

What do you mean “sustainable”?

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Abstract

In 1987 the Brundtland Report did much to popularise the notion of ‘sustainable development’. The report offers us the following definition: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”¹.

Two decades on, the literature on the subject is prolific. Very often, the sustainability has been defined along three dimensions: environmental, social and economic, so-called triple bottom line. The importance given to each typically varies according to the interested stakeholders.

There is an aspect of sustainability, however, that has received comparatively little attention, but on which sustainable development crucially depends. And this is the question of responsibility. Responsibility is of course a key tenant of governance. For development to be sustainable it needs to be conducted in a responsible manner. Recent events in global markets indicate, in no uncertain terms, the potentially dire consequences of the lack of responsibility or governance.

I propose in this paper to flesh out the notion of responsibility, an under theorised aspect of governance and sustainability. I argue that a responsible, and so sustainable development, involves both a particular orientation of care or concern, and a human capability to produce caring outcomes. As such, responsibility is not a strictly deontological concept, according to which a set of categorical rules or imperatives are imposed upon individuals. It is better understood as a human disposition that we individuals need to actively develop in our relations with others, where our psychological mind frames affect the way we interpret our surroundings, and struggle with the ‘altérité’ of those who are always inherently different and outside of ourselves.

Introduction

Within a framework of socially sustainable development, I wish in this paper to pursue the notion of ethics, in particular by looking at responsibility, and understand how it is tied in with the economic agent. To understand the place of responsibility within development, one that takes place in a context of globalisation, I advocate an analytical approach that encompasses economic, philosophical, psychoanalytical and gendered perspectives. Such an approach seeks to reflect and address the complex nature of social reality.

¹ http://www.ace.mmu.ac.uk/eae/Sustainability/Older/Brundtland_Report.html

In this paper, I will set the relation between the ability of human beings to be responsible and the capabilities framework as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. I will look into some of the ethical orientations economics can take. I will also argue that inequalities between men and women affect the ability to be responsible and for this reason merit considerable attention. I will not here go into the psychoanalytical considerations that tie responsibility to identity construction. My intention in this paper is to introduce the emancipatory possibilities latent in the understanding and awareness of our ability to be responsible. I will also point out the need for a multidisciplinary approach to responsibility, which underpins a socially sustainable development.

Responsibility as a capability

The enunciation of policies of sustainable development implies that we take a stance on the philosophy of life and that we adopt an ethos, towards which that development should tend. This is what John Rawls does through his conception of the good life by referring to an ethos of justice in a liberal egalitarian framework. Emanuel Levinas and Hans Jonas, both German philosophers, develop an ethos based on responsibility towards others and the natural environment, respectively. Their notions of responsibility constitute philosophical positions and suggest that we have a moral obligation to act responsibly. It seems equally important, however, to understand beyond motivation how responsible behaviour might come about.

I would like to build on the themes proposed by Jonas, Levinas, Rawls, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, those of justice, equality and in particular responsibility, so as to gain an understanding of the person as a responsible economic agent. Such an understanding is meant to make it possible to grasp and make operational an ethical position in economic development. This will lead me to view responsibility as both enabling people's access to development and as underlying a development that can be deemed sustainable. The economic landscape is complex and made up of agents with attitudes and behaviours, which operate at many levels: the conscious and unconscious, the immanent and the transcendental, the individual and the collective, the private and the public, and so on.

The ethics of the good life prioritises individual liberties as far as possible. Taking into account the practical considerations of the organisation of society, however, individual freedom needs to be restricted by the responsibility it entails. For Rawls, this takes the form of the "veil of ignorance", which consists of hypothetically putting aside one's own interests and adopting a neutral position so as to be able to take into account the interest of others (Rawls, 1987). Sen describes a more complex situation. "If Sen and Rawls both refuse the utilitarian approach and place similar value on the questions of liberty and of equity... Sen criticises Rawls for not going into the means of achieving real liberty. What matters, says Sen, is the relation that persons establish between the resources and the rights that they dispose of" (Guérin, 2003, 65,66). According to Sen, the ability of a person to lead the good life depends on his or her ability to effect real choices. A person who does not know how to read, for example, will find it difficult to access information on the public health facilities that he or she is entitled to. *Positive freedoms*, on the other hand, will allow persons to transform their endowments into capital, their potentialities and capacities into real capabilities. The social and even the natural environment will in large part determine the

possession or not, as the case may be, of positive freedoms, which characterises accessibility.

