

The reasoning agent: agency in the capability approach and some implications for development research and practice

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Abstract

Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA) is a freedom-centered and agency-oriented framework to the assessment of individual and social states. Indeed, it regards agency as having intrinsic, instrumental, and constructive importance. Thus, there is a growing literature exploring how to empirically capture agency. However, relatively less has been said about what the CA agency entails on its own terms. That discussion hinges on two themes: rationality, and freedom. Contrary to the dominant approach, rational choice theory, which proposes a selfish, calculative, atomistic chooser, the CA proposes a multi-motivated, multidimensional, plural, and reflective chooser. That is, instead of a rational, the CA suggests a reasoning agent, accounting for such an agent has important implications for the conduct of inquiry, including the philosophy of science. They might be better tackled in the latter is given its due.

Keywords: capability, agency, rationality, freedom, reasoning.

Resumen

El enfoque de capacidades (EC) es un marco centrado en la libertad y orientado hacia la agencia para la evaluación de estados individuales y sociales. Efectivamente, se considera que la agencia tiene importancia intrínseca, instrumental y constructiva. Así, hay una creciente bibliografía donde se explora cómo capturar la agencia empíricamente. Sin embargo, relativamente menos se ha dicho sobre lo que la agencia del EC implica en sus propios términos. Esa discusión involucra dos temas: la racionalidad y la libertad. Contrario al enfoque dominante, la teoría de la elección racional, que propone a un elector egoísta, calculador y atomista, el EC propone a un elector con múltiples motivaciones, multidimensional, plural y reflexivo; es decir, en lugar de uno racional, el EC sugiere a un agente razonante. Estudiar a ese agente tiene importantes implicaciones para la investigación, incluida la filosofía de la ciencia. Aquellas pueden enfrentarse de mejor manera si esta se aborda debidamente.

Palabras clave: capacidad, agencia, racionalidad, libertad, razonamiento.

1 Introduction

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (CA) provides a framework with which to assess social states. Challenging the conventional approach, focusing on pecuniary variables, the CA places people and their lives at the locus of attention. The most relevant questions it seeks to answer are *i*) what are people free to do and be? (Alkire & Deneulin 2010), and *ii*) what have people chosen to do and be? (Robeyns 2017).

The CA makes, at least, three momentous moves. First, it moves the locus of attention from the means (opulence) to the ends of development (people and their quality of life). To do so, it expands the informational space of inquiry to those aspects that make life worthwhile. The focus is on *functionings* or doings and beings that people value and have reason to value and *capabilities*, a vector of all possible functionings. While the former stresses achievement, the latter emphasizes effective opportunity or freedom (Sen 1999a).

Second, by so doing, it moves from a unidimensional approach that uses a single indicator (a measure of opulence) to a multidimensional one seeking to encompass those intrinsically valuable dimensions of life. This is related to the motivation aspects expressed by *wellbeing* (own personal welfare), and *agency* (self-regarding as well other-regarding goals) (Sen 1999a). Well-being and agency establish a first turn towards human diversity. There are multiple valuable doings and beings and life-styles from which people could choose, according to their personal preferences. Therefore, functionings and capabilities can manifest themselves in both well-being and agency.

Third, and partly because of the above, the CA moves from a notion of the humans as uniform to a notion of them being diverse by its stress on conversion factors, *i.e.*, what mediates the translation from resources and entitlements into capabilities and functionings. They reflect the view of humans as complex beings, consisting of personal characteristics and affected by social and environmental ones. Conversion factors establish a second turn towards human diversity. Different people in different contexts may require different quantities or qualities of resources to achieve similar outcomes.

Because of its contributions, the CA has been considered as quintessentially policy oriented (Gasper 2007). There is a growing literature employing the framework in order to inspire policy or to evaluate it. One important aspect that has received increased attention is that of agency. This is because of its intrinsic value, it is valuable in and of itself, but also because of its instrumental one, as the exercise of agency makes people better able to pull themselves

by the bootstraps. Thus, several accounts have been used empirically attempting to capture it, *inter alia*: proxy measures of empowerment (Alsop & Heinsohn 2005); global or multidimensional approaches (Narayan & Petesch 2007); accounts of effective power and control (Alsop *et al.* 2006), and efficacy (Bandura 1995); the study of autonomy (Chirkov *et al.* 2003) and ability (illustrated by agency indicators related to poverty [Alkire 2009]). While the jury is still out on which of these accounts does more justice to the CA, this state of affairs raises an important issue: if different accounts coexist, it is presumably because they capture something distinct but if, at the same time, they are all inspired by the CA, they should capture something similar as well.

Interestingly, much less attention has been given to the exploration of the CA's notion of agency itself, in its own terms. In order to contribute to that discussion and enrich empirical efforts, it seems warranted to address this logically prior issue and try to answer the question «what does the capability agent look like?».

To do so, the argument is structured as follows. According to Sen's strategy, the second section presents the dominant approach, namely, rational choice and the rational agent. The third section elaborates on the CA's redefinition of rationality, exposing its fundamental challenge to the convention. In the fourth section, freedom is addressed *vis-à-vis* rationality, achievement, and conversion factors in order to bring its dynamics with agency to the forefront. The penultimate section presents briefly a discussion of the import of this discussion for the philosophy of science and *vice versa*. The final section concludes.

2 The rational choice approach and agency

A scrutiny of agency entails a complex exercise since it not only requires accounting for human action but doing so in respect to certain ends (Alkire 2009, Hempel 1962). In this sense, the dominant approach has explained behavior in terms of its rationality, and states that a person acts rationally if their actions are coherent with their aims, *i.e.*, if they constitute means to those ends (Nida-Rümelin 1997). Put otherwise, an action is rational to the extent it enables the achievement of the agent's goals (Hempel 1962). Although originated in economics, this framework —*i.e.*, rational choice— has proven so pervasive that it rules over a growing number of social science fields (Witteck *et al.* 2013, Nida-Rümelin 1997). Consequently, this section addresses what are arguably the defining elements of rational choice: rationality, observability, and individualism.

