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THE CAPABILITIES APPROACHES AND ARISTOTELIAN PRACTICAL REASON*

Ricardo F. Crespo**

Abstract: This paper deals with the problem of how to make decisions about capabilities, as conceived by Amartya Sen. Given their incommensurable character, how to determine the particular set of capabilities to be sought in particular situations? In the last instance I posit that we need a qualitative appraisal, thus introducing the concept of “practical comparability”, which is built on Aristotelian philosophical grounds.

In his *On Ethics and Economics*, Amartya Sen begins the first chapter arguing that Economics has had two different origins. One of them is the ethics-related tradition that goes back to Aristotle (Sen, 1987:2-4). Sen also notes that the concept of “functionings”, which has a key role in his approach, has Aristotelian roots. It reflects the various things a person may value doing or being (Sen, 1999: 75). When Sen speaks about these Aristotelian roots of functionings, he refers to the Aristotelian concept of *ergon*, i.e., the function or task of something; specifically in this case, of the human being. Aristotle,

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while looking for the content of happiness, states that this is the chief good of the human being and that it consists in his function (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I:7; Sen, 1992: 39).

When Martha Nussbaum joined Amartya Sen in his claim for a capability approach to promote equality and development, she also highlighted the Aristotelian resonances of this approach. Sen, in a chapter of a book edited by Nussbaum and himself, though recognizing that he was not aware of this before, notes that “the Greek word *dynamis*, used by Aristotle to discuss an aspect of the human good (sometimes translated as ‘potentiality’), can be translated as ‘capability of existing or acting’ (...).” He adds: “The Aristotelian perspective and its connections with the recent attempts at constructing a capability-focused approach have been illuminatingly discussed by Martha Nussbaum (1988)” (Sen, 1993: 30). Sen remarks: “[t]he basis of a fair distribution of capability to function is given a central place in the Aristotelian theory of political distribution” (1993:46). At this point, however, a discussion arises between Sen and Nussbaum about the greater or lesser fixity of the list of capabilities to be sought. Nussbaum is for an Aristotelian definition of a set of capabilities while Sen leaves the matter more open, accusing a unique list of over-specification. In this way, a central discussion of the capabilities approaches revolves around Aristotle’s teachings.¹ Consequently, this discussion may be fruitfully oriented by coming back to Aristotle’s conceptions about the goods, happiness and the way in which they are related.²

In this paper, however, I do not intend to deal with this issue of capabilities and lists. There is another topic within the field of the capabilities approaches to which some Aristotelian ideas may contribute: the topic of the incommensurability and incomparability among the ends that contribute to achieve a final end. If there is no common measure that allows commensuration or a reference to compare with, how are we going to determine the concrete set of ends to be sought? The answer is that in the last instance, after trying to carry out –albeit imperfectly– quantitative comparisons, we will finally have to do a qualitative appraisal –introducing the concept of “practical comparability”. Thus, an Aristotelian practical reason that assesses and compares among ends that contribute to a final end is the way to overcome

the problems of incommensurability and incomparability. To explain why this is so, I will first expose the problem of incommensurability and incomparability of capabilities. Next, I will explain the concept of practical comparability. Finally, I will show how this concept can be applied to Economics, and to the capabilities approaches in particular, in order to solve the problem initially posed.

I. The problems of incommensurability and incomparability

Amazement is and has always signalled the beginning of science. Within the range of surprising facts that amazed men and originated science, Aristotle mentioned the incommensurability of the diagonal (*Metaphysics*, I,2,983a:13,15-20). The commensuration of second-order ends would have similarly surprised Aristotle. What are second-order ends? To explain this, we need to introduce a classical classification of ends. We may distinguish among

- a) ends that can be considered only as means, only pursued for the sake of something else (first-order or instrumental ends),
- b) ends that are desirable in themselves and also pursued for the sake of the final end (second-order ends),³ and
- c) ends which are only desirable in themselves (third-order or final ends: usually known as “happiness”).⁴

For example, we study for an exam (i.e. a mean for an instrumental end) in order to achieve graduation (a second-order end), in order to be happy (a final end), according to our plan of life (designed by practical reason). Practical rationality harmonizes the complex set of second-order ends in order to achieve a plan that will make us happy. Let us now pass to the consideration of the topics of comparison and commensuration.

To compare is to establish the similarities and differences among different things. According to Aristotle, this may be done quantitatively, by commensuration (in a greater or faster way); in a quanti-qualitative way, by a comparison of the intensity or degree of the quality (bluer or colder); and finally, by “comparison of priority” (better or happier). Comparison is the

genus and the other concepts, the *species*. In this paper I adopt this terminology and I will analyse them one by one.