The capabilities theory introduced by Amartya Sen takes the capacities of the economic agent as reflecting on the economic development that permits the good life. Sen is concerned with the person, with his or her well being, but also how it may come about. In other words, he sets out the capabilities that people can develop and which precede their constitution. In this respect, his approach is of relevance to my own analysis. I want to focus particularly on the theme of equality of access, given that it is revealing of attitudes and behaviours that matter both to responsibility and to sustainable development. Without responsibility, manifest in tolerance and respect, prevailing in our relation to others, access is hampered. Marital violence has the likely consequence of reducing women's ability and confidence to participate in economic, social and political life as a whole and their ability to achieve the good life for themselves. In addition, aggression in the home will tend to be reproduced in places of responsibility, in economic and political decisions that affect others adversely. If, on the contrary, men and women share more activities, whether domestic or professional, and more generally, if the male and female ideals are not situated in a dual and caricaturised opposition, conditions will exist for the development of people's ability to be responsible. As differences, particularly in the lifestyles of men and women, are known and shared by either sex, this difference can be understood and accepted. By reducing stereotypes and living out a common reality, the home and other places can become a vector for creating a greater understanding of others in society. This can eventually foster greater responsibility as a necessary condition for a socially sustainable development.

Martha Nussbaum goes further along the same path by proposing a list of Ten Central Human Capabilities (Nussbaum, 2003). In the name of human dignity and flourishing she justifies the enunciation of a norm through her list of capabilities, which come close to a chart of human rights. The ten capabilities are based, amongst other things, on the presumption that life is preferred over death. She summarises the bodily needs as including nourishment and shelter, but also safety and sexual satisfaction. According to Nussbaum, human life should include the ability to experience pleasure, childhood, to feel connected to and concerned for others, to develop relations with the non-human environment, humour and game, separation from others and in space.

In her list of capabilities Nussbaum says little or nothing on gender relations as such. She does, however, imply the importance of such relations in her list. She evokes tolerance between the sexes through the need "to be secure against assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction" and with "the non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation" (Nussbaum, 2003). More explicitly, she introduces a psychoanalytical dimension in the capabilities centred on emotions and on affiliation.

We should be "able to have attachment to things and people outside ourselves...to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety". We should be able "to live with and toward others...to be able to imagine the situation of others" (Nussbaum, 2003). According to Nussbaum, all "human beings begin as hungry babies, aware of their own helplessness, experiencing their alternating closeness to and distance from

that, and those, on whom they depend...[All this] is central in the formation of desires, and of complex emotions such as grief, love, and anger. This, in turn, is a major source of our ability to recognise ourselves in the emotional experiences of those whose lives are very different in other respects from our own...Even the most intense forms of human interaction, for example sexual experience, are experiences of responsiveness, not of fusion. If fusion is the goal, the result is bound to be disappointment” (Nussbaum, 2001, 78, 79).

Here Nussbaum introduces the relation to the other, its psychoanalytical dimension, or otherness. She does not make explicit the process of identity construction that needs to be understood further in order to establish the link between responsibility and gender relations, a link I consider to be particularly important. She does, however, open up the door to explore gender and responsibility, as she recognises that the capabilities theory and the central human capabilities do not give a satisfactory answer to the problem of inequality between the sexes (or races). She wonders if we should “grant [that] the capability view needs to be supplemented by an independent theory of equality” (Nussbaum, 2001, 78, 86).

My answer to this questioning is not an independent theory, but an additional capability, complementing Nussbaum’s list. I name this capability responsibility and I am defining it as the ability to take into account the vulnerabilities, needs and desires of others and, in conjunction, the ability to take into account the fragility of our ecosystem. Nussbaum seems to imply such an answer in her own arguments. Like the other capabilities, responsibility is a need that must be fulfilled as a condition for the good life. In addition, it affects and makes possible the other capabilities. In this sense, I perceive responsibility to be an underlying or a transcendental human capability.

There are, as with the other capabilities, conditions for persons to develop their ability to be responsible. These need to be examined. As indicated above, I want to focus on the way responsibility is expressed in the relation between men and women. Steven Tötösy, in his work on the sociology of masculinities, summarises the importance of gender responsibility, as part of social responsibility.

