Recent philosophical approaches to social protection: From capability to *ubuntu*

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Abstract

In the past decade or two, philosophies of social protection have shifted away from a nearly exclusive focus on the subjective and the individual (e.g. autonomous choices, utility) and towards values that are more objective and relational. The latter approaches, typified by the well-established Capabilities Approach and the up and coming ethic of *ubuntu*, have been substantially inspired by engagements with the Global South, particularly India and Africa. In this article, part of a Special Issue titled 'The Principles and Practice of Social Protection', I focus exclusively on these two newer normative philosophies of social protection, my main aim being to compare and contrast several of their theoretical and practical implications for a variety of its dimensions. I conclude by also suggesting that the implications of *ubuntu* are often more attractive than those of the Capabilities Approach and hence that the former should be taken no less seriously as potentially foundational when thinking about social protection.

Philosophies of social protection

From a bird's eye view, theoretical (as opposed to practical) approaches to poverty, development, justice and related topics in the English-speaking literature have undergone three major shifts over the past 50 years or so. Initially, being poorly or badly off was understood

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as being nearly exclusively constituted by a lack of monetary income (e.g. Fukuda-Parr, 2006: 7; Townsend, 2006: 5), with social protection measures mainly conceived as how to transfer funds to those with little. For example, in the 1960s, when the US government began tracking poverty, it used family monetary income to measure it, with more than four-fifths of public means-tested benefits transferred to poor people as cash (University of Wisconsin–Madison Institute for Research on Poverty, 1998: 1–2, 5, 38). It was common to think that poverty more or less *essentially is* the lack of a certain amount of money, whether understood in absolute or relative terms.[1]

Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, utilitarian, Kantian and basic needs–oriented philosophical perspectives came to the fore, which tended to make decent sense of a large focus on income while also showing some of its limits. Money is often useful for satisfying a large number of desires (utility), achieving a wide array of goals (autonomy) or meeting requirements for a minimally acceptable life (needs). However, sometimes money is not sufficient for those conditions, and other times money is not necessary, with a plausible example of both being self-esteem, as John Rawls (1971) made particularly clear to political philosophers. The dominant view among theorists became that poverty is essentially the inability to live well by virtue of economic want, with lack of money viewed merely as a proxy of that condition, one that could be easily measured. In the wake of this understanding of poverty came measures such as the World Bank's (1990) dollar a day approach for the poorest countries, conceived as the amount of money needed for an individual to purchase goods essential for her to 'attain a minimal standard of living' (p. 26).

Most recently, since the early 1990s, there has been a philosophical shift towards new conceptions of what it is (not) to live well as central to social protection and related forms of anti-poverty programmes. Most prominent has, of course, been the Capabilities Approach (e.g. Nussbaum, 1990, 2011; Sen, 1999), according to which poverty is best understood as the economic incapacity to function in myriad ways deemed to be objectively desirable for a human being. In addition, communitarian ideals salient in indigenous sub-Saharan Africa (i.e. in 'pre-colonial' or 'traditional' black cultures as they were not influenced by those from other continents such as Europe) have in the past 5 years been on the rise when thinking about social protection and related economic matters (Hofmeyr, 2013; Metz, 2011a, 2015a, 2015b; Mpedi, 2008; Muller, 2008; Tshoose, 2009; Whitworth and Wilkinson, 2013). These ideals are often tersely captured by the term '*ubuntu*', a southern African (specifically, Zulu, Xhosa and Ndebele) word for humanness.

Utilitarianism, Kantianism and the basic needs approach are largely individualist or subjective or both; they prescribe forms of social protection in light of values that make no essential reference to others besides a given poor person[2] and (in the former two cases) that enable her to realize her particular preferences and aims. In contrast, the newcomers are more objective and relational, focusing on particular abilities to live well considered to be apt for human beings generally, and, at least in the case of *ubuntu*, ones that systematically make an essential reference to interacting with others in specific ways.[3]

In this article, part of a special issue titled 'The Principles and Practice of Social Protection', I provide the first thorough comparison and contrast of these two objective

and relational philosophies of social protection. Although I do note several commonalities between the Capabilities Approach and *ubuntu*, I focus mainly on the differences, so as to highlight their divergent practical implications for activists and policy-makers as well as what theorists need to consider in future work. Specifically, I bring out their competing answers to the following questions: what poverty is and why justice requires social protection from it, how much the state or other agents should aid others, how a state or other donor ought to implement a social protection programme, what ought to be distributed to the poor, who among the poor should be the focus of social protection programmes, and how causes and patterns of distribution have moral relevance.

The primary aim of this article is to reveal differences between standard versions of the Capabilities Approach and *ubuntu*. However, I do suggest that the implications of latter are often more attractive than those of the former and hence that *ubuntu* should be taken seriously as foundational when thinking about social protection, at least for those sympathetic to the turn away from the individualist and subjective approaches.

