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Emmanuel Picavet, Caroline Guibet Lafaye

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Emmanuel Picavet

(*Logiques de l'agir* research team and philosophy section, Faculty of the humanities, Franche-Comté University, Besançon, France)

Caroline Guibet Lafaye

(Maurice Halbwachs Center, CNRS, Paris, France)

Rational planning for individual needs and capacities: principles and contexts ¹

Abstract

Practical rationality, when collective choices are at stake, should certainly rely on principles. These principles are perhaps not without effect on our representation of the problems to be addressed in collective action. We investigate how this structuring role of pragmatic principles accounts for notable context-dependent features of governance procedures. In the field of social policies, for example, the enhancement of personal autonomy has come to the forefront of collective challenges. Capacity-based approaches indicate a way to put into question those conceptions of autonomy which lead to an excessively uniform treatment of individuals. Following these approaches, the beneficiaries of social policies should be treated as concrete beings with their personal history, living in specific social contexts and so on. We analyse the individualizing logic which is exemplified in interactive problem-structuring and institutional decision-making about the provision of apt, context-sensitive care and services for ageing handicapped persons. It is suggested that the sought-for adaptation to specific circumstances is made possible through a complex process of description of problems and challenges for collective action, in which procedural aspects are important. This process is by no means reducible to a passive process of adjustment to independent states of affairs. If our analysis is correct, there is no such thing as the “real” nature of individual situations, as opposed to the fictions associated with ordinary social policies: the process under scrutiny really redefines the nature of institutional interactions, responsibilities and the underlying picture of the

¹ Our research on this topic has taken place within the CONREP Project (Franche-Comté Regional Council and Franche-Comté University, Besançon, France) and the CEEI project, Burgundy/ Franche-Comté higher education initiative (PRES Bourgogne / Franche-Comté). The authors have benefited from joint work with Dawidson Razafimahatolotra at the “*Logiques de l'agir*” laboratory, Besançon. We have also benefited from discussions and presentations at the EGAIS-ETICA workshop in Brussels (“Investigating Contextual Proceduralism”), April 29th-30th 2011. Corresponding author : Emmanuel.Picavet@univ-fcomte.fr.

individual person.

1. Introduction

Practical rationality is, among other things, a matter of pragmatic principles which have a guiding role for individuals and groups. The benchmark principles are usually quite general and the rationality of collective choices has to do, presumably, with the ability to turn the principles into reality with relevance, in an efficient way. How should we conceptualize this ability in the first place?

Pragmatic principles for collective choices could be identified, it seems, with the selection of desirable states of the world, chosen among the possible ones. Then we would be induced to look at the administrative or political implementation mechanisms as if they were more or less neutral instruments, by means of which we see to it that the world exhibits the desired patterns. But the following statements, if true, complicate the matter:

First of all, pragmatic principles undergo interpretative changes. This, of course, may impact representations of the collective implementation process, when it comes to spelling out the details of action problems with a view to the effectivity of principles². Turning goals into reality depends on one's views about the meaning of those principles which help articulate the goals. It can be argued, in this respect, that pragmatic principles have distinctive properties when it comes to interpretation needs: for example, they have an unequal potential for being made precise in a useful way, or in an objective way³.

In addition, pragmatic principles have a role to play in problem-structuring activities (and hence in decision-facilitation tasks at the prescriptive level), if only because they channel and format the information which is used in decision-making (this was emphasized in A. Sen's pioneering contribution to the information analysis of moral principles – see Sen [1979]). The chosen benchmark principles determine a selective awareness to specific features of the social context and personal situations; this enables them to play a crucial role in the development of joint work and inter-organizational (or inter-institutional) collaborative relationships⁴.

Among these properties, it is perhaps fair to say that only the correlation of principles with their respective information needs has been the object of systematic inquiry up to now. In this

² This can be illustrated by some of the examples discussed by Calvert and Johnson (1999).

³ This has been the object of a full-length discussion in Picavet (2011).

⁴ See: Reynaud (2003).

joint research, we take a broader view. The noted characteristics are investigated with reference to the *autonomy*, *dependence* and *capacity* (or *capability*) concepts. The institutional use of these notions in social policies gives support, we believe, to our initial statements. Such notions, in their concrete use, are related to a constructive social process; this process, we'll argue, illustrates the characteristics we have just mentioned.

