

# Some Hermeneutic Qualities of a Capabilities Approach

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## **Abstract**

This paper draws inspiration from two seemingly disparate cases – one of friendship and one of imagination – to explore some of the hermeneutic qualities of a capabilities approach.

## **Keywords**

Philosophical hermeneutics, friendship, imagination, capabilities approach, Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, Hans-Georg Gadamer

In this paper, I explore some hermeneutic qualities of a capabilities approach, a normative framework of well-being and social justice developed primarily by Amartya Sen (1980, 1999, 2009) and Martha Nussbaum (1988, 2000, 2006, 2011), and draw inspiration from a story related in the editorial to this 2019 volume of the *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*. Moules (2019) relates a story in which she shields a sick friend from problems in her own life, so as not to be an additional burden (p. 1). Although clearly rooted in an instinct to protect someone she cares for deeply, she acknowledges undermining the very principles that permit and animate friendship. Friendship requires of its participants the exercise of several capabilities, such as empathy, the capacity to love and be loved, and using one's autonomy to furnish that of another. It also demands of its participants two important sacrifices: trust and vulnerability. But as Moules (2019) notes, friendship ultimately depends on the capability to choose to be one (p. 2). In the sections to follow, I provide a brief overview of Nussbaum's (2011) capabilities approach and make connections to Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Along the way, I draw on my own experience as an educator, both in a secondary classroom and in a post-secondary program for pre-service teachers.

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## A Capabilities Approach

According to Nussbaum (2011), a capabilities approach seeks to answer the following question: What is each person able to do and to be? (p. 18). That is, it is not simply concerned with a present state of being or doing – what a capabilities approach denotes as *functionings* – but also with a person’s latent potential for choice and action, or *capabilities*. This emphasis on the individual’s potential is one of the approach’s affinities with hermeneutic thinking. One useful way to conceive of the relationship between these two key elements of a capabilities approach is to understand functionings as realizations or manifestations of underlying capabilities. In this light, yet another hermeneutic quality emerges: capabilities are alethic. In being disclosed (i.e. in the realization as a specific functioning), what might have been is concealed (i.e., other realizations).

In her book *Creating Capabilities* (2011), Nussbaum sets out a list of ten capabilities which all people must possess in some shape or form in order to lead lives worthy of human dignity, listed below:

*Life*: The ability to live a long, healthy life.

*Bodily Health*: The ability to have good physical health, nourishment, and shelter.

*Bodily Integrity*: Freedom of movement, from violence, and control over one’s body.

*Senses, Imagination, and Thought*: This might include basic numeracy and literacy as well as imaginative and metaphoric capacity.

*Emotions*: The ability to connect emotionally with others; to love; to be the object of love; a freedom from fear and anxiety; good psychological health.

*Practical Reason*: A capacity for critical thinking and being able to make reasonable decisions for one’s life.

*Affiliation*: A freedom to associate individually, politically, etc.

*Other Species*: An affinity for the natural world.

*Play*: A freedom to recreate.

*Control over one’s environment*: This could be political, material, and emotional control over one’s lived life.

Each of these capabilities is irreducible and incommensurable – taken together, they constitute the basis for a dignified life. One can see elements of friendship, for example, in Nussbaum’s capability of *affiliation*. Specifically, she characterizes affiliation as the capability to “live with and toward others” and “to be able to imagine the situation of another” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 34). But despite her fundamental role in the development of a capabilities approach, it is important to note that Nussbaum’s is but one conception of the approach. Exploring this further assists in illuminating the hermeneutic qualities of capability.

In her book *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice* (2017), Ingrid Robeyns carefully distinguishes between the capabilities approach as a broad conceptual framework and what she denotes as specific capability theories, or the various accounts, analyses, and applications of the broader framework that exist in the literature (p. 37). To make this distinction, Robeyns (2017) parses out the approach into modules, which is helpful for exploring the hermeneutic qualities of capability. The modular account affords the opportunity to be explicit in terms of human diversity, the chosen capability space, unique structural constraints, meta-theoretical considerations, and

other aspects of lived experience. This not only reflects a plurality of value inherent in the capabilities approach, but of its possible applications, too.

All capabilities theories share a common set of core elements. These elements are what distinguish a capabilities approach from other approaches to well-being, such as those rooted in human rights or the availability and distribution of resources. A capabilities approach must orient itself around these two fundamental concepts: functionings and capabilities. A capability, as Nussbaum (2011) notes, is a sphere of freedom and choice, a rich set of potentialities from which a person may choose to realize specific functionings. A functioning is a state of being or a doing. Functionings constitute one aspect of lived experience: that we are always in a state of some being or doing is a defining characteristic of human existence. In many cases, there is significant overlap in the nature of a functioning: one can both *be* numerate and *do* arithmetic, for example. In other cases, the state of being has no corollary in doing (e.g., the state of being a friend).

