The weight of poverty and the role of the subject

Gottfried Schweiger[1]

Abstract: This paper examines the role of subjective experiences in social philosophy and discusses it in relation to the critique of poverty. The subjects of poverty –the poor– and their stories can either be viewed as an essential voice in criticizing poverty or they can be viewed as flawed, distorted and misleading in contrast to 'objective' measures. I will discuss two different of theories, the capabilities approach – developed by Amartya Sen –and the recognition approach– mainly associated with Axel Honneth. While Sen is reluctant to give the poor a saying in the evaluation of their condition, Honneth, staying within the tradetion of Critical Theory, views them as indispensable for social critique. So, both theories also bring forward different ideas how to understand and conceptualize normative theory.

Keywords: Poverty, Capabilities, Recognition.

1. THE MORAL WEIGHT OF POVERTY

During recent years, the problem of worldwide poverty has become a thoroughly debated topic in philosophy. The discussion is complex and there is considerable disagreement about many issues such as questions concerning the ethical responsibility for the current situation and ethically demanded solution strategies. However, a widely shared understanding is that worldwide poverty is not only bad for the poor and to a minor extent also for the rich, but somehow morally wrong and unjust (Mack u. a. 2009). Within this realm of conceptual and normative discussions, the capability approach of Amartya Sen is an important player, while the recognition approach –closely connected to the works of Axel Honneth– is another influential theory in social and political philosophy. Therefore, a reflection on the relationship between the capability and recognition approaches regarding their take on poverty is of great value for the philosophical debate and for the wider frame of poverty research.

1.1 THE CAPABILITIES APPROACH

The central claim of the capability approach as developed by Amartya Sen over the last three decades is that evaluations of societal arrangements, quality-of-life assessments and judgments about justice or development should primarily focus on people's capabilities, that is, on their real opportunities to lead the lives they have reason to value (Sen 1999; Robeyns 2005). In other words, the capability approach puts a focus rather on what people are effectively able to do and to be,

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[1] Paris Lodron University of Salzburg, Centre for Ethics and Poverty Research.

instead of what they have or feel. This does not mean that income, happiness or commodities are not important in this perspective. But income and commodities are considered means to an end and therefore of instrumental value only, while happiness is seen as one significant aspect of human life among others that cannot be taken as the only evaluative category.

In the capability approach the availability of certain substantial freedoms is judged as the most important aspect of the life of any person. The freedoms, e.g., to live a long and healthy life, to take part in the life of the community, to receive a high quality education, to enjoy recreational activities, or to seek employment on an equal basis with others, are commonly seen as basic and it is demanded that they are made available to everyone. Since poverty is essentially defined by the absence of such intrinsically valuable components of a good human life, it is clear that it is, by definition, morally wrong.

Furthermore, capability theorists generally argue that human beings have the potential to live flourishing, meaningful and active lives according to their own values and shaped by their conceptions of the good. Social arrangements primarily have the function to provide conducive conditions for each and every person to develop their faculties and to bring them into a position to act autonomously. If somebody is affected by poverty, her valuable choices are limited and her potential to realise her life plans is seriously restrained. In a situation of serious capability deprivation it is not possible to act as an autonomous agent, which is considered a serious harm and even a fundamental violation of the equal dignity of all human beings.

1.2 THE RECOGNITION APPROACH

Axel Honneth has not developed thorough an answer to question of poverty. This means that I have to reconstruct the key ideas of the recognition approach and develop my answers from there (Honneth 1996; Honneth 2003). In summary, the recognition approach distinguishes three basic and universal forms of recognition: (a) love, which manifests itself in personal relationships and the feeling of being accepted as a particular individual; (b) rights, which mean equal access to civil and social rights; and (c) social esteem, which is the ability to valuably contribute with one's own talents and features. These different forms of mutual recognition are viewed as the intersubjective conditions for the constitution of subjectivity and identity and they enable individual self-realization, which is the core of any "good life". The denial or distortion of recognition is experienced as subjectively harmful and is articulated in various ways, either individually or collectively. Suffering is therefore one major starting point and concern of the recognition approach and this emphasizes its willingness to stay as close as possible to actual social conflicts and movements. If someone lacks one or more of these forms of recognition it is highly unlikely that she will be able to develop or sustain a positive self-relation and identify and pursue her own goals in life.

