self-ownership of the pregnant woman—issues on which the capability approach remains mute.\(^{60}\) It is therefore not surprising that the capability approach is more useful and more widely used as a theory analysing socio-economic policies where there is a consensus on those aspects that are questions about the right or where the questions about the right are much less weighty than those about the good. Examples include debates about poverty alleviation, distributive justice, 

\(^{60}\) Philosophical arguments on the moral permissibility of abortion come to widely divergent conclusions (e.g. Thomson 1971; Tooley 1972; English 1975; Marquis 1989).
environmental ethics, and disability ethics. In sum, the capability approach is not a very helpful framework for normative analyses where elements regarding moral duties and rights play the most important role – that is, where aspects of the right are crucial in addressing the normative questions.

3.12 The role of resources in the capability approach

In section 2.6.4 we discussed property A4, which stresses the importance of the difference between means and ends in the capabilities approach. In section 2.6.5, we discussed property A5, which claims that in the capability approach functionings and capabilities form the evaluative space. From these two core properties from Module A, some may draw the conclusion that resources are no longer important in the capability approach. This is a mistake. Resources are important, although in an instrumental manner. How are resources then important in the capability approach?

Firstly, a focus on functionings and capabilities does not have to imply that a capability analysis would not pay any attention to resources, or the evaluation of social institutions, economic growth, technical advancement, and so forth. While functionings and capabilities are of ultimate concern, other dimensions can be important as well, but in an instrumental way, or as indicators for what ultimately matters. For example, in their evaluation of development in India, Drèze and Sen have stressed that working within the capability approach does in no way exclude the integration of an analysis of resources:

“It should be clear that we have tended to judge development by the expansion of substantive human freedoms – not just by economic growth (for example, of the gross national product), or technical progress, or social modernization. This is not to deny, in any way, that advances in the latter fields can be very important, depending on circumstances, as ‘instruments’ for the enhancement of human freedom. But they have to be appraised precisely in that light – in terms of their actual effectiveness in enriching the lives and liberties of people – rather than taking them to be valuable in themselves.” (Drèze and Sen 2002, 3).

Second, once we have decided which capabilities are relevant, we need to investigate the determinants of those capabilities – the factors which affect the emergence, size and robustness of those capabilities. As figure 2.1 illustrates,
these determinants are resources, a person’s set of conversion factors, and structural constraints. Hence if we want to expand the capabilities of a person or a group, these are the levels where we could intervene. Resources are not the only thing that matter, and for some capabilities that we try to expand or try to equalise resource may be not be the most effective factor of intervention. At the same time, it is also clear that resources are very important for most capabilities. There are hardly any capabilities where resources do not play any role at all. Being able to buy presents enhances the capability of affiliation and social interaction; being able to get the best medical care enhances the capability of health; and being able to afford time off and time to travel enhances the capability to enjoy nature. Hence even those capabilities that could be seen as non-material dimensions of advantage, are nevertheless also aided by the availability of resources, albeit probably not in a linear way, and perhaps only up to a certain threshold level. If a capability analysis is aimed at making an intervention, then the exact relationship between resources and functionings needs to be studied for each capability analysis, rather than being assumed to have a certain shape.

Third, in empirical research there are often data constraints that force scholars to work with resources as proxies for valuable functionings. There is nothing inconsistent in taking that path, as long as one is careful in the conclusions that one draws from an analysis of resources. Moreover, if one uses multiple resources, such as a combination of income, time, and human and social capital (e.g. Burchardt 2010), then the informational riches of the analysis increases, compared to a one-dimensional monetary analysis.

3.13 The capability approach and theories of justice

Discussions about inequality and justice are very important within the capability literature. In fact, they are so important that many philosophers studying the capability approach have made the mistake of believing that the capability approach is a theory of equality, or a theory of justice. But as the descriptions of the capability approach in Chapter 2 has shown, that is not the case. Here, too, we need to make use of the distinction between the general capability approach (see section 2.3), and more specific capability theories: theorizing justice is only one among many different purposes that capability theories can have, that is, one of
the possible choices we can make in module B1. Still, given that the capability approach offers a distinct view on interpersonal comparisons of ‘advantage’, it should not surprise us that the capability approach has been widely used in thinking about inequality and justice.

The literature developing the relevance of the capability approach in theories of justice falls primarily within the domain of normative political philosophy, but there is some overlap with the work done by welfare economists and other scholars. In order to get a grip on what the capability approach does in the literature on distributive justice, -- or vice versa, what thinking goes on about theories of distributive justice within the capability literature, let us start with a brief primer to the theoretical literature on justice in the next section. Then, in section 3.13.2, I pose the question what is required for the construction of a complete capability theory of justice. The final section, 3.13.3, explores the implications of a capability-based approach to justice for practice.

3.13.1 A brief description of the literature on theories of justice

Justice is an essentially contested concept: there is no generally-accepted definition of justice, and thus no consensus on what the appropriate subject matter of theories of justice is or should be. Of course, it does not follow that nothing at all can be said about the notion of justice. David Miller’s description of social justice is a good starting point. He claims that when arguing about justice, we are discussing

“... how the good and bad things in life should be distributed among the members of a human society. When, more concretely, we attack some policy or some state of affairs as socially unjust, we are claiming that a person, or more usually a category of persons, enjoys fewer advantages than that person or group of persons ought to enjoy (or bears more of the burdens than they ought to bear), given how other members of the society in question are faring” (Miller 1999, 1).

Theories of justice do not cover the entire spectrum of moral issues. Social justice theorists generally agree that parts of morality fall outside the scope of justice. Charity is such a case: you may not have a duty of justice to help a frail, elderly

61 In particular, see the overview of different types of capability studies in section 2.4.
neighbour, but you may nevertheless decide to help that person as an act of charity and compassion. Another example is morally laudable behaviour, such as being a volunteer for social activities in your neighbourhood. Such behaviour may be morally praiseworthy, but it may at the same time not be required as a matter of justice. Hence, justice is not all that matters, if we consider how to make the world morally better.

Can we describe justice, and theories of justice, by their properties, as philosophers often do? First, justice is a property that has been ascribed to both individuals and institutions: justice is a virtue of individuals in their interactions with others, and justice is also a virtue of social institutions (Barry and Matravers 2011). Thus, we can say that a certain society is more or less just, or we can say that the behaviour of some persons is just or unjust. Theorists of justice tend to primarily discuss the justice of social arrangements, that is, of social institutions broadly defined; justice as an individual virtue is sometimes regarded as a matter of ethics rather than of political philosophy (although not every political philosopher would agree with this way of demarcating justice from ethics). Moreover, an increasing number of theorists define social institutions broader so as to include societal structures related to class or caste, as well as social norms; under such broad definitions, conceptualising justice as a virtue of institutions would touch upon many of the aspects which we would discuss if we were to see justice as a virtue of persons. For example, if a society has widely shared racist social norms, such as the disapproval of inter-racial love relationships, then a person who shows her disapproval of an inter-racial love relationship is acting upon an unjust social norm, but also showing non-virtuous behaviour.

Second, while sometimes the terms 'social justice' and 'distributive justice' are used as synonyms, it makes sense to understand 'social justice' as somewhat broader' as 'distributive justice'. Distributive justice always deals with an analysis of who gets what, whereas social justice may also relate to questions of respect or recognition, or the attitudes that a certain institution expresses. The capability approach is mainly discussed in theories of distributive justice, although it is to quite some extent able to integrate the concerns of theorists of recognition, on
what they conceive to be the narrow or mistaken focus on theories of distributive justice.62

A third point to note about the literature on justice is that there are several different schools within social justice theories. Brian Barry and Matt Matravers identify conventionalism, teleology, justice as mutual advantage, and egalitarian justice. *Conventionalism* is the view that issues of justice can be resolved by examining how local conventions, institutions, traditions and systems of law determine the divisions of burdens and benefits. Barry and Matravers rightly point out that this approach, which has been defended by Michael Walzer (1983), can lead to the acceptance of grossly unjust practices because they are generally endorsed by certain communities, even if they may be seen as unjust if judged on the basis of values and ideas not currently present (or dominant) in that society. *Teleology* is the view that social arrangements should be justified by referring to some good they are aiming for. Some examples are utilitarianism, natural law theory or Aquinas’ Christian philosophy. For teleological theories, what justice is follows from an account of the good, and thus the account of justice depends on the account of the social good itself. A criticism of teleological theories is that they *necessarily* rely on an external source (to specify what ‘the good’ is), such as utility, the natural law or God’s authority. Teleological accounts of justice therefore necessarily depend on notions of the ultimate good. However, in pluralistic societies characterised by a variety of religious and non-religious worldviews, it is hard to see how justice can be derived from notions of the good that are not endorsed by all. Many contemporary political philosophers therefore argue that teleological theories cannot be defended since people have competing ideas of the good, and we cannot call upon a generally-accepted external source that will tell us which idea of the good should be imposed on all.

The third and fourth schools of social justice, in comparison, share a commitment to some form of liberalism that recognizes the diversity of views of the good life, which a just society should respect. These schools experienced a

62 It doesn’t follow that all concerns of theorists of recognition are *best* expressed by using the capability approach. I doubt that this is the case, but will not pursue this issue here further.
major revival after the publication of John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, which is generally regarded as the single most important work on social justice written in the last century.\(^{63}\) Rawls turned to the *social contract tradition*, where justice is understood as the fair distributions of benefits of social cooperation. The core idea is that rules of justice are ultimately more beneficial to everyone than if each were to pursue their own advantage by themselves. Some of these theories (though not Rawls’s!) take the relative power or bargaining strength *as given*, and one may therefore question whether in situations of unequal bargaining power, justice will be done (M. Nussbaum 2006b). The other liberal school of justice is *egalitarian justice*, which is premised on the idea that people should be treated with equal respect and concern (Dworkin 2000). The most basic claim of those theories is that people are morally equal: each person should be treated as a being of equal moral worth. However, that general and abstract claim can be further developed in many different ways, and it is in specifying these further details that philosophers disagree. Distributive justice requires equality of something, but not necessarily equality of outcome in material terms (in fact, plain equality of resources is a claim very few theorists of justice would be willing to defend, since people have different needs, are confronted with different circumstances and, if given the same opportunities, are likely to make different use of them). Hence, John Rawls’s theory of justice can be seen as an egalitarian theory of justice, but so are theories that come to very different substantive conclusions, such as Robert Nozick’s (1974) entitlement theory. Other major contemporary theorists of justice who can be labelled ‘liberal egalitarian’ are Brian Barry (1995), Philippe Van Parijs (1995), and Ronald Dworkin (2000), among many others.

Of those four schools, it is primarily liberal egalitarian theories that are discussed in relation to the capability approach. While there is internal diversity within this group of liberal egalitarian theories, these theories share the

\(^{63}\) There is a large literature on how the differences and complementarities between the capability approach to justice (that is, capabilitarian theories of justice), and Rawls’s theory of justice (see e.g. Sen 1980, 195–200; Rawls 1988; Sen 1992b, 82–83; Pogge 2002; M. Nussbaum 2006b; Robeyns 2008b, 2009; and the contributions to Brighouse and Robeyns 2010).
commitments to the principle that there should be considerable (although by no means absolute) scope for individuals to determine their own life plan and notion of the good, as well as a commitment to a notion of equal moral consideration, which is another way to put the principle of each person as an end or normative individualism (see section 2.6.8).

Of the four schools of social justice, only the last two regard justice and equality as being closely-related values. Under conventionalism, justice is guided by existing traditions, conventions and institutions, even if those existing practices do not treat people as equals in a plausible sense. Teleological theories also do not understand justice as entailing some notion of equality; instead, the idea of the good is more important, even if it implies that people are not treated as moral equals. In some theories of conventionalism and teleology, social justice could be consistent with a notion of equality, but this is not necessarily the case for all these theories. The social contract tradition and liberal egalitarianism, in contrast, derive their principles of social justice from a fundamental idea of people as moral equals, as beings with equal moral worth. However, the notion of equal moral worth does not necessarily lead to the notion of equality of resources or another type of equality of outcome, as will be explained in what follows. Social justice and equality are related in these theories, but not always at the level of material inequality, but rather at a more fundamental level of treating people as moral equals or with equal respect and concern.

For a proper understanding of mainstream philosophical literature on theories of justice, it is helpful to know that the literature itself is highly abstract, and often rather detached from questions about policy design or political feasibility. Sen (2006, 2009c) has recently criticised such theories, and in particular Rawls’s work, for being overly “transcendental”. Such ideal theories give an account of the perfectly just society, but do not tell us what needs to be done to get closer to that very ideal, how we can make the world less unjust, and which of two situations might be more unjust than the other. Another critique on contemporary theories of justice is that they are often based on so-called idealisations or strong assumptions, which may introduce significant biases or excludes certain groups of people from the theory. For example, Dworkin (2000) starts his egalitarian theory against a set of background assumptions which rule
out racist and sexist attitudes and behaviours, as well as the adaptation of preferences to unfair circumstances (Pierik and Robeyns 2007). Certain assumptions and meta-theoretical as well as methodological choices also put philosophical theories of justice at risk of being too far-removed from practical applicability. Some have argued that these theories do not offer much guidance on how we can move to a more just society by making feasible improvements, that is, they do not tell us what kind of actions or policies need to be implemented to move us in the direction of this utopian vision of a just society. When we try to apply contemporary theories of justice to the actual reality of our chaotic and often messy world, there are all sorts of complications that need to be taken into account, such as trade-offs between different values, power imbalances between different social groups, unintended consequences of justice-enhancing interventions and policies, or interests of individuals and groups that may conflict with concerns for justice (e.g., a desire for re-election on the part of government administrations).

Debates about the practical relevance of contemporary philosophical theories of justice have gained momentum in the last decade. It remains unclear whether the outcome will change the way theories of justice are constructed in the next few decades. It may well be that we will be seeing a turn towards more non-ideal, empirically-informed, ‘directly useful’ theories that are easier to translate into practice. In any case, it is fair to say that most capability theorists working on justice are among those who most strongly advocate this turn to make theories of justice more relevant to practice.