2.1. Rational choice theory (RCT) and the rational agent

As its very name suggests, for RCT, human conduct is explained by *choice* and the latter is assumed to be *rational*. This assumption exposes the value-laden aspect of this theory, going beyond mere explanation. As Elster (1986, p. 1) put it, «the theory of rational choice is, before it is anything else, a normative theory. It [tells] us what we ought to do in order to achieve our aims as well as possible. It does not tell us what our aims ought to be». That is, it advances that human action is and ought to be rational; not only that, but the standard approach, of interest for this argument, assumes full rationality (Camerer *et al.* 2003).

What does full rationality entail? Although there is no consensus regarding what constitutes full rationality (Wittek *et al.* 2013), according to Camerer *et al.* (2003), most economists would agree on three components: *i*) people have well-defined preferences and their decisions seek to maximize them, this means that their preferences are coherent or that they observe the principles of reflexivity, completeness, transitivity, and continuity (Graziano 2013); *ii*) those preferences reflect the true costs and benefits of all available options, to the best of the person's knowledge; *iii*) in case of uncertainty, people have well-informed beliefs about how it will resolve itself and are capable of updating their beliefs in light of new information factoring it in their probabilistic assessments.

Two elements are worth stressing: self-interest and instrumental rationality. First, «rational choice consists of acting to maximize personal gain, *i.e.*, the option that allows the realization of the highest level of satisfaction for the agent» (Graziano 2013, p. 3). Second, rationality is taken to be instrumental since it is concerned with the most efficient way to maximize utility (Cruickshank 2001) or a means-ends decisions making process (Ratcliff 2001). Hence, the rational agent is selfish and calculative.

2.2. Preferences and revealed preference theory (RPT)

For RCT preferences (such as altruism) are considered exogenous and predicates about rationality do not offer an account of them («de gustibus non est disputandum») (Archer & Tritter 2001, Elster 1989). Subjective orderings of preferences are the result of extra-economic factors and are, therefore, regarded only as data. Additionally, preferences are considered as stable and when change is admitted, it is not factored in economic theory and is treated as exogenous instead (Maletta 2010). Individuals, thus, become black boxes in this regard.

Accordingly, the locus of attention is placed on choice, not on preference. This is made possible by revealed preference theory, an

approach to explain consumer behavior. Although there have been a few versions, arguably its most important assumptions are: *i)* rationality, *i.e.*, the consumer chooses a bundle with more of a good than a bundle with less; *ii)* consistency, *i.e.*, if the consumer selects bundle A when B is available, A will be consistently selected over B; *iii)* transitivity, *i.e.*, if the consumer prefers A to B and B to C, then they prefer A to C (Omoniyi *et al.* 2015).

The revealed preference axiom can summarize the approach. In its most basic (or weak) form, it states: if the consumer selects bundle X^0 at prices P^0 even though X^1 is available and affordable, bundle X^0 will be selected over X^1 unless X^0 is not affordable (Hands 2013).

What is of interest in here is the fact that RPT focuses exclusively on observables. By basing choice solely on quantities of goods and prices, it is not necessary to introduce «utility» or «preference». In fact, advancing positivist epistemology, ridding the theory of terms related to unobservable mental states such as these was the whole purpose of this project (Hands 2013). Robbins (1938, p. 636) put it succinctly: «Every mind is inscrutable to every other mind and no common denominator of feelings is possible». The focus on objectivity is necessary for the positivist template since its main contribution: generalization, external validity or prediction, relies on it.

Agency, however, inescapably entails both subjective and objective aspects (Archer & Tritter 2001). This is because people act according to reasons and meanings (the subjective) under certain circumstances (the objective). The answer provided by the dominant approach is to treat reasons as preferences and, since «de gustibus non est disputandum», disregard them, focusing instead on the cost-benefit analysis entailed by the maximization of those subjectively defined ends under a given set of limitations and enablements, *i.e.*, instrumental rationality, which is assumed to be objectively observed in choice.

Consequently, with the help of RPT, RCT adheres to the positivist pursuit for objectivity, turning the rational agents into selfish, calculative choosers.

2.3. Methodological individualism

As the discussion has suggested, RCT explains human behavior at the level of the individual. This is because RCT is «[...] the most vital form of explicit methodological individualism in contemporary social science» (Udehn 2001, p. 288). Methodological individualism is a doctrine that includes *inter alia*, ontological and explanatory individualism (Robeyns 2017). Ontological individualism claims that only individuals, their characteristics and properties exist; and that, consequently, society and its properties can be reduced to them

(Robeyns 2017). This leads to the epistemologically individualistic claim that «all social phenomena are to be explained wholly and exclusively in terms of individuals and their properties» (Bhargava 1992, p. 19).

Put differently, for RCT the structure has neither properties of its own nor causal powers and, thus, is reducible to the agent. An important implication is that what ever features the structure may have at one time, characterized as constraints or enablements in the decision-making process of the agent, are the product of the individuals, at that same time. That is, there is synchronicity (Archer & Tritter 2001). There is no historical explanation for current choices as there are no explanations for how the latter may affect future ones. In brief, the individual is the independent variable, never the dependent one (Cruickshank 2001). In this sense, for rational choice, the rational agent is a self-interested, calculative, atomistic chooser.

Although born in economics, RCT has proven to be quite influential in social science. This is no coincidence. From the start, and conforming to the positivist expectation of uncovering universal laws (or law-like generalizations), RCT claimed to be applicable beyond economic behavior. Gary Becker (1976, p. 8) himself declared: «I have come to the position that the economic approach is a comprehensive one that is applicable to all human behavior».