Commensuration

According to Aristotle, commensurable things can be compared through a common unit of measure which they all share: we can commensurate when we have a common measure.⁵ He states in the *Metaphysics*: “the measure is always homogeneous with the thing measured ... that of weight is a weight, that of units a unit” (X, 1, 1053a 24). Thus, “number is not predicated of that which is not commensurate (*me symmetros*)” (V, 15, 1021a 5-6).

A characteristic of commensuration according to Aristotle is that when we commensurate we do not take into account the ontological differences but only consider things as undifferentiated: “with numbers we suppose that what are equal and completely undifferentiated are the same” (XIII, 7, 1082b 7-9). In addition, “in the case of indivisibles (*atomoî*), one is not prior, another posterior” (III, 3, 999a 12-3). Aristotle’s idea is that when there is a relation of qualitative priority there is no commensuration: we do not consider what things have in common, but their differences. We rank pictures in an order of preference when we distinguish them; in order to count them we must leave their differences aside.

Comparison by intensity or degree of quality

However, according to Aristotle a quality can accidentally be a quantity. He notes: “The things we have mentioned [number, time, space, etc.] alone can be called in the strictest sense quantities. Other things that are so called are so called in a secondary sense (*katà symbebekós, per accidens*) –with an eye to some one of the former” (*Categories*, VI, 5b1). Furthermore, he adds: “Qualities admit of degrees. For one thing is whiter than another” (*Categories*, VIII, 11b 26). But the range of qualities has limits: while quantity does not admit an opposite, quality does (blackness and whiteness, goodness and badness) (*Categories*, VI, 5b 11 and 8, 10b 13). That is, within some qualities

we may establish an ordinal scale. Some authors consider this possibility as commensuration and others regard it as comparison (Chang, 1997a: 18). According to Aristotle, it would be more appropriate to understand it as a comparison: “The aforementioned characteristics [to have degrees] are no way peculiar to quality. What is peculiar is this, that we predicate ‘like’ and ‘unlike’ (*ómoia kai anómoia*) with reference to quality only” (*Categories*, VIII, 11a 15-6). The Latin translation of *omoios* is *par* (like), which is the origin of the Latin verb *comparare* and the English verb “to compare”. That is, when we claim that a particular robe is whiter than another one, we are actually comparing. On the other hand, from the point of view of quantity, something can be said to be equal (and to a greater or a lesser extent). When we claim that a car is faster than another we are, in fact, commensurating.

Let us take another step. We may assign numbers to the degrees of qualities. This may be more or less precise. It is much simpler to do it with whiteness rather than with goodness. This is normal practice in Economics, e.g. when devising a utility function to measure different goods. This is not new. Aristotle himself did it for the first time: “things that are exchanged must be somehow comparable. It is for this end that money has been introduced, and it becomes in a sense an intermediate; for it measures all things, and therefore the excess and the defect –how many shoes are equal to a house” (*NE*, V, 5, 1133a 20ff.). Aristotle then highlights that money is the representation of demand (*chreia*, subjective need –though no arbitrary) through price. However, a tension remains: “Now in truth it is impossible that things differing so much should become commensurate, but with reference to demand they may become so sufficiently.”⁶ In order to exchange those things, we may add, in a secondary sense, *katà symbebekos* (by accident). When we put a price to different things, we are representing or reducing their differences to undifferentiated units. However, differences remain and resurface, for example, when somebody does not agree with the price. Someone may find the good cheap and someone else may find it expensive but cannot avoid buying it; they exchange the good at this equilibrium price but they assess it differently. Let me put another clearer example: when a worker dies due to a work accident, the insurance company pays a certain

amount. This amount is conventionally determined by a scale that considers things such as the worker's position and number of years in the company. But, surely, this amount is not meant to represent the value of the person who has died.⁷ Keynes writes about these kinds of scales:

When we describe the colour of one object as bluer than that of another, or say that it has more green in it, we do not mean that there are quantities blue and green of which the object's colour possesses more or less; we mean that the colour has a certain position in an order of colours and that it is nearer some standard colour than is the colour with which we compare it (Keynes, 1973a: 38-9).

The objective quality measured may not, strictly speaking, possess numerical quantitativeness, although it has the properties necessary for measurement by means of correlation with numbers. The values which it can assume may be capable of being ranged in an order (...); but it does not follow from this that there is any meaning in the assertion that one value is *twice* another value (...). It follows that equal interval between the numbers which represent the ratios do not necessarily correspond to equal intervals between the qualities under measurement; for these numerical differences depend upon which convention of measurement we have selected (*Ibid*: 50).

