Special Issue: Happiness, Capabilities, and Opportunities

Sergio Beraldo¹ · Luigino Bruni²

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On November 18 2018, HEIRS (a network of economists working on Happiness Economics and Interpersonal relations) organized a conference in Naples, Italy. The aim of the conference was to refresh the debate on happiness, capabilities and opportunities by connecting scholars with different cultural backgrounds. There were some good reasons for this, related both to the way happiness research has been evolving in the last few years, and to the way the capability approach has been interpreted in the wider realm of the equality of opportunity.

It is indeed known that the capability approach emphasizes the objective dimensions of good life, or, more to the point, the objective dimensions that underpin the opportunities for a good life. In this perspective, happiness enters as one valuable functioning among others, not as the sole definitive objective. On the other hand, the capability approach is just one possible way to look at opportunities. These can be seen as more basically related to the size and richness of an individual's opportunity set, that is, the set of options from which people are free to choose.

Although a subjective approach to happiness—that can be traced back to Jeremy Bentham's theory of happiness as utility and is innervated by modern cognitive research—cannot skip the scepticism raised by those whose viewpoint favours either capabilities or opportunities, an alternative perspective, based on a more objective conception of happiness as eudaimonia or human flourishing, perhaps might.

These issues were at the core of the discussions held during the two-day conference that had as keynote speakers Bruno S. Frey, Mozaffar Qizilbash and Robert Sugden, among others. The three articles published in this issue of the International Review of Economics represent nothing more than a suggestive sample of the contributions that have been discussed in the days of the conference.

The first article is due to Bruno S. Frey, whose focus is on the opportunities for future happiness research (Frey 2020). As he recognizes, happiness research has

✉ Sergio Beraldo
s.beraldo@unina.it

Luigino Bruni
l.bruni@lumsa.it; luigino.bruni@gmail.com

¹ University of Naples Federico II, Naples, Italy

² LUMSA University, Rome, Italy

been a great success and has offered great insights into the determinants and consequences of subjective well-being. However, many contributions have over time accumulated, with the consequence of diminishing marginal returns. According to Frey, to bring new life to happiness research, current efforts have to be directed towards more appropriate directions: a more intensive use of statistics, in particular of panel data techniques; an extension of the analyses in such a way as to include more countries (preferably not only developed ones); more refined econometrics. All these are routes that can be taken, perhaps with the aim of deepening our knowledge of the relevant causal links between happiness and some relevant dimensions of good life, health for example.

Health, or better, the distribution of health care opportunities, is the focus of the second article of the special section included in this issue. The idea that health care is necessary to protect individuals' fair shares of opportunity is key to prominent egalitarian perspectives. It can be seen as innervating Rawls' appeal to a principle of fair equality of opportunity, as well as Sen's work on capabilities.

It is however known that Rawls' theory of justice is silent on issues related to health.

According to Sugden (1993), this is consistent with Rawls' understanding of any human society as a system of fair cooperation. In any such system, what has to be distributed justly—or fairly—are the benefits and burdens of social cooperation; this requires fairness in the distribution of the so-called social primary goods, and not in the distribution of natural primary goods, some of which are related to the health status at a very fundamental level (e.g. congenital handicaps). According to a diverse—philologically less accurate but perhaps more pragmatic—reading of Rawls' theory of justice, his appeal to a principle of fair equality of opportunity indeed presupposes, inevitably, that people function normally (Daniels 2013). This would clearly imply a social obligation to grant access to health care to everyone. As being healthy is a precondition for fair equality of opportunity to get established, any social commitment to protect opportunities implies a social commitment to protect and promote health for all people, a view that is shared by Sen's capability approach. However, while in Rawls' moral system health plays an ancillary role with respect to the relevant outcome as defined in terms of socioeconomic inequalities, in Sen's health is something that has special moral importance in itself.

In their paper Abatemarco and colleagues (Abatemarco et al. 2020) borrow from Sen the idea that equal opportunities for health are valuable per se. But, in their view, the relevant outcome variable is not given by the health prospect any individual is able to enjoy (whose equalization would be a very demanding objective), but by the equalization of the concrete impediments (measured by monetary costs) individuals have to face to obtain access to health care. In this sense, their notion is close to Rawls' ideal of equal command over resources.

The third article of this special section (Angelini et al. 2020) deals with some fundamental issues concerning the nature and role of organized power by offering a comparative analysis of various political arrangements, going from anarchy to the presence of a Leviathan. The article examines a community where production is purely the results of man's labour. Production can be damaged by misfortune unless a protection against adverse events is provided. Production can be also stolen by

external marauders. Needless to say, opportunism may arise in various forms inside the community, so that adverse events and robbers could undermine its existence and damage its members. Cooperation is the way out. As described in the article, it can either arise spontaneously or thanks to the coordination imposed by an authority.

As it stands, the analysis is an interesting examination of the characteristics an institutional arrangement should possess to face the inefficiencies generated by exogenous risks.

A last thought is for Francesca Stroffolini, one of the contributors of this special issue, who passed away in the very days the conference was held.

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