We'll highlight the notions of « dependence » and “autonomy” and their role in spelling out principles of collective action, with respect to the challenges of old age and the aging. We'll investigate the type of context dependence and some of the procedural features or governance which can be associated with dependence-based or autonomy-based principles for collective action. More particularly, we ask whether context dependence and the procedural features are impacted by those dominant interpretations of “dependence” and “autonomy” which rely on the “capability” notion (and the related principles for collective action)⁵. With this goal in mind, we'll examine the involvement of personal autonomy and individual capacities in governance processes. A case study will be provided by an institutional interactive process for answering the needs of the aging population of handicapped persons in France.

2. Capabilities, contexts and the enhancement of autonomy

2.1 General intent of the « capability » approach to personal autonomy

The contemporary capacity or *capability* approach, as developed by A.K. Sen (and, along a different path, by Martha Nussbaum) has concentrated on the description, assessment or measurement of personal capacities for choice which contribute to the objective well-being of individuals. This approach is now widely recognized as a model which can be used to articulate collective goals which pertain to the enhancement of personal autonomy, or the mitigation of personal dependence. For this reason, it is advisable to look at a number of structural features of this approach, in order to elucidate how autonomy-based or dependence-based principles have a structuring potential in collective action tasks.

A. Sen has defined his “capability” set on the basis of “functionings”, which are various features of doing and being for individuals. Capabilities (a special construal of the general notion of personal capacity) are envisioned, from the start, as opportunities for various types of achievement in life. Individual choices are the matter, but the perspective goes beyond the sheer availability of a number of alternatives and the selection operated among them. Sen's

⁵ The notion of capacity has been variously used in ethics (as evidence by the work of Martha Nussbaum), in normative economics (Amartya Sen) and in the evaluation of social policies (Robert Salais).

approach is remarkable on several accounts. It endorses a “freedom viewpoint” which brings together the choice faculties and the value an agent may locate in the different ways he can use these faculties.

In this perspective, it is allowed that various value judgments, including consequentialist evaluations, are constitutive of the worthiness, in the eyes of individuals, of those faculties which are involved in their freedom of choice, hence in their freedom generally speaking. In addition (and correlatively), this approach brings into close contact, in the joint assessment of freedom and well-being, the “procedural” dimension of choice (the features of action - that is to say, of the process leading to results) and the “opportunity” dimension (the nature and value of choices in themselves). In such a perspective, it is hardly possible to overlook the social dimension of personal capacities: individual and social determinants of personal capacities are thus intimately associated. This accounts for the context-dependent features of the associated policy-making agendas.

It is recognized from the start (and how could we possibly deny it?) that the possible achievements of human agents are dependent upon the context, more specifically, the social environment in which their actions or initiatives take place. For instance, the ability or lack of ability of a handicapped person to engage in a university course may depend on the collective effort to see to it that handicapped persons who use a wheelchair are proper access to the amphitheatres and seminar rooms. This, in itself, gives a reason to look at a specific kind of information, namely, those features of the social world which explain the consequences of personal characteristics. It appears necessary, when it comes to assessing personal capacities, to bring some properties of the social environment into the picture. One may think of collective initiatives, public policies and their achievements. Indeed, the explicit amalgamation of pieces of information about personal characteristics and about the fitness of the environment can be considered a strong point of capacity-based approaches to social ethics.

There are limits to explicitness: being a descriptive framework or matrix, Sen’s capability approach should not be expected to be ideally precise in its formulation⁶. It stands in need of interpretation but, compared with other principles of social ethics, the principles it puts forward strike one as relatively imprecise. This is not without consequence from a pragmatic point of view. Since the concrete use of capability-related principles is heavily context-dependent, it creates a need for a complex process of adjustment to the prevailing social

⁶ This has been emphasized in Muriel Gilardone’s PhD thesis (Gilardone [2007]).

context. Making these principles adequately precise in specific contexts is no easy task and this might impact the ways of collective action. Operationalizing the capability approach for the purposes of socio-economic field studies and the detailed analysis of collective options stands out as a major challenge for researchers. It should be noted, however, that generality and vagueness have merits of their own and create room for successive influential interpretations⁷.