I begin by defining what I mean by 'social protection' as something distinct from, say, social development and social justice. Then, I sketch the essentials of the Capabilities Approach understood as a political philosophy, drawing on common ground to be found among a wide array of prominent adherents to it, after which I do the same for *ubuntu*. Next, I briefly point out some implications for social protection that both philosophies share but then spend the bulk of this article bringing out divergent ones, both theoretical and practical, heretofore largely unrecognized in the literature. I conclude by pointing out that many readers will, upon reflection, find the implications of *ubuntu* to be more appealing than those of the Capabilities Approach, which leads me to propose a philosophy of social protection in which *ubuntu* is basic but the notion of capability has a central role to play.

An analysis of social protection

My aim in this article is to see what the Capabilities Approach and *ubuntu* as sources of basic principles entail for social protection, a particular approach to responding to those among the worst off in a society. In this section, I indicate what social protection involves, working to differentiate it from similar terms and concepts. Specifically, I seek an analysis of the concept of social protection that is fairly uncontroversial, one that captures what activists and policy-makers tend to mean by the phrase (e.g. ERD, 2010; ILO and WHO, 2010; OECD, 2009) and what academics are debating about when they advance rival views (e.g. Adesina, 2011; Devereux and McGregor, 2014; Holzmann and Jørgensen, 2001; Kabeer, 2014; Leisering and Barrientos, 2013; Merrien, 2013).

I submit that social protection is well construed as systematic intervention to help avert poverty ('insurance') or to improve the plight of the poor ('assistance') that is ensured by the state against the background of an economic market and that is typically deemed required on grounds of distributive justice. Let me spell out a number of these facets.

First, social protection is something that by definition involves the state but not necessarily as the agent directly carrying it out. When most readers think of social protection, state-run welfare programmes initially come to mind. However, these do not exhaust the

possibilities, as it would also plausibly count as social protection if private agents or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) undertook actions expected to help the poor, but the state monitored the extent to which they did and were prepared to step in if they did not do so adequately.

Second, social protection is not mere charity, in the sense of haphazard and unpredictable ways of giving on the part of private agents, or even a legislature. Instead, it is essentially something designed to consistently improve people's quality of life (or 'avert risks' in the management jargon) in the face of an economic market that predictably fails to provide sufficiently for everyone.

Third, social protection is usually not deemed to be an ideal. Those overseeing it might wish for poverty to be eradicated or even aim for that, but programmes can still count as being ones of social protection so long as they can be reasonably expected to make limited progress in that direction.

Fourth, and finally, although compensatory justice might sometimes be a rationale for social protection programmes, their usual theoretical ground or practical motive is distributive justice. That is, normally it is thought that social protection is appropriate simply because people are currently badly off (typically as a result of market failure), setting aside historical issues of whether the state or others wrongfully made them that way. The usual thought is not so much that social protection is warranted because the worst off were coerced, deceived or exploited (so that it would be unjustified in the absence of such, as per a neo-Lockean or libertarian approach), but instead that there is an injustice simply in being badly off or among the worst off, when their quality of life could be improved without much burden being placed on others.

In sum, social protection is a programme by which to prevent or correct poverty that is: characteristically led by the state, but not reducible to actions by it; undertaken in a thorough and comprehensive way in response to gaps in the market, rather than in a sporadic way that relies on the generosity of volunteers; not conceived as a social ideal, but rather as part of one or a stepping stone to one; and understood to advance distributive justice in particular to some, imperfect degree.

So construed, social protection is not equivalent to social justice, which is more or less another phrase for what philosophers call 'distributive justice', that is, what people owe one another in ways that the state may rightfully enforce. It is true that, for most in the field, the more social protection, the more social justice; however, the latter concept is both more demanding and also broader than the former. For all but the most conservative philosophers of social justice, a perfectly just society would not permit people routinely to suffer poverty in the first place (supposing it had the resources to avoid that), and it would also include the recognition of civil liberties, which does not concern economic matters (e.g. Barry, 1989; Dworkin, 2000; Miller, 1989; Rawls, 1971; Walzer, 1983).

In addition, social protection is not equivalent to social development. While the latter is focused on poverty alleviation in the first instance, it is usually deemed to be broader than that, and so to potentially include change such as the spread of technology, the establishment of rule of law, the realization of democratic principles, the enforcement of (negative) human rights and even the acquisition of intellectual freedom (e.g. Peet and Hartwick, 2015).

Above I sought to define 'social protection' in a way that should be fairly uncontested and readily accepted by those from a variety of backgrounds. I have intended to indicate what various competing accounts of social protection are about or at least a way that makes sense of debate between the Capabilities Approach and *ubuntu*. In the following sections, I sketch these two major normative philosophies that provide competing answers to questions about which forms social protection should take and why.