3.13.2 What do we need for a capability theory of justice?
In the previous section I gave a very brief account of the philosophical literature on theories of justice. What contribution can the capability approach make to this field? The first thing to note is that Martha Nussbaum has written at great length developing a capabilities theory of justice (e.g. M. Nussbaum 1988, 1992, M. C. Nussbaum 2000, 2002a; M. Nussbaum 2006b). Her capabilities theory is the most detailed capability theory of justice that has been developed up till now. Her theory is comprehensive, in the sense that it is not limited to an account of political justice, or to liberal democracies. Her account holds for all human beings on earth,
independently of whether they are living in a liberal democratic regime, or of whether they are severely disabled. However, Nussbaum's theory of social justice doesn't amount to a full theory of social justice. The main demarcation of Nussbaum's account is that it provides only “a partial and minimal account of social justice” (M. Nussbaum 2006b, 71) by specifying thresholds of a list of capabilities that governments in all nations should guarantee to their citizens. Nussbaum's theory focuses on thresholds, but this does not imply that reaching these thresholds is all that matters for social justice; rather, her theory is partial and simply doesn't discuss the question what social justice requires once those thresholds are met. Not discussing certain things is not necessarily a flaw of a theory: it may be theoretical work that Nussbaum will do in future work, or it may be work that will be done by other scholars. Moreover, it is quite possible that Nussbaum's account of partial justice is consistent with several accounts of what justice requires above the thresholds.

Yet, while Nussbaum’s theory of justice has been worked out in great detail and has received a lot of attention, it would be a grave mistake to think that there can be only one capability theory of justice. On the contrary, the open nature of the capability framework allows for the development of a family of capability theories of justice. This then prompts the question: what is needed if we want to create such a capability theory of justice?64

First, a theory of justice needs to explain on what basis it justifies its principles or claims of justice. For example, in Rawls's theory of justice the two principles of justice are justified by the thought-experiment of the original position and the more general social contract framework on which this is based. Dworkin's egalitarian justice theory starts from the meta-principle of equal respect and concern, which he then develops in the principles that the distribution of burdens and benefits should be sensitive to the ambitions that people have but should not reflect the unequal natural endowments with which individuals are born (Dworkin 1981, 2000). One could also develop a capability theory of justice arguing that the ultimate driving force is a concern with agency (Claassen and

64 I have presented this overview of steps that need to be taken in earlier publications (e.g. Robeyns 2016d).
Düwell 2013; Claassen 2016) or with human dignity (M. C. Nussbaum 2000; M. Nussbaum 2006b). If capability scholars want to develop a full theory of justice, they will also need to explain on what bases they will justify their principles or claims. As mentioned earlier, Nussbaum starts from a notion of human dignity, whereas the Senian strand in the capability approach stresses the importance of what people have reason to value, hence an account of public reasoning. However, little work has been done so far to flesh out this embryonic idea of ‘having reason to value’, and it therefore remains unclear whether the capability approach has a solid unified rationale on the basis of which a full account of justice could be developed.

Second, as indicated above, in developing a capability theory of justice we must decide whether we want it to be an outcome or an opportunity theory, that is, whether we think that we should assess injustices in terms of functionings, or rather in terms of capabilities, or a mixture. At the level of theory and principles, most theorists of justice endorse the view that justice is done if all have equal genuine opportunities, or if all reach a minimal threshold of capability levels. Translated to the capability language, this would imply that at the level of theory and principles, capabilities are the relevant metric of justice, and not functionings. However, among theorists of justice, not everyone subscribes to this view. Anne Phillips (2004) has been a prominent voice arguing for equality of outcome, rather than opportunities. In the capability literature, Marc Fleurbaey (2002) has argued against the view to take only capabilities into account and has defended a focus on ‘refined functionings’ (being the combination of functionings and capabilities).

A third issue which needs to be solved if one hopes to develop a capability theory of justice is to decide and justify which capabilities matter the most. There are at least two ways of answering this question: either through procedural approaches, such as criteria from which the relevant capabilities are derived or by defending a specific list of capabilities. This selection of relevant capabilities for the purposes of justice can be done both at the level of ideal theory (without taking issues of practical feasibility and implementation into account), at the level of abstract principles (Anderson 1999; M. Nussbaum 2006b; Claassen 2016) or at an applied theoretical level, which is useful for practical assessments of unjust inequalities (e.g. Robeyns 2003; Wolff and De-Shalit 2007).
Fourth, a capability theory of justice may need to engage in a comparison with other ‘metrics of justice’. In the literature on social justice there are several terms used to indicate what precisely we are assessing or measuring: the metric of advantage, the currency of justice, or the informational basis for the interpersonal comparisons for the purpose of justice. Within theories of justice, the main arguments are with Rawlsian resourcists and with defenders of Dworkinian resourcism. Other possible metrics are basic needs or the many different types of subjective welfare or preference satisfaction. A full capability theory of justice would need to show why it serves better as a metric of justice than these other metrics.

Fifth, a capability theory of justice needs to take a position on the ‘distributive rule’ (Anderson 2010, 81) that it will endorse: will it argue for plain equality, or for sufficiency, or for prioritarianism, or for some other (mixed) distributive rule? Both Martha Nussbaum’s and Elizabeth Anderson’s theories are sufficiency accounts, but from this it does not follow, as one sometimes reads in the secondary literature, that the capability approach entails a sufficiency rule. Sen may have given the (wrong) impression of defending straight equality as a distributive rule, by asking the question ‘Equality of what?’ (Sen 1980), though a careful reading shows that he was merely asking the question ‘If we want to be defending equality of something, then what would that be?’ In fact, Sen has remained uncommitted to one single distributive rule, which probably can be explained by the fact that he is averse of building a well-defined theory of justice but rather prefers to investigate how real-life unjust situations can be turned into more just situations, even if perfect justice is unattainable (Sen 2006, 2009c). The capability approach clearly plays a role in Sen’s work on justice, since when assessing a situation, he will investigate inequalities in people’s capabilities and

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65 An analysis of this comparison between social primary goods and capabilities was made by the various contributions to the volume edited by Brighouse and Robeyns (2010).

analyse the processes that led to those inequalities. Yet Sen has an eclectic approach to theorizing, and hence other notions and theories (such as human rights or more formal discussions on freedoms from social choice theory) also play a role in his work on justice. The presence and importance of the capability approach in Sen’s work is thus undeniable, but should not be seen as the only defining feature.

Sixth, a capability theory of justice needs to specify where the line between individual and collective responsibility is drawn, or how it will be decided, and by whom, where this line will be drawn. There is a remarkable absence of any discussion about issues of responsibility in the capability literature, in sharp contrast to political philosophy and welfare economics where this is one of the most important lines of debate, certainly since the publication of Ronald Dworkin’s (1981, 2000) work on justice and equality which led to what Elizabeth Anderson (1999) has called ‘luck-egalitarianism’. Nevertheless, whether one wants to discuss it explicitly or not, any concrete capability policy proposal can be analysed in terms of the division between personal and collective responsibility; but this terminology is largely absent from the capability literature. In part, this might be explained by the fact that much of the work on capabilities deals with global poverty, where issues of individual responsibility seem to be less relevant since it would seem outrageous to suggest that the world’s most destitute people are personally responsible for the situation they are in. That doesn’t mean that the responsibility question is not important: it is indeed of utmost importance to ask who is responsible for global poverty reduction or the fulfilling of the Millenium Development Goals, on which political philosophers have written a great deal (Singer 2004, 2010; Pogge 2008). The point is rather that philosophical puzzles, such as the issues of expensive tastes (for expensive wine, caviar, fast cars, or you name it), are simply beyond the radar screen of the child labourer or the poor peasant. However, while this may perhaps justify the absence of any discussion about personal responsibility among capability scholars concerned with poverty, it does not absolve theorists of justice who deal with justice in affluent societies (or affluent sections of poor societies) from discussing the just division between personal and collective responsibility (Pierik and Robeyns 2007, 148–49).

This brings us to a related issue: a theory of justice generally specifies
rights, but also duties. However, capability theorists have remained largely silent on the questions who should bear the duties for the expansion of the selected capabilities. Nussbaum passionately advocates that all people all over the world should be entitled, as a matter of justice, to threshold levels of all the capabilities on her list; but apart from mentioning that it is the governments' duties to guarantee these entitlements (M. Nussbaum 2006b, 70), she remains silent on the question who precisely should bear the burdens and responsibilities for realizing these capabilities. Yet as Onora O'Neill (1996, 122–53) has argued, questions of obligations and responsibilities should be central to any account of justice.

Finally, a theory of justice needs to explain on what basis, or by which method, it justifies its principles or claims of justice. For example, in Rawls's theory of justice, the two principles are justified by a thought-experiment in the original position, in which those choosing the principles of justice are unaware of factors which should, from a moral point of view, not play a role in deciding who gets what in life. Dworkin's egalitarian justice theory starts from the meta-principle of equal respect and concern, which he then develops with the notion that the distribution of burdens and benefits should be sensitive to the ambitions that people have, but should not reflect the unequal natural endowments individuals are born with. If capability scholars want to develop a full theory of justice, they will also need to explain on what bases they will justify their principles or claims. It is not enough to simply state principles; they need to be argued for with a sound philosophical method.

This section makes clear that a capability theory of justice is theoretically much more demanding than the basic presupposition of the capability approach that 'functionings' and 'capabilities' are the best metric for most kinds of interpersonal evaluations. While much has been written on the capability approach in recent years, by an increasing number of scholars, including philosophers, much of the philosophical work needed for turning the open-ended capability approach into a specific theory of justice remains to be done.

Note, however, that not all capability theorists working on issues of justice believe that aiming for such a fully worked-out theory of justice is what thinking about justice requires. Sen (2009c) himself has argued at length that we don't need a theory that describes a utopian ideal, but rather we need theorising to help
us with making comparisons of injustice, and to guide us towards a less unjust society. Similarly, Jay Drydyk (2012) has argued that the capability approach to justice should focus on reducing capability shortfalls, for which a utopian account of perfect justice is not needed. Some capability theorists may want to work out a full theory of justice by addressing the various specifications outlined above, while others may want to change the very nature of theorising about justice, moving it more to applied, non-ideal or grounded theories (Watene and Drydyk 2016).

3.13.3 From theories of justice to just practices and policies
Before closing this section on capabilitarian theorizing about justice, let us briefly shift from theory to practice. Since theories of justice are mainly developed at a highly abstract level, often entailing ideals of perfect justice, we may wonder whether the capability approach to social justice and equality is of any use in telling us what justice-enhancing strategies and policies to develop. Indeed, this has sometimes been phrased as a serious concern, namely, that theories of justice are too abstract and do not help us with social justice struggles on the ground. One may well argue that we roughly know what is going wrong and we need political action rather than more and more detailed theorising. Moreover, some think that in the real world the subtleties of the theories of justice are easily abused in order to justify gross inequalities, as may have been the case with philosophical discussions on individual responsibility. For example, Brian Barry’s (2005) later work exemplified this concern with the direct application of theories of justice to political change and the reform of the welfare state, rather than with further philosophical refinements of theories of justice. Related charges have been specifically aimed at the capability approach as well. For instance, it has argued that not enough attention has been paid to issues of social power in the capability writings on justice, and Feldman and Gellert (2006) have underscored the importance of recognising the struggles and negotiations by dominated and disadvantaged groups if social justice is ever to be realised. Such questions of power politics, effective social criticism, successful collective action, historical and cultural sensitivities, and the negotiation of competing interests are indeed largely absent from the philosophical literature on theories of justice. These ideal theories develop standards of a just society, but often do not tell us what institutions or
policies are necessary if just societies are to be constructed, nor do they tell us what social and political processes will help advocates implement these social changes in concrete ways.

But the capability approach can be linked to more concrete justice-enhancing policy proposals that have been developed. For one thing, the Millennium Development Goals could be understood as being a practical (albeit specific and also limited) translation of the capability approach in practice, and their successors, the Sustainable Development Goals, can also be seen as influenced by the capability approach. In fact, at the level of severe global poverty, any concrete poverty-reduction strategy which conceptualises poverty in a capability sense is, for most accounts of justice, a concrete justice-enhancing strategy, since these theories would include the absence of severe poverty as a principle of justice.

If we move from the area of poverty-reduction strategies to the question of just social policies in countries or regions with higher levels of affluence, we observe that there are much fewer actual examples of justice-enhancing policies that have been explicitly grounded in, or associated with, the capability approach. Yet many concrete policies and interventions could be interpreted as such, or are consistent with the capability perspective itself. One example relates to a policy of providing, regulating and/or subsidising child-care facilities. This can arguably be justified as a prerequisite for gender justice in capabilities since, due to gender norms, women will in effect not be able to develop themselves professionally if they are not supported in their need for decent quality-regulated (and possibly subsidised) child-care facilities. Mothers at home may be materially well-off if their husbands earn a good income but, if they do not have the genuine opportunity to hold jobs, then their capability sets are severely constrained and gender justice in capabilities cannot be achieved. An income metric which assumes equal sharing in the household may not detect any moral problem, but a capability metric will claim that women will have more limited freedoms than men, since the provisions are not there to ensure that both parents can hold jobs, and gender norms and other gendered social mechanisms will make it highly unlikely that men will volunteer to stay at home with their kids. At the same time,
men are also losing out since they have a very limited capability to spend time with their newborns.

Another example concerns a justice-enhancing intervention that can be found, in slightly different form, in many cities throughout the world. It is well-known that the children of immigrants are disadvantaged at school since they are very likely to enter school with much weaker knowledge of the language of instruction than non-immigrant children. For this reason, in several cities there are networks of volunteers to read books to small immigrant children in their own homes. In this way, they effectively reduced the gap in educational opportunity between immigrant children and non-immigrant children. This example also illustrates that justice-enhancing strategies are not confined to public policy, but can also be initiated by persons and groups at the grassroots. The government is not the only agent of justice; rather, all of us can be agents of justice.

3.14 Capabilities and human rights
Several capability theories are closely related to accounts of human rights. Within the capability literature, some scholars have developed capability theories which they regard as a human rights theory. In the human rights literature, scholars have examined to what extent the capability approach can help to develop stronger theories of human rights. And the same topics (e.g. provision/right to basic health or basic education) are defended based on both approaches, or are defended appealing to both human rights as well as capabilities (e.g. Osmani 2000). In addition, Martha Nussbaum has claimed that her capabilities theory is a version of human rights theory, which has drawn much attention to the question about the relationship between capabilities and human rights.

