

David Alexander Clark: *Visions Of Development. A Study Of Human Values*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2002.

This book offers a conceptualisation of development based on the capability approaches of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen. The methodology used for this task is what Clark calls “a new kind of ‘empirical philosophy’ that is informed by scientific inquiry and firmly rooted in social reality” (p. 5). In Clark’s own words, “this book represents an ambitious attempt to bridge the gap between social science and philosophy in the field of development ethics” (p. 5).

Apart from a brief introduction and conclusion, the book consists of 4 chapters and a large annex which contains the summary statistics and the questionnaire of Clark’s fieldwork. Chapter 1 sets the stage with a brief review of the concepts of development used in the social sciences (including economics) over the last 50 years. Some definitions and concepts focus exclusively on economic dimensions, such as economic growth per head, structural transformations in the economy or a change in quantity and composition of international trade relations. Other definitions focussed on social and political development. However, in the last 20 years more comprehensive conceptualisation such as the ideas of human development and sustainable development have gained prominence.

Chapter 2 then describes and assesses the capability approaches pioneered by Sen and Nussbaum. Clark contrasts the capability approach with the commodity approach, which views economic development in terms of the expansion of goods and services (that is, commodities). He also contrasts the capability approach with the welfare or utility approach, which holds that development and human well-being should be assessed in terms of their impact on people’s utility, whether this is defined as happiness, desire-fulfilment or choice. Clark then rehearses the arguments against these two approaches and in favour of the capability approach. He concludes that the capability approach is a more comprehensive framework to think about development. However, Clark is far from uncritical towards the capability approach. In the second part of chapter 2, he criticizes Sen’s capability approach on several grounds. According to Clark, the examples that Sen uses are not very enlightening, and Sen remains silent on the contribution of commodities to utility. Further, it would not be clear how several functionings should be evaluated in Sen’s capability approach, such as taking part in sports. Sen’s approach would also need to cater much more for some important commodities, such as soft drinks, clothing, housing, beer and cigarettes, watching television and visiting the cinema and the role of advertising. Also, Sen would not discuss how to deal with negative functionings. Finally, there is a serious risk of paternalism in the capability approach that, according to Clark, has not been dealt with.

Chapter 3 deals with one main critique on Sen’s capability approach, namely its lack of a substantial list of human capabilities. Clark analyses how Nussbaum has tried to fill in this gap, which he calls her ‘thick vague theory of the good’. The chapter mainly consists of a critique of this thick vague theory of the good on methodological, philosophical and empirical grounds. Next to a number of smaller critiques, a major worry, according to Clark,

is the charge of paternalism. “The crux of the problem is that Nussbaum’s general approach still gives the distinct impression that individuals *ought* to function” in ways specified in her list of capabilities that is part of her thick vague theory of the good (p. 75). Clark is also very critical of Nussbaum’s list, as “her conception of the human being turns out to be almost exclusively based on the myths and stories of the Ancient Greek culture and on the writings of Aristotle in particular” (p. 78). Therefore, Clark rejects “Nussbaum’s unscientific ‘story telling’ methodology ... in favour of a more reliable approach that involves conducting fieldwork to gauge directly the preferences and values of poor people themselves” (p. 80). Based on the existing lists of dimensions of development and conceptions of the good in the development ethics literature, and also based on his fieldwork in two South-African communities, Clark constructs a very long list of capabilities and essential inputs, which he calls the ‘augmented theory of the good’.