Against this backdrop, the Capability Approach offers an alternative, regarding agency instead «[...] in its older —and “grander”— sense as someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well» (Sen 1999a, p. 19). As such, it has intrinsic, instrumental and constructive value (Crocker & Robeyns 2010). In order to better apprehend the what this entails for the CA itself and for its empirical applications, two elements are of particular interest from this conception, to wit, freedom, and achievement, entailed in acting to generate an outcome, as well as reason and rationality, implied in the judgment of that action and its motivations. To facilitate the narrative, the latter is addressed first in the next section and the former in the subsequent one.

3 The CA and rationality

The CA opposes explicitly RCT's notion of rationality and, hence, of agency. Sen (2002, p. 4) defines rationality as «subjecting one's choices —of actions as well as of objectives, values and priorities— to reasoned scrutiny». Furthermore, and significantly, in his later work Sen (2009, p. 180, emphasis in the original) specifies: «[...]»

rationality is primarily a matter of basing —explicitly or by implication— our choices on reasoning that we can reflectively *sustain*, and it demands that our choices, as well as our actions and objectives, values and priorities, can survive our own seriously undertaken critical scrutiny». Consequently, this section addresses how this redefinition of rationality challenges the convention and what it means for the study of agency.

3.1. Rationality as reasoning

Discussing the notion of rationality advanced by the rational choice framework, Sen (2002, p. 4) has emphatically stated:

The broad reach [of reason] entails the rejection of some widely used but narrowly formulaic views of rationality: for example, that rationality must require following a set of a priori «conditions of internal consistency of choice» or «axioms of expected utility maximization», or that rationality demands the relentless maximization of «self-interest» to the exclusion of other reasons for choice.

In this sense, the distancing is evident in terms of motivation, the evaluative space, and the unit of analysis. Regarding motivations, the CA goes beyond the egoist agent. The CA recognizes that there are a variety of motives prompting choice and action, not only self-interest. In this sense, Sen (1977) differentiates between sympathy and commitment. Sympathy denotes a state in which someone's well being is dependent on somebody else's welfare, as when a person feels discomfort due to another's flu (coughing, or sneezing). Commitment refers to choices that foreseeably lead to lower levels of personal welfare when there are options that lead to increases. In its more inclusive sense, commitment encompasses choices and actions that are carried out with anticipated increases in well-being but that not being the reason for them, *e.g.*, because it is the «right thing to do» (Sen 2002). As such, commitment «[...] drives a wedge between personal choice and personal welfare, and much of traditional economic theory relies on the identity of the two» (Sen 1977, p. 329). Therefore, sympathetic choices and actions may be considered as self-regarding. However, commitment-based behavior cannot, and much of human experience falls under the latter.

More broadly, there may be a plurality of sustainable reasons for a choice. Different people may aim for the same outcome for different reasons. Someone may want a promotion for the wage increase, another for the reputation, another still for the ability to have a greater impact. Similarly, the same person can make the same choice at different times with different motivations each time. An individual may donate to charity to help a cause they believe in at one time, at another they may do so to get a tax break and at another out of mindless habit. Assuming consistency based solely on choice, therefore, would be misleading. Self-interest is only one

motivation, and is captured by «well-being» in the CA. Equating rationality only with self-seeking egoists is regarding people as rational fools (Sen 1977). This framework, therefore, recognizes a plurality of motivations and agency encompasses the totality of them.

Concerning the evaluative space, the CA takes issue with the one-dimensional exclusive focus on utility and its maximization. This is related to self-interest but also distinct. The issue here is arguably best illustrated using the term «preferences». For rational choice, preferences do not speak for themselves; they do so via choice. What is chosen is taken to be what is preferred. Moreover, an identification has been drawn between what is preferred or chosen and what makes one better off (Sen 1977). However, an exclusive focus on utility leaves out much of human experience. According to the CA, that tradition is restrictive in at least two ways: *i)* it completely disregards freedom and observes achievement only, and *ii)* it disregards all other achievements that are not captured by this mental state (Sen 1992).

At most, this account can be associated with well-being in CA, and only partially. The CA recognizes the scope and limitations of utility-based assessment; among the most relevant shortcomings are adaptive preferences, denoting that people adjust their mental states to their circumstances, the difficulty in interpersonal comparisons as well as in distributional analyses, and the assumption that one indicator can account for the whole of human experience (Sen 1999a, 1992, 1979). Hence, it acknowledges subjective well-being as solely one dimension among many others (Sen 1992). The CA increases the information base to incorporate diverse doings and beings regarded as important in and of themselves and not just because they produce utility or to the extent that they yield utility (Sen 1992). What is more, beyond achievement, the CA emphasizes the relevance of capability or well-being freedom, which is also multidimensional. Therefore, the CA scrutinizes more than just choice.

3.2. Rationality and choice

If, however, agency can only be accounted for in light of goals and aims (Alkire 2009), and these can be of various kinds (self-regarding, and other-regarding), as well as multidimensional (in functionings, and capabilities alike), then the CA deems relevant to expand the informational base. This means analyzing preferences and that entails opening the rational choice agent's black box.

Individuals, thus, choose to advance their considered aims, bringing thereby the change they seek in the world, after having discriminated between different reflected upon valuable options. They use sustainable reasoning not only to pursue their objectives

but also to scrutinize those objectives and values themselves (Sen 2002). Importantly, this is call for that scrutiny in others and, crucially, in the self (Sen 2009). Sen (2002, p. 36) asserts:

A person is not only an entity that can enjoy one's own consumption, experience appreciate one's welfare, and have one's goals, but also an entity that can examine one's values and objectives and choose in the light of those values and objectives. Our choices need not relentlessly follow our experiences of consumption or welfare, or simply translate perceived goals into action. We can ask what we want to do and how, and in that context also examine what we should want and how. We might or might not be much moved by moral concerns or by social reasons, but neither are we prohibited from entertaining these questions, in shaping our values and if necessary revising our objectives in that light.