It should not be surprising that there are so many scholars and practitioners interested in both the human rights framework and the capability approach, since they share some important aspects. First, they are both widely endorsed normative/ethical frameworks. Second, they seem to share an underlying motivation, namely to protect and enhance people’s freedoms. Third, they are both used for global as well as domestic questions. Fourth, both frameworks want to build strong links between theory and practice: they are studied and used by scholars but used by practitioners (political parties, activists,
policy makers, ...). And, finally, both discourses are of a strong interdisciplinary nature.

All this raises some questions. What is the relationship between human rights and capabilities? Can we say that capabilities are the objects of human rights? If so, do human rights theories and analyses have something to gain by developing capabilities-based human rights theories? Can the capability approach deliver all that is important in human rights theories? And what should we make of the alleged disadvantages of using the capability approach in thinking about human rights?

3.14.1 What are human rights?

Human rights are rights each human being is entitled to in order to protect her from severe harms that could be inflicted by others. They are norms aimed at protecting people from severe social, political and legal abuse (Nickel 2014, 1). Examples of human rights are the right to life, the right to freedom of assembly, the right to freedom of religion, the right to a fair trial when charged with a crime, the right not to be tortured, and the right to privacy.

Human rights are not all the rights that people have. As Amartya Sen (2004b, 329) writes, “there have to be some ’threshold conditions’ of (i) importance and (ii) social influenceability for a freedom to figure within the interpersonal and interactive spectrum of human rights”. Take the ‘importance threshold’ first. Here is an example of a right that is not a human right, because it does not meet the threshold condition of important: the right to parental leave. In many European countries, parents who are employed have a right to paid parental leave upon the birth of their child or when they adopt a child. While many have argued that such a right would help meet our duties towards children and parents as well as advance gender justice (e.g. Gheaus and Robeyns 2011), it is not at all plausible to argue that this should be seen as a human right. It has a much weaker moral urgency than the right to a fair trial, let alone the right to life. Human rights thus correspond to a subset of the domain of justice, and focus on those questions that are of utter importance, and of which the protection should have a greater urgency then the support of other normative claims. The second threshold – social influenceability – implies that even if something valuable is hugely important, as
long as there is limited social influenceability, its protection cannot be a human right. For example, it makes no sense to speak of a human right to be protected from volcano eruptions, or a human right to be protected from cancer.

Human rights have corresponding duties. But on whom fall those duties and what kind of duties are they? A broad, inclusive account of the duties is given by Pablo Gilabert (2009, 673) who writes:

[Human rights impose] a duty of the highest priority for individuals and governments to identify ways to protect certain important interests through (a) specific rights and entitlements, but also, when these are insufficient or not presently feasible, through (b) urgent goals of institution-building.

Note that this definition does not limit the duties to protect human rights to governments only, and that it does include institution-building as an important path towards protecting human rights.67

3.14.2 The interdisciplinary scholarship on human rights
The human rights literature is, just like the capability approach, deeply multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary. The philosophy of human rights “addresses questions about the existence, content, nature, universality, justification, and legal status of human rights’ (Nickel 2014, 1). How can human rights exist in the first place? What should be the content of human rights, that is, what kinds of harms or abuses should they protect us from? What kind of rights are human rights – are they moral claims, or legal claims, or political claims, or still something else? The question of justification asks on what ground can we say that people have human rights. Is it because humans have rational capacities or agency? If so, does that mean that new-borns do not have human rights? All these questions are studied in the vast philosophical literature on human rights.

Note that while the relationship between normative political philosophy, justice and human rights is not entirely disputed, the dominant view in the

67 This relates to a complex discussion in legal and political philosophy on whether human rights can be protected by so-called ‘imperfect duties’ or ‘imperfect obligations’ which is beyond the scope of this book. See, amongst others, Polly Vizard (2006, 84–91) and Frances Kamm (2011) for further discussion.
contemporary literature is that the domain of human rights is a subset of the
domain of justice, which in turn is a subset of the domain of morality. The reason
is that "[n]ot everything that is desirable to be realized in politics is a matter of
human rights, and not everything that is a matter of justice is a matter of human
rights. Human rights constitute the most urgent demand of basic global justice"
(Gilabert 2009, 676).

Legal scholars are interested in questions related to the treaties and
constitutions in which human rights are codified. The idea of human rights gained
momentum with the 1948 adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
(UDHR) which over time received a canonical status in legal and political debates.
The UDHR subsequently served as a template for human rights–instruments that
are legally binding, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,
the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the European
Convention of Human Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights and
the African Charter of Human and People’s Rights. One question this raises is to
what extent national constitutions are consistent with those legally binding
treaties, or with the UDHR. Another question frequently asked by legal scholars is
to what extent national jurisprudence can be in tension –and violate– a human
right that is part of an international treaty to which that particular nation signed
up. For example, in the famous ‘Lautsi case’, the question emerged whether the
Italian state’s policy to have a compulsory crucifix in the classroom of public
schools was in violation with the human right to the freedom of religion as codified
in European Convention of Human Rights (Weiler 2010; Pierik 2012; Pierik and van
der Burg 2011).

In the social sciences and international relations, questions are asked what
role human rights play in politics. How do countries differ in the degree in which
they protect human rights? What are effective instruments to support human
rights in countries when they are not violated? Is it effective to condemn human
rights violations in other countries, or is silent support for grassroots human
rights activists a more effective strategy?

And, of course, human rights are hugely important for human right
activists, who are working on actual human rights protections. Other activists,
such as those focussing on empowerment of disadvantaged groups, often take a
more instrumental attitude towards human rights, and ask whether human rights are effective instruments to reach their goals of inclusion, development, and combating forms of injustice and oppressions.

3.14.3 Why a capability-based account of human rights?

After this brief sketch of the huge literature on human rights, we can now explore the relation between human rights and capabilities. The first question which needs to be asked is: Why would we at all be interested in a capabilities-based theory of human rights? What could be gained by theorizing human rights, or trying to protect human rights, by referring to capabilities?

The first reason is philosophical, and concerns the justification of human rights. Human rights are norms or instruments to protect certain valuable things (which are called ‘the objects of human rights’). But for each object for which we claim that it is so important that it should be protected by means of a human right, we need to argue why that object has this special importance. Part of the philosophical literature on capabilities does precisely that – to justify why we need to protect certain valuable personal states. Both Sen (2004b, 2005) and Nussbaum (1997; 2011) have argued that human rights can be seen as entitlements to certain capabilities.

The second reason builds on the first. If human rights can be understood in terms of capabilities, and poverty can also be conceptualized in terms of the denial of capabilities, then poverty can be conceptualized as a human rights violation (Osmani 2005). This is important for various reasons, including the strong rhetorical force that a human rights violation has (in comparison with other claims), and also because the socio-economic human rights have sometimes been regarded as more in need of conceptual foundations, in comparison with the civic and political human rights whose status as human rights has been less contested.

This relates to the third reason why it can be helpful to conceptualise human rights in terms of capabilities, which is the often-stated worry that the protection of human rights, especially social and economic rights, is infeasible (Gilabert 2009). To counter that pessimism, we need greater clarity on the chain of steps that are involved in socio-economic human rights protection. Capabilities are the objects of our rights, and we know from our understanding of how
capabilities relate with resources and social structures what the parameters are that can influence the capabilities that people can enjoy (see the figure in section 2.11). Hence, if we want to protect human rights, in particular the socio-economic rights of which the sceptics believe that they cannot effectively be protected, the capability approach helps us see that “promoting socioeconomic rights may require attention to specific parameters that affect the capabilities of people” (Gilabert 2009, 666). In sum, the language of the capability approach helps us to respond and address the feasibility worry of socio-economic rights.

A fourth reason is that for some things that we want to protect, we are unsure whether they meet the threshold condition of importance which human rights should meet. If one is unsure about whether a certain freedom should be a right, let alone a human right, one could already start to protect/enhance it if one sees it as a capability. One does not need to wait until the discussion about whether the threshold is met is settled, before one starts to protect something that everyone agrees is in any case important.

A final reason is more practical or political. In some countries, the terminology of ‘human rights’ is regarded with suspicion, as it is seen as stemming from a colonial era, and, as a consequence, is regarded as an instrument of Western domination. This makes it hard for both local and global advocates of human rights to advance their cause. By using the terminology of capabilities, which is not linked to a particular colonial era or western power, instead of the language of human rights, the same valuable rights can be argued for.

3.14.4 Are capabilities sufficient to make a theory of human rights?
There is quite a lot of interest among capability scholars and those working in the human development paradigm for trying to bring the best of the capability approach and the human rights approach together (e.g. Vizard 2006, 2007; Vizard, Fukuda-Parr, and Elson 2011; Fukuda-Parr 2011; Gilabert 2009, 2013). One important question, though, is how much the capability approach can offer if one is interested in construction a powerful human rights theory. Is the notion of capabilities sufficient to make a theory of human rights?

The answer clearly must be negative. A theory of human rights needs other elements, such as a discussion on the scope and, importantly, the justification of
human right. Yet, by making use of the distinction between the capability approach and capability theories that was introduced in section 2.3, we can see that it is not at all an embarrassment for the capability approach that, by itself, it cannot deliver a theory of human rights. Instead, that should be the task of a specific capability theory, where in the various modules additional elements that are needed for a human rights theory can be added.

This raises the next question: what would have to be added, then? The important thing that may need to be added (in A6 – other dimensions of ultimate value) are process freedoms. Sen (2004b) argues that we should make a distinction between freedoms as substantive opportunities and the process aspect of freedom (procedural aspects). Both are, in his view, relevant when thinking about human rights, but only the opportunity aspect of freedom is captured by the notion of ‘capabilities’. Linda Barclay (2016) makes a similar point, by saying that rights that concern equitable processes are very important for human rights, and cannot be captured by the notion of capabilities. Clearly, procedural characteristics, for example those that guarantee a free trial, may not necessarily best be understood as capabilities, but perhaps rather more as elements of institutional design. Yet as proposition A6 emphasizes, not everything that is of crucial importance is a capability. Recall that proposition A6 allows us to include other elements of ultimate value, and this could include what Sen calls process freedoms.68 In short, by seeing a capability-based human rights theory as a capability theory, for which various theoretical additions and choices are possible, it becomes clear that more is needed than the mere reference to ‘capabilities’.

3.14.5 The disadvantages

Finally, we need to ask the question whether there are any disadvantages in using

68 The example that Barclay gives is the right not being discriminated against. Barclay believes that ‘not being discriminated against’ is a very important human right, but cannot plausibly be conceptualized as a capability, since one does not have a choice to be discriminated against or not. However, not being discriminated against is a functioning, and it is a mistake to think that the capability approach holds that we should only focus on capabilities and never on functionings, as was argued in section 3.4.
the capability approach to further our thinking and policy making/activism on human rights, and –ultimately– to let a capabilities-based human rights theory compete with the existing human rights accounts.

The first thing to note is that there is a long-standing human rights discourse, that is used by activists all over the world, and often very effectively so. Clearly there are costs involved for these activists to become familiarized with the capability language. If the human rights discourse delivers to them what they need, why would we change it?

Second, there is a worry about legitimacy. The current human rights declarations and treaties have been the result of actual political processes, and the treaties were drafted by a large number of people, drawn from all over the world. For the capability approach, this is different. Given the prominence of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, and also the many publications which (wrongly) reduce the capability approach to the work by, primarily, Sen and Nussbaum, the capability approach is much more associated with some specifically named individuals. A capability-based human rights theory which is the work of one thinker can never have the political leverage that the existing human rights framework has. For the various practices in which human rights are used (legal, policy making and activism), a capability-based human right framework can therefore never replace the existing human rights framework.

However, there is, of course, a more fruitful relationship possible, and that is to see the two frameworks as complementarity rather than as the capability-based human rights theory replacing the existing human rights framework (M. C. Nussbaum 2011). Note, however, that any merging of the two frameworks has to be between a particular capability theory and human rights thinking, rather than between the general capability approach and human rights thinking. A good

69 Unfortunately, Nussbaums’ (2011a) account of the capability approach only adds to that reductionist and misleading portrayal of the capability literature (Robeyns 2011, 2016b; Unterhalter 2013).

70 Hence, when Nussbaum (2011, 24) writes “the CA is a type of human rights approach”, we should read this as “Martha Nussbaum’s capability theory is a type of human rights
example of such practical work is the UK’s Equality and Human Rights Framework. Tania Burchardt and Polly Vizard (2011) used insights from both the capability approach, as well as the existing human rights thinking, to create a framework that is used for the monitoring that the Equality and Human Rights Commission needs to do in order to meet its legal mandate.⁷¹

### 3.15 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to deepen our understanding of the capability approach, by analysing some questions of clarification that are often posed, and by reconstructing and synthesizing some developments that have taken place in the capability literature over time.

The next chapter will focus on a range of critiques that have been put to the capability approach. Of course, it is not always entirely clear whether a certain question or debate is a purely matter of clarification, or rather a matter of debate and dispute; put differently, there is no neat demarcation between the main focus in this chapter, and the main focus in the next chapter. Still, the approach used in this chapter has been to try to be as neutral and even-handed in describing the literature as possible, whereas in the next chapter I will be taking a more active role in arguing for or against certain views or claims.

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⁷¹ See [https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en)
4 Critiques and debates

4.1 Introduction

In chapter 2, I have given an account of the capability approach, which has given us a better sense of the necessary core as well as the scope of the capability approach, as well as how the structure of a capability theory or capability analysis looks like. While that account has aimed to be precise and comprehensive, it nevertheless raises some further issues. That is inevitable: it is almost always the case that after we have gained an introductory understanding of a theory or a body of knowledge, further questions pop up. Most theories are much more complicated than the introductory version, which inevitably needs to be simplified. There is a good reason for why introductory accounts need to be simplified, since otherwise one would be overwhelmed with the details and layers of complexity, before even having a basis understanding. But we are now ready to move on to those additional layers of complexity and details. In this chapter, we will do that by looking at critiques and disputes that apply to the capability approach, but the general framework, as critiques and worries that are specific to a particular discipline.