Essentials of the Capabilities Approach

Advocates of the Capabilities Approach abound, and, even for a given Capabilities theorist, a close look can often reveal more than one Capabilities theory (cf. Nussbaum, 1993, 2011). Here, my aim is to present what appears to be philosophical common ground among a number of the most prominent adherents to a Capabilities Approach. So, instead of focusing merely on, say, Amartya Sen's influential version (1999), I spell out what he and others would be likely to accept when it comes to basic political commitments, at least upon reflection, and just enough to facilitate comparison and contrast with *ubuntu*.

At bottom, Capabilities theorists typically believe that distributive justice, at least at the national level, is at the core a matter of the state ensuring that people have the internal and external abilities to live in a variety of ways that are objectively good for their own sake. The capabilities are distinguished in the first instance from functionings; they are opportunities to live in particular ways and not the actual ways of living, which focus appears apt as a way to respect people's capacity for choice.

Specifically, capabilities are opportunities to live in 'objectively good' ways, not merely in ways that would enhance subjective well-being. Capabilities theorists reject the idea that society ought at bottom to be organized according to whatever people happen to want or believe to be valuable, and instead contend that there are certain ways of life that people ought to want or to believe to be valuable. Note that quite consistent with this view is that democratic deliberation ought to be what specifies the relevant objective goods, perhaps because it would reveal the truth about them or, again, out of respect for people's choice.

Finally, although the distinction between internal and external capabilities is largely Martha Nussbaum's (2011: 21–23, 84–85), Capabilities theorists more generally would find it a revealing one. For example, the capability to obtain an education has an internal dimension involving the person's mental abilities, including the emotional strength to cope with academic challenges, as well as an external one, say, the money needed to buy books or the transport needed to get to school.

Capabilities theorists differ principally in terms of how to specify the relevant capabilities and which capabilities they believe are indeed relevant. Famously, Sen (2004) maintains that the capabilities apt for a given society should be determined by the democratic bodies in it, while Nussbaum (2011) in contrast believes in philosophical reflection, at least consequent to widespread consultation with non-philosophers. In this article, I focus on commonalities between Sen, Nussbaum and other proponents of the Capabilities Approach such as Sabine Alkire (2002), Ingrid Robeyns (2006) and Melanie Walker (2006). I believe that, for all such theorists, the relevant capabilities would likely include at the very least the following: political participation, free association, rational

deliberation, education, health and life. For them, a state is more unjust, the more it fails to ensure that its (legal) residents have the internal and external abilities to function in these ways (at least if it has the resources to do so).

It is well known that the United Nations has found the Capabilities Approach to be attractive in thinking about global development (e.g. United Nations Development Programme, 2010). Less well known is that something close to it has been applied at the domestic level for more than 40 years by the Kingdom of Bhutan under the heading of 'Gross National Happiness' (on which see Alkire, 2013; cf. Metz, 2014a).

Essentials of *ubuntu*

As indicated above, the word '*ubuntu*' means human excellence in southern Africa and is usually associated with a certain kind of communitarianism. In this section, I present one major swathe of indigenous sub-Saharan thought about ethics, interpreted as a political philosophy, that those in and beyond that region are finding of interest (drawing on Metz, 2011a, 2011b, 2014b; Metz and Gaie, 2010). It focuses on the idea that a communal relationality is foundational to morality.[4] As with the Capabilities Approach, I do not focus on any one person's interpretation of *ubuntu* or African ethics but rather piece together salient themes that provide a plausible principled ground for social protection. I take this approach partly because no one person's interpretation of *ubuntu* is dominant and partly because it is the overlapping consensus among many interpreters that is philosophically interesting.

Some of the more common maxims associated with ethical thought in an indigenous sub-Saharan context are 'I am because we are' and 'A person is a person through other persons'. One will find such expressions among a wide array of traditional African peoples, ranging from those in South Africa (Dandala, 2009: 260; Tutu, 1999: 35) to Kenya (Mbiti, 1990: 106, 110, 113) to Nigeria (Menkiti, 1984: 171) and to many other locales (Nkulu-N'Sengha, 2009: 143). In unpacking these sayings in the rest of this section, I am not undertaking mere moral anthropology or sociology. Rather than simply recounting the beliefs of a given indigenous African people or group of them, I draw on interpretations of the maxims that contemporary African philosophers, theologians and related theorists have advanced in light of them.

Although it is not readily clear from the linguistic structure, these maxims have normative or ethical connotations to those familiar with indigenous cultures in many parts of the African continent. When it is said that a person is a person, part of the implicit suggestion is that one ought to become a real person or to develop true personhood. Sub-Saharan thinkers commonly hold that personhood comes in degrees, where one's foremost aim in life should be to exhibit it as much as one can (see Nkulu-N'Sengha, 2009, for a thorough analysis); one should strive to maximise self-realization or human excellence (literally *ubuntu*), where such virtue is capable of continuous development.