From this, I will formulate a recognition-based concept of poverty that combines descriptive and normative features. Poverty is living under such

circumstances that are connected with feelings of denigration and humiliation, as they do not allow the experience and gain of socially prevalent forms of recognition and therefore hinder undistorted self-realization. Beyond the basic physiological and psychological needs all humans share, a further operationalisation and differentiation has to include empirical knowledge about the target society. In this sense, a recognition-based concept of poverty combines absolute and relative elements. The general forms of recognition –personal relationships, cognitive respect and social esteem– are universal but their concrete formation and embodiment is relative. It is important to stress that recognition can come in all different shapes and is not only about identity politics but also includes material and social forms such as income, housing or political participation.

So both the capabilities and the recognition approach emphasize the high importance of personal freedom and view poverty basically as a limitation of it. But the differences are equally important and one of them is the role of the subjects of poverty. The poor and their stories can either be viewed as an essential voice in criticizing poverty or they can be viewed as flawed, distorted and misleading in contrast to "objective" measures.

2. THE ROLE OF THE SUBJECT

The role of subjective experiences, feelings and emotions is highly debated within moral, social, and political philosophy. It is also an important topic within poverty research and in debates about adequate measures of poverty and social exclusion. What role do and should such subjective experiences, feelings and emotions such as anger, shame, emotional distress or happiness and joy play, when it comes to measure and evaluate poverty? In most official surveys, whether from the European Union or from other national institutions, such subjective experiences, feelings and emotions are not indicators or necessary conditions of poverty and social exclusion (Nolan und Whelan, 2011). They rather focus on monetary or material aspects such as deprivation, unemployment, basic commodities or capabilities. But there is a growing concern that this might be a major shortcoming and that the multidimensionality of poverty and social exclusion also demands the inclusion of such subjective criteria because they are an important part of the experience of poverty and social exclusion (Brock, 1999). The rise of the debate about subjective well-being is also an indicator for this (McGillivray und Clarke, 2006). What is certain is that poverty and social exclusion are in general connected with an impaired well-being and harmful feelings and emotions, although this is not true for everyone (Watson, Pichler, und Wallace, 2010). Finally, the role of the poor themselves in the measurement and the conceptual approach of poverty is in question. Do they know best or maybe better than the poverty researchers what poverty means or should mean? These questions arise also within normative spheres, when it comes to evaluating poverty. Do subjective feelings have or should they have normative weight and, if so, how much? Is something morally wrong because it is felt as wrong or harmful? And what should we do with the long known cases in which people adapt to their living conditions and feel happy

although they should not? These problems of alienation and the unreliability of subjective feelings and emotions are still unsolved and open for debate within normative theories. Neither poverty research nor normative philosophy is situated outside the real world, which is full of relations of power and domination.

> «A question remains: whose analysis and categories are to be privileged? These are largely "ours", those of professionals who are not ourselves poor, expressed in "our" language. The words, concepts, categories and priorities of poor people, especially illustrated by the way they were elicited and expressed in the Voices of the Poor, were rich and varied with commonalities. There are trade-offs to be puzzled over: between "their" realities and ours; between local participatory diversity and commensurability for purposes of aggregation; and between many categories representting poor people's realities and fewer categories more manageable for outsider professionals and for measurement.» (Chambers, 2007, 38)

Now, the recognition and the capability approach present different solutions or at least different perspectives on the role of the subjective within poverty research and in the evaluation of the moral significance of poverty and social exclusion. And this different approaches also reflect different convictions about the nature of normative reasoning in general. One is to give the subjects of poverty or any victims of injustice a prominent role and articulate social critique from their perspective. The other one is to formulate a theory that explains the poor what is wrong about their condition and which therefore implies know a lot more about what is good and what is wrong.

