Comment on the Papers by
Shelley Feldman: Social Development, Capabilities, and the Contradictions of (Capitalist) Development and
David Barkin: Incorporating Indigenous Epistemologies into the Construction of Alternative Strategies to Globalization to Promote Sustainable Regional Resource Management

Paul B. Thompson

Shelley Feldman draws from a number of authors who have commented on Sen and Nussbaum’s “capabilities approach,” concluding that although their work has undeniably moderated some of the excesses associated with development theory and practice of years past, it still fails to challenge the neo-liberal paradigm of thinking on the general nature and legitimacy of development, and by extension, fails to challenge the unequal distribution of power inherent in the modern state system.\(^1\) David Barkin offers us a rich description of how local knowledge has been integrated with specific forms of technical expertise to create projects for human development in Mexico.\(^2\) By implication he suggests that there is a more effective ethic for involving marginalized and oppressed peoples in processes of development than the capabilities approach, one that might be summarized as “just do it.”

I have not been asked to comment on these two provocative papers because I have experience or training in development theory or practice. I have neither. Nor do I put myself forward as someone who wants or needs to be heard by development professionals, much less the intended beneficiaries of development activities, or even by interested bystanders and observers of the various intellectual debates on global inequality, sustainability, or distributive justice. I doubt seriously that I have anything


useful or even amusing to say to these audiences. I am here solely in the spirit of dialog across disciplinary traditions. My qualification is that I, indeed, earned the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the discipline of philosophy, and that I have been gainfully employed in various university philosophy departments for the past 25 years. I do not make this disclaimer from false modesty, for I am not modest and I do not intend to speak falsely. Modesty, however, is part and parcel of what I want to convey. I will not say, as the German romantic poet Novalis said, that philosophy will bake no bread, but Feldman and Barkin have each given us reason to doubt that the capabilities approach will do much baking.

Their criticisms, both explicit and implied, lead us to ask, “What questions were the capabilities approach intended to answer?” Feldman has reviewed some of the key questions for the literature of development theory, where it was becoming clear by the mid-1980’s that the paradigm of expanding markets for commoditized trade and the policy injunction for governments and international institutions to remove policy-induced distortions for individuals to participate in these markets were failing to address the main problems of the poor. These circumstances prompted questions at both the theoretical and policy level. Theoretically, the capabilities approach broadens the scope of development economics by showing that satisfaction of preferences calls for much more than maximization of personal welfare, especially including circumstances and outcomes (such as positive freedom for individuals) for which advances in net social welfare is a wholly inadequate substitute. Sen showed that policy choice could be seen as procedure

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3 Novalis was the pseudonym for Friedrich Leopold, Baron Von Hardenberg (1772-1801), and the full aphorism “Philosophy can bake no bread, but she can procure for us God, Freedom, and Immortality,” is far less modest. See Thomas Carlyle, “Novalis (1829)” Critical and Miscellaneous Essays in Five Volumes, Volume II. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904, pp. 1 – 55.
for economizing the satisfaction of this broadened conception of preference, resulting in a practical reorientation of development toward policies that favor poverty alleviation and local empowerment. But Feldman, whose paper might be re-titled “two cheers for capability,” has also argued that the questions for which capability is an answer do not go nearly far enough, while Barkin has shown how very far it is possible to go with an ethic that is much more prosaic.

What did philosophers think that Sen was doing? In the 1970’s, analytic ethics was preoccupied with a split between theorists such as R. M. Hare, J.C.C. Smart and Richard Brandt, on the one hand, all of whom were advocating some form of utilitarian consequentialism, and opponents such as John Rawls, Robert Nozick and Bernard Williams, all of whom found reasons to reject it. This is the milieu into which Sen inserted himself, and to those familiar with this milieu the capabilities approach seemed to be Sen’s attempt at an ethical or political theory that would maintain the basic logical structure of consequentialism while resolving conceptual problems and disturbing results associated with utilitarianism. Consequentialist ethical theories interpret moral justification or correctness as a function of the value associated with a state of affairs that is brought about as the causal consequence of action or policy. In the classical portrayal of policy analysis, laws, policies and managerial activities can be characterized as options available to a decision maker. The consequences of selecting any given course of action can be modeled as a causal process. This is where economic science enters the picture. The selection of which option to choose depends on the political orientation of the decision maker. This is where philosophy enters the picture.
Prior to Sen’s work, the role of philosophy in policy debate might have been caricatured as follows: Theorists committed to a utilitarian/consequentialist approach carried on a debate about the decision rule that should be applied to the predictions that economists make. Should it evaluate each choice on an action by action basis, or should it be applied to broad principles of policy guidance? How should it cope with analytic difficulties in aggregating the preferences of affected parties? Are there certain types of consequence that should be given greater weight, such as those relevant to basic needs? Another group of theorists tended to see policy choice largely in terms of the rationale that can be given for establishing and prioritizing rights and privileges. They believed that a rich characterization of the reasons a person might legitimately have for acting one way or another provided insight into this rationale, and thought that the welfare consequences of a given pattern of rights was, at best, of limited relevance. These theorists had their own debates about the relative importance of property rights and individual liberties as compared to social entitlements, dignity and respect, but all of these criteria accord considerably less weight to economic models.