Hence, this chapter is focussed on offering clarifications. We will look into the following issues. Section 4.2 asks whether everything that's been called a capability in the literature is also genuinely a capability. Section 4.3 addresses a dispute that kept capability theorists busy for quite a while over the last two decades, namely whether a capability theorist should endorse a specific list of capabilities. For many years, this was debates under the banner “the question of the list” and was seen as the major critique that Martha Nussbaum had on Amartya Sen's work on the capability approach. Section 4.4 asks whether we should understand the capability approach as a theory that addresses the government, as Nussbaum argues (and rejects that suggestion). Section 4.5 analyses a debate that has generated much controversy, namely whether the capability approach can be said to be too individualistic. The next section, 4.6, focusses on a closely related issue, namely the scope for the inclusion of ‘power’ into the capability approach. And should the capability approach pay much more attention to political economy? Section 4.7 asks whether the capability is a liberal theory, and whether
it cannot be anything else then a liberal theory. Section 4.8 argues, despite the many references to ‘the human development and capability approaches’, these are not the same thing. And finally, section 4.9 discusses the potential and problems of a capabilitarian welfare economics.

4.2 Is everything that’s called a capability also genuinely a capability?

Since this chapter is the place to collect critiques and debates, let me start with a very basic point of criticism, and that is that not everything that is called ‘a capability’ in the capability literature is, upon closer examination, genuinely a capability. The main criticism that I want to offer in this brief section, is that we should be very careful in our choices of terms and concepts: not everything that is important is a capability, and it is conceptually confusing (and hence wrong) to call everything that is important a capability. As an interdisciplinary language used in many different disciplines, the capability approach already suffers from sloppy use of terms because of interdisciplinary differences in the usage of terms, and we should avoid contributing to this conceptual confusion. Let me give one example to illustrate the critique.

In her book Allocating the Earth as well as in earlier work, Breena Holland (Holland 2008, 2014) argues that the role of the environment in making capabilities possible is so important and central that we should conceptualize environmental ecological functioning (that is, the ecosystem services that the environment offers to human beings) as a meta-capability that underlies all other capabilities. As Holland puts it, “the environment’s ecological functioning is a meta-capability in the sense that it is a precondition of all the capabilities that Nussbaum defines as necessary for living a good human life” (Holland 2014, 112). By using this terminology, Holland wants to stress that protecting the ecosystem is not just one way among many equally good ways to contribute to human well-being – rather, it is a crucial and non-substitutable precondition for living. Yet one could question whether conceptualizing it as a “meta-capability” is correct. As I have argued elsewhere (Robeyns 2016a), the environment is not a capability, since capabilities are real opportunities to beings and doings. The environment and the services that its ecosystems give to human beings are absolutely necessary for human life to be possible in the first place, but that doesn’t warrant giving it
the conceptual status of a ‘capability’. It would have been better, in my view, to introduce a term showing that there are substitutable and non-substitutable preconditions for each capability, and that there are absolutely necessary (or crucial) versus less central preconditions. An environment that is able to deliver a minimal level of ecosystem services to life on our planet is both a non-substitutable as well as an absolutely necessary precondition for human well-being understood in terms of capabilities. There are many other preconditions for human well-being, but a minimum level of sustainable ecosystem services is one of the very few—perhaps even the only one—that is both non-substitutable and absolutely necessary. That makes it hugely important – perhaps even more important than some capabilities (which could be accommodated by including it in proposition A6), but the absolute priority it should receive does not warrant us to call it a capability.

4.3 Should we commit to a specific list of capabilities?

At an earlier stage of the development of the capability approach, a rather heated debate took place on whether or not it was necessary that Amartya Sen listed the capabilities which he felt were relevant. This ‘question of the list’ debate wasn’t always very helpful, since participants in this debate were not making the distinction between capability theories and the capability approach, which, as I will show in this section, is crucial to answer this question. Several scholars have criticized Sen for not having specified which capabilities matter or for not giving us some guidelines on how the selection of capabilities could be conducted (e.g. Sugden 1993; Roemer 1996; M. C. Nussbaum 2003a). As is well known, Sen has explicitly refrained from committing himself to one particular list of capabilities. But should Sen (or anyone else) commit to a particular list of capabilities?

In order to answer that question, it is important to keep the distinction in mind between the general capability approach, and particular capability theories. As Mozaffar Qizilbash (2012) rightly points out, Sen has written on the capability approach in general, as well as developed particular capability applications, critiques, and theories. When asking whether Sen (or anyone else) should commit to a particular list of capabilities, we have to keep that distinction firmly in mind – since it matters to the answer of our question. This is an important reason why
the distinction between the capability approach versus specific capability theories, applications and analyses (introduced in section 2.3), is so important.

For the capability approach in general, it is obvious that there cannot be one list that applies to all the different purposes for which the capability approach can be used – that is, for more specific capability theories and applications. Hence in so far as the critique, that Sen (or any other capability scholar) should endorse a particular list of capabilities, is aimed at their writings on the capability approach, rather than more specific capability theories, this critique misfires. This is also part of the answer that Sen has given to his critics. Each application or theory based on the capability approach will always require a selection of valuable functionings that fits the purpose of the theory or application. Hence the capability approach as such is deliberately too underspecified to endorse just one single list that could be used for all capability analyses (Sen 1993, 2004). It is quite likely that those who have criticised Sen, or the capability approach in general, for not entailing a specific list of capabilities, have not sufficiently appreciated the distinction between the capability approach in general and more specific capability theories.

But what then about specific capability theories, applications and analyses? Should these always commit to a particular list of capabilities? It is possible to distinguish two types of critiques addressing capability theories, which I will label the weak and the strong critique. The strong critique entails that there must be a clear list of capabilities that form the ones that are relevant for the capability application or theory at hand.

The strong critique is most clearly voiced by Nussbaum, who has proposed a list of ten “central human capabilities” that specify the political principles that every person should be entitled to as a matter of justice.\textsuperscript{72} Nussbaum’s capabilities theory differs in a number of ways from Sen’s version. Nussbaum (1988, 2003) not only argues that these ten capabilities are the relevant ones, but in addition claims that if Amartya Sen wants his version of the capability approach to have

\textsuperscript{72} These ten capabilities are: Life; Bodily health; Bodily integrity; Senses, imagination and thought; Emotions; Practical reason; Affiliation; Other species; Play; and Control over one's environment. For more details, see (M. Nussbaum 2006b, 76–78).
any bite for addressing issues of social justice, he has to endorse one specific and well-defined list of capabilities.

Sen does not accept the stronger critique as it applies to particular capability theories. The reason is the importance he attaches to agency, the process of choice, and the freedom to reason with respect to the selection of relevant capabilities. He argues that pure theory is not capable of making such a final list of capabilities (Sen 2004). Instead, Sen argues that we must leave it to democratic processes and social choice procedures to define the distributive policies. In other words, when the capability approach is used for policy work, it is the people who will be affected by the policies who should decide on what will count as valuable capabilities in this policy question. This immediately makes clear that in order to be operational for (small-scale) policy implementation, the capability approach needs to engage with theories of deliberative democracy and public deliberation and participation.

Sen’s response to the strong critique can be better understood by highlighting his meta-theoretical views on the construction of theories, and theories of justice in particular. One should not forget that Sen is predominantly a prominent scholar in social choice theory, which is the discipline which studies how individual preferences and interests can be combined to reach collective decisions, and how these processes affect the distribution and levels of welfare and freedom. Sen published ground-breaking work in social choice theory before he started working on the capability approach, and he has never ceased to be interested in and contributing to social choice theory.\(^3\) Sen’s passion for social choice theory is also a very likely explanation for his critique of the dominant forms of contemporary theories of justice, which he argued focus on describing a utopian situation of perfect justice, rather than giving us tools to detect injustices and tools on deciding how to move forward to a less unjust society (Sen 2006, 2009c).

\(^3\) Sen was also awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize for his contributions to social choice theory and welfare economics. For some of his work on social choice theory, see (Sen 1970a, 1970b, 1976, 1977b, 1979, 1983, 1986, 1992c, 1999c).
On my reading of Sen’s writings on capability theories and applications, he is not against the selection of dimensions in general, but rather (a) against one list that would apply to all capability theories and applications, and (b) as far as those capability theories and applications are concerned, in favour of seriously considering procedural methods to decide which capabilities matter.

However, even if we would all accept that view, it doesn’t settle all disputes. Even if we agree that a selection for, say, a poverty evaluation should be a different one from the selection of capabilities for a theory of justice, it still allows for different views on how that selection should be done. Some scholars have argued that the selection should be made based on a normative grounding, hence by philosophical reasoning and argumentation (M. C. Nussbaum 2000; 2006b; Claassen 2016). Others have argued for a selection based in a procedural way (Byskov 2017). For empirical applications, it has been argued that the selection of dimensions should be done in a way that minimises biases in the selection (Robeyns 2003). For policy-relevant applications, it has been argued that the freedoms listed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights could provide a good starting point, and should plausibly be playing a larger role in the selection of capabilities (Vizard 2007; Burchardt and Vizard 2011). There are by now various overviews published on how to select functionings and capabilities – but, interestingly, they almost always are limited to a certain type of capability theories – hence for a specific choice in Module B1, such as well-being for policy making (Hick and Burchardt 2016; Alkire 2016), multidimensional poverty measurement (Alkire et al. 2015a; Alkire 2016), human development projects and policies (Alkire 2002; Byskov forthcoming) and theories of justice (Robeyns 2016d). Thus, there are a range of arguments pointing out that the selection of capabilities for particular capability theories needs to be sensitive to the purpose of the capability theory, and hence selection is a matter to be decided at the level of the capability theories, rather than at the more general and abstract level of the the capability approach (see also Sen 2004a).

4.4 Is the capability approach only addressing the government?

Some capability scholars believe that the capability approach is a theory about public policy or state action. For example, Nussbaum (2011a, 19) writes that it is
an essential element of the (general) capability approach is that it ascribes an urgent task to government and public policy. In her own capabilities theory of justice, Nussbaum makes very clear that she sees the government as the actor of change. But is it right to see the government as the only agent of change or agent of justice in the capability approach? I think the literature offers ample evidence that this is not the case.

The first thing to note is that, while the dominant view is that the capability approach is a related to public policy and assumes the government as the main or only agent of change, and while Nussbaum highlights the government as the agent of change in her account of the capability approach in Creating Capabilities, not all capability scholars endorse this government-focus. For example, as Frances Stewart (2005, 189) writes:

Given that improvements in the position of the poor rarely happen solely through the benevolence of governments, and are more likely to occur because of political and economic pressures, organisation of groups among the poor is important — even essential — to achieve significant improvements.

The view that the capability approach is government-focussed may thus be reinforced by the fact that Martha Nussbaum makes this claim, but the first thing to notice is that not all capability scholars agree. Another prominent example is the work of Solava Ibrahim (2006, 2009) who has shown how self-help initiatives can play a crucial role in promoting the capabilities of the poor, by enhancing their ownership of development projects, and “overcoming their helplessness by changing their perceptions of their own capabilities” (Ibrahim 2009, 236). Similar research has been conducted in more informal settings in Khayelitsha, a South-African Township, by Ina Conradie (2013). And these studies are just two that have been published in widely read scholarly journals – but there is a wide range of capability theories and capability applications that are not, or not primarily, addressing the government. In conclusion, the first observation is that some of the capability literature does not address the government. But can we in addition also find reasons for not restricting the agents of change in the capability approach to the government?
The first reason relates to the distinction between the capability approach and capability theories and applications, which was introduced in section 2.3. As far as we are looking at the capability approach, rather than particular capability theories or applications, an exclusive focus on the government is clearly an unwarranted claim. There is nothing in module A that forces us to see the government as the addressee of our capability theory, and module B1 (the purpose of the capability theory) gives us the choice between any addressee we would like to pick. One could also use the capability approach to analyse what neighbours, in a particular street or neighbourhood in a well-functioning democratic state, could do for each other and their common interests, in order to improve the quality of life in their neighbourhood. The neighbours may prefer to keep the initiative for themselves, and not ask the government to solve their local problems.

Another example of a capability application where the government is not involved at all, is the case of parents deciding on the school to send their child to (assuming they have options to choose for, which globally is not the case for many parents). Suppose that parents have the choice between two schools. The first school focusses more on making pupils ready for excelling in their future professional life, endorsing a human capital understanding of education. In the other school, there is more attention paid to creative expression, learning the virtues of cooperating, taking responsibility for oneself, others and the environment, and a concern with the flourishing of the child as he or she is now, not just as a future-adult. Clearly there is a different ideal of education in these two school. The parents may sit down and write two lists of the pros and cons of the different schools – and many items on that list will be functionings or capabilities. Parents choosing between these two schools will choose for different future capability sets for their children. Although the terminology may not be used, capabilities are at work in this decision making; yet very few people would argue that it is a task for the government to decide whether children should be sent to schools focussing on human capital training, or rather on human flourishing. The scholarship focussing on curriculum design using the capability approach, or on making us understand the difference between human capital and human
capabilities is doing precisely all of this (Brighouse 2006; Robeyns 2006c; Wigley and Akkoyunlu-Wigley 2006; Walker 2008, 2010, 2012b).

Of course, one could respond to these examples by saying that there may be capability applications or theories that belong to the 'private sphere' and that therefore the government is not the (only) agent of change – yet that capabilitarian political theories, such as theories of justice, should address the government.

But this response will not do either. As several political theorists have argued, the question who should be the agents of justice is one that needs to be properly discussed and analysed, and it is not at all obvious that the primary or only agents of justice should be the government (O’Neill 2001; Weinberg 2009; Deveaux 2015). There are at least three reasons one could give for not giving the government the main role as agent of change, or indeed any role at all. The first reason is one’s general ideological commitment as regards to political systems. Anarchism and (right-)libertarian political theories would either give the government no agency at all, or else only in so far as property rights need to be protected (Nozick 1974). There is nothing in the structure of anarchist or libertarian political theories that rules out that they could adopt functionings and capabilities as (part of) the metric of quality of life that should guide the social and economic institutions that we choose for our societies. People have very different views on the question what can realistically be expected from a government. Just as we need to take people as they are, we should not work with an unrealistic utopian account of government. It may be that the capabilitarian ideal society is better reached by a coordinated commitment to individual action or by relying on market mechanisms. Adherents of public choice theory would stress that giving the government the power to deliver those goods will have many unintended but foreseeable negative consequences, which are much more important than the positive contributions the government could make.

