

Identifying the least advantaged: a debate on metrics between primary goods and capabilities

Katarina Pitasse¹

Long abstract

The existence of poverty shows us that our institutions have failed in guaranteeing well-being and real freedom for all. This state of affairs leaves us with the knowledge that people do not enjoy access to the same opportunities, goods and services; that is to say, many people live under precarious material, social and political conditions. Even when the unjust picture in which the accumulation of advantages lays in the hands of the few is not new, it is time to point out that we should have effective normative guidance that lead us to a realistic and successful project to fight poverty and, consequently, transform contemporary democratic liberal societies both developed and developing.

To attend this aim, it is thus important to clarify how existing theories of justice evaluate an individual's social position and how they identify who the least advantaged in a society are (i.e., who counts as a poor person, at least in an abstract sense).² This clarification can add an important point of view to poverty studies. To do that, theories of justice need a metric or currency to identify whom count as the least advantaged in society. Such metric or currency is used to evaluate a person's status, that is to say, it is a theoretical tool to see if the status of a person or group is fair or unfair.

Metrics of justice are traditionally presented in two types, namely: they can be subjective or objective. The former metrics focus on an individual's internal or mental status, such as his or her happiness and satisfaction of preferences. Objective metrics of justice, in turn, are about the factual status of the individual, such as having access to primary goods and functionings (ANDERSON, 2010).

Let me elaborate. On the one hand, subjective metrics are praised by their potential to allowing access to understanding how deprived a person may feel about her own situation and by her own determination and are conducted without any external nor disrespectful evaluation of the person's status. An objection to this understanding of a person's status is that she may lack the necessary preconditions to evaluate and judge whether or not her life goes well. On

¹ Katarina is Ph.D. candidate at the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium), where she is a member of the Hoover Chair of Economic and Social Ethics. Her research is focused on understanding unconditional and participative policies to fight against poverty. katarina.fragoso@uclouvain.be

² By abstract here I mean the general characteristics or conditions upon which a group of individuals can be said to be poor.

the other hand, objective metrics appear as an alternative to the aforementioned objection and seek to apply an external evaluation about the deprivation suffered by some people. Nonetheless this objective metric can be criticized of being disrespectful in that it does not take into account the evaluation of those directly involved (PARR, 2017: 01).

Moreover, it's possible to say that some metrics are a combination of both subjective and objective metrics, thus escaping from the strict separation among them. Indeed, a combination of both metrics seems a good option because it can aggregate dimensions from one diagnosis and provide a proxy picture of who is the least disadvantaged in a society. For example, an approach interested in social primary goods would consider not only the objective status of a person but also other subjective dimensions such as social base of self-respect. Or, the capabilities approach which, apart from considering objective and subjective dimensions such as happiness, self-respect and nourishment, suggests that we need to regard what a person can do with the amount of resources that she has, taking into account personal, environment and social conditions. Approaches focused on primary goods and capabilities are egalitarian theory of justice³ and can be said to have an openness to combine both subjective and objective metrics. Moreover, these approaches have also moved away from a focus on income and wealth toward a broader range of factors that affect whether or not people can stand in relations of equality of opportunities with respect to one another (e.g. social norms, cultural attitudes).

I have so far described how metrics are useful to have a clearer idea of who counts as a poor person in a determined society. Now, however, I want to move on to explain how different theories of justice understand and make use of those metrics when assessing and comparing the circumstances lived by individuals. More specifically, I shall refer to two prominent egalitarian metrics of justice: the Rawlsian notion of social primary goods and the capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (ROBEYNS; BRIGHOUSE, 2010:01). Both metrics seem to privilege objective with subjective aspects. For instance, primary goods are considered a list of objective goods used to identify the least advantaged in a society, taking into account a broader list of means⁴ -more than only income- that every

³ Egalitarian theories of justice, in a distributive fashion, focus on improving the quality of the life of the least advantaged. More specifically, egalitarian theories of justice require actions to aid the least advantaged. Thus, making a metric or currency to identify who those are better-off from who those are worse-off necessary (ARNESON, 2010: 101).

⁴ In the Sen's words: "In studying poverty, there is an excellent argument for beginning with whatever information we have on the distributions of income, particularly low real income. There is, however, an equally good case for not ending with income analysis only. John Rawls's classic analysis of "primary goods" provides a broader picture of resources that people need, no matter what their respective ends are, this include income but also other general purpose "means" (SEN, 1999: 72).

(rational) person needs, and bearing in mind a neutral conception of the good. The capabilities approach, in turn, improved the notion of primary goods (ROEMER, 1996:203) by considering what a person is capable of achieving, and, what she or he is capable of being and doing with those goods.

This aggregation of objective and subjective aspects seems to go in the right direction. Primary goods can be understood as a list of rights, liberties and basic resources that one needs to access opportunities to develop her/his concept of life. With it, Rawls's approach permits us to avoid the supremacy of just one kind of means to achieve a good life, such as a metric focused on income and happiness. The Capabilities approach, in turn, allows us to go further than primary goods, by highlighting that it is important to focus on real freedom, namely, the goals of life (ends) that one has, rather than on resources (means). Sen, then, takes into consideration the very conditions, personal, social and environmental, that interferes in the person conversion of means into ends.

Despite these advantages, in general, primary goods and capabilities can be criticized for being ambivalent in regards to arbitrary rules such as domination and exploitation that risk the access a person may have to rights and just social relations (FORST, 2014). The capabilities approach is a metric of justice that seems to go further than Rawls's scope by regarding not only what a person has, but also how she is treated in a society. Collective relational necessities and capabilities allow us to defend the claim that a structure and fair relations between individuals are needed in order to guarantee a just society. With that, it is possible to avoid the risk to fall into poverty, because this approach rejects exploitation, domination, servility and social exclusion from all social relations and cultural norms (WOLFF, 2015). In this vein, the capabilities approach seems to provide a proxy picture of the least advantaged by also considering the notion of agency as part of their identity.

In this paper, I focus on metrics of justice to identify the least advantaged. First I will explore the distinction between subjective and objective metrics of justice. Although drawing on this distinction help us to point out important objections to the subjective proposal (such as adaptive preference and expensive tastes), in the second section, I will show that this distinction is not so rigorous because it is possible to find objective aspects within subjective metrics and vice-versa. In addition, I will argue that although aggregation of subjective and objective metrics as understood by Rawls and Sen is the better option, it can be insensitive to important relational factors and empowerment. Finally, I argue in support of the capabilities approach as satisfactory metric of justice given that it is able to aggregate subjective and objective indicators of distributive justice and also a participatory/agency dimension.