Firstly, when it comes to the preferred option, the choice made is to be assessed against the reasons behind it. Whether functionings or capabilities, the CA stresses that these are the doings and beings or combinations thereof, respectively, that one values and has reason to value. This emphasis highlights the importance that not just any type of life deemed valuable is legitimate. There may be aims lacking justifiable reasons (Sen 2009). One may value to take the law into one's own hands, seeking violent vengeance, for instance. This underlines the importance of *sustainability* of reasoning.

Furthermore, there may be choices answering to preferences questioned by the individual themselves. That is, there are preferences for one's preferences, which implies reasons for one's reasons. A smoker may choose to smoke but do so reluctantly because they know it to be unhealthy (Sen 2002). The individual has a second order preference opposed to their first order preference. This insight contributes to accounting for the imposition of self-restraint such as going on a diet or setting the alarm clock or any other mechanisms that stop one from acting out of passion, by impulse or on a whim.

Preferences denote what people value and scrutinizing them exposes their values. Values, in turn, are related to people's morality. In order to expose the latter, the former need to be examined. Sen (1977) has suggested that rankings of preferences rankings can prove useful for this undertaking. This meta-ranking, he argues, allows people to express their moral judgments in terms of the preferences they would have preferred to have. In this sense, this tool «[...] assists the reasoning which involves considering the merits of having different types of preferences (or of acting as if one had them)» (Sen 1977, p. 341).

Secondly, with respect to the alternatives, scrutiny of the options not taken is significant because bundles are not necessarily made equal. Although individuals may end up making the same choice, their motivations might be quite different. Although this issue is developed further in the next section (regarding freedom),

suffice it to say here that options can be meaningful and meaningless. The exercise of reason in the first case is certainly distinguishable from that in the latter.

Thirdly, preferences and values depend on the circumstances of the individual (Sen 2002). An important issue for the CA is adaptive preferences, which refers to the adjustments people make in order to better cope with the situation in which they find themselves. In situations of disadvantage, as a mechanism of self-protection from frustrations and depression, disenfranchised people adapt their aspirations, aims and values to what seems realistically feasible, finding satisfaction in small gestures and appreciating handouts (Sen 1992), which have questionable reason to value: «Deprived groups may be habituated to inequality, may be unaware of possibilities of social change, may be hopeless about upliftment of objective circumstances of misery, may be resigned to fate, and may well be willing to accept the legitimacy of the established order» (Sen 1990a, p. 127).

More generally, this stresses the CA's argument that the doings and beings one values and has reason to value, and the combinations thereof, depend on conversion factors. People's preferences depend on their personal characteristics as well as those of their context, *i.e.*, social and environmental features. In order to inquire into preferences and identify their reasons, the individual's physical and mental attributes (*e.g.*, years of schooling, proneness to illness, self-esteem, etc.), the traits of the society in which they live (*e.g.*, hierarchical, patriarchal, theocratic, etc.) and the traits of their environment (*e.g.*, amount of rainfall, likelihood of draught, distance to basic services, etc.) have to be factored in.

3.3. Rationality and reasonableness

The changes one seeks, nonetheless, usually are not expected to ensue in a vacuum. When the social context is involved, preferences, choices and actions that have survived one's critical examination may not suffice. Such situations demand to move from the requirements of rationality to the demands of reasonableness (Sen 2009). This means incorporating the perspectives and considerations of others, of what is regarded as reasonable behavior, since they play a part in the scrutiny to which one's actions and choices can be sensibly subjected.

The assessment of reasonableness can take different forms. Based on Scanlon's (1998) proposal that, at its most basic, what is right and wrong is what could be justified to others in such a way that, if adequately motivated, they could not reasonably reject, three possible alternatives have attracted special attention: the contractarian view, the cooperative perspective, and the duty of power (Sen 2009). Contractarian reasoning consists on agreeing on

a set of principles on the basis of symmetry and is illustrated by Rawls' «original position» in which all members of a society are behind a «veil of ignorance», which equalizes them as no one knows their actual position in society and ought to accord principles, for reasonable conduct in this case, *a priori*. The mutual benefits of cooperation perspective suggest the engagement of all members of society in an exchange where each can advance their own advantage according to their own notion of the good. As such, at best is based on the notion of reciprocity, at worst, in *quid pro quo*. Finally, the duties of power alternative propose that having effective power to act justly entails an obligation to do so. It is self-initiated and unidirectional as it is prompted by the agent with no retribution and expectation thereof.

These procedures aim at «impartial evaluation», which Sen (2009) suggests can provide a notion of objectivity with some plausibility for moral and political philosophy. Resting on his proposal to reconsider objectivity for practical assessments, Sen (1993b) recognizes that the same phenomenon is observed differently by different people *because of their position*. Should people be able to observe the phenomenon from the same position, he argues, they would make the same observation. Impartial evaluation, in this sense, entails two elements of non-subjectivity: the comprehension and communication on an objective basis, and objective acceptability. The former alludes to people's claims being sufficiently outside of personal subjectivity so that others can apprehend them; the latter indicates that people can debate the correctness of each other's claims (Sen 2009). Therefore, in order to assess one's behavior in the social context impartially, individual introspection and self-examination need to be complemented by other's inquiry; that is, public reasoned scrutiny is necessary for evaluations with some ethical objectivity.