That is, we can compare by the different degrees of qualities, albeit with some limitations.

Comparison by priority

Aristotle affirms that “one man is not a more man than another, as one pale thing is more pale than another and one beautiful thing more beautiful than another (...) Thus substance does not admit of a more and a less” (*Categories*, V 3b 33-4a 9). That is, if we consider only the undifferentiated substance the only thing we can do is to commensurate, but not to compare by a ranking. However, very close to this passage, he affirms that Socrates is more a substance than the species man and the genus animal (both secondary

substances), and that of these secondary substances the species is more a substance than the genus because it is nearer to the primary substance (V, 2b 7-8, 17). That is, this hierarchic comparison is not by degree of the quality of being substances, but by the kind of substances they are.

There is another passage especially relevant to our problem, the incommensurability of second-order ends. Aristotle asserts that when one good is sought for the sake of another, once attained, it does not add: things belonging to a hierarchical order are neither commensurable nor additive:

Moreover, a great number of good things is more desirable than a smaller, either absolutely or when the one is included in the other, viz. the smaller number in the greater. An objection may be raised suppose in some particular case the one is valued for the sake of the other; for then the two together are not more desirable than the one; e.g. recovery of health and health, than health alone, inasmuch as we desire recovery of health for the sake of health (*Topics*, III, 2 117a 16-21).

That is, when something is comparable in this priority way it is neither commensurable nor comparable by degree of quality.⁸ This is an analogical comparison.

Incommensurability of second-order ends and the capabilities approaches

For some authors, problems of incommensurability and/or incomparability arise among second-order ends (Finnis, 1980, 1987; Chang, 1997a; Anderson, 1997).

However, before going on we should clarify how these problems affect the capabilities approaches. By focusing on achieving capabilities, Sen reinserts the ends into economics and economics into the practical area. He proposes a consideration of the ends that allow the development of capabilities; and capabilities are themselves ends. He considers the latter as incommensurable and points out the consequent limitations of standard Economics.

According to Sen, the set of capabilities that someone chooses corresponds to her/his election of a kind of life (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993: 3). Thus, we read that:

The capability approach is concerned primarily with the identification of value-objects, and sees the evaluative space in terms of functionings and capabilities to function. This is, of course, itself a deeply evaluative exercise (...) the capability approach differs from utilitarian evaluation (...) in making room for a variety of human acts and states as important in themselves (Sen, 1993: 32-33).

That is, the capability approach aims at ends that are values in themselves and that are looked for the achievement of the kind of life chosen. In addition, Sen's concept of commitment gives room to an element of the self, self-scrutiny, which supposes the introduction of moral and social non self-interested motivations (Sen, 2002: 36).

He also remarks that the question of the identification of the objects of value is different from the question on their relative values which calls for a further evaluative exercise (Sen, 1993: 33). Along with Bernard Williams, he argues –against utilitarianism– that “rights of different people and of different types do not get merged into one homogeneous total, yielding a ‘monist’ morality based in the maximization of such a magnitude” (1982a: 19).⁹ In the same vein, Sen states:

The capabilities perspective is inescapably pluralist (...) To insist that there should be only homogeneous magnitude that we value is to reduce drastically the range of our evaluative reasoning (...) Heterogeneity of factors that influence individual advantage is a pervasive feature of actual evaluation (...) (1999: 76-7).

Nevertheless, despite Sen's criticism of commensurability, in some writings he maintains that maximization is the common structure of all human action: “a person can accommodate different types of objectives and values

within the maximizing framework” (2002:37). We have to clarify that Sen’s concept of maximization differs from the one habitually used in Economics. For him, maximization does not require completeness of preferences, which is the case in his proposed concept of optimization (1997:746,763). According to Sen, maximization is like Simon’s concept of satisfying (1997:768). Sen also relies on G. Debreu’s *Theory of Value* ([1959] 1973, 10) to so define this notion. The relaxation of the requirement of completeness transforms commensuration in comparison. Notwithstanding, the spirit is still quantitative.¹⁰ Elizabeth Anderson suggested that he should completely abandon the utilitarian framework and concentrate on notions as identity, collective agency and reasons for actions (Anderson, 2001:37). Sen answered that these motivations may be introduced in the maximization logic (2001: 57). However, concerning this point, a tension can be observed in Sen’s arguments. He admits that the maximization approach is limited as a characteristic of rationality:

We must also recognize that maximizing behaviour is at most a necessary condition for rationality and can hardly be sufficient for it. Reason has its use not only in the pursuit of a given set of objectives and values, but also in scrutinizing the objectives and values themselves. Maximizing behaviour can sometimes be patently stupid and lacking in reasoned assessment, depending on what is being maximized. Rationality cannot be just an instrumental requirement for the pursuit of some given –and unscrutinized– set of objectives and values (2002: 39).

