

# The philosophical evaluation of poverty

Capabilities and recognition

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## 0. Introduction

During recent years, the problem of worldwide poverty has become a thoroughly debated topic in philosophy. The discussion is complex and there is considerable disagreement about many issues such as questions concerning the ethical responsibility for the current situation and ethically demanded solution strategies. However, a widely shared understanding is that worldwide poverty is not only bad for the poor and to a minor extent also for the rich, but somehow morally wrong and unjust (Pogge 2008; Pogge and Moellendorf 2008). But, as poverty research clearly shows and as philosophy also knows, poverty is not simply poverty. In fact, it comes in many different shapes and forms: absolute and relative poverty, chronic and transitory poverty, rural and urban poverty, youth and elderly poverty or voluntary and involuntary poverty. Being poor can mean “not to have things”, it can mean “not to be able to do things”, it can mean “not to be this or that” (Spicker, Alvarez Leguizamón and Gordon 2007). Poverty, again, can be social exclusion.

When the discussion is about worldwide poverty, it is mostly about absolute poverty, about thresholds and sufficiency, about 1.25 dollars a day, basic medical care, starvation or child mortality. And there are good arguments that these matters of life and death are at the centre of attention of ethical and political reasoning as they ask for immediate and coordinated action. The still expanding knowledge about the social determinants of health is a clear indication of this urgent importance, since it clearly shows that social inequality affects well-being, illness and life expectancy (Anand, Peter and Sen 2004; Marmot and Wilkinson 2003).

Within this realm of conceptual and normative discussions, the capability approach of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum is an important player (Sen 1980, 1992, 1999a, 2009; Nussbaum 2000, 2006, 2011; see also Alkire 2002 and Crocker 2008). It is not only an alternative and increasingly influential approach to poverty and poverty research but also philosophically engaging.

In this contribution, we focus on this philosophical side of the capability approach and discuss it together with another philosophical theory which has not been applied to issues of poverty to this extent, the recognition approach. We view both as providing different but equally challenging answers to the normative question why poverty is morally wrong. Therefore, a reflection on the relationship between the capability and recognition approaches regarding their take on poverty is of great value for the philosophical debate and for the wider frame of poverty research.

In the first section, we discuss the capability approach and outline its main assumptions. The concepts of “functionings”, “capabilities”, and “agency” are introduced and the differences from utilitarian and resource-based approaches in social ethics are explained. We present this approach’s

definition of poverty as the deprivation of capabilities and indicate the consequences this understanding of poverty has for its description and evaluation. We conclude that poverty is morally wrong according to the capability approach because it is essentially connected to a deprivation of valuable freedoms that can be seen as a necessary condition for exercising autonomy.

At the heart of the second section is a reconstruction of the recognition approach as developed by Axel Honneth. We distinguish between three basic and universal forms of recognition – love, rights and social esteem – which form the intersubjective conditions for developing and sustaining self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. A lack of one or more forms of recognition is connected to experiences of disrespect, and poverty is defined as a deprivation of recognition. Such a deprivation leads to the incapacity for undistorted self-realization and this is the main reason why poverty is considered morally wrong.

In the third section we set the two approaches in relation to each other, focusing mainly on two aspects: (a) the role that is attributed to subjective experiences, feelings and emotions in these theories and (b) issues of justification of their central normative claims. We indicate that in spite of important differences in dealing with these questions, interesting similarities between the capability and recognition approaches can also be found. Most importantly, both lead to the claim that poverty can never be adequately assessed without putting it into the context of a comprehensive ethical theory about the nature and function of societies. This conclusion is explored further in section four, where we defend the view that the critical function of social philosophy plays an irreducible role in the study and understanding of poverty.

## **1. Capability Deprivation: The Capability Approach on Poverty**

The central claim of the capability approach as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum over the last three decades is that evaluations of societal arrangements, quality-of-life assessments and judgments about justice or development should primarily focus on people's capabilities, that is, on their real opportunities to lead the lives they have reason to value (Sen 1999, p. 75; Nussbaum 2011, p. 20; see also Robeyns 2005, p. 94). In other words, the capability approach puts a focus rather on what people are effectively able to do and to be, instead of what they have or feel. This does not mean that income, happiness or commodities are not important in this perspective. But income and commodities are considered means to an end and therefore of instrumental value only, while happiness is seen as one significant aspect of human life among others that cannot be taken as the only evaluative category.