Yet another quality of functionings and capabilities is that they are value-neutral. That is, the capabilities approach reflects two important aspects of lived experience. Firstly, it recognizes that not all functionings or capabilities are good. The capability to rape is one oft-cited example of a capability with negative value (Robeyns, 2017, pp. 39-40). While a capabilities approach is clearly oriented around agency, it is so only insofar as that agency is in service of human dignity.

In establishing functionings and capabilities as value-neutral, the approach compels us to choose which functionings and capabilities we value. Robeyns (2017) notes that many capabilities theories collapse two normative moments into a single decision in defining functionings as “those beings and doings that one has reason to value” (p. 43). Instead, we must carefully delineate between the decision to use capabilities and functionings as the interpretive space (i.e., to agree on a capabilities approach) and the choice of which capabilities and functionings will fill that space. This is an especially important distinction for complex moral questions, such as those we find in education, as well as for the practical decisions of living a life. Should children be able to determine the content of their learning and how they communicate their understanding? Should education cultivate in students the imaginative capacities to live a rich life or the skills required to be an economically productive citizen? To what extent should we cultivate the capabilities for vulnerability, trust, and friendship as a society? These are also the sorts of questions one must approach hermeneutically.

At its most fundamental, a capabilities approach focuses on both functionings (beings and doings) and capabilities (spheres of freedom) as the interpretive space in which we can best understand individual well-being. It embraces value-pluralism in its strong commitment to human dignity. It takes each person as an end and the individual as the ultimate unit of value, but it does not do so at the expense of other aggregative approaches to well-being. Rather, it is a complement to other approaches. A capabilities approach strives to tell us the most about the individual: how one can convert resources into capabilities, how one can realize states of being and doing from their capabilities, and about one’s ultimate state of well-being.

### Some Detective Work: Settling In

When in need of both relaxation and inspiration, I turn to whom I think is one of fiction's great hermeneuts: George Simenon's Chief Inspector Maigret. The protagonist in Simenon's slim novels bears little resemblance to others in the genre, say Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or Chandler's Philip Marlowe. Surely, they share a certain *mise-en-scène*: the streets are gritty, knifed with shadow, full of sideways glances and hushed talk. It matters little whether the puddles they splash through as they walk their beats are in Paris or London or Los Angeles. But Maigret is different. "I don't go in for deductions," Maigret barks at an underling in *The Yellow Dog*, as if taking a shot at his esteemed colleague across fictional space and time (p. 69). When a counterpart questions his method in *Maigret*, the Chief Inspector asks what he means. "You know better than I do," the man replies. "Usually you get involved in people's lives; you try to understand their thinking and you take as much interest in things that happened to them twenty years earlier as you do in concrete clues" (p. 103). Rather than abstract experience into formal logic, like Holmes might have done, or punch and stumble his way through high society's seedy underbelly, as Marlowe was wont to do, Maigret, as a superior notes in *Maigret and the Toy Village*, "settles into a case as if it were a pair of comfortable old slippers" (p. 22).

Moules, McCaffrey, Field, and Laing (2015) invoke the insufficiency of the "Raymond Chandler method" of inquiry (p. 62). "Hermeneutic practice," they note, "is a lot like detective work in that one proceeds on the basis of attuned perception, concrete discovery, and the imagining (...) of possible meanings and courses of action" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 62). We typically associate interpretation – or, in the profession's parlance, *cracking the case* – with the accumulation and analysis of data or clues, but this sort of concrete discovery is only part of a complex process. Maigret's colleagues mistook his attuned perception, his interest in the particular, for a lack of method. Heidegger, as Moules et al. (2015) note, suggested that when "something addresses us in the particular, it does so as a case of something that is already significant" (p. 63). Moules et al. (2015) are careful to distance the term *case* from its typical sense: it is not a body of hard facts to be acted upon, but rather "something that has befallen one" (p. 63). Caputo writes that the word *case* is derived from "cadere, casum, to fall, as in a casualty, for which we buy insurance" (cited in Moules et al., 2015, p. x). But in hermeneutics, and arguably for my friend Maigret, the case is not merely a particular instance of some universal. For teachers as for detectives, it is the individual that is of most importance; universals are simply abstractions. We do not presume to crack a case – it cracks us! As Caputo argues, a case does not fall in one's lap, rather one rises to the case: "We have everything we can do to rise to the occasion of the individual, to ascend to the thick, dense, rich, complexity of the individual situation, instead of lolling lazily amidst the thin transparencies of universals" (cited in Moules et al., 2015, p. x).