The capability approach can be used as a normative benchmark when it comes to assessing social policies as instruments for the enhancement of choice capacities or margins for action. To be sure, these values are not entirely consensual, as many people believe that restrictions on individual margins of action are valuable in themselves, especially as testimonies to the limits of individualism, or the individual endorsement of a social or traditional discipline. Nevertheless, the enhancement of personal capacities for choice is essential to all varieties of progressive thought. The approach is indisputably individualistic in character, as it concentrates on the situation of individuals with a view to evaluating (positively or negatively) the evolution of society, or those policies which have an impact on it. This brand of individualism, however, is attenuated by Sen's distinctive resolution to take full account of the complex interaction between the situation of persons, their social life and their environment.

This kind of approach can be used to assess the extent to which handicaps and capacity impairments are being compensated in an active way. For example, the handicapped persons may expect a better working life and everyday care both from improved medical services (which impact their personal situation) and from collective initiatives with an influence on their environment (for example, through the adaptation of workplaces or the setup of health-care and home-service procedures)⁸. Because of this association of personal, environmental and social parameters, the quest for the relevant information in problem-structuring tasks benefits from being oriented toward the interaction of the person and the social, technical and material environment. In this respect, with practical purposes in mind, the capability approach can help.

⁷ Eduardo Giannetti da Fonseca (1991, ch. 10) thus writes: “[...] it must be observed that attempts to overcome the vagueness of ordinary language by setting up new and tailor-made technical terms, interposing rigid definitions and carrying as far as possible the formalism of the presentation are likely to run into fresh problems of their own. Even clarity and precision [...] may be bought at too high cost” (p.143). See also: March and Olsen (1979, ch. 4), De Munck and Zimmermann (2008).

⁸ Miralles, González-Alcántara, Lozano-Aguilar and Marin-García (2008).

2.2 The interactive side

Up to now, we have treated the social dimension as a set of parameters in the environment of personal initiatives. The interactive dimension has only been tacit. But should we not inquire into it in a more detailed way? One important interactive feature is related to the claims which are put forward in the aim of promoting the choice capacities (or the achievement opportunities) of persons in specific groups, or persons in specific situations. These “claiming” initiatives must be considered in association with the reactions they meet: the fact that they are heard (or not), understood (or not) and, possibly, successful. In the case of handicapped persons and those who must face “dependence” situations, this is often captured through the notion of “empowerment” for specific groups of persons with shared interests to uphold. There is a growing normative interest attracted by the empowerment of social and institutional actors in their mutual relationships.

This notable interactive dimension is involved in the claiming initiatives which aim at the development of choice capacities, or various lifetime achievements to be made eligible for specific groups in the population (or for people in specific situations). Such claiming initiatives should be viewed as correlated with the reception they meet, as theories of relational and collaborative governance have emphasized⁹: how they are heard, understood and, finally, followed by real effects in social life. The specificities of public choice (such as public-interest standards in deliberative activities) and public-image concerns may induce officials to develop their receptivity to the needs of handicapped or dependent persons. Insofar as reputational concerns are involved, the same applies to firms, in addition to immediate profit-making motives. Of course, this receptivity can be lowered by budget limits or by priority conflicts which involve other concerns.

One step beyond, we must encompass the fact that individuals adapt themselves to their environment. They develop useful skills and aptitudes in an environment which has been shaped by nature and by their fellow men and women. The resulting capacities have their role in shaping the *statu quo* situation which provides a benchmark for evaluating collective initiatives: the usefulness of such initiatives is correlated, of course, with a judgment on the antecedent state of things. Thus, there is an interactive side to the determination of personal capacities. Personal capacities depend on individual adaptation to policies, and expectations about future policies. Policies, in turn, are launched in a way which may depend upon the situation of persons in the relevant population. But adaptation to impoverished conditions is

⁹ See: Lenoble and Maeschalck (2010), esp. sec. II-4.

no sufficient ground for a positive judgment on the state of society. Social criticism is useful in this respect, as a supplement to existing claims in society, especially when social demands reflect a more or less fatalistic acceptance of poor living conditions.