For a better understanding of these claims, it is useful to take a closer look at three central terms as introduced by Sen (e.g. Sen 1992, pp. 39–42 and Sen 1999, pp. 74–76; see also Alkire 2002, pp. 4–11): (achieved) functionings, capabilities and agency. *Functionings* are the valuable activities and states that make up people's well-being – such as being healthy, having a good job, being adequately nourished or taking part in the life of the community. It is possible to differentiate between functionings as “the various things a person may value doing or being” (Sen 1999, p. 75) and achieved functionings as the particular beings or doings a person has realized at a given point in time. *Capabilities*, then, are understood as the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that are feasible for a person. They reflect the person's freedom to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value. If a person has more capabilities, this means that he or she has more valuable options to choose from – put differently, more life paths are open to her. Capabilities depend on individual skills and dispositions, on the goods and resources a person possesses and also on the social environment that can enhance but also limit a person's freedom.

The ability to choose reflectively is of central importance to the theoretical framework of the capability approach. Persons are not seen as passive recipients of their environments but as active beings. And this is where the notion of *agency* can be introduced: It refers to a person's ability to pursue and realize goals that he or she values and has reason to value. According to Sen, an agent is “someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives” (Sen 1999, p. 19). And these objectives can often go far beyond the mere pursuit of one's own well-being. Due to this understanding of agency, the capability approach transcends standard economic frameworks where the person is understood solely as a rational profit maximizer incapable of commitments and sympathy.<sup>1</sup>

In the capability approach, each person is seen as an end and a source of agency in her own right. This is connected to an ethical individualism and claims that individuals – and only individuals – are the units of moral concern (Robeyns 2005, p. 107). This does not mean, however, that it views individuals in isolated terms. It acknowledges the importance of social groups and cultural factors in the life of every human being and recognises their enormous influence on the substantial freedoms people enjoy. However, social and cultural aspects are never considered as intrinsically valuable but only taken into account insofar as they affect the opportunities and freedoms of individuals (see Drèze and Sen 2002, p. 6, and Nussbaum 2006, p. 216).

As a consequence of these considerations, the capability approach is essentially connected to

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<sup>1</sup> For further details of Nussbaum's understanding of agency and the special role she attributes to practical reason and sociability in the characterisation of this concept, see e.g. Nussbaum 2000, pp. 72–73.

a critique of both utilitarian and resource-based approaches in social ethics. It questions the utilitarian assumption that the central policy aim is the enhancement of people's psychological happiness or desire-fulfilment for the following reasons (inter alia Nussbaum 2011, pp. 50–56, and Sen 1999, pp. 62–63): First there is the fact that people's aspirations tend to adapt to the prevailing circumstances. Many deprived people come to terms with the precarious situation they live in and cease to have high expectations for their future. Therefore they cannot be considered unhappy and from a purely utilitarian point of view there is no reason to improve their situation – a conclusion that is firmly refuted by capability theorists. Apart from this problem, which is normally discussed under the heading of “adaptive preferences”, it is, second, argued that it is insufficient to focus on just one factor (happiness) to think about a good human life. There are many different dimensions that matter – e.g., mobility, health, the use of reason, friendships, and affiliation – which cannot be reduced to one type of feeling of happiness or pleasure. And third, as was mentioned above, the capability approach stresses the agency aspect of humans and refuses to see them as simple beings exclusively striving for happiness and preference satisfaction.

Resource-based approaches that evaluate social arrangements by the distribution of goods are criticised from the capability perspective because they unavoidably introduce ethically relevant distortions (Nussbaum 2011, pp. 47–50 and 56–58, and Sen 1999, pp. 70–74). Persons are different in many respects (e.g., age, sex, genetic disposition) and may live in an enabling or constraining environment. These factors influence decisively how somebody can use certain resources, and therefore even strict equality in the possession of resources leads to different life options. As observed earlier, the capability approach recommends seeing resources as important means allowing people to live the life they want. However, they are of instrumental value only and should not be seen – as often happens in economic contexts – as good in themselves.

A direct focus on functionings and capabilities in evaluative exercises avoids, it is argued, all the mentioned distortions and difficulties and places the expansion of valuable freedoms for each and every person – according to the capability approach the aim of social development – at the centre of attention. Thereby it becomes possible to consider many aspects of people's lives as important and the discussion of what it means to lead a good life is broadened.