However, the “top-level” philosophical debate, the one that had to be understood before one could make sense of anything else, was between utilitarian/consequentialist heirs of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill and the non-consequentialist heirs of John Locke and Immanuel Kant. As described by Sen, utilitarianism fleshes out the basic structure of moral justification or policy choice by making a number of key postulates. First, utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism in which value is associated with outcomes through individual subjective preferences. Second, justification consists in economizing on the satisfaction of these preferences, or as the utilitarian maxim has it,
doing the greatest good for the greatest number. Third, preference satisfaction is amenable to a procedure of sum-ranking. Fourth, the states of affairs in question are specified wholly in terms of their impact on individual welfare or well-being, which is also taken to be the focus of an individual’s subjective preferences.\(^4\) The capabilities approach maintains the first three of these postulates in broad outline, at least, while abandoning welfarism in favor a substantially broadened notion of the outcome or consequence of actions and policy. In one sense, Sen’s accomplishment was to drag economics back in to the center of this debate (something that many economists were keen to avoid) by arguing that the philosophers’ concerns penetrate into the economic modeling of consequences. In another sense, Sen’s accomplishment was to dislodge philosophy’s confidence in its hegemony over the normative dimension by arguing that it was possible to incorporate many or possibly all of the concerns raised by non-consequentialists into the economic models being used to predict the consequences of policy choice.

In large degree, the substantial philosophical literature on capabilities to which Feldman refers early in her paper is still preoccupied with the aftermath of that 1970’s debate. A symposium on Sen’s work published in 2001 finds political philosopher Philip Petit defending Sen against his critics by arguing that Sen’s notion of choice requires that preferences are actually effective in bringing about the desired state of affairs, a view that Petit believes brings Sen much more in line with traditionally non-consequentialist notions of human freedom, while maintaining the consequentialist orientations of the

theory. In the same symposium, T. M. Scanlon argues that Sen’s reform of consequentialism falls short of the mark, mainly because it is still a form of consequentialism and as such, the goodness associated with a state of affairs is the ultimate basis for assessing actions. In contrast, Scanlon argues that the reasons a particular agent has for accepting a moral principle must be considered, and that these reasons will reflect the particular standpoint and circumstances of the person in question.

Sen’s reply to these comments indicates that these philosophers have not simply misread his primary intentions.

I might well discharge my responsibility to stimulate cross disciplinary dialog by feigning shock and dismay at the way in which Feldman and Barkin overlook the debate over consequentialism and non-consequentialism. This philosophical debate is arguably quite tightly connected to the view that economic growth is the sine qua non of development, and especially to the highly reductive versions of this view that the capabilities approach was intended to correct. As Sen argued in his 1987 book On Ethics and Economics, economic theory, and especially welfare economics, of which development economics is a part, are descended from utilitarian moral theory and incorporate many of its presuppositions and assumptions. Furthermore, economics owes its ascendancy over the other social sciences in part to its ability to rationalize policy choice through comparing the consequences of policy alternatives, that is, in virtue of its compatibility with consequentialism.

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There is, however, another way to look at the tight connection between contemporary philosophy and contemporary economic theory, and that is the way that is suggested by Michel Foucault’s work on Jeremy Bentham, the father of utilitarianism. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault asserts the claim that Bentham’s panopticon is an archetype for a complex of social institutions and technical infrastructure that configures power relations in the manner distinctive of modern society. The disciplinary practices that permeate modern society produce not only the knowledge model that integrates economics or philosophy as pursued in modern universities, but the very form of subjectivity that is accepted by both consequentialist and non-consequentialist ethical theorists alike.\(^8\) This subject acts in the world through the process of choice, of performing certain behaviors on the basis of beliefs and values. Ethical justification for this subject is a matter of demonstrating the conformity of his or her conduct with rational belief, as determined by the scientific disciplines, and rational choice, as disciplined by philosophical argument. This is not to say that every element of choice is rationally determined, for some aspects of feeling or emotion may be wholly arbitrary. What is more, the aspects of the subject’s personality open to flexible and non-uniform determination can be expanded further by attending to the historical and cultural dimensions of virtue and community as aspirational values. Yet it is still the choice-making subject that stands at the center of contemporary philosophical ethics.