Those who have failed to manifest humanness are frequently said 'not to be persons' or to be 'non-persons' or even to be 'animals' (e.g. Dandala, 2009: 260–261; Nkulu-N'Sengha, 2009: 144). This way of speaking does not mean that wicked or unjust individuals are literally no longer human, namely, no longer the subject of human rights; it

means rather that they have failed to exhibit what is valuable about human nature to any significant degree.

What is it that is valuable about human nature? How does one develop into a real person? Which behaviours are expressive of *ubuntu*?

According to one of the key maxims, one is to realize personhood 'through other persons' but, again, that phrasing could be more helpful to those outside the fold. According to the standard understanding, then, to develop personhood through other persons means to prize communal or harmonious relationships with them, which Desmond Tutu (1999) calls the 'greatest good' for indigenous African morality (p. 35). To grasp the sort of communitarianism involved, which differs from that influential in the West (e.g. Sandel, 1984), consider remarks from Nigerian, South African, Ghanaian and Kenyan intellectuals about communion or harmony:

> Every member is expected to consider him/herself an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards achieving the good of all. (Gbadegesin, 1991: 65)

> The fundamental meaning of community is the sharing of an overall way of life, inspired by the notion of the common good. (Gyekye, 2004: 16)

> (T)he purpose of our life is community-service and community-belongingness. (Iroegbu, 2005: 442)

> (African values include) living a life of mutual concern for the welfare of others . . . Feeling integrated with as well as willing to integrate others into a web of relations free of friction and conflict. (Masolo, 2010: 240)

> Harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic social relations within the group. (Mokgoro, 1998: 17)

The focus of these remarks is not so much on the normative authority or priority of a *group*, as per many forms of communitarianism, but rather on the propriety of certain ways of *relating* to individuals.

Specifically, these remarks suggest two distinct relational themes (initially analysed in Metz, 2007). On one hand, there is a relationship of *identity*, a matter of considering oneself part of the whole, being close, sharing a way of life, belonging and integrating with others. Part of this kind of relationship is psychological, for example, thinking of oneself as a 'we' and not so much an 'I', while another is behavioural, interacting with others on a cooperative basis.

On the other hand, there is reference to a relationship of *solidarity*, achieving the good of all, being sympathetic, acting for the common good, serving others and being concerned for others' welfare. Here, too, there is a behavioural component, of doing what is likely to enable others to live better lives, as well as a psychological one, of doing so consequent to sympathy and for the sake of the other.

In sum, the more one prizes these kinds of other-regarding tendencies, or people's capacity for them, the more humanness one exhibits or the more of a person one is. And distributive justice at the domestic level, from such perspective, is well understood to be

a matter of the state honouring its residents' ability to be party to communal relationships, ones of identifying with each other and exhibiting solidarity towards one another. Roughly, this will mean that the state itself identifies with and exhibits solidarity towards its residents, as well as enables them to do so with themselves.

Note that such a philosophical interpretation of the African ethical tradition differs from social capital theory, the view that much of what it takes to avoid poverty or otherwise to develop is to have strong ties with others (e.g. Lin, 2002). *Ubuntu*, understood as above, does not essentially deem communal relationships to be particularly useful means (although it does not deny that either) but rather to be what is most worth pursuing for its own sake, as a way to give others their due.

Similarities regarding social protection

Although my primary aim in this article is to reveal the respects in which the Capabilities Approach and an *ubuntu* political morality differ when it comes to social protection, it is worth pausing to note some key similarities. Doing so should make sense of why they have been on the rise.

First, both the Capabilities Approach and *ubuntu* focus on enabling people to live an objectively good life for human beings. For the former, there are a variety of human capabilities that people have reason to value for their own sake, while for the latter, there is one all-important capacity of developing one's personhood or humanness (which, however, has a complexity to it, including many different other-regarding dimensions). For both, poverty is unjust insofar as it is an inhuman condition, because it unnecessarily prevents people from realizing their human potential. Relatedly, both philosophies have their roots in the tradition of virtue ethics, with Nussbaum well known for having been influenced by Aristotle, and the word '*ubuntu*' just meaning human excellence.

Turning from the question of why poverty is wrong to whom ought to be saved from it, both perspectives, second, direct attention primarily to the chronically poor and the worst off. Those whose lives are 'most inhuman', either in terms of quantity, by which I mean the duration, or quality, the intensity of the condition, have a strong claim to aid before others. However, there is nothing in either theory that would give these groups what economists calls a 'dictatorship' (or 'trump') over the transitory poor and the not quite as badly off. If many, many more of the badly off could be kept from poverty compared to a small handful of the very worst off, both theories have the resources to permit aiding the former.