What do these considerations mean for the understanding of poverty? In the capability approach it is defined as the deprivation of certain crucially important capabilities (Sen 1999, p. 87), a definition that has consequences for both the description and the ethical evaluation of poverty. When it comes to describing poverty, it is clear that many life dimensions must be considered in order to get to an adequate picture of an impoverished life. Poverty is seen as a multidimensional

phenomenon that cannot be adequately characterised by reference to a single measure such as income (the standard measure of poverty) or happiness, but must take into account a multitude of important beings and doings (see Alkire 2002). Furthermore, adequate poverty measures that are in line with the capability approach must be able to capture not only valuable functionings that have been achieved but also a person's freedom to choose the kind of life she has reason to value. One of the advantages of this approach for the description and measurement of poverty is that it explicitly recognises that there are many causes for capability deprivation and that the relation between low income and capability failure varies between different communities, families and individuals (Sen 1999, pp. 87–90). Factors such as age, gender, social position, family situation or health condition affect the way goods or income can be converted into valuable functionings, and therefore the capability perspective on poverty generates many insights ignored by the narrow equation of poverty with low income.

But why is poverty a problem from an ethical point of view? As shown above, in the capability approach the availability of certain substantial freedoms is judged as the most important aspect of the life of any person. The freedoms, e.g., to live a long and healthy life, to take part in the life of the community, to receive a high quality education, to enjoy recreational activities, or to seek employment on an equal basis with others, are commonly seen as basic and it is demanded that they are made available to everyone.<sup>2</sup> Since poverty is essentially defined by the absence of such intrinsically valuable components of a good human life, it is clear that it is, by definition, morally wrong.

Furthermore, capability theorists generally argue that human beings have the potential to live flourishing, meaningful and active lives according to their own values and shaped by their conceptions of the good. Social arrangements are of instrumental value only and they primarily have the function to provide conducive conditions for each and every person to develop their faculties and to bring them into a position to act autonomously. If somebody is affected by poverty, her valuable choices are limited and her potential to realise her life plans is seriously restrained. In a situation of serious capability deprivation it is not possible to act as an autonomous agent, which is considered a serious harm and even a fundamental violation of the equal dignity of all human beings.

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<sup>2</sup> However, the question which capabilities are intrinsically valuable and relevant for everyone is a subject of great controversy. Sen argues that it has to be settled in public discussions (Sen 2009), whereas Nussbaum suggests a list of ten central capabilities, arguing that all of them are implicit in the idea of a life worthy of human dignity (Nussbaum 2011, pp. 33–34).

## 2. The Recognition Approach to Poverty

What is poverty and what is its ethical significance? First, these answers cannot really be distinguished, as poverty is a thick concept, which means that it combines descriptive and evaluative features (Williams 1985). Second, the recognition approach has not developed thorough answers to these two questions. This means that we have to reconstruct the key ideas of the recognition approach and develop our answers from there. Third, we want to focus on the normative evaluation of poverty, hence the question why it is bad and morally wrong.

Mainly following Honeth's work, the recognition approach can be reconstructed along five key ideas (Deranty 2009; Honneth 1996; Honneth 2007; Petherbridge 2011). (a) First, it aims to demonstrate that there are three basic forms of recognition, love (personal relationships), rights (cognitive respect) and solidarity (social esteem), which form the intersubjective conditions to develop and sustain self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. (b) Second, these different forms of mutual recognition are equally important and as they are the intersubjective conditions for the constitution of subjectivity and identity, they also enable individual self-realization, which is the core of what Honneth calls his "formal conception of ethical life". Self-realization, which relies on different forms of recognition, can thus be seen as the final goal of Honneth's theory, and struggles for recognition are ultimately struggles for self-realization (Kompridis 2004; Zurn 2000).

"Taken together, the three forms of recognition – love, rights, and esteem – constitute the social conditions under which human subjects can develop a positive attitude towards themselves. For it is only due to the cumulative acquisition of basic self-confidence, of self-respect, and of self-esteem – provided, one after another, by the experience of those three forms of recognition – that a person can come to see himself or herself, unconditionally, as both an autonomous and an individuated being and to identify with his or her goals and desires." (Honneth 1996, p. 169)

(c) Third, if recognition is denied or insufficiently granted, individuals suffer from certain forms of disrespect, like physical abuse, discrimination, social exclusion, denigration of their way of life or a lack of dignity. The possibilities for self-realization are not sufficiently given. (d) Fourth, social conflicts are then likely to arise, which can be understood as "struggles for recognition", as different groups (e.g., women, ethnic or religious minorities, workers) claim and fight for recognition for themselves. Such claims carry critique and anticipate social change. This finally leads to social progress and the gradual expansion of rights to different groups, abolishing previous forms of discrimination and exclusion. (e) Fifth, a critical social philosophy has three main tasks: (e.1) to



distinguish justified from unjustified claims of recognition; (e.2) to reflect on whether social developments and relations sufficiently ensure and foster recognition or if they are rather oppressing and disrespecting; (e.3) to develop therapeutic measures for how things should change and act alongside with those who are suffering. All these three are important parts of what can be called the diagnosis of social pathologies (Haber 2007; Honneth 1996; Zurn 2011).