The final chapter then presents the results from fieldwork conducted in March 1998 in two poor South African communities, Murraysburg and Wallacedene. Supported by two teams of interviewers, 157 interviews were conducted. The questionnaire first asked one general open question about the things that make a good life, and then proceeded to ask for some items, such as education, employment, economic resources, whether -and if so, why- they were held valuable. The third part of the questionnaire consisted of a list of goods, services and capabilities (and their properties), which respondents could rank as essential, valuable, unimportant or undesirable. Clark describes at length the findings of his fieldwork. What are the main findings that tell us something about the capability approach and development ethics? First, the poor respondents attach great importance to recreational activities, which are missing in Nussbaum’s thick vague theory of the good. Second, several respondents attach importance to status, prestige, success and pride, which go against the spirit of Nussbaum’s Aristotelian approach. Third, while according to Clark, “most development ethics focuses on the person’s physical condition at the expense of his or her state of mind” (p. 164), this is a mistake as the survey shows that happiness, pleasure and joy are key aspects of a good life. Finally, many of the basic necessities are seen as means and therefore are not given any intrinsic value. Clark argues that they may well possess some intrinsic value, and that “some of the items that have been categorized as ‘means’ may actually deserve a place in the thick vague theory of the good after all” (p. 165).

Should students and scholars of development economics, development ethics and the capability approach read this book? I am not so sure. On the one hand, Clark should be applauded for asking the right questions and for going through the pains of collecting his own material. He also makes a couple of interesting theoretical observations and comments, such as his argument to pay more attention to goods and resources. But the book is full with –often repeated- small comments, and most of them were either made by other critics before, or were based on a selective reading, and some seem to be mistakes. There are some other problems that I have with the book, such as the frequent reference to “Sen and Nussbaum’s list” (whereas Sen capability approach, as Clark himself notes at other points, has no theoretical list of capabilities), the suggestion that Sen would be an Aristotelian thinker (like the earlier Nussbaum), or some very questionable statements that are not discussed nor defended, even though there has been recent debates on these issues (e.g. that methodological individualism is an important feature of Sen’s conceptual framework, p. 76).

However, the main reasons why I cannot recommend this book are not these smaller mistakes -even though I think they should have been corrected - but two much more fundamental problems.

First, even though published in the second half of 2002, the relevant literature published in the last three or four years is not discussed in this book. In one respect this is very problematic, and that is with Clark's discussion of Nussbaum's work. Clark characterizes Nussbaum as an Aristotelian writer, and analyses her papers up to 1995, and reproduces her list of capabilities published in that year. However, it is difficult to understand why Clark has not discussed the evolution in Nussbaum's thinking, especially her move away from Aristotelian thinking and her substantially revised list of capabilities, as represented in a series of papers and most notably in her 2000 book *Women and Human Development*. In that book, Nussbaum has written a very elaborate response to the charge of paternalism, and has clearly stated that capabilities, and not functionings matter, in contrast to Clark's reading. Limiting the discussion of Nussbaum to her writings up to 1995 largely undermines most of Clark's critiques, and it certainly makes this book less interesting for people who want to get an introduction to the capability approach, or those who are on the forefront of this field.

My second main worry concerns the conclusions drawn from the fieldwork. Clark believes that the responses to question II.1 of his questionnaire give him the aspects of the good life, and thus can be used to find out how poor people see development. These responses should also serve as a test to see whether the capabilities on Nussbaum's list would all be valuable and whether people conceptualise development only in terms of capabilities. The question reads as follows: "Think about the *things* that make a good life. These *items* could be *things* that you already have, or *things* that you need, want or desire" (p. 232, italics added). In my understanding, this question asks about the commodities that are necessary to reach a good life, not the dimensions as such. No wonder, then, that the respondents play down functionings such as being healthy, and talk about jobs, housing, education and income. I am therefore not at all surprised with Clark's findings, even though Clark himself considered his fieldwork "to be an extremely profitable exercise, which provides some interesting and potentially unique insights into the concept of development" (p. 96). Moreover, although Clark did discuss some limitations of what one can conclude based on his data, his book lacks a more fundamental discussion about which is the appropriate empirical methodology to find out how people see development. Perhaps another methodology, such as focus groups or in-depth interviews, would have been more appropriate.

Let me conclude on a more positive note. In my view, the capability approach is a paradigm in the making, and we need the kind of 'empirical philosophy' that Clark advocates if we want to make progress. But given the immature state of this literature, it is likely that we will need to go through a lot of trial and error before we will get a better view of which methodologies work, and which don't. *Visions of Development* certainly is a contribution to this trial and error process, and we can always learn from that.

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