



Freedom or happiness? Agency and subjective well-being in the capability approach

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ABSTRACT

Human agency is a pivotal part of freedom and happiness. This article outlines two aspects of agency – power and control and self-establishment of goals – and situates it in the capability approach and vis a vis SWB. One can view the CA as an integration of ‘agency’ and ‘outcome’ oriented approaches. When agency is possible, it has primacy. When not, it is valued achievements (among others SWB) that acquire importance. Therefore agency is key for understanding how SWB fits in the general policy framework as a valued outcome. Two important functions of SWB information in this respect are outlined: as a frame of problem and as a signalling device on the effectiveness of policy.

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1. Introduction

Both the subjective well-being and the capabilities approach to well-being take individuals who are the beneficiaries or the victims of policy outcomes and the workings of social structures serious. Both take an interest in how individuals are actually doing and their actual circumstances, as opposed to the arcane and abstract structures of ‘neo-classical welfare economics’. The Subjective well-being approach does so by investigating and propagating the antecedents and facilitators of positive psychological functioning and human happiness and satisfaction. The capability approach prioritizes human freedom: the ability and liberty to live the life one wants to live.

These are two prominent recent approaches to well-being and important contenders as bases for policy thinking. Both approaches touch upon dimensions of human life and well-being that are fundamentally important for and to individuals, and no researcher working within one of these fields would deny the relevance for human well-being of the concerns of researchers working in the other field. Yet Comim (2005: 162) notes: “this seemingly obvious overlap in their object of research does not appear to be accompanied by any considerable acknowledgment of the vast work that has been produced in the two fields. It is in fact quite remarkable how both CA and SWB theories seem to turn their backs on each

other’s contributions.” How are we to understand this gulf? How might we bring these two approaches into closer contact with one another?

The aim of this paper is to integrate the concerns of both approaches. It does so by taking agency as a focal point of departure. Once the meaning and place of agency is established, it becomes more straightforward to see how the work done under the heading of these two approaches can inform and complement each other in a constructive way.

Section 2 sets out to determine the necessary elements of the concept of human agency. The aim here is to present a reasonable concept of agency that is capable of sustaining consensus on the necessary elements of human agency. This working definition will then be used in Section 3 to situate agency within the general framework of the CA. It is argued that the CA is an integration of an ‘agency’ and ‘outcome’ oriented approaches, among the latter is the happiness approach. Finally Section 4 establishes the place of SWB in the CA with reference to agency. Two important functions of SWB information in this respect are outlined: as a frame of problem and a context of discovery and as a signalling device on the effectiveness of policy. Section 5 concludes the article.

2. What is agency?

The concept of human agency involves consideration of three distinct elements: (a) action, power and causality, (b) purposiveness and (c) the determination of objectives.

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2.1. Action, power and causality

The first necessary element of agency or being an agent is tied up with the notions of action, power and causality. Standard dictionary definitions of 'agent' and 'agency' capture this aspect:

Oxford Dictionary:

Agent: A person or thing that takes an active role or produces a specified effect.

► *Grammar* the doer of an action.

Agency: action or intervention so as to produce a particular result.

Merriam-Websters Online Dictionary:

Agent: One that acts or exerts power.

Agency: The capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power.

In these definitions an agent takes action, exerts influence or power, and thereby causes something to happen. The ideas of action and power are indispensable to the concept of agency in identifying the source of a causal chain of events. Playing a mere role in the causal chain of events, by for example happening to be in a certain place on a certain moment, is not sufficient to classify something as an agent. It is by being the cause of an event through action that exerts an influence or power that agency is established. Thus one necessary element of being an agent or of agency is:

1. The ability to act to influence or affect the state of the world.

2.2. Purposiveness and one's goals as one's own

The ability to influence or affect the state of the world, however, is not sufficient to characterize *human* agency. Another aspect of agency, contained also in the Oxford Dictionary definition, is that action, influence or power is directed purposefully. The inclusion of purposiveness in the concept of agency rules out mere accidental outcomes, and helps distinguish human agency from the agency of non-human agents.