With regard to what to distribute to the poor (or to prevent people from becoming poor), a third commonality between the theories is that they entail that grants and insurance schemes are appropriate and yet do not exhaust the proper content of social protection. Ensuring that people have money is obviously going to be a way to help them avoid poverty, supposing that a market economy is dominant. However, by the Capabilities Approach and *ubuntu*, money is relevant only insofar as it helps people obtain what they need to live in a human way. Some things essential for living humanly could be provided directly, that is, without the medium of money, that is, food, healthcare and education. And then some things cannot be bought at all. For instance, certain

familial, associative and political relationships cannot be purchased on a market and are particularly clear cases in which the two theories prescribe non-pecuniary responses to the poor from the state.

Fourth, and finally for now, the Capabilities Approach and *ubuntu* both forbid hard paternalism, that is, coercing or deceiving people into avoiding poverty or more generally living well. The former does that precisely with its focus on capability as opposed to functioning, the explicit purpose being to give people opportunities they may elect to take up or not. The latter does it more implicitly with its conception of communal relationship. Recall that it includes identifying with others, which requires coordination rather than subordination. One is not truly *sharing* a way of life with others if one uses force or fraud to get them to do something.

There are no doubt other similarities between the two theories. However, these are the ones that I gather have made them particularly attractive to recent theorists, policy-makers and activists.

Differences regarding social protection

In the rest of this article, I bring out respects in which the two philosophies diverge, sometimes merely at the level of theory but more often also in terms of practice. I highlight ways in which the Capabilities Approach and *ubuntu* offer competing answers to a variety of live questions about social protection.

What poverty is and why justice requires protection from it

I noted in the previous section that both approaches imply that poverty is a political wrong insofar as it is an avoidable, economic obstacle to people exercising their valuable human capacities. Although that is true, there are two apparent differences between them with regard to the nature and injustice of poverty.

For the Capabilities Approach, poverty is understood to be a state of affairs in which some cannot live objectively well due to lack of goods or services. As Nussbaum (2011) has put it, '(P)overty is best understood as capability failure . . . Poverty involves heterogeneous failures of opportunity' (p. 143). And why poverty is an injustice (most clearly for Nussbaum) is that it is disrespectful of the dignity people have in virtue of being capable of various distinctively human ways of living.

By *ubuntu*, there is not a single obvious way to conceive of poverty. One could do it in terms of people being biologically and socially needy, akin to the model that Nussbaum's quotations suggest. However, another, relational construal of the nature of poverty also suggests itself and would be of interest. According to this perspective, poverty is above all a failure of relationship. An *ubuntu* interpretation could focus attention on the way in which the absence of social protection is essentially an expression of lack of solidarity between the state and the vulnerable. Whereas for the Capabilities Approach, poverty is straightforwardly construed as incapability, with injustice being a function of the state's failing to rectify it when it could, for *ubuntu*, poverty could be understood to be a failure of the state to ensure that people's needs are met when it could, a failure to care adequately.

One implication of the latter view is that if the state could not meet people's needs, say, because of a lack of resources, then there would be not merely an absence of injustice when it comes to poverty but also, strictly speaking, no poverty and instead something else (say, a low quality of life). That is counterintuitive to some degree.

However, when most interested in social protection speak of 'poverty' they have in mind something that the state can and should counter as a matter of justice, and conceiving of it essentially as a failure to relate in a caring way (or, more carefully, failure to respect people in virtue of their capacity to care and be cared for) captures that well. As one impoverished person is quoted in the influential *Voices of the Poor*, 'Poverty is humiliation, the sense of being dependent, and of being forced to accept rudeness, insults, and indifference when we seek help' (in Narayan, 2000: 30).

Here is another theoretical difference between the two views, with regard to understanding poverty from the conceptual vantage point of freedom (see Hoffmann and Metz, unpublished). Among Capabilities theorists, Sen (1999) is most well known for thinking of development as freedom (see also Alkire, 2002). For him, an individual's economic freedom consists in her capabilities to achieve valuable functionings, where that is a condition that makes no *essential* reference to anyone but the individual (although it, of course, could). If the relevant functionings include being healthy and reasoning practically, then to determine a person's freedom one ascertains how able she is to function in those ways. This approach suggests that an individual's freedom is essentially a form of *independence* from others, with poverty being a lack thereof.

In contrast, a natural interpretation of economic freedom from an *ubuntu* perspective is that it is, at least in part, inherently a form of *interdependence* with others, with poverty a lack thereof. First, consider a poor person in relation to the state. She lacks the ability to be party to a relationship in which she is an object of the state's solidarity (is cared for). Second, consider a poor person in relation to other residents. She also lacks the ability to be party to a relationship in which she is a subject of solidarity, that is, one who cares for others. As an elderly African woman remarked to me at an *imbizo* (collective discussion) devoted to *ubuntu* and poverty, 'For me, the problem with being poor is that I don't have anything to give to others' (see Metz, 2011a: 238). Although interdependence, the ability to share with and care for others, might not exhaust economic freedom, an *ubuntu* ethic suggests that it is essential to it to some degree, a fascinating and underexplored philosophical understanding of what it is and why it is relevant to justice.