A paradoxical situation is possible with respect to public policy, as a consequence of individual expectations. Among other things, individual choices are influenced by expectations of future action (or the lack of it) at a collective level. For example, people with motricity problems may be tempted to limit their mobility through adjustments in their lifestyle and personal goals, because they don't expect favourable policy initiatives in the predictable future. After this pattern, individuals may improve their personal situation on their own initiative, in such a way that, all things considered, public authorities are distracted from acting in the required way in the interest of handicapped or "dependent" individuals. From a normative point of view, impoverished prospects in life are a predictable and problematic outcome. The other way round, collective decisions may be reached on the basis of expectations about the selective adaptive efforts of handicapped or ageing individuals (and their circle of relatives, friends or employees). For example, limited care for the dependent elderly could be the consequence, in some cases, of optimistic estimates of the ability of these persons to rely on their own efforts for the enhancement of their living conditions.

3. A Case study

Dealing with the dependence situations associated with ageing is a collective and complex decision-making process. It involves successive administrative and political reports, plans and policies as well as detailed institutional steps. This process comprises the identification of emerging problems, the buildup of frameworks for analysis and description, the deliverance of prescriptive advice and collective action in the end. All this takes place against a background of deep uncertainty with respect to the future of the ageing population, in terms of size, qualitative needs and lifestyle. The selection of collective ways of dealing with imperfectly specified problems turns out to be connected, we hypothesize, with the limits of information and prediction, when novel situations keep emerging¹⁰.

We now concentrate on the example of a CNSA 2010 report (the result of "practice exchange" workshops, nov. 13th, 2009 to feb. 4th, 2010, National Fund for Solidarity and

¹⁰ See: Alchian (1990); Picavet, Dupont, Dilhac and Bolaños (2009).

Autonomy, France), entitled *Aide à l'adaptation et à la planification de l'offre médico-sociale en faveur des personnes handicapées vieillissantes* [Aid to adaptation and planning for medical / social supply in favour of ageing handicapped persons]. This example gives an opportunity to (1) examine (with a view to autonomy problems) the way “capacity” principles are mobilized, transformed into decision procedures and used in a context-dependent way, (2) examine how the capacity approach can be associated with (or favours?) individualizing strategies in the answer to collective problems, (3) examine the role of inter-institutional dialogue in interactive decision-making¹¹.

The report concentrates on three essential dimensions of interactive planning in the examined policy domain: (a) the elements of debate (what is at stake, really?); (b) the emerging consensual benchmarks; (c) examples and successful experiments. This last feature can be held to be illustrative of a well-known stylized fact (established in comparative work by Robert Matland¹²): when policies have ambiguous goals or means, success or interesting results are typically dependent on successful experiments and initiatives. In the case at hand, the complexities of ageing as a process and the multi-dimensionality of “handicap” broadly conceived, certainly contribute to the ambiguity of goals and means. In addition, it is commonplace to observe that the notions of “autonomy” and “dependence” have complex meanings.

The CNSA report is the result of « practice exchange » workshops, aiming at the identification of the concerned population and its needs (in terms of accompanying actions or care). A major challenge was to characterize, on this basis, the necessary adaptations in collective answers, and the possible collective choices. Answering the needs is, by and large, identified with promoting autonomy: the whole point of the enterprise is to look for efficient ways to deal with the conditions of an autonomous personal lifestyle. The specific effects of ageing (at the individual level) are characterized in terms of autonomy losses. This has to do with the following factors: the negative evolution of functional capacities (which are already negatively affected by handicaps), the growing susceptibility to illnesses which are statistically associated with old age and, finally, the changing expectations associated with a new step in lifetime (which negatively impact the value of significant possible choices).

¹¹ For general background material on present-day research in the field, see : Ackroyd, Batt, Thomson and Tolbert (2005); and: Cropper, Ebers, Huxham and Smith Ring (2008).

¹² Matland (1995).