A second reason why capabilitarian political theories may not see the government as the only or primary agent of justice, relates to the distinction between ideal theories of justice (which describe which normative principles would be met in a just world, and which institutions would meet those principles), versus nonideal theory (which describes what is needed to reduce injustices in the
world in which we live). In several areas of the world, governmental agents are involved in (severe) creation of economic and social injustice, either internationally or against some of its own minorities – or, in highly repressive states – against the vast majority of the population (e.g. Hochschild 1999; Roy 2014). The government is then more part of the problem than part of the solution, and some would argue that it is very naive to construct capabilitarian political theories that simply assume that the government will be a force for the good (Menon 2002). Similarly, some political philosophers have argued that in cases of injustice in which the government doesn’t take sufficient action, as in the case of harms done by climate change, duties fall on others who are in a position to ‘take up the slack’ or make a difference (Karnein 2014; Caney 2016).

The third reason why capabilitarian political theories may not see the government as the only or primary agent of justice, relates to the question on what grounds we decide to allocate the responsibility for being the agent of change to someone. As Monique Devaux points out, we can attribute moral and political agency derived from our responsibility in creating the injustice (a position advocated by Thomas Pogge (2008) in his work on global poverty) or because of the greater capacities and powers that agents have, as Onora O’Neill (2001) has advocated. Devaux (2015, 127–28) argues that in the case of justice related to global poverty, the moral agency of the poor stems from the knowledge that stems from the experience of living in poverty. This may make them not only more effective as political agents in some contexts, but it also leads to the poor endorsing a different political agenda, often focussing on empowerment, rather than merely reducing poverty understood in material terms. This is in tune with the earlier mentioned research by Ibrahim (2006, 2009) and Conradie (2013) on self-organisation by the poor.

It has not been my aim in this section to defend a particular way to answer the question who should be the agent(s) of justice. Rather, my aim has been much

74 On the distinction between ideal and nonideal theories of justice, see e.g. (Swift 2008; Stemplowska 2008; Robeyns 2008a; Valentini 2012).

75 The second and third reasons may sometimes both be at work in an argument to attribute agency to a particular group or institutions.
more limited – namely, to show that it is not at all self-evident to assume that a capabilitarian political theory, let alone another type of capabilitarian theory of application, would always have the government as the only agent of change, or the primary agent of change. *Pace* what Nussbaum (2011a) claims on this issue, there is no reason why this should be the case, and there are many good reasons why we should regard our answer to the question who the agents of change are, as one that requires careful reasoning and consideration – and ultimately a choice that is made in Module B and Module C, rather than a fixed given in Module A.

### 4.5 Is the capability approach too individualistic?

At the beginning of this century, an often-heard critique at academic meetings on the capability approach was that “the capability approach is too individualistic”. This critique has been especially widespread among those who endorse communitarian philosophies, or social scientists who argue that neoclassical economics is too individualistic, and believe that the same applies to the capability approach (e.g. Gore 1997; Evans 2002; Deneulin and Stewart 2002; Stewart 2005). The main claim would be that any theory should regard individuals as part of their social environment, and hence agents should be recognised as socially embedded and connected to others, and not as atomised individuals. Very few scholars have directly argued for the claim that the capability approach is too individualistic, but a few have stated it explicitly. Séverine Deneulin and Frances Stewart (2002, 66) write that “the [capability] approach is an example of methodological individualism” and also add “the individualism of the [capability] approach leads us […] to a belief that there are autonomous individuals whose choices are somehow independent of the society in which they live.” But is this critique correct? What are we to make of the critique that the capability approach is “too individualistic”?76

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76 Amartya Sen has responded to their critique by stating that “I fear I do not see at all the basis of their diagnosis” (Sen 2002b, 80). As my arguments in this section will show, I think Sen is right, because Deneulin's and Stewart's critique fails to properly distinguishing between different types of individualism, including methodological individualism (which the capability approach is not) and normative individualism.
4.5.1 Different forms of individualism

To scrutinise the alleged individualistic character of the capability approach, we should distinguish between ethical or normative individualism on the one hand and methodological and ontological individualism on the other hand. As we already saw in section 2.6.8, ethical individualism, or normative individualism, makes a claim about who or what should count in our evaluative exercises and decisions. It postulates that individuals, and only individuals are the units of *ultimate* moral concern. In other words, when evaluating different states of social affairs, we are only interested in the (direct and indirect) effects of those states on individuals. *Methodological and ontological individualism* are somewhat more difficult to describe, as the debate on methodological individualism has suffered from confusion and much obscurity. Nevertheless, at its core is the claim that "all social phenomena are to be explained wholly and exclusively in terms of individuals and their properties" (Bhargava 1992, 19). It is a doctrine which includes semantic, ontological and explanatory individualism. The last is probably the most important of these doctrines, and this can also explain why many people reduce methodological individualism to explanatory individualism. *Ontological individualism* states that only individuals and their properties exist, and that all social entities and properties can be identified by reducing them to individuals and their properties. Ontological individualism hence makes a claim about the nature of human beings, about the way they live their lives and about their relation to society. In this view, society is built up from individuals only, and hence is nothing more than the sum of individuals and their properties. Similarly, *explanatory individualism* is the doctrine that all social phenomena can in principle be explained in terms of individuals and their properties.

The crucial issue here is that a commitment to normative individualism is not incompatible with an ontology that recognises the connections between people, their social relations, and their social embedment. Similarly, a social policy focusing and targeting certain groups or communities can be perfectly compatible with normative individualism.

(which the capability approach meets, and, as I have argued in section 2.6.8, *should* meet).
As I argued in section 2.6.8, the capability approach embraces normative individualism – and this is, for reasons given there, a desirable property. However, it also follows from the discussion on the importance of structural constraints (section 2.7.5) that the capability approach does not rely on ontological individualism.

Clearly, scholars have divergent (implicit) social theories, and hence some attach more importance to social structures than others do. Nevertheless, I fail to see how the capability approach can be understood to be methodologically or ontologically individualistic, especially since Sen himself has analysed some processes that are profoundly collective, such as his analysis of households as sites of cooperative conflict (1990a). In later work too, he acknowledged persons as social embedded, as the following quote from his joint work illustrates:

The [capability] approach used in this study is much concerned with the opportunities that people have to improve the quality of their lives. It is essentially a ‘people-centered’ approach, which puts human agency (rather than organizations such as markets or governments) at the centre of the stage. The crucial role of social opportunities is to expand the realm of human agency and freedom, both as an end in itself and as a means of further expansion of freedom. The word ‘social’ in the expression ‘social opportunity’ (...) is a useful reminder not to view individuals and their opportunities in isolated terms. The options that a person has depend greatly on relations with others and on what the state and other institutions do. We shall be particularly concerned with those opportunities that are strongly influenced by social circumstances and public policy... (Drèze and Sen 2002: 6)

Of course, the critique is not only (and also not primarily) about Sen’s work, but about the capability approach in general, or about capability theories. But the work done by others then Sen similarly doesn’t meet the criteria for being plausibly considered to be methodologically or ontologically individualistic. In general, we can say that the capability approach acknowledges some non-individual structures, and for the various more specific capability theories, the degree to which they move away from methodological or ontological individualism depends on the choices made in modules B and C. But whatever those choices are, there are already some features in module A that prevent capability theories to be methodologically or ontologically individualistic.
4.5.2 Does the capability approach pay sufficient attention to groups?

The critique that the capability approach should focus more on groups is often related to the critique that the capability approach would have a too individualistic focus, but is nevertheless a distinct critique. A clear example of that critique can be found in the work of Frances Stewart (2005), who argues that in order to understand processes that affect the lives of people, such as violent conflict, one has to look at group capabilities – which she defines as the average of individual capabilities of all the individuals in the selected group. The reason we need to focus on these ‘group capabilities’ is because they are a central source of group conflict. They are thus crucial to understand processes that we want to understand, such as violent conflict.

We will return to Stewart’s specific complaint below, but first unpack the general critique that the capability approach doesn’t pay enough attention to groups. Because to properly judge the critique the capability approach does not pay sufficient attention to groups, we need to distinguish between a weaker and a stronger version of that claim.

A stronger version of that claim would be that the capability approach cannot pay sufficient attention to groups – that there is something in the conceptual apparatus of the capability approach that makes it impossible for the capability approach to pay attention to groups. But that claim is obviously false, because there exists a large literature of research analysing the average capabilities of one group compared to another, e.g. women and men (Kynch and Sen 1983; M. C. Nussbaum 2000; Robeyns 2003, 2006a) or the disabled versus those without disabilities (Kuklys 2005; Zaidi and Burchardt 2005). Capability theorists have also written on the importance of groups for people’s well-being, like Nussbaum’s discussion of women’s collectives in India. Several lists of capabilities that have been proposed in the literature include capabilities related to community membership: Nussbaum stresses affiliation as an architectonic capability, Alkire (2002) discusses relationships and participation, and in earlier work I have included social relationships (Robeyns 2003). The UNDP (1995, 2004) has produced Human Development Reports on both gender and culture, thus also policy reports based on the capability approach focus on groups.
The weaker claim states that the present state of the literature on the capability approach does not pay sufficient attention to groups. I agree that contemporary mainstream economics is very badly equipped to account for group membership on people's well-being. But is this also the case for the capability approach? While some capability theorists have a great faith in people’s abilities to be rational and to resist social and moral pressure stemming from groups (e.g. Sen 1999b, 2009b), other writers on the capability approach pay much more attention to the influence of social norms and other group-based processes on our choices and, ultimately, on our well-being (e.g., Alkire 2002; Nussbaum 2000; Iversen 2003; Robeyns 2003a). There is thus no reason why the capability approach would not be able to take the normative and constitutive importance of groups fully into account. But admittedly, it is a theoretical choice that needs to be made when making scholarly decisions in Modules B3, B5 and C1, - and hence we may not agree with the assumptions about groups in each and every capability theory.

If we return to the reasons Stewart gave for a focus on group capabilities, we notice that the main reasons stated are that analysis of groups capabilities are needed to understand outcomes. Yet that is precisely what the just mentioned capability applications do (since they do not only measure group-inequalities in capabilities but also try to understand them). Those applications also investigate how the groups-identities constrain groups in different degrees, or which privileges they ensure for certain groups. In my reading of the literature, many capability scholars do precisely this kind of work, and to the extent that they do not do so, one important reason is that they are engaging in documenting and measuring inequalities, rather than in explaining them. The complaint should then be that capability analysis should be less concerned with documenting and measuring inequalities, and should spend more time on understanding how inequalities emerge, are sustained, and can be decreased – but that is another complaint.

Still, I do think that a consideration of the role of groups in the capability approach does give us a warning. To fully understand the importance of groups, capability theories should engage more intensively in a dialogue with disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history, and gender and cultural studies. This will
make the choices of the account of human diversity (Module B3), the account of structural constraints (Module B5), and of ontological and explanatory theories (Modules C1) more accurate. Disciplinary boundaries and structures make this kind of dialogues difficult, but there is no inherent reason why this could not be done.

4.5.3 Social structures, norms, and institutions in the capability approach
The critique that the capability approach would be too individualistic, is sometimes also put in another way, namely that the capability approach should pay more attention to collective features, such as social structures, social norms, and institutions. How can the capability approach account for such collective aspects of human living and societies?

At the theoretical level, the capability approach does account for social relations and the constraints and opportunities of societal structures and institutions on individuals in two ways. First, by recognising the social and environmental factors which influence the conversions of commodities into functionings. For example, suppose that Jaap and Joseph both have the same individual conversion factors and possess the same commodities. But Jaap is living in a town with cycle lanes and low criminality rates, whereas Joseph is living in a city with poor infrastructure for cyclists, and with high levels of criminality and theft. Whereas Jaap can use his bike to cycle anywhere he wants, at any moment of the day, Joseph will be faced with a much higher chance that he will be robbed or that his bike will be stolen. Hence, the same commodity (a bike) leads to different levels of the functioning ‘to transport oneself safely’, due to characteristics of the society in which one lives (its public infrastructure, crime levels etc.)

The second way in which the capability approach accounts for the societal structures and constraints is by theoretically distinguishing functionings from capabilities. More precisely, moving from capabilities to achieved functionings requires an act of choice. Now, it is perfectly possible to take into account the influence of societal structures and constraints on those choices, by choosing a nuanced and rich account of agency (Module B4 – account of agency) and of societal structures (Module B5 – account of structural constraints). For example,
suppose Sarah and Sigal both have the same intellectual capacities and human capital at the age of 6, and live in a country where education is free and children from poorer families receive scholarships. Sarah was born in a class where little attention was paid to intellectual achievement and studying, whereas Sigal’s parents are both graduates pursuing intellectual careers. The social environment of Sarah and Sigal will greatly influence and shape their preferences for studying. In other words, while initially Sarah and Sigal have the same capability set, the social structures and constraints which influence and shape their preferences will influence the choice they will make to pick one bundle of functionings. However, the capability approach allows to take those structures and constraints on choices into account, but whether a particular capability theory will take that into account, will depend on the choices made in the various modules, especially module B4 and B5. Yet it is clear that the choices made in Modules B and C will have ultimately far reaching consequences for our capabilitarian evaluations.

Summing up, one could, plausibly, complain that a certain capability theory doesn’t pay sufficient attention to social structures or collective features of human life. This may well be a very valid critique for a particular capability theory where the additional theories of human diversity, social structures, and other social theories more generally, are very minimal (that is, the explanatory and ontological theories added in C1 are not properly accounting for many collective features of live). But I have argued that it is not a valid critique against the capability approach in general.

4.6 What about power and political economy?
In section 4.5, I analysed the critique that the capability approach would be too individualistic, and argued that this charge is based on confusions of different distinct types of individualism, as well as a flawed (and unduly limited) understanding of the possibilities that capability theories have to include social structures as factors that explain the advantage of persons. However, there are two closely related critiques that require to be addressed briefly: first, that the capability approach downplays power and social structures, and second, that capability theories are diverting our attention from the political economy of
poverty and inequality, which is much more important than the measurement and evaluation of poverty and inequality. Let us analyse these two critiques in turn.

4.6.1 Which account of power and choice?
The first worry is that the capability approach will be insufficiently critical of social constraints on people’s actions, and will not pay due attention to “global forces of power and local systems of oppression” (Koggel 2003). Put differently, the worry is that the capability approach does not pay sufficient attention to inequalities in power (Hill 2003). Similarly, there is also a worry that the capability approach would be used in combination with a stripped-down version of human choice. For example, despite Sen’s repeated criticism on choice as revealed preference, one could in principle make interpersonal comparisons of functionings assuming revealed preference theory: a person will choose from their option set what is best for them. But this ignores the fact that our choices are heavily influenced by patterns of expectations and social norms77, as well as commitments we have to certain interests that do not necessarily affect our own advantage.78 Depending on the choice theory one adopts, the capability approach could lead to widely divergent normative conclusions (Robeyns 2000; 2001).