“It is imperative for social philosophy to find a determination and discussion of those developmental processes of society that can be conceived as processes of decline, distortions, or even as 'social pathologies'.” (Honneth 1996, p. 370)

These five ideas form the core of the recognition approach as an immanent normative theory, which was labelled by Antti Kauppinen as a form of internal reconstructive critique (Kauppinen 2002). The social critique of the recognition approach rests on the interaction of three terms: (a) subjective experience; (b) objective criteria; and (c) socially embedded normative claims. The denial or distortion of recognition is experienced as subjectively harmful and is articulated in various ways, either individually or collectively. Suffering is one major starting point and concern of the recognition approach and this emphasizes its willingness to stay as close as possible to actual social conflicts and movements. But, as many critics have pointed out, a critical social philosophy cannot rest upon subjective experiences alone; it has also to identify some sort of objective criteria to distinguish justified from unjustified forms of recognition or disrespect (Deranty 2010; Fraser 2003; Pilapil 2011; Zurn 2003). To do so is a difficult task and has to shoulder much of the normative work within the recognition approach. Here, we want to focus on those criteria which derive from the three forms of recognition as they are connected with the normative benchmark of the recognition approach, namely “undistorted self-realization” (Honneth 1996). This means that the possibilities to engage in personal relationships, the equal protection by civil and social rights, and the experience of social esteem and belonging are objective criteria to evaluate an individual life but also social relations. On the one hand, these criteria are context sensitive – social esteem in one society can have a different meaning from in another one – but on the other hand, they are universal – they are oriented towards undistorted self-realization. Also, these criteria have value in themselves, which means that disrespect is morally wrong even if this does not ultimately distort or hinder self-realization (Honneth 2002). Which concrete goods, resources or capabilities fulfil these criteria cannot be determined without further empirical knowledge. Then, what are known here as socially embedded normative claims are those claims of recognition that address implicit or explicit normative promises within society. They serve as a reference point for claims of recognition, as they

are also objects of struggles for recognition. For example, the achievement principle in capitalist society implicitly promises that everyone who is talented and hardworking should be able to make a good living, and struggles for recognition can either address this principle as it is not fulfilled, or can address the possibility that this principle is flawed in itself and hinders the self-realization of some.

“‘Love’ (the central idea of intimate relationships), the equality principle (the norm of legal relations), and the achievement principle (the standard of social hierarchy) represent normative perspectives with reference to which subjects can reasonably argue that existing forms of recognition are inadequate or insufficient and need to be expanded.” (Honneth 2003, p. 143)

Given this background, we will now present an account to evaluate poverty. Poverty is morally wrong a) if it is subjectively experienced as harmful, (b) if it is connected with forms of disrespect or distorts the possibilities of self-realization and (c) if it contradicts valuable implicit or explicit normative claims, which are embedded in society. From this, we can also formulate a recognition-based concept of poverty that combines descriptive and normative features. Poverty is living under such circumstances that are connected with feelings of denigration and humiliation, as they do not allow the experience and gain of socially prevalent forms of recognition and therefore hinder undistorted self-realization. Beyond the basic physiological and psychological needs all humans share, a further operationalisation and differentiation has to include empirical knowledge about the target society. In this sense, a recognition-based concept of poverty combines absolute and relative elements. The general forms of recognition – personal relationships, cognitive respect and social esteem – are universal but their concrete formation and embodiment is relative. It is important to stress that recognition can come in all different shapes and is not only about identity politics but also includes material and social forms such as income, housing or political participation. Although the recognition approach has a strong connection to social psychology, especially in the early works of Honneth, this does not impair its capability to deal with material claims and questions of redistribution. Crucial topics of poverty such as income, living wage, material deprivation, housing education, health or unemployment are not outside its sight, but can rather be reconstructed as materialisations of recognition, mostly of social esteem, which are embedded in social, economic and political institutions (Schmidt am Busch 2010).

In summary, the recognition approach distinguishes three basic and universal forms of recognition: (a) love, which manifests itself in personal relationships and the feeling of being

accepted as a particular individual; (b) rights, which mean equal access to civil and social rights; and (c) social esteem, which is the ability to valuably contribute with one's own talents and features. If someone lacks one or more of these forms of recognition it is highly unlikely that she will be able to develop or sustain a positive self-relation and identify and pursue her own goals in life. The concrete embodiment of such forms of disrespect is not crucial for the recognition approach, whether it is a lack of resources or a lack of capabilities. Rather more important is that people are denied the intersubjective conditions of self-respect in the three spheres of personal relationships, rights, and social relations. In short, the recognition approach views poverty as a deprivation of recognition and the incapacity for undistorted self-realization.