The technical report must provide guidance for decision-making. Indeed, it is conceived as some sort of problem-structuring and decision-facilitating device. There is a doctrinal side to the enterprise but the goals are practical ones and doctrine has a role in practical reasoning. The report promotes a specific step-by-step adaptation path. In addition, the report deals with the structuring of institutional dialogue. It delivers guidelines for appropriate queries and answers to assist the concerned persons in their ageing process. In the interactive dimension of institutional decision-making, the analysis of needs fulfils some of its most important functions: the enhancement of dialogue through the selection of appropriate common benchmarks (or focal points for attention) and the structuring of choices through priority-setting tasks.

The methodological concern for flexible adaptation turns out to be associated with the promotion of more substantial guidelines, concerning the appropriate collective choices for the country. Thus, it is suggested that collective organization should be compatible with a renewed attention to specific situations. It should be based, ultimately, on the revealed needs of individual persons – so the argument goes.

Providing for the needs of the elderly raises information problems. As Plato observed in *The Statesman*, policy-making for the city at large makes it impossible to adapt to the details of every individual situation. Collective goals and choices necessarily make use of the existing (and rough) categories which are otherwise used for descriptive purposes. For this reason, the project of placing individual situations at the heart of collective policy-making has difficulties of its own. None the less, if we follow the path of an individualistic approach, as the report recommends, the ways of collective action should rule out the more rigid sort of “answers” or “solutions” which are based on rough estimates of needs; as it turns out, they are always at risk of being too standardized and they are hardly able to adapt through time in order to accommodate the changing realities of individual lifestyles and environmental data.

Thus, we find methodological concerns at the root of the collective action process: the prevailing statistical categories are inappropriate for accurate descriptions and predictions of people’s needs; if we start from such rough data, we are unable to give to pragmatic plans the desired flexibility in response to evolving contexts. This actually leads to prescriptive guidelines for the collective articulation of what a personal “life project” is about; the process exhibits a social buildup of the individual’s “life project” for political (or institutional) purposes.

The chosen perspective on individual “life projects” highlights specific individual capacities. First and foremost, one’s capacity to develop expectations about the future and to give shape to one’s own future in accordance with personal wishes. This expresses personal autonomy of course, after the pattern of A. Sen’s notion of “capability”. Thus understood, autonomy concerns shed a new light on which capacities matter for the development of the whole “capability” of individuals. The subjective dimension of projects and needs comes to the forefront. As a result, this side of things is held to be the very foundation of needs-oriented dialogue with the relevant institutions.

The « life project » notion is thus somehow operationalized in a decision-facilitation perspective, with special emphasis on the buildup of institutional dialogue. It can be said to be embedded in a socially constructed dialogue situation between individual beneficiaries and institutional agents. Incidentally, this makes a difference with the philosophical notions of “life plan” (Joshua Royce) and “rational life plan” (John Rawls)¹³. Thus, the promotion of interactive decision-making and the concentration on a given picture of the individual (a more or less “liberal”, autonomy-based picture) go hand in hand. The liberal perspective on persons and their choices gives weight to a number of directly relevant individual capacities, which are at the core of one’s aptitude to express needs and to articulate expectations and claims. Let us note that the key notion of a personal and evolving “life project” offsets potentially rival notions, such as the continuity of an established lifestyle, or the good fit (or “harmony”) between a person’s lifestyle and the social environment. This can be held to express definite, predominantly liberal values.

As a matter of operational planning at the collective level, “life project” appears to be essentially correlated with the notion of an “individualized compensation plan”. This notion refers to an inclusive and coordinated intervention strategy which aims at dealing with all handicap situations, irrespective of the possible association with the ageing process or with old age as such. The whole enterprise is to let collective action and institutional cooperation revolve around personal needs; the ultimate aim is to help individuals fulfil their expectations with due assistance in order to compensate for capacity losses.

Although they are socially constructed, and designed as matrices for institutional exchange and decision-making, “life project” and “individualized compensation plan” are

¹³ Royce (1908), Rawls (1971).

individualistic notions. Thus, the CNSA report exemplifies an individualizing approach to the assessment of situations and the elaboration of rational collective strategies. Probably, this is favoured by the insistent reference to personal capacities, such as the capacities to choose, to engage in activities, to elaborate and revise personal plans, etc. Claude Gamel (2007) has argued that capacity-based approaches of social needs tend to be associated with (or indeed, actively promote) an individualizing treatment of needs in social policies. The basic general idea is that institutional dialogue and interactive decision-making should aim at adapted answers to singular situations.