How much social protection to provide

When considering how much a given agent such as the state ought to aid those targeted by social protection, it is natural to think that it should do so to the maximum degree (subject to available resources). In particular, for the Capabilities Approach, what matters above all is the degree to which people have the relevant capabilities, which suggests that a relevant agent should do all it can do to provide them.

However, for *ubuntu*, an agent's intentions also matter morally, which, under certain conditions, means that it could be appropriate to trade off some degree to which others are actually aided. By an *ubuntu* approach to just action, what counts is that an agent strives to benefit others (to do what is likely to benefit them), that is, that she *relates* in a

caring way. That is distinct from a focus in the first instance on the *result that others are benefited*.

In certain 'invisible hand' situations well known to economists, intending to help others is likely to reduce the degree to which they would in fact be helped. For the most well-known example, there can be circumstances in which if an agent such as a firm were to focus on its own interests (say, in profit), it could unintentionally benefit others to degree X, whereas if it instead aimed to promote others' good, it could benefit them to an $X - N$ degree, where $N > 0$. Perhaps the firm makes goods particularly useful for alleviating poverty and lacks the knowledge needed to aid the poor in a direct fashion.

In this kind of scenario, the Capabilities Approach would naturally prescribe the former act, as more capabilities would be realized, whereas *ubuntu* would likely prescribe the latter, so long as N were marginal. Above all for *ubuntu*, one must relate in a communal manner, which is not invariably correlated with a state of affairs in which others' needs or capabilities are maximally fulfilled. It is an empirical matter when a state might encounter this sort of invisible hand scenario. The point is that it is a theoretically interesting issue that could also make a practical difference.

How to implement social protection

Few these days would suggest that social protection should be undertaken without consultation with those whom it is intended to benefit. As two scholars have recently noted, 'the importance of "participation" has been taken on board, at least nominally, by the major international development agencies' (Devereux and McGregor, 2014: 299). Why think that the state (and any attendant actors) have a duty to understand poverty from the perspective of the poor and to obtain their input?

One reasonable suggestion is that without engagement with the poor, a social protection programme would be less likely to work. Generally speaking, people best know their own interests and how to realize them, a point that John Stuart Mill is famous for having relied upon in his philosophy. And, so, a friend of the Capabilities Approach might contend that consultation is normally vital in order to be able to ensure that people's opportunities are advanced.

However, there are two prima facie problems with this rationale. First, it is not *always* the case that consultation with the poor would assist in doing what is most likely to help. *Sometimes* policy-makers and activists can be in a position to know on their own what would advance others' capabilities. Although friends of the Capabilities Approach often accept the ideal of participatory poor, there is no clear reason within the logic of the theory to support that view in a situation in which their participation would not be of use or, worse, would do less well than a more top-down, technocratic approach when it comes to advancing capabilities – imagine the poor's lack of education were to get in the way.

Second, a requirement to consult with the poor does not seem reducible to mere considerations of efficiency. There is intuitively a moral reason to include the poor that is independent of the epistemic consequences of doing so. There is something about a participative process that matters in itself or for its own sake when it comes to justice.

Of course, on most versions of the Capabilities Approach, certain kinds of political engagement such as democratic deliberation are deemed to be valuable functionings and hence to ground capabilities that the state must provide. However, it is far from clear that consulting with the poor when formulating a social protection programme is inherent to such a capability. And, even if it were, that capability would need to be weighed up against others, and it could easily be outweighed. If a top-down approach to social protection produced marginally greater capabilities for the poor in the long run, that would seem to be justified by the Capabilities Approach.

In contrast, an *ubuntu* perspective naturally gives much more moral weight to the procedure by which social protection is undertaken. The way that goods or services are distributed must be done in a way that esteems relationships of identity and solidarity. It is the former element that does real work, in the present context. Recall that identifying with others is roughly a matter of enjoying a sense of togetherness and engaging in joint projects. These factors have an intrinsic significance for just relationships distinct from caring (doing what is likely to advance capabilities or to improve people's quality of life), and they make good sense of why there is strong moral reason for social protection programmes to be participatory (beyond considerations of efficiency).

What to distribute to the poor

There is nothing in the Capabilities Approach that requires the kinds of goods or services directed towards the poor to include an extrinsic or relational dimension. That is, what the state must ensure the poor have does not need to mention anyone but the given poor person to whom it is being directed. For example, Nussbaum's list of 10 capabilities are, except for affiliation, all ones intrinsic to a person, making no essential reference to any person but the one with the capability. Recall the categories of life, bodily health or integrity, play, imagination, thought, practical reason, material control and other species. And then Sen's appeal to democratic specification is also entirely compatible with such an intrinsic orientation.