That is, we need to know how to scrutinize a set of objectives and values, i.e., of human ends. If maximization is not the way to do it, because human ends and values are dimensions that are beyond quantity, how are we then to do it? Maximization has a place in the realm of instrumental rationality and its problem about how to allocate means to achieve ends most efficiently. But, as already explained, maximization has no place within the realm of practical rationality in which the problem is how to harmonise and rank qualitatively heterogeneous ends. The problem is very well expressed by Sabina Alkire:

The capability approach conceives of poverty reduction as multidimensional. That is, it recognizes that more than one human end (enjoyment, knowledge, health, work participation) has intrinsic value in a society, and that the set of valued ends and their relative weights will vary with the diversity of individuals and cultures. But if human ends are diverse in kind and cannot be adequately represented by a common measure such as income or utility, this creates a problem. It becomes impossible to choose ‘rationally’ between options that pursue different set of ends, *if* one means by rational what is meant by ‘rational choice theory’, namely, the identification and choice of a maximally efficient or productive option, the one (or one of the set) in which the total benefits minus the total costs is the highest possible (2002: 85-6).

We need, Alkire goes on, to approach “substantive and valuational judgments” (2002: 88). My proposal is that we can compose the set of ends needed to achieve happiness by using a ‘practical comparability’ enlightened by quantitative imperfect measures. In the Appendix, I develop the concept of Aristotelian practical reasoning from which practical comparability stems.

II. How do we sort out the problem of incommensurability and incomparability?

Many authors specify the different fields or values among which comparability, as defined above, is not possible. Aristotle argues against Plato’s monistic conception of the good: “of honour, wisdom, and pleasure, just in respect of their goodness, the accounts are distinct and diverse. The good, therefore, is not some common element answering to one Idea” (*NE*, I, 6, 1096b 22-5; *Politics* III, 12, 1283a 1ff). However, Aristotle is only indicating that there is no “common element” between these goods. According to his thought, this discards commensuration and comparison by the intensity or degree of the quality but not comparison by priority. They are all goods but in this case ‘good’ is not a common measure: they are different goods. R. Chang instead

distinguishes being useful, skilful, enjoyable, beneficial and morally good as incomparable ends (1997:257). Chang asserts that abstract general values do not sort out the problem: “it makes no sense to say that one thing is simply better than another; things can be better only in a respect” (1997a:6). She is looking for a common element, for a *covering value*, something that would be impossible in the realm of comparison by priority from an Aristotelian point of view.¹¹ This quest is understandable: how could we compare such different things without a common reference?

We can compare by priority different things because we can put them in a hierarchical order according to certain criteria. In a certain sense, we may say that there is something in common between comparable things. But this common ground is not intrinsic; rather it is an external reference, according to which the differences are determined. This is the comparison we may establish between the different things of which we may predicate analogical –not univocal– terms.

Then, how do we come to compare second-order ends? Is it possible to optimize this choice (using my notion of optimization)? How do we deliberate when there are neither common measures nor covering values? Chang suggests that there are always covering values, though sometimes unnamed. I posit that they are not really covering values, but external references to which each element in the scale relates. This is the milieu where practical reasoning enters the game. Practical reasoning appraises the contribution of each different end to the desired final end; it assesses the actual situation against the draft of our plans of life in order to make the required concrete decision. The desired final end is the point of reference considered by practical reason in order to rank and thus compare the different ends. As Keynes considers in relation with right actions, “it must be in virtue of an intuitive judgment directed to the situation as a whole, and not in virtue of an arithmetical deduction” that we assess them (1973a: 345). For Keynes, this should not be regarded as a weakness (1973a: 75-6).¹² I propose to label this particular ability to compare “practical comparability.”

Let us illustrate this way of solving the problem of comparability with an example. On March 4th 1966, John Lennon affirmed:

Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and I will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now. I don't know which will go first –rock 'n' roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right, but his disciples were thick and ordinary.¹³

Leaving the prophetic tones aside, let us concentrate on the comparison: “We're more popular than Jesus now.” We might be able to count the number of Beatles' fans and how many people believe in Jesus. We cannot, however, infer from this counting that any of the two is more popular than the other. This undifferentiated kind of popularity would be no more than a meaningless number, without any intrinsic meanings. To be a fan of the Beatles and to be devout of Jesus certainly imply different commitments. They actually entail “different loves”, which may even overlap: we can be simultaneously fans of the Beatles and devout of Jesus. These attitudes pertain to different levels. We can not commensurate them: we have to compare them. But trying to compare by counting becomes misleading. Thus, we need a criterion going beyond the undifferentiated number in order to rank these different kinds of popularity.

