

GLOBAL ETHICS: CAPABILITIES APPROACH¹

(Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

The capabilities approach is meant to identify a space in which we can make cross-cultural judgments about ways of life. The capabilities approach is radically different from, yet indebted to, traditional ethical theories such as [virtue ethics](#), [consequentialism](#) and [deontology](#).

This article begins with a background on global ethics. This situates the capabilities approach as a possible solution to the problems that arise from globalization. The second section provides **Amartya Sen's** account of the basic framework of the capabilities approach.

1. Background of Global Ethics

Issues of globalization have sparked great controversy since the 1980s. Globalization is seen through various forms of social activity including economic, political and cultural life. Practicing global ethics requires moral reasoning across borders. Borders can include culture, religion, ethnicity, gender, race, class, sexuality, global location, historical experience, environment, species and nations. Ethicists ask how we best address issues of globalization—that is, how we begin to address conflicts that arise when vastly different cultural norms, values, and practices collide.

There have been two broad philosophical approaches to address this issue. The dominant approach aims to develop moral theories that are not committed to a single world-view or religious foundation, but are compatible with various perspectives. In other words, it is a goal to develop a theory that is both 'thick' (that is, it has a robust conception of the good embedded within a particular context, and respects local traditions) and 'thin' (that is, it embraces a set of universal norms).

The debate between these two approaches to global ethics has reached an impasse. Since communitarians hold that moral norms are always local and valid internal to a particular community, universalists charge the communitarians with relativism. Moreover, universalists argue that communitarians fail to provide useful methods for addressing cross-border moral conflict. However, the communitarians charge the universalists with either positing theories that are too thin to be useful or advancing theories that are substantive but covertly build in premises that are not universally shared, and so risk cultural imperialism.

2. The Capabilities Approach

Amartya Sen, an economic theorist and founder of the capabilities approach, developed his theory in order to identify a space in which we can make cross cultural judgments on the quality of life. To best understand how these judgments can be passed, we must investigate a critical distinction made by proponents of the capabilities approach—between function and capability. A function, on the one hand, according to Sen, is an achievement, but this should be broadly understood to include any 'state of being.' Let's examine Sen's bike-riding example to shed light on a 'function.' He says a bicyclist has achieved the purpose of what one does with a bike—namely, ride it. From this example,

¹ <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ge-capab/>

clearly the choice to ride a bike is a function of a human being, however, the scope of functioning is not merely limited to a person's intention to ride the bike. A 'function' entails any 'state of being' which includes excitement, happiness and fear. For example, a child who first begins to ride her bike may display a great amount of fear as she wobbles down the road, but once she understands how to ride the bike smoothly, she can enjoy (or perhaps become excited) riding her bike. Thus, when the child rides her bike (and is excited from doing so), she has performed the functions of riding a bike, and having the emotions associated with doing so, while partaking in the capability of play.

A capability, on the other hand, is a possibility, not just any possibility, but a real one. For example, we can talk about the possibility of a person in a deeply poverty-stricken area to find employment and support a family. However, such a possibility may not be real considering external circumstances—for example, no clothing, food or shelter. Put differently, a 'capability set' (as Sen calls it) is the total functions available for a person to perform. By describing it in such a way, Sen places a deep correlation between freedom and function. That is to say, the more limited one's freedom, the less opportunities one has to fulfill one's functions. In sum, Crocker (2008) says succinctly that, according to Sen, a capability X entails (1) having the real possibility for X which (2) depends on my powers and (3) and no external circumstances preventing me from X.

A capability and function should not be understood as mutually exclusive or completely paralleling one another. Let's consider two people with the same capabilities. Even though they have same capabilities, they may participate in radically different functions. For example, two people may both have the opportunity to engage in play, but do so in radically different ways (for example, one may swim while the other volunteers at a homeless shelter). Proponents of the capabilities approach argue this makes the theory most attractive, that is, it accommodates various ways of life even though it puts forth a conception of the good. Now, let's consider a situation in which people participate in the same functions, but possess different capabilities set. Consider Sen's example of hunger. Two people may be hungry, but for radically different reasons. Consider, on the one hand, a person who seeks to fulfill her desire to eat, but cannot because of socio-economic circumstances. On the other, a person may be hungry because she is fasting for religious reasons or protesting an injustice. In both examples, the person suffers from starvation, but for radically different reasons.