But purposiveness also, although a necessary aspect, is not a sufficient condition to distinguish human agency from non-human agency. Consider a definition of agency in computer science:

"An agent is an encapsulated . . . system that is situated in some environment and that is capable of flexible, autonomous action in that environment in order to meet its design objectives." (Jennings, 2000: 280)

In this definition purposeful action is also a necessary condition for a system or entity to be called an agent. Indeed an artificially intelligent system is often said to act according to some purpose for which it was designed. But purposiveness in human agents means something different. An AI system cannot choose its objectives; its objectives are constructed for it by its designers. AI systems do determine their sub-goals, and are capable of acting in this way. But they do not decide about their ends themselves. Sub-goals are not ends; they are means to some other final goal. Human individuals as agents, then, are seen as having the capacity to choose, determine or negotiate ends in a way that an AI system cannot. Purposiveness and self-determination of one's reasons for purposeful action are necessary aspects of the concept of agency. Therefore we note as a second necessary element of *human* agency:

2. The ability to judge and reflect upon goals and situations and to determine one's own goals and objectives as reasons for action.

2.3. Necessary conditions for human agency

We have thus established power to act and influence the state of the world and the ability to act purposefully on the basis of one's own objectives as necessary elements of the concept of human

agency. Combining these we write down the following definition of agency:

A human agent is a person or collection of persons having the ability to exert power so as to influence the state of the world, do so in a purposeful way and in line with self established objectives.

3. Freedom, agency and outcome

3.1. Freedom is a mixture of agency and achievement

One of the important distinctions made within the CA is that between freedom and achievement, or in other terms, between capability and achieved functionings. *Functionings* reflect in Sen's words: "the various things a person may value doing or being." *Achieved Functionings* refers to the *actual* occurrence of a state of affairs: "the particular beings or doings a person enjoys at a given point in time" (Alkire, 2005: 2). *Capability* than refers to the: "alternative combinations that are feasible . . . to achieve. Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles)." (1999: 75) Capability thus refers to the option, the possibility, the liberty, the ability etc., or in short the *freedom*, to reach a state of affairs.

Where in this conceptual scheme does agency fit? The conception of agency in the CA incorporates the necessary aspects of agency outlined in Section 2. Agency in the CA literature involves action and active choice, or more generally the power to influence the state of the world (e.g. Sen, 1999: 189; Sen, 1999: 190), and it requires that the goals and objectives of an agent are his own (see for example Sen, 1999: 12, where he contrast agency with the use of the term in the principle-agent literature). Thus an agent in Sen's words is "someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives [my italics]" (Sen, 1999: 12).

This conception of agency informs the capability approach throughout. Indeed the freedom to do and to be can be conceptualized wholly in terms of the level of agency one possess, were it not though that agency considerations themselves necessitate a concept of freedom that includes not only the *power to act on the basis of self-established goals* but also to experience beings and doings that *do not require one's active participation in their coming about* (Sen, 1985: 210; 1993: 43–44). For example a crime-free environment is counted as greater freedom compared to muggers haven taken over the streets, even if this does not require any specific action on the part of the individual enjoying the crime-free environment. Freedom or capability includes *both* agency, which requires action and control, it requires that one has the levers of control in one's hands and that these levers can be used to generate the desired outcome; *as well as* achieved functionings which do not necessarily require any activity or influence on the state of affairs by the person experiencing the functioning.¹ In situations where control is lacking, so to agency is lacking. Whether we in this case evaluate one situation as affording greater freedom than another, depends on the preferences of the individual regarding the outcomes.² Thus it should

¹ Sen (1993: 43/44): "...Cohen [has the] . . . conviction that 'the exercise of capability' must be a rather 'active' operationCohen gives examples (e.g. small babies being well nourished and warm as a result of the activities of their parents) that clearly show that . . . enjoying functionings . . . need not be a particularly athletic activity. I see no reason to object to this, since athleticism was never intended, despite the fact that Cohen has obviously been misled by my use of such words as 'capability' and 'achieving'."

² Freedom is thus determined by agency as well as achieved functionings. Even when in Sen's CA one is concerned with outcomes, however, the framework is still one of respecting the person as an agent. Sen only defines outcomes as part of the

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