3.4. Reasoning and agency

Hence, for the CA, the agent behaves rationally when they choose according to their aims after having critically scrutinized them and derived sustainable reasons for them. This examination leads to, at least, three significant insights: *i*) choice can only be assessed in terms of preferences, thus, «de gustibus est disputandum», including the (second order) preferences for (first order) preferences or reason for reasons; *ii*) scrutiny of choices and preferences includes the options not selected, and *iii*) this inquiry does not regard the individual as separated from their social context, their historical background, and their geographical environment but as dependent on it. To different extents, these insights are not only an invitation but a demand for the inclusion of unobservables, escaping thereby the positivist straight jacket. As Sen (1977, pp. 339-340) states, «once we give up the assumption that observing choic-

es is the only source of data on welfare, a whole new world opens up, liberating us from the informational shackles of the traditional approach».

In this sense, the CA makes a move from a focus on «rationality» to a focus on «reason». As a result, it regards agency in quite different terms. Agency is about bringing about change *and* judging achievements. This section has focused particularly on the latter component. It has highlighted that the judging entails questioning oneself, whether or not it can also be made by others. There is an element of not only subjectivity but, more importantly, *reflexivity* in the study of agency. That means a move from the exclusive reliance on measurement to the inclusion of meaning.

4 The CA and freedom

Freedom takes central stage for Sen's capability approach. As such, it is closely related to other important categories such as agency. For the CA, agency and freedom are intertwined. Indeed, Sen (1999a) has called the approach freedom-centered or freedom-based (Sen 1992) and agency-oriented (Sen 1999a). Likewise, freedom is interwoven with rationality, understood as the «[...] use of reasoning to understand and assess goals and values, and it also involves the use of these goals and values to make systematic choices» (Sen 2002, p. 46). In this section, it is discussed the import of freedom for agency by addressing the complex dynamics between freedom, rationality, achievements, and conversion factors.

4.1. Freedom and rationality

From this perspective, rationality and freedom are interdependent. According to Sen (2002), considering rationality as the scrutiny of one's choices, aims and values, denotes that rationality is dependent on freedom in two senses: first, options must be available to exercise reason in order to choose; in slavery there are no choices to be made and reason cannot be exercised; second, in the presence of multiple options, rationality has to be able to accommodate the variety of reasons and preferences supporting a choice. This is central to the idea of freedom of thought.

There is arguably a third way in which rationality is dependent on freedom. Each effective opportunity to choose the doings and beings we value and have reason to value is an occasion to act rationally, *i.e.*, to subject preferences to reasoned scrutiny. There is a learning process in choosing that enables exercising one's reasoning muscles. Whether one achieves what one values or not, one

gains information and experience from choices, which can be useful in order to make future choices better. Therefore, more freedom can lead to better reasoning and, thus, more rationality. This suggests that one's reasoned scrutiny can be performed more or less rigorously, depending on different considerations. Three inferences can be reached from the above: *i*) rationality is a matter of degree, not an all or nothing quality; *ii*) rationality is inherently plural, and *iii*) rationality is subject to different factors.

At the same time, freedom is dependent on rationality. This is related to the discussion formulated above. An account of freedom requires some notion of people's preferences and the reasons for those preferences. Nevertheless, freedom is often elaborated independently of values, preferences and reasons. In this sense, «freedom must depend on reasoned assessment of having different options» (Sen 2002, p. 5). This applies for both opportunity freedom and process freedom. While opportunity freedom refers to the effective choices that a person has to take to lead a life that values and has reasons to value, process freedom denotes the conditions underlying those opportunities (Sen 1999a). Both perspectives of freedom are relevant and are related to each other. To clarify the difference, Sen (1997) introduces the distinction between «culmination outcomes» and «comprehensive outcomes». The former is concerned with outcomes only; the latter, in addition to outcomes, concentrates on the process leading them. The difference is illustrated in a politician seeking only to win an election and one seeking to win it fairly (Sen 2009, 2002). The following discussion, however, focuses on opportunity freedoms, unless otherwise stated, due to its clearer relation to agency.

4.2. Freedom and achievement

Freedom is at the heart of the approach, so much as so that Sen (1999a) defined development as freedom and placed it at the core of the idea of justice (Sen 2009, 1990c). It is regarded as the effective opportunity people have to lead the lives they value and have reason to value. As such, freedom is intrinsically important, in addition to functionings. The focus on the former is significant because the alternative, paying attention to achievements exclusively, is tantamount to privileging outcomes to the detriment of the how they come about.

The intrinsic value of freedom challenges the process of conventional evaluations of states. Should freedom be only instrumentally important, for the achievements it can lead to, it would be appropriate to make assessments in terms of the latter; that is, in terms of the choice made (Sen 1992). The value of the opportunity, thus, would rest on the value given to one element of the set: the chosen option, assumed to be the best option. By so doing, the value of the capability set is effectively obscured since it is

judged in terms of the functioning chosen. Accordingly, the elimination of all other doings and beings from the vector of possibilities entails no real disadvantage as long as the chosen option remains since, ultimately, is the only one that matters (Sen 1992).

There can also be a close relationship between freedom and achievement. Indeed, choosing is an important achievement. «"[C]hoosing" itself can be seen as a valuable functioning, and having an x when there is no alternative may be sensibly distinguished from choosing x when substantial alternatives exist» (Sen 1999a, p. 76). Also, it is possible to represent functionings in such a way as to reflect the options available. This possibility is illustrated by «fasting», which not only entails starving but starving when having the choice of not doing so. Sen (1985, 1988) refers to this functioning as «refined».

The relevance of freedom should not displace that of achievements in one additional and important sense. For this discussion, it is crucial to assess the choices, together with the bundle of options, because such an exercise says something about the scrutiny performed. Sen (2002) has briefly hinted towards the fallibility of rationality. The fact that one subjects one's actions and preferences to critical analysis does not automatically mean that the result will be optimal. One's reasoning can be biased or restricted, leading to deception, misconception, and suboptimal results, which can lead to unexpected or undesirable consequences. In other words, a limited rationality can translate into a limited agency, since one's choices may generate an undesired change or no change at all. To be sure, it could also generate «overoptimal» results due to sheer luck, but it is still a case of unintended consequences and, as such, it is still a case of limited agency. Looking at both elements, capabilities and functionings, as well as preferences, therefore, can be helpful to expose the type and degree of rationality at work.