Moules et al.'s characterization of hermeneutics as detective work lends itself well to interpreting capability. Consider the case of friendship. We can conceive of what friendship might look like: a friend is someone who is there for you when you are down, who you share important moments with in life, and who you feel you can trust implicitly. These are the sorts of concrete discoveries one might make with an attuned perception (Moules et al., 2015, p. 62). But what of the underlying capability set that makes friendship possible? Friendship requires vulnerability, for example, but in friendship it must be reciprocal and what is said is as important as what is left unsaid. Each offer of friendship is underwritten by a solicitation: *will you be mine?* And no friendship is

settled once and for all. Rather, the functionings and capabilities we require to sustain so complex a human relationship as friendship are in constant flux. One must not only take stock of the present state of a relationship, but anticipate a friend's needs, wants, and desires, to "imagine (...) possible meanings and courses of action" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 62).

A concrete example from my practice as an educator might offer further insight. I work diligently to listen to my students, to hear them, to interpret what I hear in curricular and pedagogical contexts, but I often become distracted by institutional constraints, the logistics of schooling, and calls for accountability. It is easy to forget what one is listening for, to forget that the goal of interpretation is human freedom and that capability is the shape that freedom assumes in lived experience. I regularly find the pendulum of my own teaching practice swinging frequently between the two extremes of reductive abstraction and a kind of teacherly punch-and-stumble, as if specters of Holmes and Marlowe have alighted on my shoulders. In the same lesson, I might as easily deduce ideas about a student's ability from a test score as I induce them from a conversation in which I am forced to rely mostly on intuition. In cultivating a hermeneutic approach to capability, the point is to stop the pendulum, to remain vigilant of both extremes. I must remember to evoke my friend Maigret.

Of course, a case soon falls in which one is obligated to do just that. In this case – The Case of the Mysterious Rock – I observed a student teacher in a grade-three classroom during his first practicum in the Education program at the University. His lesson was simple but engaging: they were to brainstorm as a class the general characteristics of rocks, then work through stations characterizing specific examples. In the first part of the lesson, students raised their hands to suggest the general characteristics of rocks, and the student teacher wrote them on the whiteboard for all to see.

"Hard," a little girl called out after raising her hand.

"Yes, rocks are definitely hard," the student teacher agreed, writing the word *hard* on the whiteboard.

"Rough," suggested a boy, to which the student teacher again agreed, writing the word *rough* on the whiteboard. All was going as planned.

In our conference prior to the lesson, the student teacher had mentioned one boy in particular. This boy had taken out every book in the library on rocks and minerals; he spent his recesses "mining" in the schoolyard; he insisted his father take him out looking for rocks on the weekends. He was obsessed with rocks, and the student teacher was excited to present his lesson to this boy. Consequently, I watched this boy with some interest throughout the lesson, and as students continued to suggest adjectives – round, sharp, grey, and so forth – this boy looked increasingly pensive. Finally, he put his hand up, and the student teacher smiled broadly when he addressed the child.

"Mysterious," said the boy.

There was a slight pause and the student teacher furrowed his brow.

“Well, I don’t know,” said the student teacher. “I don’t know if rocks are mysterious.”

To which the boy relayed a story of finding a rock with his father. The rock they found, said the boy, was hard, rough, and grey, but when his dad hit the rock with a hammer, it was filled with crystals.

“It was mysterious,” the boy repeated.

The student teacher was intransigent. *Mysterious* would not end up on the whiteboard.

“That is really interesting, that must have been pretty neat,” said the student teacher, “but is mystery a characteristic of a rock?”

The boy scrunched his face up.

“Like, when I say ‘mysterious’,” the student teacher continued, “does it make you think of a rock?”

Yes, I screamed from within. The boy said nothing.

“Are there any other ways we could describe a rock?” the student teacher said as he turned to the other students.

Something of this story gnawed at me. It was not simply pedagogical. Rather, I felt I had watched a scene unfold in which two impulses wrestled and wrangled for dominance. Gadamer (1960/1989) writes that the principles of both Romanticism and the Enlightenment secure their validity through “the presupposition of the progressive retreat of magic in the world,” and in a sense I felt I had watched it recede before my very eyes (p. 275). My own impulse was to lament the lost opportunity to sustain a young child’s curiosity, but when I reflected on the lesson, I did not feel comfortable with the obvious alternative – writing mysterious on the board and moving on – either. At some point, I realized it was not these two impulses, but rather the ontological vacuum in which they consisted that required my attention. This manifested itself in the student teacher attempting to strip away the boy’s experience from the characteristics of a rock. The student teacher discounted *mysterious* as a characteristic of a rock because it did not fit into a methodical basis for characterizing one, namely the senses. Rocks are rough or smooth to the touch, can be shiny or grey, feel light or heavy – but with which sense can I determine a rock to be mysterious? For the student teacher, the “absence of such a basis [did] not mean that there might be other kinds of certainty, but rather that the judgment [had] no foundation in the things themselves” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 273).