“My postulate is that gender responsibility is one of the most important social ...tasks of our time...It is so, because it will become possible to eradicate negative discrimination – racial, religious, ethnic, sexual, etc., - only after gender responsibility has become an unquestioned and unquestionable universal human quality...Therefore, gender responsibility – because it transcends cultural, social, economic, etc., demarcations and because human interaction is most immediately marked by gender relationships – attains ultimate importance. Further, if gender responsibility evolves into a universal human characteristic, other negative discrimination will, either logically disappear (an admittedly idealistic view) or at least they will be easier to combat” (Tötösy, 1998, 173-177).

I take this form of responsibility as being a necessary, though not sufficient condition to attain the good life that is sought in a socially sustainable development.

An ethical orientation in economics

I would like to reflect on the ethical dimension of economics, as discussed by Jérôme Ballet and François Régis Mahieu in *Ethique Economique*. According to these authors, “the ethics of economics, in its modern version...celebrates responsibility, discussion or more recently even faith...and depends strongly on societies and their trends” (Mahieu, Ballet, 2002, 2). I retain both these ideas. On the one hand, I concern myself with people’s ability to be responsible. Responsibility is motivated by ethical consideration that needs to be rendered explicit in economics, as in other fields. Although responsibility responds to an ethos it does more than that. It is a human ability, but one that is latent and needs to be developed. As such, it may be thought of as a tendency, facing counter-veiling tendencies. The ability to take into considerations other people’s vulnerabilities, needs and desires and the ability to preserve the ecosystem seems to be largely under developed in the actual context of globalisation and this is so at many levels (the economic, the social, the environmental, the personal, the public, and so on). On the other hand, as societies change and as their trends evolve, dominant discourses get questioned and challenged. These changes mean that responsibility is located in a context where the identities of men and women and, more generally, the way we relate to others, not only need to be, but can be reconsidered. I perceive both a threat to existing identity and the opportunity for constructive alternatives, based on human vulnerabilities, needs and desires.

Mahieu and Ballet establish a distinction between the immanent and the transcendental economy. The former “is limited by that which can possibly be experienced...and creates rules on an experimental basis in a society of nature...the socio-biological framework for this approach is amoral to the extent that the ability of people to reflect on themselves, a priori, is denied” (Mahieu, Ballet, 2002, 2). According to Jean-Paul Sartre, this corresponds to the world into which men and women are born. Existentialist theory asserts that existence and not essence allows man and women “to become what they have decided to become” (Sartre, 1990, 2). It is also the society of nature portrayed by Hobbes in which man is a wolf to man and where citizens enter into a social contract in order to preserve order. The transcendental economy, by contrast, “is located beyond experience and uses reason in a society of rights. It has pure concepts, a priori, at different levels, which go beyond [are not reducible to] experience. In this framework, people transcend their opportunism and exercise a form of self-constraint. The result is one of universal ethical rules...” (Mahieu, Ballet, 2002, 2).

Both the immanent and the transcendental are relevant to my analysis, which I place at the intersection of the two approaches. On the one hand, responsibility can be considered as the result of economic opportunism. In this sense, a consequentialist approach to responsibility works as a condition to achieve a sustainable development ensuring the survival of mankind, or even its well being. This sort of responsibility becomes necessary for the economic agent. It is a social contract that benefits the system. In this sense companies understand their corporate social responsibility as being good for business. On the other hand, I maintain that people are capable of transcendence, in the Kantian sense, of self-reflection and of morality, be that from a social, a spiritual or a psychoanalytical perspective. In the same vein, Levinas describes our ability to enter into an ethical relation with other as one of infinite

responsibility towards others, one that requires transcendence of the self. I want to set responsibility as an ethical proposition, which is the result of necessity in a utilitarian economic framework, as well as resulting from people seeking to relate to and identify with others and are capable of transcendence in their relations with others. On this view, for both immanent and transcendental motives, ethics appear “as an absolute priority in current economic affairs delimiting possible economic choices” (Mahieu, Ballet, 2002, 3).