4.3. Rationality and achievement and conversion factors

It was argued at the start of this section that the interdependence between rationality and freedom leads to three inferences about rationality, to wit, that it is a matter of degree, plural and that it depends on certain factors. In this sense, functionings can be some of the most relevant. Given that achievements are constitutive to a person's being (Sen 1992), they can affect the reasoned scrutiny of one's choices, actions and values. The level of education, for example, is likely to be associated with important competences such as analytical and critical thinking as well as other cognitive abilities. Significantly, the type of this education is also important since the critical analysis to which one can subject one's choices and preferences can also differ. The same applies for other functionings such as health, employment, or self-esteem. It seems sen-

sible to expect it to be easier to dedicate time and effort to analyze oneself if one does not have to worry about their survival or that of their loved ones, can afford the basic commodities and doesn't have to deal with depression, respectively. Hence, rationality is dependent on achievements.

Achievements, in turn, are also dependent on rationality. This relationship is perhaps more evident but warrants explicit mention. There may be different ways to achieve reflected upon valuable doings and beings. Some may be more efficient, other more legitimate, etc. Accordingly, how achievements can be reached may depend, *inter alia*, on the rigorousness of the scrutiny performed over one's choices and reasons.

Related to this discussion is the dynamic between rationality and conversion factors. Of particular interest are social ones: on the one hand, for example, they can constraint or enable rationality by making information, education or participation accessible or not to different people; on the other hand, social attributes can affect rationality in the sense of suggesting what reasoned scrutiny might entail; for instance, several communities the world over have increased their call for the inclusion of nature as part of the «development» agenda. For them, some goals may not be valuable after reflection (e.g., increasing economic growth without care for the environment), which for other communities may seem acceptable. Accordingly, conversion factors can highlight the plural nature of rationality and how the former depends on the latter. Such plurality needs to be underlined, as Sen (2009, p. 195) has admitted: «Rationality is in fact a rather permissive discipline, which demands the test of reasoning, but allows reasoned self-scrutiny to take quite different forms, without necessarily imposing any great uniformity of criteria».

In discussing social identity, the influence other people may have on a person's self-knowledge has been highlighted. Social identities are denoted by the different memberships that people may have in different groups. Importantly, Sen seems to assume *active* memberships; *i.e.*, agents choosing to belong to a group deliberately, not just happening to be a part of a group as a result of the pursuit of their interests (Teschl & Derobert 2008). This rejects communitarian accounts that see human beings as embedded in social groups and who cannot understand themselves in absence of their relations to others. Thus, Sen refutes the notion that society can have a determining effect on people's identities (Sen 2007). He argues that the multiple identities, according to the different memberships people may have, are the product of an evaluative process which leads to deliberate choice. Culture, values and context are meaningful, and they exert an influence, as it is not possible to «reason from nowhere» (Sen 1999b, p. 23). Nevertheless, even within specific cultures and communities, there are choices and

«[e]very human being has the ability to question and to doubt» (Teschl & Derobert 2008, p. 135). In Sen's view, the order is conspicuous: «reason before identity» (Sen 1999b).

Likewise, social conversion factors can also depend on rationality. Social as well as cultural customs, norms and institutions are the product of people's agency and change because of people's agency. That democratic nations have increased the breadth and depth of rights of their citizens can be an illustration. Social change, thus, is the consequence of a change in the meaning that the *statu quo* has for (a critical mass of) people and their choice to act accordingly.

That rationality is dependent on several conditions, including environmental factors, has been suggested by Sen (1993b) in his discussion regarding the importance of individual position: «What we can observe depends on our position *vis-à-vis* the objects of observation. What we decide to believe is influenced by what we observe. How we decide to act relates to our beliefs. Positionally dependent observations, beliefs, and actions are central to our knowledge and practical reason».

4.4. Freedom, achievement and the individual

Whether capabilities or functionings, the CA suggests that evaluations of states ought to take place at the level of the individual. This individualism, however, is not methodological but ethical. The CA rejects the ontological assumption that individuals, and their properties and choices, are all there is to society and the latter is an aggregation of the former; for instance, institutions influence what the values or preferences of people can be and, at the same time, people can influence those institutions. The call to question and assess reasons establishes a strong contrast into incorporating unobservables and meaning into the inquiry.

The CA's individualism is ethical; that is, the ultimate unit of concern is the individual (Robeyns 2017). What is of interest is whether the individual is suffering from deprivations or if they are enjoying freedoms and achievements. Any other alternative, such as a focus on the community, a household or the family, would obscure the inequalities and discriminations that can ensue within them. Relevant issues such as gender, age, ethnicity, etc., can be mistakenly omitted by shifting the locus of attention to collective units of analysis.

This is not to deny that there are collective capabilities and functionings or, indeed, agency. There may be changes in the world that can be achieved only collectively. Voting is a telling example (Sen 2002). That collective agency, however, hinges on individual agencies. Therefore, although the CA does not exclude the former, it privileges the latter.

4.5. Freedom and agency

Opportunity or substantive freedom is intertwined with agency because choosing itself is an exercise of agency. Whether in terms of self-regarding or other-regarding aims, to choose from different options is part of bringing about or achieving change. Hence, to be free is to be an agent.

Expanding the freedoms that people enjoy (and eliminating their unfreedoms), thus, enhances their agency. This expansion, however, is qualified. It neither means that only more options nor that only more choices automatically increase freedom. If options are trivial, no additional amount of them represents an expansion of freedom. Only the addition of doings and beings that one values and has reason to value count for the effective exercise of agency.