What I lamented most was the lost opportunity for conversation, one in which each member is subsumed and led by the topic. What might the topic have been in this case? It was clear the impulse of the student teacher would have been to move the student from unknown to known, from mysterious to hard, heavy, and grey. A dichotomy of subject and object and the ostensible assurance of method are two defining characteristics of rationalism and the Enlightenment. In its

drive for objectivity, Gadamer (1960/1989) argues that one prejudice “defines its essence: the fundamental prejudice (...) is against prejudice itself” (p. 273). It was this impulse that made the student teacher reluctant to accept *mysterious* as an answer, but with some justification, too. Romanticism’s rebuttal to the enlightenment was to supplant objectivity with the “world of myth, unreflective life, not yet analyzed away by consciousness,” which it conferred a “romantic magic, even a priority over truth” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 275). In doing so, Romanticism situated itself in opposition to the Enlightenment, perpetuating “the abstract contrast between myth and reason” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 275). It would do the child an injustice to simply accept *mysterious* as an answer. Rather, it demands a conversation – but which one?

The answer requires good detective work and we cannot arrive at one simply by collecting physical evidence. In discussing Heidegger’s notion of Being, Caputo (2018) writes that our lived experience is not so easily observable. “We are not simply there, period, not simply present, like a rock or a plant which has certain properties,” he writes. “Our Being is more evasive, more self-evasive, so a hermeneutic investigation is more like detective work, looking for clues” (p. 36). But we know there is never just a plant, never just a rock. In discussing Heidegger’s example of a table – how such an inanimate object can become enmeshed in and inextricable from our experience – Caputo (2018) notes that it is not the table that is meaningful in itself, but in how it relates to those who live with it: “The table links us to other people who also sat at it, is marked by the times of the day, by the times of life” (p. 41). I think Caputo is right to suggest that if Heidegger’s sons happened upon the table later in life, “the whole world of their childhood (...) would come rushing over them (Caputo, 2018, p. 41). Much the same for a mysterious rock or an old friend.

### Square Brackets

In her translation of Sappho’s poems, the Canadian poet Anne Carson uses square brackets to indicate missing pieces of text in the papyri. This is not a technical convention, nor does Carson mark every gap in Sappho’s work. Rather, the brackets “are an aesthetic gesture toward the papyrological event” and “imply a free space of imaginal adventure” (Carson, 2002, p. xi). A well-placed bracket is a rich metaphor for capability and offers a fecund space for hermeneutic inquiry. In this sense, the familiar notion of *giving someone space*, whether it be for grieving, imaginative flight, or friendship, takes on new meaning – and confers great obligation on those involved. The specifics of that obligation are variable. The brackets might be to acknowledge a student’s lived experience in the classroom or to furnish the opportunity for one to be vulnerable, to be a friend.

Characterizing capability as hermeneutic draws our attention not simply to the act, or functioning, but to its potential. Heidegger writes that hermeneutics consists in the “quiet power of the possible” (quoted in Caputo, 2018, p. 55). This is arguably true of a capabilities approach as well. Of this connection between action and potential, Ricoeur writes:

We could say that a meaningful action is an action the *importance* of which goes “beyond” its *relevance* to its initial situation... An important action, we could say, develops meanings that can be actualized or fulfilled in situations other than the one in which this action occurred. To say the same thing in different words, the meaning of an important event

exceeds, overcomes, transcends, the social conditions of its production and may be reenacted in new social contexts. (quoted in Arthos, 2000, quotations and italics in original)

Caputo (1987) also writes eloquently of this intimate connection between what is realized and what is possible, noting that the “real world is the world which, motivated by actual concatenations of experience, has actually taken shape in experience. And corresponding in this are the real and more or less likely ‘possibilities’ opened up by the actual course which experience takes” (p. 44). This idea of the opening up of possibilities is echoed by Sen in his discussion of the role of education in a capabilities approach and its capacity to make “the horizon of vision wider” (Sen, 1999, p. 199). The actual beings and doings of a life are clearly important, but they cast long shadows of potential on the “undetermined but determinable horizon of ... experiential actuality at [a] particular time” (Husserl, quoted in Caputo, 1987, p. 45). Capabilities represent this undetermined but determinable horizon, and the best means by which to explore these horizons is hermeneutic inquiry; a conversation – but which one?

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