I further want to draw point to the relation between what is and what ought to be. I begin with the observation (what is) of our relation to others and to the environment: the vulnerability of our social system and that of our ecosystem. This leads me to take up normative positions on what should be and here I advocate that we develop our ability to be responsible. Given that we are social, highly interlinked beings with a need to relate to and identify with others, a necessary condition to attain the good life is that we address the vulnerabilities, needs and desires of others now and for generations to come. In this sense, the (our understanding of) nature of the world (what is) creates its own imperatives and responsibility becomes what ought to be in so far as reality creates an agenda of its own: human beings have vulnerabilities, needs and desires that need to be addressed. In a socially sustainable development sustainability and the ensuing need for responsibility effectively result from an imperative that addresses the nature of social and ecological reality. This is how I understand Paul Ricoeur’s proposition that we adopt an ethical position, which he defines as “the pursuit of the good life, with and for others, through just institutions” (Ricoeur, 1990, in Mahieu, Ballet, 2002, 4).

Sen and Nussbaum adopt, to a certain extent, an approach combining immanent and transcendental ethics. For Sen, justice is tied to a person’s freedom to develop their capabilities as a condition for their well being. His ethical approach is partly consequentialist, as he addresses immanent realities. In other words, he privileges a person’s liberty, but on the condition that his or her freedom be effective. Freedom is not a value that can be placed above all else. Although Sen does not subscribe to utilitarianism, he effectively recognises that justice introduces the need for equity. He justifies that rules and constraints be adopted, giving people some sort of minimum access to development. In addition, he understands development itself as a product of cooperation and as the result from the input of many. Thus in the name of freedom and development, a certain level of equity takes precedence. Sen is being quite realistic about freedom and reconciles transcendental positions with immanent needs.

Nussbaum makes a courageous attempt to reconcile ethical considerations and practical realities. She adopts a relativist ethical position between national sovereignty and cultural differences, on the one hand, and draws up a list of central human capabilities, on the other. Ruth Lister justifies just such an approach in her argument on citizenship, which she argues calls for a differentiated universalism (Lister, 2003). In drawing up a list of ten capabilities, Nussbaum draws on Aristotle where “a good political arrangement is one in accordance with which anyone whatsoever might do well and live a flourishing life” (Nussbaum, 2001, 81). Moreover, she recognises that there are such a thing as universal values, as is made clear in the following passage.

“Indeed, if, as the critics of realism allege, we are always dealing with our own interpretations anyhow, they must acknowledge that universal conceptions of the human are prominent and pervasive among such interpretations, hardly to be relegated to the dustbin of metaphysical history along with rare and recondite philosophical entities such as the Platonic forms. As Aristotle so simply puts it, “One may observe in one’s travel to distant countries the feelings of recognition and affiliation that link every human being to every other human being.”” (Nussbaum, 2001, 69).

On a more spiritual note, there is a presumption here of the existence of a metaphysical truth, outside the self, capable of being perceived through wisdom and which is ultimately detained by some supposed higher entity. On such a metaphysical philosophical conception, it follows that we can understand human beings as possessing universal features. This also implies that mankind is capable of transcendence and self-constraint when faced with the Kantian categorical imperative. On these conceptions, the economy should logically reflect the transcendental nature of human beings and give rise to universal ethical rules. Sen’s and Nussbaum’s philosophy of economics tends towards (a reflection of) complexity, located between the immanent and the transcendental economy, between positive and normative stances in a structured, highly complex, highly interrelated social reality. In this respect, I accept the approach adopted by these authors, one that may initially appear contradictory, but one, which is ultimately consistent with the real needs addressed by the capabilities approach.

Understanding responsibility through the inequalities between men and women

Sen observes that women are in a disadvantaged position in terms of access, in terms of positive freedoms. He argues that, as such, they are not in a position to fully develop their capabilities. Nussbaum reacts with a list of criteria that corresponds to the minimum well being people should be granted, which should further allow them to develop their capabilities. In these analyses, inequality is firstly presented as unjust in itself, and then as a further impeachment to personal development. For the purposes of my own research, I am concerned with inequality in so far as it intervenes in the ability to be responsible. Inequality affects not just development, but its sustainability. Inequality between men and women is revealing of how difference affects responsibility. Are differences between men and women rejected by the dominant one of the two? What is our relation to that which is different and foreign from us? How does this affect the ability to take into consideration vulnerabilities, needs and desires of others? These are some of the questions that relate inequality between the sexes, difference and responsibility.