Standard economics pays very little attention to the social and cultural constraints that impinge on people’s choices, in contrast to sociology, gender studies, cultural studies, among other disciplines. In political philosophy, one sees a similar split between the core of Anglo-American political philosophy, where the concept of the self that is endorsed is that of an agentic, rational, autonomous agent, and other traditions in philosophy which pay more attention to relations and the social embedding of individuals, including unjust structures in which one finds oneself, as well as mechanisms that reproduce power-differences. The consequence is that it is possible to use functionings and capabilities as the evaluative space in combination with many different normative accounts of choice, with a widely divergent critical content.

77 On the importance of social norms in explaining a person’s choice and behaviour, see e.g. (e.g. Elster 1989, 2009; Anderson 2000a).

78 On commitment, see e.g. (Sen 1977a, 1985b; Cudd 2014).
Take as an example the choice of men versus women for paid (labour market) or unpaid (care and household) work. In all societies women do much more household and care work, whereas men do much more paid work. Both kinds of work can generate a number of different functionings so that the largest capability set might perhaps be reached only by giving everyone the opportunity to combine both types of work. However, I would argue that in the current world where hardly any society allows people to combine market work and non-market work without having to make large sacrifices on the quality of at least one of them, the labour market enables more (and more important) functionings than care work (psychological functionings like increased self-esteem, social functionings like having a social network; material functionings like being financially independent and securing financial needs for one’s old age or in the event of divorce). Many schools in political philosophy and normative welfare economics have typically seen the gender division of labour as ethically unproblematic, in the sense that this division would be the result of men’s and women’s voluntary choices which reflect their preferences. However, this is an inadequate way of explaining and evaluating this division, because gender related structures and constraints convert this choice from an individual choice under perfect information into a collective decision under socially constructed constraints with imperfect information and asymmetrical risks. Moreover, evaluating the gender division of labour can only be done if we scrutinise the constraints on choice, and these may turn out to be very different for men and women. What is crucial for the discussion here is that both positive theories of the gender division of labour (which are choices made in Modules B3, B4, and B5) bear different normative implications. If a housewife is held fully responsible for the fact that she works at home then the logical consequence would be that she had the capability to work on the labour market. However, if we embrace a theory of choice that focuses on

79 As is also suggested by the empirical findings of Enrica Chiappero-Martinetti (2000) who measured achieved functioning levels for Italy.

80 The seminal work in this area is Susan Okin’s book *Justice, Gender and the Family* (Okin 1989). On the gendered nature of the constraints on choice, see also Nancy Folbre (1994).
gender specific constraints, then we will not hold the housewife fully responsible for her choice but acknowledge that her capability set was smaller and did not contain the possibility for a genuine choice to work on the labour market. It seems, thus, that it is perfectly possible to apply the capability approach in combination with different accounts of gender-specific constraints on choices.

By giving choice such a central position and making its place in well-being and social justice evaluations more explicit, the capability approach opens up a space for discussions on how certain choices are constrained by gender-related societal mechanisms and expectations. But again, the capability approach provides no guarantee for this: it depends on the choices made in modules B and modules C. For example, conservatives will want to integrate a conservative theory of gender relations within the capability approach, whereas for critical scholars it will be crucial to integrate a feminist account of gender relations, which includes an account of power. No doubt the two exercises will reach very different normative conclusions. In short, for scholars who defend a theory of human agency and social reality that challenges the status quo, one of the important tasks will be to negotiate which additional theories will be integrated in further specifications of the capability approach, especially the choices made in module C1.

The conclusion is that the core characteristics of the capability approach (as listed in module A) do not necessarily have significant implications for the role of power in capability theories and applications, which can include widely divergent views on social realities and interpersonal relations. Indeed, the fact that the capability approach interests both scholars who work in the libertarian tradition, as well as scholars who work in more critical traditions, illustrate this conclusion. My own personal conviction is that there is ample reason why we should not adopt a stripped-down view on the role of social categories and social structures, and hence include a rich account of power that is supported by research in anthropology, sociology and other social sciences. But for everyone advancing a capability theory or application, it holds that they should defend their implicit social theories, and be willing to scrutinize them critically.
4.6.2 Should we prioritise analysing the political economy?

Capability scholars have been criticised for having their priorities wrong: by focusing so much on the metric of justice and on human diversity in the conversion of resources into capabilities, their approach draws attention away from huge inequalities in terms of resources (income, wealth) and therefore helps to preserve the (unjust) status quo. Thomas Pogge (2002) has specifically argued that the capability approach -- Sen’s work in particular -- overemphasises the role of national and local governments, thereby neglecting the huge injustices created by the global economic system and its institutional structures, such as global trade rules. Similarly, Alison Jaggar (Jaggar 2002, 2006) has argued that Western philosophers, and Martha Nussbaum’s work on the capability approach in particular, should priorities not the analysis of cultural factors constraining poor women’s lives, or listing how an ideal account of flourishing and justice would look like, but rather focus on the global economic orders and other processes by which the rich countries are responsible for global poverty.

Pogge and Jaggar may have a point in their charge that capability theorists have paid insufficient attention to these issues, which have been discussed at length in the philosophical literature on global justice. But one might also argue that this is orthogonal to the issues about which the capability approach to social justice is most concerned, namely, how to make interpersonal comparisons of advantage for the purposes of social justice. One could, quite plausibly, hold the view that, since most capability theorists are concerned with human well-being, they should invest their energies in addressing the most urgent cases of injustice, investigate their underlying causal processes and mechanisms, and concentrate on the development of solutions. Using the modular view of the capability approach, this critique boils down to the view that we should concentrate on modules outside the core, namely those that explain certain unjust structures.

This is not, however, a valid critique of the capability approach as a general framework, nor does it recognise the role that capability theories can play in substantive debates about global justice and inequality. Rather, the critique should be reformulated in saying that the most urgent issues of justice do not require theories of justice, but rather a political-economy analysis of unjust structures. But then we are no longer facing a critique on the capability approach,
but rather a critique on our research priorities, which goes beyond the scope of this book.\textsuperscript{81} It is clear that the capability approach will not solve all the world’s problems, and that we should regard it as a tool to be applied to help us in analysing cases that need our attention, rather than an intellectual tool that has become an end in itself for academics. But from that it doesn’t follow that all scholars developing the capability approach should become political economists – or malaria researchers, for that matter.

### 4.7 Is the capability approach a liberal theory?

Students of the capability approach often ask whether the capability approach is a liberal theory – something which those who ask that question seem to think is a bad thing. Given the various audiences and disciplines that engage with the capability approach, there is a very high risk for misunderstandings of discipline-specific understandings of particular terms, such as the term “liberal”. Hence, let us answer the question: is the capability approach a liberal theory, and if so, in what sense?

In many capability theories and applications, including the work by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, there is a great stress on capabilities rather than functionings, as well as on agency and the power of people to shape their own destiny.\textsuperscript{82} What is ultimately important is that people have the freedoms (capabilities) to lead the kind of lives they want to lead, to do what they want to do and be the person they want to be. Once they effectively have these freedoms, they can choose to act on those freedoms in line with their own ideas of the kind of life they want to live. For example, every person should have the opportunity to be part of a community and to practice a religion, but if someone prefers to be a hermit or an atheist, they should also have this option. Now, it is certainly true that individual freedoms and agency are certainly a hallmark of liberalism. But is this

\textsuperscript{81} Serene Khader (2011, 24–30) faces similar critiques in her study of adaptive preferences (rather than the global economic order), and provides a sensible response to those worries.

\textsuperscript{82} Sen’s work on identity testifies to the great fait he puts in people’s power to choose whether or not to adopt certain group-memberships and identities. See e.g. (Sen 2009b)
enough to conclude that the capability approach, in contrast to specific capability theories, is a liberal framework.\footnote{In earlier work, I concluded that on those grounds we could conclude that the capability approach is a liberal theory. I now think that this conclusion was premature.}

First, given that interdisciplinary context in which the capability approach is operating, it is very important that the word 'liberal' is not confused with the word 'liberal' in daily life. In ordinary language, 'liberal' has different political meanings in different countries, and can cover both the political right or left. In additional it is often used to refer to (neo-)liberal economic policies which prioritise free markets and privatization of public companies such as water-suppliers or the railways. In contrast, philosophical liberalism is neither necessarily left or right, nor does it \textit{a priori} advocate any social or economic policies. The first misunderstanding to get out the way is that capabilities as freedoms refer exclusively to the ‘free market’ and thus that the capability approach would always lead to an endorsement of (unfettered) markets as the institutions that are capabilities-enhancing. Sen does argue that people have reason to value the freedom or liberty to produce, buy, and sell in markets. This point, however, is part of his more general work on development, and is a very different matter than the highly disputed question in economics and politics regarding the benefits and limits of the market as a system of economic production and distribution. Functionings and capabilities are conceptualizations of well-being achievements and well-being freedoms, and the question which economic institutions are the best institutional means to foster functionings and capabilities is both analytically but also politically a question that can only be settled after we first agree what economic outcomes we should be aiming at—and this is a question to which the capability approach gives a (partial) answer. The question what the appropriate institutions are that lead to capability expansions, is a separate question, which cannot be answered by the capability approach in itself, but requires the coupling with a political economy analysis. However, there is nothing in the (limited) literature that so far has undertaken this task, that suggests that unfettered markets are what a capability analysis would suggest – quite the contrary, as the work by Rutger Claassen (2009, 2015) shows:
capabilities theories give reasons for regulating markets, and for constraining property rights. In sum, if the word ‘liberal’ is used to refer to ‘neoliberalism’ or to ‘economic liberalization policies’, then neither the capability approach in general, nor Sen and Nussbaum’s more specific theories, are liberal in that sense.

Yet, I believe it is correct to say that Sen and Nussbaum’s writings on the capability approach are liberal in the philosophical sense, which refers to a philosophical tradition which values individual autonomy and freedom. Yet even philosophical liberalism is a very broad church, and Sen and Nussbaum’s theories are arguably of a critical strand within philosophical liberalism, since the explanatory theories that they use in their capability theories (that is, the choices they make in module C1), are in various ways aware of social structures.

Third, while the particular capability theories advocated by Sen and Nussbaum aspire to be liberal, it is very well possible to construct capability theories that are much less liberal. Take a capability theory that opts in module C1 for (1) a highly structuralist account of social explanation, as (2) theories of bounded rationality, that place great attachment to people’s structural irrationalities in decision-making. In module C4, the theory accepts some degree of paternalism due to the acknowledgement of bounded rationality in decisions making. Similarly, one could have a capability theory of social justice that argues that the guiding principle in institutional design should be the protecting of the vulnerable, rather than the maximal accommodation of the development of people’s agency. Such theories would already be much less liberal.

Is it possible for capability theories to be non-liberal? This would probably depend on where exactly one draws the line between a liberal and a non-liberal theory, or, formulated differently, which properties we take to be necessary properties of a theory in order for that theory to qualify as ‘liberal’. The clear line that the capability approach draws, is in the principle of each person as an end, that is, in the endorsement of normative individualism. The principle of normative individualism that

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84 Nussbaum (2011b; 2014) has written explicitly on the type of liberalism that her capabilities approach endorses – political liberalism. For arguments that Nussbaum’s capability approach is, upon closer scrutiny, not political liberal but rather perfectionist liberal, see Barclay (2003), and Nussbaum (2003b) for a response.
individualism is clearly a core principle of liberal theories. Yet it is also a core principle of some non-liberal theories which do not give higher priority to agency or autonomy (e.g. capability theories that merge insights from care ethics, and which give moral priority to protecting the vulnerable over enhancing and protecting agency). However, if a theory would endorse functionings and/or capabilities as the relevant normative metric, yet violate the principle of each person as an end, it would not only not qualify as a liberal theory, but it would also not qualify as a capability theory. At best, it would qualify as, e.g., a hybrid capabilitarian-communitarian theory.

4.8 Why ‘human development’ is not the same idea

Some believe that the terms ‘human development approach’ and ‘the capability approach’ are synonyms. Although I will argue that this is not the case, the equation of ‘human development’ with ‘capability approach’ is often made. They are often seen as two words that we can use for the same thing, or scholars talk about the ‘capability and human development approach’. How can it be explained that the capability approach has so often been equated with human development? And is that equation a good thing?

First, the Human Development Reports, and its best-known index, the human development index, have been vastly influential in making the case for the capability approach, and in spreading the idea of ‘functionings’ and ‘capabilities’ both inside and outside academia (UNDP 1990). In other words, one main series of publications within the human development approach and the corresponding analyses and indexes, is arguably one of the politically most successful applications of the capability approach. However, it doesn’t follow from this that they are the same thing.

A second possible explanation for why the capability approach and the human development paradigm are often equated, is that both the international association as well as the current name of the main journal in the field, have merged both terms: the Human Development and Capability Association (HDCA), and the Journal of Human Development and Capabilities. This seems to suggest that ‘human development’ and ‘capabilities’ necessarily go together. But this need not
be the case: the use of a particular title doesn’t make two things the same thing (and in a moment, I will give a few examples of where this isn’t the case).

Third, the most important reason why the equation of ‘human development approach’ and ‘capability approach’ shouldn’t be surprising, is that human development is the paradigm that aims at shifting the attention in our evaluation of the quality of life and the desirability of social arrangements by shifting our focus from either material resources or mental states to people’s functionings and capabilities. The capability approach is thus a central and indispensable element of the human development paradigm.

Finally, one may believe that the two terms are the same given that some influential authors in the capability literature equate the two terms, or merge them into one idea (Alkire and Deneulin 2009a, 2009b; Fukuda-Parr 2009; M. Nussbaum 2011a). Let me highlight two examples. Sabina Alkire and Séverine Deneulin (2009a, 2009b) do not distinguish between the reach of the capability approach, and the human development approach; instead, they merge it into one term, ‘the human development and capability approach’. More recently, Martha Nussbaum (2011a) has written on the distinction in her Creating Capabilities. Martha Nussbaum has suggested that ‘human development approach’ is mainly associated, historically, with the Human Development Reports, and that the term ‘capability approach’ is more used in academia. Nussbaum prefers the term ‘capabilities approach’ since she also likes to include non-human animals in her account; but as far as humans are concerned. Nussbaum doesn’t point out any substantive differences. However, for those of us, like me, who are using the capability approach to analyse and evaluate the quality of the lives as well as the living arrangements of human beings, this is not a valid reason to make the distinction between ‘the human development approach’, and ‘the capability approach’.