The statement would make sense if we specify it, saying, for example, “we are more popular than Jesus as musicians,” thus deciding a criterion against which the comparison will be made. Conversely, it could also be said: “Jesus is more popular than the Beatles as a religious leader.” We are comparing by the intensity of degree of quality.

In addition, popularity as musicians and as religious leaders cannot be compared in themselves. We cannot say that the popularity of the Beatles as musicians is greater than the popularity of Jesus as a religious leader. We need a superior criterion to make the comparison. Anyone can say: “Religion is more important than music for me.” Now, she is legitimately, “practically” comparing by assessing the contribution of each love to the external criterion of her plan of life. She may do this because she exercises practical reason, which stands for her capacity to compare different kinds of values and attitudes toward them, and ranking them in agreement with a certain criterion. Calculi are not engaged in this process. It is a practical assessment of our

practical reason. People have another way of appraising, comparing and deciding that transcends calculation, i.e. practical reasoning. This comparison is neither exact nor numerical; we cannot claim, “for me, religion is twice more important than music.” The best we could do is to arrange a personal ordinal hierarchy of importance which can never be said to be complete. However, we can always compare and decide.

I add some clarifications. First, this hierarchy may change: Taylor outlines the “Kairotic element or context” (1997: 182). During some parts of our life we might prioritize the Beatles over Jesus, but this choice may change afterwards. To put an art example, a painter may fill the sketch in order to, later on, finish the picture (by taking practical decisions on the concrete colours and forms). Alternatively, s/he may paint besides the original sketch or substantially modify it. The sketch, however, remains aside or behind this last stage of development of the picture. The former is an image of the cautious person practically comparing and deciding how to achieve his general plan of life. The latter is an image of the incontinent (*akrates*) rationalizing on how or why to behave in a different way. This highlights the relevance of human time which enables us to provisionally step outside our plan of life.¹⁴

Secondly, this hierarchy is abstract; it does not have a significant meaning unless we use it for making decision in a specific case. Orderings, rankings and hierarchies become more relevant when conflicts appear. Suppose that attending a Beatles’ concert would prevent me from attending Sunday Mass. Nobody would calculate the specific utility of both engagements in order to compare them afterwards. Both the calculation and weighting of utilities become impossible. We should decide by appraising both alternatives with our practical reason. While I was writing this article, I asked a friend (who is a judge) about his procedure to compare particular colliding values in order to solve dilemmas. His answer was: first, this comparison is qualitative; second, there are always good reasons to decide for or against –or for a combination contained within the wide gamut of possible greys– and, finally, that this solution is “reasonable” (one of the best words to express practical rationality).¹⁵

Third, this procedure is rational. Practical reasonableness is not irrationality but the rationality of human affairs. The decision made is not exact; it may be contested. But, quite often, this is in line with the general appraisal. Rationality does not entail exactness. Rigorous thinking in the practical field is inexact. To try to insert exactness into the practical field would be like trying to force a normal person to wear an orthopaedic device. Everyday life affairs, including its economic aspects, resonate with the task of a jury. As Aristotle highlights, “a rational animal is one with the power to arbitrate between diverse appearances of what is good and integrate the findings into a unitary practical conception.”¹⁶ This human capacity of comparing what seems to be incomparable is indeed admirable. In Wiggins’ words,

[Individual agents] can deliberate, in the light of the good and the possible, about ends, about the constituents of ends, and about the means to ends. Somehow, despite the intractability and uncertainty of the subject-matter of choice, agents do arrive at judgments about what is worthwhile or what can or cannot be done in pursuit of what. And somehow, from out of all this, they arrived at shared, partly inexplicit norms of reasonableness (Wiggins, 2002: 373-4).¹⁷

Fourth, we are not always making extreme decisions. Most times, alternatives are compatible: we are able to arrange ways of performing all of them, by distributing them among different times or situations. Other times, we decide rather automatically, just because we are used to doing things in a certain way. Still other times we use “closer” criteria to decide. However, a coherent person acts in a way that, if analysed, the foreseeable consequences of his/her actions would finally led to his/her plan of life.

