

Western Philosophy of Social Science

Lecture 13. Human capabilities and freedom

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What is the “good” of economic development?

- Economic growth?
- Improve well-being?
- Alleviate poverty?
- Create sustainable development?

“Putting the poor first”

- Poverty alleviation as the most important goal of development
- Why should poverty be taken to be the most important consideration in development?
- What is the harm of poverty?
- We need a conception of the human good that will allow us to answer this question.

“Putting the poor first”

- Consider this as a goal for economic development:
 - Economic development policies should always be designed to give highest priority to improving the well-being of the least-well-off in society.
- Why is this more important than:
 - Economic development policies should be designed to improve the average income of society (so everyone benefits).
- Extreme poverty is a uniquely debilitating human condition.

Theories of human well-being

- Utility: maximize happiness
- Basic needs
- “quality of life”
- Human capabilities and functionings

Philosophical theories

- Utilitarianism: a simple theory of happiness as enjoyment
- Aristotle: a theory of human happiness as self-definition
- Kant and Rousseau: freedom and autonomy

Human capabilities

- Amartya Sen's theory of human well-being
- Human beings have a set of capabilities and functionings
 - To acquire knowledge
 - To exercise skills in work
 - To interact with others
 - To exercise freedom
- It is intrinsically good that every human being should be able to realize his/her capabilities to the fullest extent possible.

Examples of human capabilities

- To live a normal life span
- To have good health and physical development
- To use the senses and the mind to acquire knowledge
- To form a conception of one's goals in life
- To form important connections to others—
family, friends, colleagues
- Martha Nussbaum

Human capabilities and gender

- There are significant and persistent differences in many countries between men and women in the realization of human capabilities.
- Women and girls often have lower health outcomes
- Women and girls often have lower educational opportunities and literacy
- Women and girls often have reduced rights in civil society—property ownership, labor, self-control.

Requirements for realizing capabilities

- Education
- Health
- Conditions of freedom
 - Mobility
 - Thought and expression
 - Association
- Adequate nutrition
- Material standard of living

Basic needs

- The theory of human capabilities gives a principled justification for why basic needs are “basic”:
- They are foundational to the realization of human capabilities.
- So improving satisfaction of basic needs is a means of increasing the realization of human capabilities.
- This also increases the productivity of society.

Basic needs

- For example, education.
 - Education, literacy, and the development of cognitive capabilities are the ground on which the individual develops productive capabilities.
- For example, health care.
 - Access to health care makes it possible to live a normal and productive human life.

Entitlements

- Amartya Sen emphasizes that an individual's material well-being is the result of the complete bundle of his/her entitlements—which normally take several forms.
 - Wages through income
 - State subsidies and services
 - Ownership of property
 - Social obligations by others
 - Farm income in self-consumption
- Well-being in times of famine is crucially affected by variations in entitlements.

Freedom

- Is freedom just an abstract value? No.
- It is a condition in which individuals can choose their goals for their lives and find avenues for fulfilling those goals.
- Freedom is valuable both intrinsically – it is a good thing for a human being to be free – and instrumentally – it is helpful for achieving other good things to live in a free society.

Measures of human capabilities and well-being

- The Human Development Index
- Human Development Index
- Quality of Life Index
- Measurement of differences in quality of life internationally and nationally
- China's experience: large differences in quality of life between regions and between urban and rural populations.

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