So, should we use ‘human development approach’ and ‘capability approach’ as synonyms, and merge them together into ‘the human development and capability approach’? I believe that we shouldn’t do this. I think there are at least four valid reasons why we should make a distinction between the two ideas.

The first reason is a historical reason: while the capability approach has been very important in the development of the human development paradigm, the
human development paradigm has derived insights and concepts from many other theories and frameworks. Human development has been defined as “an expansion of human capabilities, a widening of choices, an enhancement of freedoms and a fulfilment of human rights” (Fukuda-Parr and Kumar 2003, xxi).

There are important historical ideas in the human development paradigm that are to a significant extent based on Sen’s capability approach. And Amartya Sen was closely involved in the development of the Human Development Reports that have been key in the maturing of the human development paradigm. Yet as some key contributors to the human development paradigm have rightly pointed out, the human development paradigm had other intellectual roots too, such as the basic needs approach (Streeten 1995; Fukuda-Parr 2003; Sen 2003a).

The second reason is an intellectual reason. The capability approach is used for a very wide range of purposes, as the account I presented in chapter 2 makes ample clear. These include purposes that are only tangentially, or very indirectly, related to human development concerns. For example, the philosopher Martin van Hees (2013) is interested in the structural properties of capabilities, especially on how the formal analysis of rights fits to the capability concept. This research would allow us to see how capabilities, as a concept, would fit in, and relate to, the already existing literature on the structure of rights. But it would be extremely stretched to say that this is also a contribution to the human development literature; in fact, I would find such a statement an implausible inflation of what we understand under ‘human development’. Rather, it is much more plausible to say that the study by Van Hees is a contribution to the capability literature, but not a contribution to the human development literature. If we were wrongly to equate the capability approach with the human development paradigm, this would create problems for understanding such a study as part of the capability approach.

The third reason is a practical reason. Those who have written on the human development paradigm stress that ‘development’ is about all people and all countries, and not only about countries which are often called ‘developing countries’, that is, countries with a much higher incidence of absolute poverty, and often with a less developed economic infrastructure. For example, Paul Streeten (p. viii) writes:
“We defined human development as widening the range of people’s choices. Human development is a concern not only for poor countries and poor people, but everywhere. In the high-income countries, indicators of shortfalls in human development should be looked for in homelessness, drug addiction, crime, unemployment, urban squalor; environmental degradation, personal insecurity and social disintegration.”

To include all human beings within the scope of ‘human development thinking’ is widely endorsed within human development scholarship and policy reports. However, it is also a matter of fact that most people, including policy makers, associate the term ‘development’ not with improvements to the lives of people living in high-income countries. This is unfortunate, but it is a fact one needs reckoning with. In high-income countries, some of the terms often used for what could also be called ‘human development interventions’ are ‘policies’, ‘institutional design’, or ‘social transformations’. While it is laudable to deconstruct the term ‘development’, at the same time we should be careful about using words that would lead to scholars and policy makers in high-income countries not using the capability approach if they (mistakenly) believe that it is a framework only suitable for ‘developing countries’ (as they would use the term).

The final reason is a political reason. There are many capability scholars who would like to develop an alternative to neoliberalism, or, more specifically when it concerns development policies, to the ‘Washington consensus’. While more sophisticated analyses of both doctrines have been put forward, both doctrines focus on private property rights, the primacy of markets as an allocation mechanism, the focus in macro-economic policies on controlling inflation and reducing fiscal deficits; economic liberalisation with free trade and capital flows; and, overall, a restricted and reduced involvement of governments in the domestic economy, such as markets in labour, land and capital (the so-called ‘factor markets’) (Gore 2000; Fukuda-Parr 2003; McCleery and De Paolis 2008). The Washington consensus is the development policy views propagated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (two international institutions based in Washington DC, and hence its name). The ideas of the Washington consensus spread in the 1980s and were endorsed as the consensus view by the IMF and the World Bank by 1990, and formed the dominant views for at least two decades.
Over the last decade, neoliberalism and the Washington consensus have been heavily criticised from many different corners, and there is a renewed recognition for the importance of the historical, cultural and institutional specificity of countries in deciding what good development policies are; but it seems too early to conclude that any of those alternative views is now more influential than neoliberalism and the Washington consensus. Many citizens, scholars, policy makers and politicians are searching for alternatives, and some hope that the capability approach can offer this alternative.

My suggestion would be that if one’s goal is to develop a powerful alternative to neoliberalism and the Washington consensus, one has to look at the human development paradigm, rather than the capability approach. The reason is that the human development paradigm includes many specific explanatory theories that stress the importance of historical paths and local cultural and social norms in understanding development outcomes and options in a particular country. The human development paradigm is, therefore, much more powerful than the capability approach for this specific purpose.

Recall the Modular view of the capability approach that I presented in chapter 2. The human development paradigm is a capabilitarian theory or capability application, because it endorses all the elements from module A. In addition, it has made particular choices in modules B and, such as a strong notion of agency (B3) as well as an elaborate account of social structures (B4); and, importantly, the choice for anti-neoliberal ontological accounts of human nature and explanatory theories about how the economy and societies work (C1), as well as the endorsement of additional normative principle and social ideals (C4) such as human rights and ecological sustainability. Hence the human development paradigm is much more powerful as a policy paradigm then the capability approach, since it is much more comprehensive (taking many more aspects into account then merely people’s functionings and capabilities) and it is much more powerful in policy or political terms (being informed about what works and what doesn’t).

In sum, I think it is not correct to equate the capability approach and the human development approach. The two are theoretically and historically related, but they are not exactly the same. For those who work within development studies
and are endorsing a critical assessment of the development policies that have been pursued as part of the so-called 'Washington consensus', it is understandable that the two may seem to be the same, or at least so close that they can be merged. But that is only if one looks at the two notions from a specific perspective. Merging the two notions would do injustice to the work of other thinkers using the capability approach, and it would also ultimately hamper the development of the capability approach over its full scope.

4.9 Can the capability approach change welfare economics?

Of all the (sub)disciplines where the capability approach is relevant, welfare economics may well be the one where it is most difficult to describe its impact. The reason is that the capability approach to welfare economics could be seen in two very different lights, depending on one's own position towards the current state of economics: either as an improved modification of mainstream welfare economics, or else as a path that could lead us to a very different type of welfare economics, which would radically break with some mainstream assumptions and practices. One could say that the welfare economists interested in the capability approach have two very different agenda's: the first group only wants some changes in the normative focus, and possibly in some of the ontological and behavioural assumptions in the theory development but no methodological or meta-theoretical changes, whereas the second group wants a paradigm change or a scientific revolution, where there would be meta-theoretical and methodological pluralism (module B7) and much richer or thicker accounts of human agency (module B3) and structural constraints (module B5). In addition, it makes a difference whether we analyse the possibilities for a capabilitarian theoretical welfare economics or for a capabilitarian empirical welfare economics.

4.9.1 Welfare economics and the economics discipline

Before analysing the reach and limit of the capability approach in these various endeavours, a few general comments are in order about economics in general, and welfare economics in particular. Let us first ask: what is welfare economics? As Sen (1996, 50) writes, “Welfare economics deals with the basis of normative judgements, the foundations of evaluative measurement, and the conceptual underpinnings of policy-making in economics.” While, in practice, much of the
economic discipline is concerned with policy advice, welfare economics is nevertheless a small subfield of economics, and is by some prominent welfare economists seen as unduly neglected or marginalised by the mainstream of economics (Atkinson 2001). One important reason is that welfare economics makes explicit the inevitable normative dimensions of economic policy analysis and evaluations, and most economists have been socialised to believe that ‘modern economics’ is value-free, and that anything to do with normativity can be outsourced to ethics or to a democratic vote. In reality, however, the imaginary science-value split that mainstream economists would wish for, is for many economic questions impossible (Reiss 2013; Hausman, McPherson, and Satz 2016). It would therefore be much better to face this inevitability upfront, and understand economics as a moral science (Boulding 1969; Atkinson 2009; Shiller and Shiller 2011), rather than as applied mathematics or a form of value-free modelling. But in economics, as in any other discipline, there are complicated sociological processes conveying views about authority and status, as well as unexamined believes about what ‘good science’ is and which type of objectivity is most desirable: one is not born an economist, but becomes one through one’s training which is in part also a socialisation process (Colander and Klamer 1987; McCloskey 1998; Nelson 2002). Unfortunately, most economists are unwilling to engage with these fundamental questions and hold on to the belief that economics is superior to other social sciences and have little to learn from other disciplines (Fourcade, Ollion, and Algan 2015). Many economists who are interested in economic questions but are not endorsing the myth of value-free social science, or who crave for more methodological and meta-theoretical freedom, have left to another discipline which offers them those liberties.85 After all, economists do not have a monopoly in studying economic topics, and there are many questions about economic topics that are analysed by economic sociologists, economic historians, political economists, economic geographers, and economic philosophers. In my view, one cannot analyse the reach and limits of the capability approach in welfare

85 There are plenty of academic economists who have moved to history, development studies or philosophy in order to enjoy the greater methodological and paradigmatic freedoms in those disciplines.
economics if one does not acknowledge the extreme levels of discontent and disciplining within economics, which cannot be found in any other discipline that engages with the capability approach.

With this background in mind, we can now proceed to ask whether the capability approach can make a difference to welfare economics. First, in section 4.9.2, we will look at the main theoretical contribution of the capability approach to welfare economics: its contribution to the development of non-welfarist welfare economics. In section 4.9.3 we will analyse what kind of empirical analyses a capabilitarian welfare economics could make, and what its challenges and possibilities are. Finally, in section 4.9.4, we analyse which challenges the development of a heterodox capabilitarian welfare economics would face.

4.9.2 Non-welfarism

The main theoretical contribution of the capability approach is that it contributes to the development of post-welfarism or non-welfarism in welfare economics. Welfarism is the position that social welfare depends exclusively on individual utilities, which are either understood in a hedonic or in a desire-satisfaction sense, and has been the dominant position in economics for a long time. Post-welfarism broadens the informational basis of interpersonal comparison with non-utility information, such as deontic rights, or objective information such as people’s functionings and capabilities. In a series of publications, Sen has offered strong theoretical arguments to move from welfarism to non-welfarism (sometimes also called ‘postwelfarism’). Some reasons for this move are the same arguments that hold against desire-satisfaction theories or the happiness approach that we reviewed earlier in sections 3.7 and 3.8. Another argument is that relevant information is left out of the informational basis. If two social states have exactly the same utility-levels, but social state A has also a set of legal and social norms that discriminate against one group of people, whereas in social state B the principles of moral equality and non-discrimination are protected, then surely we should prefer social state B over social state A. But welfarism, because of its exclusive focus on utilities, is unable to take any type of non-utility information into account, whether it is the violation of deontic principles, information on
rights, liberties and justice, or information on inefficient or unsustainable use of common resources.

Non-welfarist welfare economics requires some changes to how we do welfare economics. As Sen (1996, 58) noted in his discussion of the contribution of the capability approach to non-welfarist welfare economics, if we move to an informational basis with multiple dimensions of different types and sorts (as in the capability approach), then this requires explicit evaluations of the different weights to be assessed to the contributions of the different functionings and capabilities to overall (aggregate) social welfare. For Sen, the way to proceed is by public reasoning about those weights. This should probably not be seen as the only and exclusive way to determine the weights, since not all work in welfare economics is suited for public discussion about the weights – for example, often work in welfare economics entails desk-studies of inequalities or the analysis of welfare effects of certain policy measures, and it is practically impossible to organise an exercise of public reasoning for every desk study that welfare economists make. Luckily, as the survey by Decancq and Lugo (2013) shows, there are various weighting systems possible that can provides the weights which are needed if one wants to aggregate the changes in different functionings and capabilities. For example, Erik Schokkaert (2007) has suggested to derive the weights of the functionings from the contribution they make to the life-satisfaction of people, after those weights having been cleaned of ethically suspicious information.

However, as we saw in section 4.9.1, many (possibly most) economists are unwilling to be engaged in explicit evaluative exercise, since they believe in the science/value split and naively believe that economics can be value-free. This makes it harder for welfare economics to engage in such normative work, since they run the risk that their peers will no longer accept their work as ‘economics research’. But it is an inconsistent position to reject all explicit evaluative exercises. Economists are happy working with GNP per capita and real income metrics as proxies of welfare, which uses market prices as the weights. But this is equally normative: it is assumed that the welfare-value for a person of a certain good is reflected by the price that the good commands on the market. This is problematic, for reasons that have been explained repeatedly in the literature. For
one thing, market prices reflect demand and supply (and thus relative scarcity of a good) – diamonds are expensive and water (in non-drought places!) is cheap—but this doesn’t say anything about their importance for our well-being. Moreover, market prices do not take into account negative or positive welfare effects on third parties, the so-called externalities, despite their omnipresence (Hausman 1992).

Of course, it may be that, upon reflection of the various weight available, some capability theorists will argue and conclude that the set of market prices, possibly combined with shadow prices for non-market goods, is the best way to proceed. That is quite possible, and would not be inconsistent with the general claim in the capability approach that weights need to be chosen. The point is rather that the choice of weights needs to be done in a *reflective* way, rather than simply using the weighing scheme that is dominant or customary. I take it that this is the point Amartya Sen is trying to make when he argues that “Welfare economics is a major branch of ‘practical reason’” (Sen 1996, 61).

### 4.9.3 Empirical possibilities and challenges

When Amartya Sen introduced the capability approach in economics, there was quite some scepticism on its potential for empirical research. For example, Robert Sugden (1993, 1953) famously wrote:

> Given the rich array of functionings that Sen takes to be relevant, given the extent of disagreement among reasonable people about the nature of the good life, and given the unresolved problem of how to value sets, it is natural to ask how far Sen’s framework is operational. Is it a realistic alternative to the methods on which economists typically rely – measurement of real income, and the kind of practical cost-benefit analysis which is grounded in Marshallian consumer theory?