Of course, Capabilities theorists have frequently made the point that in order for any kind of capability to be realized, the state and other actors must consider relational factors (e.g. Foster and Handy, 2008). For instance, the ability of a farmer to acquire information might depend on his friendship with another one. Or a lack of education on the part of girls might be a function of the extent to which others pressure them to conform to gender roles.

The point I am making is different: relational factors might merit moral attention apart from their instrumentality, apart from whether they are tools or mechanisms by which to promote other goods. By *ubuntu*, that is the case. From this perspective, the most important (but not sole) way to help another person is to foster her personhood or human excellence, and since communion constitutes that, relational factors take priority as ends in themselves. Goods or services to prioritize as a matter of justice are those that would particularly enable people to relate communally, meaning that what comes to the fore are goods or services such as couples counselling, women's shelters, parenting classes, quality day care, rehabilitation programmes, neighbourhood parks, densification in spacious

neighbourhoods, job training, non-exploitive labour relations and grassroots organizations (Metz, 2011a: 238–239).

I am not implying that no version of the Capabilities Approach could include these kinds of goods or services. The point is that it does not include them *essentially*, as key aspects of development or of a richer life, whereas *ubuntu* clearly entails that they are central.

Note that the suggestion is not that *only* these kinds of goods or services are apt and that cash grants are irrelevant. In fact, the relational focus of *ubuntu* entails that divisible and transferable goods such as money are also an appropriate part of what the state should ensure that the poor have. For *ubuntu*, it is vitally important that beneficiaries be able to exhibit solidarity, say, by sharing at least some important goods with others or even giving some of them away entirely.

In contrast, the Capabilities Approach is consistent with beneficiaries being the only ones able to use goods or services. Hence, of the two views, *ubuntu* better captures the persistent view that the provision of monetary income is rightly one core aspect of social protection (even if it should not be the sole or even main provision).

Who should be the focus of social protection

If a state, perhaps aided by international donors, had an abundance of resources, then it would probably have strong reasons of justice to prevent or relieve anyone's poverty, regardless of whether the state were related to them or not. Cosmopolitanism would follow quickly. However, even if there are clearly enough resources in the Western world to alleviate global poverty, they are not forthcoming, for unfortunate political reasons. A given state with people in (or at risk of falling into) poverty must at present make do with limited resources. The question then arises as to how to distribute scarce goods; who gets priority when it comes to social protection?

There is nothing inherent to the Capabilities Approach that would direct a state's attention to those with ties to it such as (legal) residents. If there were, say, strangers in a neighbouring country or newly arrived illegal aliens who had somewhat fewer capabilities than a state's long-standing residents, the logic of the Capabilities Approach would seem to recommend that a state pass over the latter in favour of the former.

In contrast, 'family first' and 'charity begins at home' are maxims frequently associated with an *ubuntu* conception of justice. In general, African morality characteristically has a partial dimension, such that those with whom an agent is already communally related have *some* priority relative to those lacking such a tie (Appiah, 1998; Ramose, 2003: 385–386). Traditionally speaking, the relevant tie is one of blood or clan, but these days moral and political philosophers tend to focus on harmonious bonds, which normally transcend both. *Ubuntu* entails that a state would be just to exhibit solidarity in the first instance with those with which it has most intensely identified, roughly its legal residents, at least in a condition of scarcity where not all can be aided.[5]

Note that this approach does not imply that only members or those in relation to an agent have a moral standing with respect to it. Anyone with the capacity to commune has a moral status or a dignity, by the present conception of an African justice. This impartial dimension is consistent with admitting a partial one according to which there is some

extra reason for the state to aid those with whom it has already communed. After all, by analogy, my having extra reason to look after my son's needs need not entail that your son counts for nothing.

How causes and patterns of distribution are relevant to justice

For a final contrast between the Capabilities Approach and *ubuntu*, consider how they would probably take account of the ways in which poverty has come about or is distributed over a society. Although this divergence is more theoretical at this stage, with no obvious practical 'payoff', it is interesting and merits consideration as to whether it might not affect the practice of social protection in some way, upon further reflection.

By the Capabilities Approach, whether a person has a capability or not is one thing, and how she came to obtain it or whether others also have it are distinct matters. On the standard interpretations, one first ascertains who is lacking in capabilities and then considers such things as what should be done in light of how people have become lacking in them and how much inequality there is with regard to their distribution. Such an approach is patent in the Human Development Index, which was eventually revised to include a separate dimension of the degree of inequality, where the initial one did not (United Nations Development Programme, 2010).