### **3. Capabilities and Recognition: The Role of Subjective Experiences and Issues of Justification**

After this brief outline of the capability and recognition approaches, we now set them in relation to each other, and investigate if there are major differences or similarities between them. The aim of such an analysis is to highlight the benefits which arise from a mutual engagement between the capability and recognition approaches. We are not primarily interested in an abstract or artificial academic enterprise, as we rather think that such a discourse between the capability and recognition approaches brings us further towards answering some of the most pressing questions of our time, particularly when it comes to social justice and poverty. Given that they are both very complex and detailed theoretical approaches, we have to focus on very few important propositions. For our purposes, (4.1) the role that is attributed to subjective experiences, feelings and emotions in the theories and (4.2) issues of justification are of special interest.

#### **4.1 The role of subjective experiences**

The role of subjective experiences, feelings and emotions is highly debated within moral, social, and political philosophy. It is also an important topic within poverty research and in debates about adequate measures of poverty and social exclusion. What role do and should such subjective experiences, feelings and emotions such as anger, shame, emotional distress or happiness and joy play, when it comes to measure and evaluate poverty? In most official surveys, whether from the European Union or from other national institutions, such subjective experiences, feelings and emotions are not indicators or necessary conditions of poverty and social exclusion (Atkinson and

Marlier 2010). They rather focus on monetary or material aspects such as deprivation, unemployment, basic commodities or capabilities. But there is a growing concern that this might be a major shortcoming and that the multidimensionality of poverty and social exclusion also demands the inclusion of such subjective criteria because they are an important part of the experience of poverty and social exclusion (Brock 1999; Norton 2001). The rise of the debate about subjective well-being is also an indicator for this. What is certain is that poverty and social exclusion are in general connected with an impaired well-being and harmful feelings and emotions, although this is not true for everyone (Layte, Maître and Whelan 2010; Watson, Pichler and Wallace 2010). Finally, the role of the poor themselves in the measurement and the conceptual approach of poverty is in question. Do they know best or maybe better than the poverty researchers what poverty means or should mean? These questions arise also within normative spheres, when it comes to evaluating poverty. Do subjective feelings have or should they have normative weight and, if so, how much? Is something morally wrong because it is felt as wrong or harmful? And what should we do with the long known cases in which people adapt to their living conditions and feel happy although they should not? These problems of alienation and the unreliability of subjective feelings and emotions are still unsolved and open for debate within normative theories. Neither poverty research nor normative philosophy is situated outside the real world, which is full of relations of power and domination.

“A question remains: whose analysis and categories are to be privileged? These are largely ‘ours’, those of professionals who are not ourselves poor, expressed in ‘our’ language. The words, concepts, categories and priorities of poor people, especially illustrated by the way they were elicited and expressed in the *Voices of the Poor*, were rich and varied with commonalities. There are trade-offs to be puzzled over: between ‘their’ realities and ours; between local participatory diversity and commensurability for purposes of aggregation; and between many categories representing poor people’s realities and fewer categories more manageable for outsider professionals and for measurement.” (Chambers 2007, p. 38)

Now, the recognition and the capability approach present different solutions or at least different perspectives on the role of the subjective within poverty research and in the evaluation of the moral significance of poverty and social exclusion. For the recognition approach, as said, subjective experiences, feelings and emotions are a necessary condition that something is morally harmful and wrong. Although there are discrepancies about the exact role and weight of such feelings, it is a major pillar which cannot be dismissed (Fraser and Honneth 2003; Deranty 2010). This leads back to the very roots of the recognition approach, which comes from a tradition and further pursues the

idea that social philosophy has to reflect social movements and take their claims seriously and as a starting point for normative explorations. So, subjective experiences, feelings and emotions, voiced by such groups and social movements as the labour class, women or black people form the beginning and the concern of the recognition approach. Without this relation the critique of the recognition approach would be artificial and without any audience. The recognition approach aims to not only hear the voice of the poor but to give it systematic weight.