Fifth, the facts that the decision is inexact and that the hierarchy may change do not imply that the ends are completely substitutable. In the actual decision they may be: I can postpone dinner to help a friend finish her work. I can hold my breath and free dive to admire a beautiful coral reef. These activities cannot be endlessly performed, however. In his praise of friendship Aristotle notes that “when men are friends they have no need of justice” (*NE*, VIII, 1, 1155a 26). However, friendship without justice risks falling

into favouritism: they are not completely replaceable. That is to say, ends are heterogeneous and cannot be always substituted for each other. They need a harmonization following the order in agreement with the criterion signalled by our plan of life. We need to be healthy, nourished and dressed, but before being completely satisfied in those respects we will surely try to add goods such as knowledge or friendship.

Finally, once the decision on ends is set, is it possible to express it in terms of a maximization procedure? Can we account for the decision calculating a constant or a varying ratio of substitution of the involved ends? Let Wiggins answer:

The incommensurabilist will not, of course, deny that after the event, some such ratio may be hit upon. That claim is nearly vacuous and the incommensurabilist will be foolish to deny the nearly vacuous [...] It does not represent a falsifiable claim about the agent's springs of action (2002: 371).

Why is it “clearly vacuous”, not falsifiable? Because this notion of maximization seems to be a truism. Whatever the action is, it could be regarded *a posteriori* as a maximization. The scope of this notion of maximization is so broad that it would turn reasonable to point out that good reasons to perform any action can always be found. Nevertheless the latter does not entail pointing out that we are always “maximizers”, at least in ordinary language.¹⁸ Besides, this representation can be misleading, because it conceals the actual reasons behind the actions. It might be that some actions are motivated by maximization: this is obvious and applies to a vast field, i.e. the means-ends relations. However, this is not true for any action. As Wiggins relentlessly points out, utility theory is not a sketch but a caricature of human decisions and actions (2002: 390). If a change in the lexicon is accepted, i.e. translating maximization into “having a reason for”, we would be constructing an *ex post* theory, but not necessarily a guide for action concerning ends. In this sense, economic theory is, at best, a good theoretical representation of what has happened. Henry Richardson explains the problem in this way:

[P]reference-based utility is not a form of commensurability useful in making choices but rather a way of representing choices once made. Saving the action-guiding role of the formalistic model by supposing some finally complete articulation of reasons, of dimensions of value or goodness, and of discriminations therein, is like telling Seurat that in order to place all the figures in his masterly afternoon scene of the Grande Jatte, all he has to do is first determine where to put all the points of paint on the canvas. The solution may be logically coherent, but it is totally impracticable, and puts the cart before the horse. If our practical knowledge were perfect, we would already know what to do (1997: 102).

At this point, one may wonder how could it be that economic theory often works (not only describes and explains, but also rightly prescribes and predicts). The problem involved is how to fill the gap between individual, contingent and free human actions and scientific generalisations about these actions. We can do it, because we can capture tendencies. These tendencies ultimately rely on human habits and institutions. Probability and statistics are instruments to deal with large numbers and tendencies. However, we must not forget, as Keynes remarked, that “probability begins and ends with probability” (1973a: 356). When we pass from large numbers to the individual conduct we are changing the level of consideration: general conclusions do not necessarily apply to actual situations. “This is due to the fact,” as Keynes also affirmed, “that a statistical induction is not really about the particular instance at all, but has its subject, about which it generalises, a *series*” (1973a: 450).¹⁹

In the light of the former considerations, we can provide an answer to this objection: “Incommensurability is only a philosophical theory and we are wasting time considering it. If we actually decide, how could it be that ends were incommensurable?”²⁰ The answer is that although incommensurability and incomparability entail a theoretical problem for decision-making, we usually sort out this problem by using “practical comparability”. In these cases, quantitative calculi do not apply: they are only a rough indication or an *a posteriori* description (Finnis, 1982:115).

This comparability is not merely theoretical, as standard rational choice-theory is. Nevertheless, it is not irrational either. It can be labelled as practical rational action.

III. How to apply practical comparability in Economics?

Although not always in the way here discussed, the issues of incommensurability and incomparability have been extensively dealt with in the literature on philosophy, especially in the practical reasoning field. It has also been incorporated in the capabilities approaches as a problem that has to be sorted out. However, it has not permeated Economics. In Economics, the language of incommensurability and practical reasoning is still very limited. Thus, the challenge on how to incorporate it to Economics remains.