Whether or not Foucault hoped to loosen the knots that bind the subject to its discipline, such a loosening is certainly the project of Arturo Escobar in *Encountering Development*. Escobar’s hope is that deconstructing the discipline of development will free oppressed peoples from becoming its subjects. Freed from this discipline, they might

express themselves in ways that have little to do with subjects who express preferences
through their production and consumption behavior, or who bear rights and exercise
entitlements. They might build a small certified butchering facility and raise low-fat
pork, for example, simply because doing so is a natural extension of traditional practice,
given changing conditions, and not as a choice that is subject to evaluation, justification
or disciplinary analysis by experts. Freed in this way, indigenous people escape not only
the net of disciplinary philosophy and economics, the net in which the capabilities
approach is entangled; they also escape the metatheory of Foucault and Escobar. Freed in
this way, it seems they have escaped academic philosophy altogether, and it is for this
reason that I describe my message as one of modesty and humility.

Development professionals may not want to escape academic philosophy so
completely, however. Feldman’s complaint that Sen fails to take up the question of power
is reminiscent of a complaint that sociologist C. Wright Mills lodged against philosopher
John Dewey in 1942. Dewey had advocated a reflective and self-critical account of
political life in which members of any specific community engage in continuing efforts to
bring their understanding of political loyalty into accord with ever more comprehensive,
even metaphysical, interpretations of community, democracy and justice. For Dewey,
strategic political maneuverings were not central to this task. Mills felt that Dewey’s
pragmatic social philosophy amounted to a formula for rationalizing alienation and

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presented at the conference on Community in Hard Times, The University of Toledo, Toledo, OH, April 2,
2005.
accommodation to the existing status quo. In its place he advocated a vision of participatory democracy latter taken up by the New Left that sees politics as “the art of collectively creating an acceptable pattern of social relations.”

In recounting Mills’ criticism of Dewey, Matthew Flamm writes that liberals who took up this vision have been left with an impoverished view of ethical and political ideals, one that compresses justice, democracy and community into the single problem of articulating the conditions for political empowerment. Are we now to add “development” to this list? Social scientists who have taken up the task of empowerment deploy their analytic tools in skillful accounts of who wins and who loses under a given set of institutional arrangements, but are bereft of the capability for entertaining the question of which power relations should prevail. Flamm endorses an observation made by James Miller to the effect that this reduces politics to a spectator sport.

I take it that Flamm and Miller are referring to the way that spectator sports encourage a form of boosterism that amounts to simply rooting for one side, rather than another. In the present context, it is Barkin more than Feldman who seems to fall prey to this tendency. Perhaps it is obvious that our sympathies should lie with the poor and dispossessed, and that we should cheer on those development projects capable of subverting the well-documented abilities that powerful people have to co-opt development efforts for their own benefit. Here I have two cheers for participatory development, not because I would ever root against it, or even less because I doubt that

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Barkin has correctly sided with the most worthy competitor, but because this way of politicizing development seems to leave little role for philosophical reflection and critique, for entertaining reasons why we should root for the poor and the dispossessed, much less what sort of broad conceptualization of ethical and political norms could underwrite the various political and economic development activities we clump under the heading of development.

For what it is worth, Dewey proffered his conceptions of community and democracy specifically in response to Walter Lippmann’s suggestion that alienated individuals might be better off with experts making decisions on their behalf. As Cornell West has argued, Mills’ attack on Dewey should be seen as a “creative misreading” of Dewey’s central point. It is also worth noting that the 2001 paper by Petit cited above was defending the capabilities approach against critics who had worried that it might amount to a form of rationalization through the systematic creation of preferences that would be satisfied by the existing status quo. As such, it seems clear that concern over existing power distributions is not wholly absent from the philosophical debate.

Whether grasping the subtleties of the distinction between consequentialist and non-consequentialist ethical theory is a necessary condition for integrating philosophical ethics and development theory (and I am inclined to think that it is not), philosophers are engaged in an attempt to press beyond the articulation of values and their subsequent enforcement in the political realm. There are significant substantive and stylistic differences between philosophers such as Dewey and Foucault, on the one hand, and the analytic tradition in which the capabilities approach has been developed, on the other. Nevertheless, all of these philosophers are trying to state and defend conceptualizations

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of politics, democracy, community, justice and development in a discourse environment that is open to any similarly motivated critique. Doing so may require a small space for reflection, argument or even aggressive give and take, and creating that space may require a respite from collectively creating an acceptable pattern of social relations.

I am not suggesting that Feldman or Barkin falls prey to the reductive caricature of liberal politics that I have sketched above, nor am I calling for any retreat from the empowerment of marginalized groups or engagement with indigenous epistemologies in development practice. The modesty with which I began is quite sincere. Yet if there is to be any productive engagement between the discipline of philosophy and the disciplines of development, philosophers will need to be permitted scope to explore their worries about such questions as whether a consequence-predicting model of ethical justification can ever hope to articulate the reasons we take a given notion of development to be adequate or inadequate, even if doing so doesn’t bake any bread.