“To undertake an effective critique of society one must start by taking into account instances of injustice or violations of standards of justice. In contrast to its positive counterpart, the experience of injustice possesses greater normative bite. As such, for Honneth, no experience of injustice must be ignored even if its public expression is fraught with danger and difficulty. This approach to social justice and normativity is typical of the Frankfurt School, which grounds the motivation for social resistance and liberation movements not on grand theories of intellectuals but on people’s everyday experience.” (Pilapil 2011, p. 81)

Then again the capability approach has a more distant and critical relation to subjective experiences, feelings and emotions when it comes to their moral value and role in determining poverty and social exclusion. As pointed out above, Sen and Nussbaum are sceptical of taking people’s subjective assessments of their own situation as the defining feature of their well-being. They argue that individual desires, preferences or psychological happiness are malleable, susceptible to manipulation, adaptive to adverse circumstances and therefore of limited usefulness for evaluational exercises (inter alia, Nussbaum 2000, pp. 111–166 and Sen, pp. 63–64; see also Comin & Teschl 2005, pp. 234–237). This is the case, it is argued, because the conditions people live in influence their perception of their objective realities, and especially factors such as entrenched deprivation, social exclusion or predominant power structures within a society can contribute to individuals having a distorted picture of their lives. Particularly in cultural contexts where social norms systematically disadvantage certain groups, even the notion of self-interest can become useless, as Sen demonstrates using the example of women in rural India who have learned to subordinate themselves to other members of their family:

“It has often been observed that if a typical Indian rural woman was asked about her personal 'welfare', she would find the question unintelligible and if she was able to reply, she might answer the question in terms of her reading of the welfare of her family. The idea of personal welfare may not be viable in such a context [...].” (Sen 1990, p. 126)

According to capability theorists, this adaptation problem clearly shows that social evaluations must transcend purely subjective measures (as used by utilitarians) and go in the “objectivist direction” (Sen 1987, p. 16). Otherwise, the real circumstances of the disadvantaged members of society are systematically misrepresented. As Sen puts it:

“Consider a very deprived person who is poor, exploited, overworked and ill, but who has been made satisfied with his lot by social conditioning (through, say, religion, political propaganda, or cultural pressure). Can we possibly believe that he is doing well just because he is happy and satisfied? Can the living standard of a person be high if the life that he or she leads is full of deprivation? The standard of life cannot be so detached from the nature of the life the person leads.” (Sen 1987, pp. 7–8)

Going in the objectivist direction means that the evaluative space of well-being must be expanded beyond any subjective metric and should include functionings and capabilities. By looking at this kind of information in order to characterize the well-being of a person, one gets the real picture of a person’s circumstances and perceived misrepresentations of social realities are avoided. That is to say, the consideration of achieved functionings tells one exactly how a person is living and capabilities are best understood as an objective notion expressing the individuals’ general and specific freedoms to live the life he or she has reason to value (see also Comim 2008, p. 170). In other words, it is assumed that an increase in well-being always involves an increase of important options to choose from.

Despite this objectivization in the definition of well-being and the rejection of *naive* first person evaluations, the individual’s perspective is still highly valued in the capability approach. In Sen’s writings there is the background assumption that an expansion of valuable capabilities is connected to a reduction of the formation of adaptive preferences in people’s values and desires and he is clear that in his opinion “[g]reater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world, and these matters are central to the process of development” (Sen 1999, p. 18). Therefore, in fair and conducive circumstances the desires and preferences of persons indicate their “real” interests and they have to be taken seriously.

However, in the non-ideal world we live in initiatives are often necessary in order to bring people to engage in reasonable deliberation processes about their circumstances and moral convictions. Especially in the work of Martha Nussbaum, it becomes clear that persons are characterized as active beings who can go through a two-stage process of awareness which challenges the invidious nature of adaptive preferences (Nussbaum 2000, p. 140; Comin & Teschl 2008): First, they have to recognize the problematic conditions they live in and second, they must

conceive of themselves as worthy human beings with fundamental entitlements. Only if these conditions are satisfied is a search for true self-definition which is not distorted by adaptive preferences possible. As a consequence, capability theorists frequently claim that it is necessary to interfere in social contexts where certain groups are marginalized due to norms, traditions and power structures. Each individual has the right to be put into a position where the exercise of genuine agency is possible and social arrangements must be organized in a way that that *everyone* has the real chance to reach this goal.

The different approaches to the role of subjective experiences are also present within the different methodologies and concepts within poverty research. The Participatory Poverty Assessment, for example, stands against distant descriptions and definitions of poverty by so-called experts, which can be criticized for reproducing poverty themselves (Norton 2001). Poverty research is seen as part of the equation and not as an unrelated observer. Such approaches are also based on the conviction that we do not know what poverty is, without asking the poor themselves, and that poverty research can be a tool for empowerment. This is a position the recognition approach also favours, because it aims to take the experiences of the disrespected, poor or excluded seriously and supports their struggles for recognition (Lister 2004). As shown, Sen is more critical of such participatory approaches and his criticism is shared by many poverty researchers, who view the value of subjective assessments as limited and advocate that they should at least be supplemented by other “objective” indicators.