For the recognition approach, as said, subjective experiences, feelings and emotions are a necessary condition that a condition is morally harmful and wrong. Although there are discrepancies about the exact role and weight of such feelings, it is a major pillar which cannot be dismissed (Honneth, 2003; Pilapil, 2011). This leads back to the very roots of the recognition approach, which comes from the tradition of Critical Theory and further pursues the idea that social philosophy has to reflect social movements and take their claims seriously and as a starting point for normative explorations. So, subjective experiences, feelings and emotions, voiced by such groups and social movements as the labour class, women or black people from the beginning and the concern of the recognition approach. Without this relation the critique of the recognition approach would be artificial and without any audience. The recognition approach aims to not only hear the voice of the poor but to give it systematic weight.

> «To undertake an effective critique of society one must start by taking into account instances of injustice or violations of standards of justice. In contrast to its positive counterpart, the experience of injustice possesses greater normative bite. As such, for Honneth, no experience of injustice must be ignored even if its public expression is fraught with danger and difficulty. This approach to social justice and normativity is typical of the

Frankfurt School, which grounds the motivation for social resistance and liberation movements not on grand theories of intellectuals but on people's everyday experience.» (Pilapil, 2011, 81)

This opens new possibilities for social critique and gives it more bite and weight, because it is not the critical theorist alone speaking but he or she articulates the suffering and critique of the oppressed and the victims of injustice themselves. This approach can also be used to detect injustices that otherwise would go unnoticed or would be misinterpreted by the distant critic. The poor are the real experts on the condition and without them many different dimensions, causes and consequences of poverty would not be known. But the subjects of poverty do not only know a lot about the negativity of a harmful life but they also know a lot about the "good life" and what forms of recognition are legitimate and what not.

> «I always introduce the conflicts and struggles of capitalist social formations with reference to those principles of mutual recognition that are considered legitimate by the members of society themselves. What motivates individuals or social groups to call the prevailing social order into question and to engage in practical resistance is the moral conviction that, with respect to their own situations or particularities, the recognition principles considered legitimate are incorrectly or inadequately applied». (Honneth, 2003a, 157)

Then again the capability approach has a more distant and critical relation to subjective experiences, feelings and emotions when it comes to their moral value and role in determining poverty and social exclusion. Sen is sceptical of taking people's subjective assessments of their own situation as the defining feature of their well-being. They argue that individual desires, preferences or psychological happiness are malleable, susceptible to manipulation, adaptive to adverse circumstances and therefore of limited usefulness for evaluational exercises. This is the case, it is argued, because the conditions people live in influence their perception of their objective realities, and especially factors such as entrenched deprivation, social exclusion or predominant power structures within a society can contribute to individuals having a distorted picture of their lives. Particularly in cultural contexts where social norms systematically disadvantage certain groups, even the notion of self-interest can become useless, as Sen demonstrates using the example of women in rural India who have learned to subordinate themselves to other members of their family:

> «It has often been observed that if a typical Indian rural woman was asked about her personal "welfare", she would find the question unintelligible and if she was able to reply, she might answer the question in terms of her reading of the welfare of her family. The idea of personal welfare may not be viable in such a context». (Sen 1990, 126)

According to capability theorists, this adaptation problem clearly shows that social evaluations must transcend purely subjective measures (as used by utilitarians) and go in the "objectivist direction". Otherwise, the real circumstances of the disadvantaged members of society are systematically misrepresented. As Sen puts it:

> «Consider a very deprived person who is poor, exploited, overworked and ill, but who has been made satisfied with his lot by social conditioning (through, say, religion, political propaganda, or cultural pressure). Can we possibly believe that he is doing well just because he is happy and satisfied? Can the living standard of a person be high if the life that he or she leads is full of deprivation? The standard of life cannot be so detached from the nature of the life the person leads». (Sen, 1987, 7–8)

Going in the objectivist direction means that the evaluative space of well-being must be expanded beyond any subjective metric and should include func-tionnings and capabilities. By looking at this kind of information in order to characterize the well-being of a person, one gets the real picture of a person's circumstances and perceived misrepresentations of social realities are avoided. That is to say, the consideration of achieved functionings tells one exactly how a person is living and capabilities are best understood as an objective notion expressing the individuals' general and specific freedoms to live the life he or she has reason to value. In other words, it is assumed that an increase in well-being always involves an increase of important options to choose from.