Nevertheless, practical reasoning is not as far from Economics as one could believe. This way of producing decisions is not at all unfamiliar to economic methodology, at least as conceived by Keynes and as utilised by practical economists. In effect, Keynes was a great advocate of the heterogeneity of economic material and he unsystematically designed a “reasonable” method to deal with this subject. Keynes’s proposal, though probably unnoticed by him, is similar to practical reasoning. In a letter to Roy Harrod dated July 4th, 1938, he states that “the material to which it [Economics] is applied is, in too many respects, not homogeneous through time” (1973b: 296). In the next letter (July 16th) he warns that “one has to be constantly on guard against treating the material as constant and homogeneous” (1973b: 300). According to Keynes, Economics “deals with motives, expectations, psychological uncertainties” that are not numerically measurable (1973b: 286, 300). They are “complex and incompletely known facts of experience” (1972: 186). He also states:

The atomic hypothesis which has worked so splendidly in physics breaks down in psychics. We are faced at every turn with the problems of organic unity, of discreteness, of discontinuity –the whole is not equal to the sum of

the parts, comparisons of quantity fail us, small changes produce large effects, the assumptions of a uniform and homogeneous continuum are not satisfied (1972: 262).

Thus, he remarks, “in economics (...) to convert a model in a quantitative formula is to destroy its usefulness as instrument of thought” (1973b: 299). “The fact that our knowledge of the future is fluctuating, vague and uncertain, renders Wealth a peculiarly unsuitable subject for the methods of the [neo]classical economic theory” (1937: 213). For him, what is needed is “an amalgam of logic and intuition and the wide knowledge of facts, most of which are not precise” (1972: 186). He considers Economics as one of the moral sciences (1972:300), “in which theory and fact, intuitive imagination and practical judgment, are blended in a manner comfortable to the human intellect” (1972:335). He also develops these ideas in the *General Theory*, where he notes that we need models that are simplified sketches of reality, but he clarifies:

The object of our analysis is, not to provide a machine, or method of blind manipulation, which will furnish an infallible answer, but to provide ourselves with an organised and orderly method of thinking out particular problems; and, after we have reached a provisional conclusion by isolating the complicating factors one by one, we then have to go back on ourselves and allow, as well as we can, for the probable interactions of the factors amongst themselves. This is the nature of economic thinking (...) In ordinary discourse, where we are not blindly manipulating but know all the time what we are doing and what the words mean, we can keep ‘at the back of our heads’ the necessary reserves and qualifications and the adjustments which we shall have to make later on, in a way in which we cannot keep complicated partial differentials ‘at the back’ of several pages of algebra which assume that they all vanish (1936: 297-8).

This is why “the specialist in the manufacture of models will not be successful unless he is constantly correcting his judgment by intimate and

messy acquaintance with the facts” (1972: 300). This need of closeness to facts is one of the characteristics of practical reasoning as conceived by Aristotle.

This plural method by which Keynes put into play deduction, induction, rhetoric, imagination (examples) and dialectic arguments is completely reasonable for him. He frequently used the word “reasonable” which, as mentioned, is the logic of practical rationality (1936:148,153). He also uses the expression “common sense” (1973a:240,244,247,259,261,418-9), which is exemplified in his praise of Marshall:

The study of economics does not seem to require any specialised gifts of an unusually high order. Is it not, intellectually regarded, a very easy subject compared with the higher branches of philosophy and pure science? Yet good, or even competent, economists are the rarest of birds. An easy subject, at which very few excel! The paradox finds its explanation, perhaps, in that the master-economist must possess a rare *combination* of gifts. He must reach a high standard in several different directions and must combine talents not often found together. He must be mathematician, historian, statesman, philosopher –in some degree. He must understand symbols and speak in words. He must contemplate the particular in terms of the general, and touch abstract and concrete in the same flight of thought. He must study the present in the light of the past for the purposes of the future. No part of the man’s nature or his institutions must lie entirely outside his regard. He must be purposeful and disinterested in a simultaneous mod; as aloof and incorruptible as an artist, yet sometimes as near the earth as a politician (1972: 173-4).

Without knowing it, he is masterfully describing the conditions of a practical scientist.

In addition, this plural method is what practical economists actually use when studying, advising, or making decisions about personal, institutional or policy matters. I think that as economists, we usually have the experience of the difficulties involved in our subject, which stem from its organic character. This produces complex relations among variables that have to be

analysed step by step. This complexity overcomes the possibility of models, and requires a final synthesis prudentially achieved.