“There is a deeper problem about exclusive reliance on participatory methods, which goes back to Sen’s criticisms of the utilitarian approach. People’s own assessment of their own condition can overlook their objective condition, and can be biased as a result of limited information and social conditioning (i.e., these methods also suffer from “valuation neglect”). The generally public aspect of assessments may also make it difficult to get honest assessments, and could involve participants in some risk.” (Ruggeri Laderchi, Saith and Stewart 2006, p. 40)

As these considerations indicate, a discussion between the capability and the recognition approach and their different weighting and integration of subjective experiences, feelings and emotions can be situated within a much larger context. How should poverty be measured? Who are the “experts”, the poor or the scientists?

Are there any lessons to be learned from the diverging arguments that the capability and recognition approaches offer, or could they benefit from each other in any way? Despite the differences pointed out above, we want to argue that, at critical analyses, important similarities can

be found between the two approaches that are relevant for foundational issues in poverty research. On the one hand, it must be stressed that the recognition approach does not rely only on “the voices of the poor” but also aims at justifying and empowering them. It relies on criteria that distinguish justified from unjustified forms of recognition and makes use of the category of “undistorted self-realisation”. This notion is considered universally valid and serves as a foundation for the objective evaluation not only of individual lives but also of social relations. On the other hand, the capability approach does not simply dismiss the knowledge and subjective experiences, feelings and emotions of the poor. Their perspectives are taken seriously and considered indispensable for the definition of valuable capabilities in a certain socio-economic context. Sabine Alkire, for example, has drawn on participatory tools and techniques in an effort to answer the question: “How do we identify valuable capabilities?” (Alkire 2002). However, an essential claim of the capability approach is to make people critically engage with their experiences, feelings and emotions and to provide them with the material and immaterial resources necessary for it.

Thus, in both approaches we find a nuanced characterisation and evaluation of poverty that is associated with (a) a set of objective criteria necessary for the assessment of poverty and (b) the recognition that these criteria are context sensitive and only applicable in a certain context if the subjective experiences, feelings and emotions of the persons concerned are given due weight. So far, the capability approach put a focus on (a) while the recognition approach was more concerned with (b). However, we believe we have shown that both aspects are relevant for both approaches and that there is potential for further investigations or even a unified theory.

## **4.2 Issues of Justification**

The second point of discussion concerns the normative foundations of the capability and the recognition approach. There are some major differences but also similarities between them in this matter. The question is, what does the normative work in these theories?

The recognition approach relies on a somewhat murky mixture of anthropological, psychological, and social theses (Deranty 2009). The three forms of recognition, developed from empirical and philosophical sources, form the backbone which then allows the integration of subjective dimensions as well as insights from empirical research and social theories. Love, rights, and social esteem are not only important for any human being and for a good life, but can also function as criteria for the assessment of social relations, phenomena and processes. So, the recognition approach seeks to justify its claims by showing that these three forms of recognition are



of real normative importance and value and that it can successfully understand maybe not all but the most important features of today's societies in recognitive terms (Schmidt am Busch 2010). The notion of undistorted self-realization plays a major role here. Recognition has normative value both in itself and because it enables such undistorted self-realization as the key to a good life. So, the distinguished forms of disrespect are also developed from this positive basis of a good life with undistorted self-realization filled with experiences of recognition. What the recognition approach criticizes on poverty is that in the end it obstructs such a good life.

“Thus, for modern societies I proceed from the premise that the purpose of social equality is to enable the personal identity-formation of all members of society. For me this formulation is equivalent to saying that enabling individual self-realization constitutes the real aim of the equal treatment of all subjects in our societies.” (Honneth 2003, p. 177)

What is the normative foundation of the capability approach? In Sen's work, the idea of democracy and critical public discourses carries most normative weight (Sen 2009). He stresses the democratic legitimization of evaluational exercises and the importance of critical and informed reasoning about normative ideas and values. Although he identifies some capabilities of crucial importance, such as health or education, for Sen it is neither possible nor the task of philosophy to present a conclusive and universally valid hierarchy of capabilities. It is rather the normative strength of free deliberation processes that forms the backbone of his theory.