Despite this objectivization in the definition of well-being and the rejection of *naive* first person evaluations, the individual's perspective is still highly valued in the capability approach. In Sen's writings there is the background assumption that an expansion of valuable capabilities is connected to a reduction of the formation of adaptive preferences in people's values and desires and he is clear that in his opinion «[g]reater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world, and these matters are central to the process of development» (Sen, 1999, 18). Therefore, in fair and conducive circumstances the desires and preferences of persons indicate their "real" interests and they have to be taken seriously. However, in the non-ideal world we live there are basically no "ideal" circumstances for an open and undistorted deliberation process.

The different approaches to the role of subjective experiences are also present within the different methodologies and concepts within poverty research. The Participatory Poverty Assessment, for example, stands against distant descriptions and definitions of poverty by so-called experts, which can be criticized for reproducing poverty themselves (Norton, 2001). Poverty research is seen as part of the equation and not as an unrelated observer. Such approaches are also based on the conviction that we do not know what poverty is, without asking the poor themselves, and that poverty research can be a tool for empowerment. This is a position the recognition approach also favours, because it aims to take the experiences of the disrespected, poor or excluded seriously and supports their

struggles for recognition (Lister, 2004). As shown, Sen is more critical of such participatory approaches and his criticism is shared by many poverty researchers, who view the value of subjective assessments as limited and advocate that they should at least be supplemented by other "objective" indicators.

> «There is a deeper problem about exclusive reliance on participatory methods, which goes back to Sen's criticisms of the utilitarian approach. People's own assessment of their own condition can overlook their objective condition, and can be biased as a result of limited information and social conditioning (i.e., these methods also suffer from "valuation neglect"). The generally public aspect of assessments may also make it difficult to get honest assessments, and could involve participants in some risk.» (Ruggeri Laderchi, Saith, und Stewart, 2006, 40)

As these considerations indicate, a discussion between the capability and the recognition approach and their different weighting and integration of subjective experiences, feelings and emotions can be situated within a much larger context. How should poverty be measured? Who are the "experts", the poor or the scientists?

3. CONCLUSION

Are there any lessons to be learned from the diverging arguments that the capability and recognition approaches offer, or could they benefit from each other in any way?

In both approaches one finds a nuanced characterisation and evaluation of poverty that is associated with (a) a set of objective criteria necessary for the assessment of poverty and (b) the recognition that these criteria are context sensitive and only applicable in a certain context if the subjective experiences, feelings and emotions of the persons concerned are given due weight.

So far, the capability approach put a focus on (a) while the recognition approach was more concerned with (b). However, the both approaches are in many ways overlapping and can therefore also learn from each other.

On the one hand, it must be stressed that the recognition approach does not rely only on "the voices of the poor" but also aims at justifying and empowering them. It tries to develop criteria that distinguish justified from unjustified forms of recognition and makes use of the category of "undistorted self-realisation". This notion is considered universally valid and serves as a foundation for the objective evaluation not only of individual lives but also of social relations. On the other hand, the capability approach does not simply dismiss the knowledge and subjective experiences, feelings and emotions of the poor. Their perspectives are taken seriously and considered indispensable for the definition of valuable capabilities in a certain socio-economic context. Sabine Alkire, for example, has drawn on participatory tools and techniques in an effort to answer the question: «How do we identify valuable capabilities?» (Alkire, 2002).

However, an essential claim of the capability approach is to make people critically engage with their experiences, feelings and emotions and to provide them with the material and immaterial resources necessary for it.

There is no "objective" way of measuring and conceptualizing poverty as there is no way of "objectively" defining justice or the "good life", but still every theory needs a certain set of normative claims that transcend the subjectivity of personal assessments, because if it does not it is always in danger to become arbitrary.

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