For all its problems of applicability, this trend in public policy is attractive to some degree. Indeed, it seems rational on the face of it, given the difficulty to predict the real needs of persons, as well as the appropriate ways of need-fulfilment, on the basis of general data about the ageing process, and age itself. This would seem to justify a tentative adaptation to fine-grained contextual conditions and personal needs. This is why the collective answers to capacity losses should be “modulated”: we must pay due attention to the “complexity” and “diversity” of the ageing process in a case-based perspective.

The authors of the CNSA report stress that personal history (for example, whether one has lived or not in caring institutions) conditions personal needs for the ageing handicapped person. But it is not absolutely obvious that, starting from this departure point, we should conclude that taking real needs into account presupposes individualized answers and care, because the latter are associated with specific problems such as the difficulty and cost of truthful information gathering.

We have tried to characterize the “individualizing” logic which underpins the “life project” / individualized compensation plan” pair of notions. This logic, we believe, tends to favour institutional dialogue on the one hand (so that needs can be identified in a detailed way) and, on the other hand, interactive decision-making (in order to promote well-articulated, well-coordinated and efficient answers to existing needs, in the interest of personal capacities and autonomy). Such recommendations, if they are to be taken seriously in practice, involve a complex, continuous process of reallocation for institutional domains of action (or prerogatives). Thus, from the point of view of the involved institutional actors, attempts at

rational planning are shown to lead, in this case, to a potential reshuffling of professional identifying characteristics¹⁴.

It seems to us that the institutional dimension of interactive decision-making is well illustrated, in this case study, by the quest after a correct equilibrium between the social supply of general basic services and the provision of specialized, adapted care. It is expected, in this respect, that this kind of pragmatic breakdown of general and special issues could eventually coincide with a demarcation line between the needs which can be predicted from rough data and the needs which call for dialogue and the familiarization with concrete situations.

A further interesting feature of the recommendations is the invitation to look for reasons when it comes to relying on this or that decision-maker. Choices of this kind are best understood as answers to contextual elements, such as the comparative relevance of the acquired know-how of various institutional agents, when it comes to facing new situations. Here again, context-dependence is placed in favourable light. It is not portrayed as a source of instability or shifty expectations. Rather, it is positively associated with flexible decision-making.

Correlatively, it is suggested that the challenges of ageing call for new skills and new collaborative initiatives. This tends to confirm that the action domains of institutional actors should be flexible enough, so that they can adapt to evolving contexts of collective action. As it turns out, here again, methodological concerns impact substantial conclusions. The need for shared reasons in collective action is part of a methodology of collective-action planning. Among the relevant reasons, we find the reasons to invest some institutional agents (rather than others) with the responsibility to act in given classes of situations. Accordingly, consent to the flexibility of institutional responsibilities and prerogatives is advocated.

4. Conclusion

Our main conclusion is that context-dependence is, to some extent, shaped by the chosen principles themselves. Focal principles in collective action are not just means to adapt to changing circumstances or contexts (in a passive way). The chosen principles actively favour definite ways of adapting to circumstances, as exemplified by the development of

¹⁴ This side of planning tasks is addressed by: James G. March, Martin Schulz and Xueguang Zhou, *The Dynamics of Rules. Change in Written Organizational Codes*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000 (ch. 1).

“individualizing” social strategies to address social needs. These strategies involve a high degree of reliance on general principles, both methodological and substantial.

In our case study, we haven’t examined the process of developing benchmark concepts and principles for collective action in its temporal development ; rather, we have considered things as they are, even though we should remember at each step that the involved notions, political (and ethical) principles and evaluative judgments are, by and large, the result of constructive, often interactive social processes. As a matter of fact, the social use of general notions and the elaboration of the companion prescriptive judgments are dependent upon inter-institutional relationships, and it might be conjectured with some confidence that the latter are influenced by transitory circumstances or emerging contexts. This influence, however, does not necessarily rule out objectivity in evaluation or in the reasons which motivate choices.

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