The difference between men and women, whilst initially biological, manifests itself (with the exception of giving birth) in the access to resources, in rights and in the division of labour, amongst other things, which reflect collective and individual attitudes on the conception of men and women. Both sexes may share the same physical conditions (climate, food, housing, and so on) with equivalent abilities (walking, running, eating, sleeping, etc.), but their roles and activities remain most of the time very different. Take certain Muslim societies. One can wonder about a segregation where half the population (the men) set the rules (particularly when it comes to public life) for what the other half (the women) can do with their body (what parts may or may not be displayed), with their private life (when divorce is still

unilaterally decided by men repudiating women) and even her life (women may be stoned for committing adultery). Such inequalities mark an absence of tolerance and respect and need to be understood at their source, if we are to envisage the possibility of generating alternatives possible attitudes. There seems, on the face of it, to be a greater or lesser degree of rejection of difference, that of the opposite sex, and that which the latter stands for and symbolises. This rejection essentially prevents a person from developing their ability to be responsible, to take into account their vulnerabilities, needs and desires and is at some level based on fear, one that can be explained, amongst other things, by people's psychoanalytical make up.

The kind of responsibility that is proposed by Jonas and Levinas is one of moral obligation, which leaves unanswered the question of how the ability to be responsible can be activated. Positive freedoms are a condition for flourishing. A further condition is that we act responsibly towards one another and the environment, particularly if the flourishing is to last over generations. Responsibility constructs itself in a relation between the self and that, which is different from us: others (or other things). As such, it expresses itself in the relationship between sexes (the most universal source of difference in social reality) and can help generate equality. On this view, I consider the relation between sexes as a place where inequality is expressed, as well as the location in which identity gets constructed. I want to respond to the following issues. If difference generates intolerance, understanding responsibility requires us to explain the link between the two concepts. Are wars of religion not an expression of *different* cultural belongings? Does this not translate a fear of losing one's sense of identity? Fear of difference is played out within the family context, as well as in the international political arena. With an in depth examination of that which drives the need for ontological security, but also the desire (beyond need) to construct and develop one's identity, we can begin to bring answers to the way in which responsibility is developed in the face of difference.

The capability to be responsible addresses inequality and unequal access. Responsibility also addresses all the other capabilities in so far as it reinforces them. Responsibility towards others generates more equality of access. It implies that we apprehend others in their differences so that we can respond to their needs and grant them positive freedoms. Sen and Nussbaum attach importance to the position of women in so far as they perceive their well being suffering from unequal access to resources. I perceive inequality as a result, and not just a cause. It is the result of irresponsibility, a behaviour that manifests an underlying attitude. Any fundamental change in such behaviour will require equally fundamental changes in individual and collective, conscious and unconscious attitudes. Equal access, as conceived by Sen, and sustainable development more generally involves responsibility towards others. As such, responsibility accompanies and transcends the other capabilities by its very effect on access. Nussbaum too underlines the link between capabilities as she explains that "the items on the list are related to one another in many complex ways" (Nussbaum, 2001, 86).

Concluding comments

I will conclude by reiterating the centrality of the relation between men and women in my analysis. Responsibility involves tolerance and respect, particularly in relation to difference. A failing responsibility manifests itself in the unequal opportunities and

well being between men and women, issues which so preoccupy feminist emancipatory projects. I can, of course, point to many cases of inequality and intolerance in other non-gendered categories. But my choice is to concentrate on gender relations for the following reasons. As I mentioned earlier, gender is the most universally present social category reflecting (whether perceived or real) differences. In addition, gender differences, as they currently stand and/or are perceived and gender relations can give us an insight into fundamental questions, such as the definition of the self, the loss of identity, fear of the unknown (of difference and of death), so many factors that affect and explain the ability to take into account vulnerabilities, needs and desires of others. The way people immerse themselves in society and their ability to act responsibly will depend in part on their psychoanalytical make up and their sense of self-identity, all of which is manifest in gender relations. More generally, responsibility needs to be understood from its ethical perspective, as a requirement for development and flourishing and as a capability that emerges from the development of the self. Finally, if these different dimensions of responsibility are comprehended, gender relations can become a location and an instrument for change, one that can support emancipatory initiatives for development. My project will remain to seek out the particular conditions necessary for responsibility as a further condition for a socially sustainable development.

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