“The framework of capabilities helps [...] to clarify and illuminate the subject matter of public reasoning, which can involve epistemic issues (including claims of objective importance) as well as ethical and political ones. It cannot [...] aim at displacing the need for continued public reasoning. [...] The richness of the capability perspective [...] includes its insistence on the need for open valuational scrutiny for making social judgements, and in this sense it fits in well with the importance of public reasoning. This openness of transparent valuation contrasts with burying the evaluative exercise in some mechanical — and valuationally opaque — convention [...]” (Sen 2005, p. 157)

Although Nussbaum agrees on the importance of open public discussions about normative questions, she is more explicit on the conditions necessary for fair and just deliberation processes. She argues that the notion of human dignity entails a set of fundamental entitlements of universal value that must be secured for all persons. In order to specify this idea she presents a list of ten central human capabilities that can, in her opinion, “become the object of an overlapping consensus

among people who otherwise have very different comprehensive conceptions of the good” (Nussbaum 2006, p. 70).<sup>3</sup> According to Nussbaum, a state has the duty to secure each of these capabilities for all its citizens up to an appropriate threshold level.

Nussbaum’s list shares some basic assumptions with the recognition approach: Being recognized, loved, supported and seen as a valued member of society can as well be founded on it as the importance of having equal rights and sufficient opportunities to live a flourishing life according to one’s own conception of the good. Furthermore, the role of anthropological reasoning, the link to undisputable and minimum human needs and wants, and the idea that every person is entitled to have real and meaningful opportunities to live a good life in line with her values and commitments seem to be very similar to the claims of recognition theorists.

In summary, the capability and recognition approaches share the same goal and ultimate benchmark: the possibility to lead a good, flourishing life, which is essentially characterized by freedom. Both give a substantial account of positive freedom, emphasise the social embeddedness of the individual and point to the crucial role that social institutions have for the life chances of every person. Of course, these similarities leave much space for interpretation and a continuative analysis is necessary to flesh out further details. However, we think that our discussion has revealed a major common ground between the two approaches that we want to pursue in the following section. Their normative evaluation of poverty is directly connected with a substantial critique of existing social and political practices (nationally as well as internationally) and they point to the critical function of social philosophy and the irreducible role it has for the study and understanding of poverty.

In this section we described the possibilities of a beneficial relation between the capability and recognition approaches regarding two major points of discussion: (a) the role of subjective feelings and emotions in the evaluation of poverty and social exclusion and (b) the respective normative groundwork of these approaches. We concluded that in spite of the differences, interesting similarities can be found and ultimately both lead to the claim that poverty can never be adequately assessed without putting it into the context of a comprehensive ethical theory about the nature and function of societies.

Our focus on these two points left out various other focal points: the weighting of relative and absolute criteria in relation to the three forms of recognition and the identification of a threshold of capabilities, the role of the social movements, the poor themselves or governmental and social institutions in poverty alleviation, or – a methodological issue – the relation of social sciences and

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3 For the latest version of her list see Nussbaum 2011, pp. 33–34.

philosophy in poverty research and questions of the operationalization of the capability or the recognition approach. All these and more topics have to be addressed in further research.

#### **4. The critical function of social philosophy and its role in poverty research**

What can social philosophy contribute to the rapidly growing field of poverty research? Our assessment of the capability and recognition approaches shows that both theories are fundamentally concerned with the normative dimension of poverty. They see poverty as harmful because it diminishes a person's positive freedom to lead a fulfilling life and jeopardises her options for undistorted self-realisation. From their perspectives, it is obvious that poverty is a structural problem of most of today's societies that can only be appropriately understood if connected to questions of justice and the nature of a good society.

Most projects and studies in poverty research do not depart from such a broad understanding of poverty. Much research is done to define poverty, to develop adequate poverty measures and to gather data about the number and circumstances of the poor (Harriss 2009). Even if there is still much work to do, it is clear that today we have better and more comprehensive information on many aspects of the quantity and quality of poverty than at any moment in history. As important as these efforts are for a description of these phenomena, they are, from the point of view of a critical social philosophy, insufficient.

When taking either the capability or the recognition approach as a starting point for the study of poverty, it is clear that defining and measuring poverty and counting the number of the poor can only be a preliminary stage to a much bigger project. Dealing with poverty is always and inseparably connected to the questions of how the situation of the poor can be improved, how their empowerment is possible, and what needs to be done to tackle the deeply rooted problem of social exclusion. Alice O'Connor has criticized poverty research for being too much concerned with such head counting of the poor and that it neglects the "big" questions.

"Although liberal in origins, poverty knowledge rests on an ethos of political and ideological neutrality that has sustained it through a period of vast political change. Very much for this reason, it can also be distinguished by what it is not: contemporary poverty knowledge does not define itself as an inquiry into the political economy and culture of late twentieth-century capitalism; it is knowledge about the characteristics and behavior and, especially in recent years, about the welfare status of the poor." (O'Connor 2001, p. 4)

Social philosophy asks the “big” questions – they are its original subject – which may not be answered easily or sufficiently but are nonetheless of undeniable importance. How do we want to live and what shall we do to make our world a better place?

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