Similarly, increases in the number of choices are not necessarily better for people's lives. There can be an excess of choices when people do not *get to* choose but *have to* choose; that is, when instead of an opportunity, they become an obligation (Sen 1992). Compulsory unvalued choices could be regarded as restrictions on agency not only because, at the extreme, they can be a source of unfreedoms, since they can force one to bring about an unwanted change, but also because they can have an opportunity cost: resources dedicated to attend to them are resources that could have been dedicated to pursue one's considered valuable aims and generate a wanted change. Hence, the CA's emphasis on freedom also means relieving people from unnecessary choice.

Crucially, for the CA, agency freedom also entails responsibility (Sen 1985) and obligations (Sen 2009). Since individuals bring about changes deliberately, and these changes are the result of sustainably reasoning on their preferences and choices, agents are responsible for those changes. Regardless of the outcome produced, whether the state of affairs obtained is the intended one or not, people are responsible for their choices and actions. This is particularly the case in public policy since by its very nature it entails interventions seeking to generate an outcome. Thus, the states of affairs that are brought about can affect the chooser and others. That being so, agents are responsible to both and accountable for their choices and reasons. Thus, assessment of their reasonableness in the public sphere is of especial importance here. As discussed above, such process of what could be regarded as collective reasoning, much like the CA's rationality, is plural.

Certainly, the CA argues for that change to take place in the space of capabilities and functionings. This begs the question, nevertheless, of what are the relevant of capabilities and functionings. Sen has been criticized because it has not provided a definitive list of the freedoms and achievements. That list has not been generated precisely because of the CA's notion of agency. It is up to the

people, exercising their agency, to reason about what are the doings and beings they value and have reason to value. Different lists can be established depending on the purposes of the exercise and those involved, and so should they (Sen 2004).

Freedom, therefore, is intrinsic to agency. However, assessing it empirically can prove daunting since, among other things, it may entail the incorporation of counterfactual information, *i.e.*, what one *would* choose had one been given the option. This is referred to as «counterfactual choices». In such cases, exercises can do no better than focusing on achievement, *i.e.*, choice (Sen 1999a). Sen (1992, p. 53) has recognized the challenge posed by that situation has as admitted the need for compromising the approach:

Practical compromises have to be based with an eye both to (1) the range of our ultimate interests, and (2) the contingent circumstances of informational availability.

Even when the pragmatic acceptance of limitations of data availability force us to set our sights lower than the full representation of capability sets, it is important to keep the underlying motivations clearly in view and to see practical compromises as the best we can do under the circumstances.

If accounting for capability can prove overly taxing, accounting for agency, which implies the requirements of rationality, is arguably even more so.

5 Capabilitarian agency and the philosophy of science

The capabilitarian agent is a multi-motivated, multidimensional, plural, (un)reflective chooser. They are multi-motivated since self-regarding as well as other-regarding values and preferences guide their decisions and actions. Their multidimensionality lies in the fact that those motivations can lead to outcomes, capability or functionings, in various dimensions constitutive of their being, other than utility but utility inclusive. They are plural because they are characterized by a wide range of personal as well as contextual attributes, which affect their ability to bring their preferences to fruition. Their reflexivity stems from their introspection, which is a matter of degree and dependent on several factors, and enables them to subject their choices, actions and preferences to reasoned scrutiny. They are choosers to the extent that they have meaningful options from which to choose in order to lead the lives that they value, according to their reasoned conception of the good and in the sense that the change they generate in the world is evidenced in their choices.

The CA seems to show an interesting eclecticism between explanation and interpretation. Accounting for agency requires ana-

lyzing actions in light of goals, aims and preferences. While the former may be observable, the latter is not necessarily so. Moreover, both are generated under certain objective circumstances, which may have different meanings for different people. As Archer and Tritter (2001, p. 4) have stated:

Many of the «agents» properties and powers are subjective in nature and entail their capacity to entertain meanings and to act in relation to them, whilst the «parts», which constitute their structured environment, have objective properties and powers to constrain and enable action. Both therefore and necessarily have to feature in any account of action, such as decision-making. The problem consists in how to combine them.

Because of the nature of the issue and its implications for empirical inquiry, it seems advisable to take one step back and address this problem from the philosophy of science. Given the public policy nature of the CA, the aforementioned insights gain in relevance when considering how to operationalize them. By far, applications of the framework have been dominated by quantitative methods (Fauverque in Zimmermann 2006), based as they usually are on a positivist philosophy of science. This is not surprising given that the CA was conceived within economics. Despite its advantages, this tradition shows some shortcomings when it comes to applying the CA, which has led to resorting to practical compromises (Sen 1999a), and accounting for the CA's agency seems no exception.

While Sen has not addressed explicitly the location of the CA within the philosophy of science, he has shown an interesting ambivalence. In his earlier contributions, despite employing the positivist template, he has pointed towards the importance of revising it. In the first footnote on his *Positional Objectivity* (1993b, p. 126), signaling its instrumental use rather than complete adherence:

This article does not address the foundational issues in metaphysics that relate to positional dependence, in particular the presumed «duality» between the external world and our conceptual powers. The language of the arguments presented in this article invokes this duality, and it is certainly simpler to see the practical and immediate implications of the claims made here in that classical Cartesian form. However, the full implications of this line of reasoning can be worked out only, I believe, by reexamining the issue of that duality itself.

Nevertheless, positivism's focus on objectivity and prediction, because of its interest in certainty, exposes its scope and limitations. While it may help account for the objective part of the CA's agency, it is not well suited to address the subjective part. Indeed, the call to analyze reasons, which are unobservable, speaks volumes of the ontological challenge posed by the capability approach. Therefore, if the interest is to provide a more faithful account of the capability agent and not to advance a doctrine, it seems warranted to look elsewhere.

