The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach

This landmark handbook collects in a single volume the current state of research on the capability approach. It includes a comprehensive introduction to the approach, as well as new research from leading scholars in this increasingly influential multidisciplinary field, including the pioneers of capability research, Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen. Incorporating both approachable introductory chapters and more in-depth analysis relating to the central philosophical, conceptual and theoretical issues of capability research, this handbook also includes analytical and measurement tools, as well as policy approaches which have emerged in the recent literature. The handbook will be an invaluable resource for students coming to the capability approach for the first time, as well as for researchers engaged in advanced research in a wide range of disciplines, including development studies, economics, gender studies, political science and political philosophy.

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The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach

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In Memory of Tony Atkinson
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I am honoured to be asked to write a foreword to this extremely interesting Handbook, which can be seen – and admired – from many different perspectives. It is, at one level, a celebratory product, reflecting the fact that there is a good deal to applaud in the excellent work that has been done over the last four decades by a group of highly talented and innovative researchers on the reach and use of the capability approach. Each chapter has interesting things to say, while also reporting on the work that has been going on in this new – and very active – field.

If there are doubts about the sufficiency of the capability perspective in understanding the nature and contents of human welfare (I must confess that I do share some of the doubts about sufficiency as opposed to necessity), it is hard to deny the need for the capability perspective in making sense of our well-being and the importance of human freedom. The enormous contributions made by the capability perspective towards the discernment of human well-being and freedom have been well brought out by the papers in this Handbook. To appreciate their importance we do not need to champion any conviction that there is absolutely nothing more to say. The capability approach is a contribution to our understanding, not an attempt to annihilate all other insights that might come from elsewhere.

If celebration is a part of what the Handbook presents, what it offers as a guide and as a reference book is surely another. The nature, contents and relevance of different kinds of capabilities and their integration constitute a vast field of research, and it is very useful to have a monograph that can help the reader to understand the underlying ideas behind particular concerns (including providing references to writings on those ideas).

If these are uncomplicated contributions of the Handbook, we surely have reason to be interested in less simple virtues as well. To note a disagreement is not just the knowledge that there is an absence of an agreed position, it is also an opportunity to understand the respective reasoning behind conflicting positions that can be held on a particular question. Disagreements are important not merely because, as Publilius Syrus noted in conflict-ridden Rome in the first century BC, ‘Agreement is made more precious by disagreement’, but also because the survival of differing views can sometimes present alternative perspectives that may each offer some durable understanding of a complex issue.

For example, an insistence on a unique, canonical list of capabilities may be useful (for example, it can help in the fight for certain specific human rights,
ignoring other claims), and yet reserving certain choices for democratic decision (for example, in choosing priorities in policy-making) can give voice to all (even to the least advantaged), with reflective participation being seen as having importance of its own. The Handbook contains many examples of productive disagreement. It is important to appreciate that the persistence of disagreement is not just a reflection of the fact that the capability approach is a new field of research that calls for more work (that too, but not just that); it may indicate much more, for example the fact that the continuation of divergent resolutions may be entirely reasonable in a valuational subject – old and new.

I can also point to some other contributions that the Handbook makes, including identifying the need for more research in some established fields, as well as pointing to the case for opening up new areas of investigation which deserve to be brought into the enterprise of knowledge (to borrow a telling description from Isaac Levi). As we read the highly informative contributions included in the Handbook, we cannot miss the fact that some of the areas of capability research are splendidly incomplete. The Handbook is, thus, both a report on past work and an invitation to do fresh things, and that surely is also something to celebrate.
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