Ubuntu probably prescribes a different approach. To see how so, consider the case of access to water. First, imagine that one person has access to water at the expense of another, say, by having dammed up a river without having obtained consent to do so. Then, by *ubuntu*, it is plausible to say that she does not have this capability in its full sense. The relevant capability (if one elects to conceive of poverty in such terms) is not merely one of accessing water but rather one of accessing water in a way that esteems relationships of solidarity and identity. Taking water in this manner is to subordinate rather than coordinate, and to harm rather than aid, and hence flouts these communal values. The state would, therefore, have to promote the relevant ability to drink water not only with respect to the one who lacks water but also the one who has it.

For a second example, imagine a case in which a person has lots of water but not by virtue of having forcibly taken it from another. Instead, suppose she has benefited from rainfall that simply was not available to the other (set aside considerations of who is responsible for climate change). Suppose, now, that the former has much more freshwater than she needs and could easily spare some for the one suffering from drought. And now think about what it would mean if she failed to give some of it away. By *ubuntu*, it is natural to say that although she has access to water, she does not have it in a comprehensive or appropriate way, as she has failed to share and care with it.

By a natural interpretation of *ubuntu*, a capability is itself is marred by the anti-social or discordant way in which other facets of it have been attained. In contrast, the standard Capabilities Approach does not distinguish between capabilities attained through communal relations and those attained otherwise. As a consequence of this, considerations of oppression and inequality are applied *after* the measurement of well-being, yet another interesting difference between the two approaches to social protection.

Conclusion: combining the two philosophies?

In the previous section, my primary aim was to reveal how core elements of the Capabilities Approach and of *ubuntu* have divergent theoretical and practical implications. However, the reader could surely detect respects in which I have tended to find *ubuntu* more attractive or at least worth taking seriously as a rival to its more influential competitor. I conclude this article by suggesting a philosophical way forward.

Suppose the reader is like me in being sympathetic to the following ideas: an important dimension of the nature and injustice of poverty is that it is, in part, a function of an uncaring state and similar institutions that could do more; when fighting poverty with social protection, it is normally not morally enough to do so unintentionally, even if the results of doing so would be marginally more beneficial; participation on the part of the poor in social protection programmes is morally important for its own sake to some degree; money must be distributed, but, in addition, certain goods or services that are likely to foster ties among people must be as well; in a condition of scarcity, a state has particular moral reason to focus on aiding those with whom it is already related, roughly, its residents; and the way a certain good has been distributed might itself be relevant to whether a person's capability has been comprehensively obtained.

I have suggested that an influential interpretation of *ubuntu* captures these judgements better than does the Capabilities Approach as normally understood. If that is correct, then perhaps *ubuntu* should be deemed foundational, with capabilities being invoked to specify how precisely to aid others beyond helping them realize their human excellence as communal beings. That is, the most important capability might be the capacity to prize relationships of identity and solidarity and then subsidiary capabilities would be those essential for having and actualizing it. As exhibiting solidarity is a matter of caring for others' quality of life, and prizing identity requires doing so in a way that provides opportunities to live well (and does not force people to do so), capabilities are a natural facet of an *ubuntu* approach to social protection. When seeking to prevent or alleviate poverty, the friend of *ubuntu* will naturally attend to opportunities of the kinds that Nussbaum, Alkire and others have specified; advancing them would be some ways of esteeming identity and solidarity with others.

I do not suggest that this approach is clearly correct, even granting the argumentation made in this article. My claim is merely that it is a novel conception of social protection that is worth taking seriously by those who have welcomed the recent shift away from individualist and subjective approaches and towards those that are more relational and objective.

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Notes

1. As social protection programmes have only recently begun to be implemented in many developing countries (Merrien, 2013), the practical focus there is often on absolute amount of monetary income (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009: 45–46; Von Gliszczynski, 2015).
2. Note how this sense of 'individualism' contrasts with another used in the field, as an approach by which social protection targets individuals rather than communities or states (e.g. Von Gliszczynski, 2015: 124–125). All the philosophies mentioned in this article entail that individuals, and not so much groups, are properly targeted by social protection, but only some of them, namely, Kantianism and utilitarianism, maintain that the basic reason for doing so is a value constituted solely by the internal properties of individuals, in contrast to views according to which relationships (also) merit pursuit for their own sake.
3. Note that this sense of 'relationalism', according to which relationships of certain kinds merit pursuit for their own sake, is not implied by a focus on relative deprivation. Attention to inequality could be motivated not by a basic relational concern, but by its effects on the internal properties of individuals, such as their health.
4. For other readings of the African tradition, which take relationality to be a derivative value, see Bujo (2001) and Gyekye (1997).
5. If a state has permitted illegal immigrants or refugees to reside in its territory for an extended time, and they have integrated themselves into the society and contributed to the state's goals, they count as 'residents' or 'compatriots'.

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