What Sugden, and other early welfare economic critics of the capability approach, such as John Roemer (1996, 191–93) were looking for, is a theory that is fully formalised and provides a neat algorithm to address questions of evaluation.

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86 Note also that for welfare economists, an important concern in examining and developing a capabilitarian welfare economics will be the question how it can be formalized. On formalizations of the capability approach, see (Sen 1985a; Kuklys and Robeyns 2005; Basu and López-Calva 2011; Bleichrodt and Quiggin 2013).
and/or (re-)distribution. That requires two things: first, to be able to put the capability approach in a fully formalized model which can econometrically be estimated. This requires us to move beyond the welfare economic models as we know them, and may also require the collection of new data (Kuklys 2005). In addition, it requires us to accept that the different dimensions (functionings and/or capabilities) are commensurable, that is, have a common currency that allows us to express the value of one unit of one dimension in relation to the value of one unit of another dimension. Onedimensional or aggregated evaluative spaces are, ultimately, a necessary condition for conducting contemporary mainstream welfare economics. Yet there may well be a trade-off between the number of dimensions and the informational richness of the evaluative space on the one hand and the degree in which the theory can be formalised and can provide complete orderings of interpersonal comparisons on the other hand. Some welfare economists are working on the question how to aggregate the many dimensions such that one has, in the end, again one composite dimension to work with, but it should be obvious that this is not the only way to develop capabilitarian welfare economics. The alternative is to stick to the view that well-being is inherently multidimensional, which requires other methods and techniques that allow for fuzziness, vagueness and complexity (Chiappero-Martinetti 2008, 2000, 1994, 2006; Clark and Qizilbash 2005; Qizilbash and Clark 2005). As a consequence, there are several ways to develop a capabilitarian welfare economics, and to make the capability approach ‘operational’ (Atkinson 1999, 185).

The worry of Sugden can be best answered by looking at the applications that have already been developed, and which have been listed in several overviews of the empirical literature (e.g. Kuklys and Robeyns 2005; Robeyns 2006b; Chiappero-Martinetti and Roche 2009; Lessmann 2012). However,}

\[\textsuperscript{87}\] In addition to the first, rather rough empirical application in the Appendix of Sen’s (1985a) Commodities and Capabilities, the literature on empirical applications in welfare economics using individual-level data started of with the paper by Schokkaert and Van Ootegem (1990), in which they showed that unemployment benefits may restore an
whether the applications discussed in those surveys satisfy the critics, depends on what one wants from empirical work in capabilitarian welfare economics. As was already shown in chapter 1, empirical applications of the capability approach do make a substantive difference to research using other normative frameworks, such as income-based metrics. But from that it doesn’t follow that capabilitarian welfare economics will be able to deliver alternatives for each and every existing welfarist study in economics. It may well be that sometimes the informational riches of the capability approach clashes with requirements regarding measurability that certain empirical applications put upon the scholar.

4.9.4 Towards a heterodox capabilitarian welfare economics?

In the last two sections, we discussed how the capability approach can make a difference to contemporary welfare economics both theoretically and empirically. Those debates by and large stay within the mainstream of contemporary welfare economics, even though as Amartya Sen (1996, 61) notes, it will require “to go more and more in these pluralist and heterodox directions, taking note of a variety of information in making the wide-ranging judgements that have to be made.” The reference to ‘heterodoxy’ that Sen makes here is limited to the informational basis of evaluations, yet in some other work he has challenged some of the behavioural assumptions underlying mainstream welfare economics (e.g. Sen 1977a, 1985b). However, other economists believe that we need a much more radical heterodox and pluralist turn in economics, which would also affect meta-theoretical views, the range of methods that can be used (e.g. including qualitative methods), giving up on the believe that economics can be value-free, and engaging much more – and much more respectfully – with the other social sciences, and indeed also with the humanities. What can these heterodox economists expect from the capability approach?

The answer to that question flows from the description of the state of economist that was given in section 4.9.1. The unwillingness of mainstream welfare economics to take serious and open-mindedly learn from other disciplines
(Fourcade, Ollion, and Algan 2015; M. C. Nussbaum 2016) clashes with the deeply interdisciplinary nature of the capability approach. The modular view of the capability approach that was presented in chapter 2 makes it possible to see that a heterodox capabilitarian welfare economics is certainly possible. It could not only, as all nonwelfarist welfare economics does, include functionings and/or capabilities as ends in the evaluations (A1) and possibly include other aspects of ultimate value too (A6), but it could also include a rich account of human diversity (B3), a richly informed account of agency and structural constraints (B4 and B5) and could broaden its meta-theoretical commitments (B7) to become a discipline that is broader and more open to genuine interdisciplinary learning. Yet the modular account also makes it very clear that mainstream welfare economists can make a range of choices in those modules that are more in line with the status-quo in current welfare economics, which would result in a very different type of capabilitarian welfare economics.

In short, while both types of capabilitarian welfare economics will depart in some sense from welfarist welfare economics, we are seeing the emergence of both mainstream capabilitarian welfare economics as well as heterodox capabilitarian welfare economics. The problem for the first is that it will have little means of communication with other capability theories, since it does not adopt many of the interdisciplinary choices that most other capability theories make. The problem for the latter is that it will not be taken seriously by mainstream economics, since it does not meet the very narrow requirements of what counts as economics, according to vast majority of card-carrying professors of economics. Taking everything together, a capabilitarian welfare economics is possible, but (a) it will be harder to develop the capability approach in welfare economics then in some other disciplines because of the methodological and meta-theoretical clashes and restrictions, and (b) the difficult position that welfare economics has within mainstream economics will become even more challenging, since moving into the direction of the capability approach conflicts with the criteria that the gatekeepers in mainstream economists impose on anyone who wants to do something that they want to be considered 'economics'. This may also explain why there is much less work done in welfare economics on the capability approach,
compared to some other disciplines or fields where the capability approach has made a much bigger impact.

4.10 Taking stock

In this chapter, we have engaged with a range of critiques that have been voiced on the capability approach, or debates that have developed in the capability literature. While I hope that I have been fair in representing all viewpoints, I have in many cases argued for a particular way of looking at the problem, and in a significant number of cases argued that critiques had to be reformulated in order to be sound, or where not sufficiently appreciating the modular structure of the general capability approach or the distinction between the capability approach and capability theories. Several of the critiques presented in this chapter had bite as a critique on a particular type of capability theory, but not on the capability approach in general.

We have now almost reached the end of this book. The next and final (and, very short!) chapter will not provide a summary of the previous chapters, but rather provide some thoughts and speculations on what the future of the capability approach could look like, which issues will need to be addressed to unlock its full potential, and which limitations will always need to be reckoned with.
5 Which future for the capability approach?

In the last two decades, much time and intellectual energy has been spent on trying to answer some basic questions about the capability approach. What difference does it make to existing normative frameworks? Can it really make a difference to welfare economics as we know it? How should we select capabilities, and how should these dimensions be aggregated? Is the capability approach not too individualistic? Can it properly account for power? And can it properly account for the importance of groups and the collective nature of many processes that are crucial for people's capabilities?

I believe that much of the dust that kept capability scholars busy in the last two decades has fallen down, and we can move to another face in developing the capability approach and using it to study the problems that need addressing. As many capability scholars have acknowledged (sometimes a little implicitly) for a very long time, and as this book has illustrated in detail, there are a variety of capability theories possible. As a consequence, one capability theory does not need to be a direct rival of another capability theory: we do not necessarily need to choose between them, and it will often be a mistake to see them as rivals. Many different capability theories can co-exist. This theory-pluralism should be embraced, rather than attacked by trying to put the capability approach into a straightjacket. There is, of course, the real risk that any theory that is somehow ‘broadening’ the informational basis of is seen as a capability theory – hence a real risk of inflation. However, the modular understanding of the capability approach, which clearly lays out the properties that every capability theory, application or analysis should meet, give clear criteria that a proper capability theory should meet.

Having sorted all of this out, frees up our energy to put the capability approach to good use. It is impossible for one person to know all the interesting paths that the capability approach should take (even if that one person benefited from comments and many helpful discussions with others). But as a start, let me just mention some lines of further thinking, research and interventions that would be interesting to explore.

First, within the disciplines where the capability has been discussed and developed, there are plenty of opportunities to see what difference the capability
approach can make if pushed all the way to its limits. In some fields, such as educational studies, the capability approach is well-developed and widely applied. But there are other fields where the capability approach has so far merely been introduced, rather than being used to develop matured and complete theories. One question, which remains unanswered after our discussion in section 4.9, is whether the capability approach can provide an equally powerful alternative to utility-based welfare economics. In the literature on theories of justice, which we discussed in section 3.13, the capability approach is widely debated, but there are hardly any fully developed capabilitarian theories of justice, apart from Nussbaum’s (2006b) and the theory of disadvantage by Wolff and De-Shalit (2007). We need book-length accounts of capabilitarian theories of justice, capabilitarian theories of institutional evaluation, capabilitarian theories of welfare economics, and so forth.

Second, the capability approach is, so far, almost exclusively used for normative purposes – such as studies evaluating whether certain people are better off than others, studies trying to propose a certain policy or institution (for the effect it has on people’s functionings and capabilities) rather than others, or studies arguing for justice in terms of people’s capabilities. But one could also use the capability approach for *explanatory* studies, e.g. trying to examine which institutions or policies foster certain capabilities, or using the notions of functionings and capabilities in the analysis of people’s behaviour and decisions making. For example, labour economists model the decision on a person’s labour supply – how many hours she would be willing to work – by looking at the costs and benefits of working more or less hours; but wouldn’t it make much more sense to also ask how the capabilities of different options compare? For example, many adults are happy to work as many hours for less pay if the work is more intrinsically rewarding or if it contributes to the creation of a public good. Another example is how we explain the decision of a parent to not use formal child care, or only for a very limited number of hours. If we explain that exclusively in terms of financial costs and benefits (as some governments do), we don’t capture the fact that the capabilities of affiliation and social relations are very different in the two scenarios. A general model of people’s behaviour and decision-making should therefore not only look at the pecuniary costs and benefits of different options, but
also at the different levels of valuable functionings, and absence of functionings with a negative value, that the different options offer. The challenge of this approach is, of course, that capabilities are often merely qualitative variables, and this hampers the explanatory models that many social scientists use. But if our decision-making and behaviour is largely influenced by the capabilities that characterize different options, then surely, we should prefer (i) a more muddy and vaguer explanatory model that takes all important aspects into account above (ii) a more elegant and neat model but which gives us a distorted picture of how persons act and live. Some of this is already done, of course, since there is a large literature on certain functionings taken individually, e.g. in explanatory research on people’s health. The suggestion I’m making here is to look at those functionings in a more systematic way, and to integrate functionings and capabilities as general categories in theories of behaviour and decision making, next to other categories such as resources and preference-satisfaction.

Third, the capability may well have a very important role to play in the current quest for a truly interdisciplinary conceptual framework for the social sciences and humanities. Despite that universities are still to a large extent organized along disciplinary lines, there is an increasing recognition that many important questions cannot be properly studied without a unified framework or conceptual language in which all the social sciences and humanities can find their place. The capability approach may well form the nexus connecting existing disciplinary frameworks, precisely because it links people with the economic means to their wellbeing, it links people with the legal rules and jurisprudence as well as the social norms and practices that enable and constraint their capabilities, and so forth. And it could also link normative to explanatory frameworks, rather than leaving the normative frameworks implicit, as is now too often done in the social sciences.

Fourth, the capability approach should be more extensively used in designing new policy tools. Citizens who endorse a broad understanding of the quality of life that gives non-material aspects a central place, have been annoyed for many years in the constant equation of economic growth with an end in itself,

88 This is a methodological point that Amaya Sen has been pressing for a very long time.
rather than a means to human flourishing and the meeting of human needs. They have been saying, rightly in my view, that whether economic growth is a good thing depends, among other things, on how it affects the overall quality of life of people, as well as how other public values fare, such as ecological sustainability, and that we have very good reasons to take seriously the limits to economic growth (Jackson 2016). But those who want to put the ends of policies central, and focus policy discussions more on ultimate ends rather than on means, need to move from mere critiquing to having more tools that enable to make constructive proposals. The alternatives for GDP, which I briefly discussed in chapter 1, are one element that can help, but other tools are also needed.

Fifth and finally, the capability approach should be used in guiding existing practices on the ground, in many different segments of society, and in many different societies of the world. This is not easy, since there are quite significant challenges for theorists to bridge the gap between their work and practices on the ground, as several theorists who engaged in such theory-practice collaborations have pointed out (e.g. Koggel 2008; Wolff 2011). Yet if the capability approach aspires to make a difference in practice –which many capability scholars do– then thinking carefully about how to move to practice without diluting the essence of the framework is crucial. Luckily, there are signs that more of these ‘on the ground applications’ are being developed, and that the capability approach is not only of interest to scholars and policy makers, but also for practitioners and citizens. One example is Solava Ibrahim’s (2017) recent model for grassroots-led development, which is conceptual and theoretical yet based on ten years of fieldwork. Another example is the practical field of social work in the Netherlands, where social work professionals have recently argued that the field of social work is in need of a new moral compass, in order to counter the technocratic developments which, it is argued, have dominated changes in social work in recent decades. Some social workers argue that the human rights framework could provide a useful theory (Hartman, Knevel, and Reynaert 2016), while others believe that capabilities could be helpful in restoring the ethical and political dimensions in the practice of social work (Braber 2013). As the discussion in section 3.14 has shown, there need not be a conflict between those two frameworks. Yet it remains to be seen in the years to come if and how the capability approach is able to guide the effective
change of the entire sector of social work in countries where the traditional welfare states are under pressure.

However, with all these future extensions of the capability approach, it remains important to also explicitly acknowledge its limitations. This book has shown what the capability approach has to offer, but also what needs to be added before the vague and underspecified capability framework can be developed into a more powerful capability theory or capability application. Especially the choices made in Modules B, but also the additions made in modules C1 (additional explanatory and ontological theories) and module C4 (additional normative claims and principles) will be crucial for many capabilitarian theories and applications to become powerful.

There is no point in pretending that the capability approach can do more than it is able to do, since this would blind us for the necessary coalitions with other theories and insights that are needed. It is in those coalitions with complementary powerful theories and frameworks that the success of the future of the capability approach lies.
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