Indeed, Sen (2009, p. 183) acknowledges that the redefinition of rationality challenges the expectations of research when he asserts:

It is one thing to accept the need to understand the nature of rational choice because of its own importance and also for its relevance in analysing actual choice, but it is quite another to expect that an understanding of rationality of choice could be immediately translated into the prediction of actual choice based on the set of choices that all count as rational, even when human beings are assumed to stick invariably to choices that are rational.

In this context, it may be enticing to consider the other main alternative: constructivism, which focuses on the perceptions, meanings and subjectivities. Hence, what ever is gained in interpretation is certainly lost in explanation.

Although positivism and constructivism are the most common philosophies of science, often depicted as opposites (see Hollis 1994), there are other alternatives that seek to bridge the gap between objectivity and subjectivity. One example is critical realism, whose combination with the CA at the philosophical (see Martins 2007, 2006) and empirical level (see Tao 2013) has been incipiently suggested. Another, rather promising alternative, might be pragmatism. This relationship has been inchoately suggested in abstract terms (see Zimmermann 2006) but nothing has been said in terms of the philosophy of science nor as it relates to agency.

Engaging in that exploration is precisely what the CA's agency demands. As agents, scholars also make choices regarding their research, which «seeks to make a difference» (Mehta *et al.* 2006, p. 1) and «is committed to improvement» (Molteberg & Bergstrøm 2000, p. 7). Theories and frameworks (like the CA) are chosen, methods and techniques are decided upon and, of course, consciously or not, the philosophical paradigm advanced is also a choice. Thus, if the goal is to do justice to the CA, all these elements should be subjected to critical assessment by oneself and by the academic community in order to find sustainable reason.

6 Conclusions

Sen (1999a, p. 19) has defined agency «[...] in its older —and “grander”— sense». In this sense, he has suggested that agency's importance is threefold: intrinsic, instrumental and constructive. As such, it is not surprising that there is a growing body of literature dedicated to capturing agency empirically in different ways with an ever increasing level of sophistication in its techniques and methods. In order to contribute to the efforts, this paper has sought to shed some light on a logically prior issue: who the CA's agent is.

Throughout the discussion, the implications for empirical exercises have been hint to via the philosophy of science.

The point of departure has been the dominant approach in economics and several disciplines in the social sciences: rational choice theory. It has been argued that because of its focus on self-interest as the only motivation, instrumental rationality as the only mental process, utility as the only evaluative space, choice as the only observable, and the individual as the only ontological entity of concern, the rational choice agent is a selfish, utility maximizing, calculative, atomistic chooser. Further, it has been suggested that this characterization is the result of RCT's adherence to positivism and its pursuit of objectivity and prediction in the quest for certainty.

Conversely, the CA suggests a richer image. From Sen's definition of agency, two components come to forefront, namely, acting or freedom and judging or rationality. In reverse order, to underline its contrast *vis-à-vis* the convention, judgment has been addressed first. Rationality, for the CA, is a wider concept and entails subjecting the agent's actions, choices, values and preferences to reasoned scrutiny. By redefining rationality so, the CA opens up the individual's black box harnessing introspection and self-evaluation in order to question one's actions, decisions, reasons, and even reasons for those reasons (or preferences about preferences). Consequently, the studying the CA's agent entails the inclusion of unobservables.

The CA's freedom has also been consequential for agency. Substantive freedom is the effective opportunity one has to choose the life one values and has reason to value. Several issues have been raised. First, the interdependence between rationality and freedom has been highlighted inferring from this that rationality is: *i*) a matter of degree, *ii*) plural, and *iii*) dependent on several factors. Then, the intrinsic relevance of freedom has been discussed showing how it implies a challenge to an exclusive focus on choice. Subsequently, the dynamics between rationality and achievement as well as with conversion factors were addressed. Finally, the CA's individualism has been discussed showing that, contrary to the convention, it is not methodological, thus neither ontological nor epistemological, but ethical, which means that individuals are ultimate units of concern for assessments.

Consequently, the capability agent can be regarded as a multi-motivated, multidimensional, plural, and reflective chooser. Agents have self-regarding as well as other regarding motivations. Their goals and aims, whether in the space of capability or functionings, can be related to a wide range of dimensions, regardless of their contribution to utility. Agents depend on their personal as well as contextual attributes in order to act and their actions can shape themselves as well as their context. Thus, to a certain extent, agents are constitutive of the structure and the structure constitu-

tive of agents. The change that agents bring about is the product of critical assessment, introspection and reflection on their actions, choices and preferences, which is a quality itself subject to change. Agents are also choosers to the extent that they have effective opportunity to choose from meaningful options of considered valuable types of life and in the sense that the change they generate in the world is evidenced in their choices.

In this sense, in answering the question «what does the capability agent look like?», it has been argued that one need not only «look». The argument suggests emphasis on observation, comes from the positivist's focus on objectivity and prediction, which have led to practical compromises in applications of the CA. However, if different philosophies of science are considered, less compromising might be required.

The capability agent demands a move from the exclusive focus on measurement to the inclusion of meaning. This suggests that it may prove fruitful to employ the CA in tandem with more interpretive approaches. While it is doubtful that extreme versions of constructivism can do justice to the CA's agency, interesting attempts have been carried out of late. One example is that of critical realism, for which there is incipient work. Another one, which seems quite promising is pragmatism, although nothing has been said about it *qua* philosophy of science nor agency. Such line of research seems not only necessary but, in fact, meets the demands CA's agency. The CA calls for all agents to subject their actions, choices, preferences and values, including preferences for preferences, to personal and collective critical scrutiny until sustainable reason is reached. For development scholars and practitioners, this entails the evaluation of all their decisions, including the philosophy of science. That is the rational and reasonable thing to do.

7 References

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