Conclusion

The fundamental difference between economists' practices and the capabilities approaches lies not in the methodological field but in the fact that economists often do not take into account a solid concern with an "integral human fulfilment" (Alkire, 2002:107). However, the process is similar: a prudential decision that considers theoretical and quantitative inputs. In the last instance, after trying to do –imperfectly– quantitative comparisons, we finally will have to do a qualitative appraisal, introducing a concept of practical comparability as the way to overcome the problems of incommensurability and incomparability. This is no more than practical reasoning assessing and comparing.²¹

This vision coincides with Alkire's view on how to evaluate decisions for which a comparison among different possible projects is needed:

An assessor who was comparing two activities aimed at capability expansion could base his or her decision on the following information: 1. a social cost-benefit analysis, which accounts for all economic costs and benefits that can be accurately estimated; 2. the description of positive and negative changes in valued functionings from the holistic impact exercise (...); 3. the ranking values of the most significant functionings and their associated dimensions of value, which identify the relative strength of the impact in the eyes of the beneficiaries (...); qualitative ranking values of these impacts by facilitators; 5. the degree and kind of 'participation' and self-direction exercised in the activity; 6. further information from standard assessment tools and activity history (...) (Alkire, 2002: 285).

At the same time, she warns against not taking into account the different dimensions involved in the decision. She looks for a harmonious set of

purposes and orientations, recognising, however, that a decision has to be made and it could not be the best: “Heroic specification is required” (Alkire, 2002: 77). Nevertheless, “[i]n the spirit of the capability approach”, she adds, “the assumptions on the basis of which this specification takes place should be collaborative, visible, defensible, and revisable” (Alkire, *Ibid.*).

If Economics –as in the capabilities approaches and happiness theories– decides to deal with ends, it will have to adopt practical rationality enlightened by technical rationality. It should, however, be noticed that although the decision to deal with ends is a legitimate one, Economics may be blurring its limits with other social sciences such as Ethics and Politics. Moreover, one may wonder whether this decision would be a realistic one. The distinction between standard Economics as a science –which involves only technical rationality– and economic decisions –which involves both rationalities– is analytically possible. But in fact the step between the science and the practice is actually extremely short. According to Aristotle, Politics is the science that must determine the content of what today we would call a social policy:

If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? (...) If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is, and of which of the sciences or capacities it is the object. It would seem to belong to the most authoritative art and that which is most truly the master art. And politics appears to be of this nature; for it is this that ordains which of the sciences should be studied in a state, and which each class of citizens should learn and up to what point they should learn them; and we see even the most highly esteemed of capacities to fall under this, e.g. strategy, economics, rhetoric; now, since politics uses the rest of the sciences, and since, again, it legislates as to what we are to do and what we are to abstain from, the end of this science must include those of the others, so that this end must be the good for man (*NE*, I, 2).²²

As historians of economic thought very well know, classical economists conceived economics as “political economy”, as part of practical science (moral, political). In the *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith considered it “a branch of the science of a statesman or legislator” (Bk IV, Introduction, 1). Economics at that moment was a moral science. Then, attracted by the exactness of positivist science, it became unfaithful and abandoned practical science. Regardless of the evolution of this trend, I would only like to stress that, given the difficulties produced by the divorce between technical and practical rationality, the only way to overcome this split entails fostering a possible reconciliation.

The reconciliation of technical and practical rationality does not entail a merge or the absorbing of practical rationality by the instrumental one.²³ Merging distorts the instrumental behaviour, the non-instrumental one, or both (Stewart, 1985: 66). Economics must not only refrain from its temptation to replace practical rationality with the instrumental one; rather, it should give more priority to practical rationality. For one, economic theories concerned with ends need to adopt practical rationality because it is the rationality of ends.

Appendix: Aristotelian Practical Reasoning

Human beings decide what to do using their intellectual capacities. Broadly speaking “practical” means ordered to decision and action. Practical thought is thinking about what one ought to do, for what reasons and how one could do it: it is *about* and *for* action, thought *in* and *from* action. Practical reason is human reason itself in the task of directing persons towards decision, choice and action. It tries to answer the question “how should I behave?”, “or what ought I to do?” Hence, practical reasoning is the discursive or inferential thinking about what we should do: it relates reasons and appraises the alternative means to attain them.

This inquiry about how to act stems from a practical experience: the experience of looking for a goal when acting. Rational beings, such as

humans, naturally ask themselves why should they search one or another goal and what are the means to attain it. This question together with an answer to it is involved, at least tacitly, in any action. The experience of the goal of an action –a goal that may be good or bad in itself and/or for us– is the starting point of practical reasoning. The motivation of an end for acting entails a normative function of practical reason. We may say that normative rationality is the specific structure of human action. Practical reason also enacts norms to believe in. In that way, it also expands its scope to the theoretical field when this cannot sufficiently justify its hypothesis.

Practical philosophy or science is a disciplined and critical reflection on practical reasoning, its process and its goals. It is the normative reflection about the right goals of human actions, i.e., about the results of practical reasoning. The more practical it is, the less scientific and inversely, the more scientific, the less practical. The following are their main traits, as conceived by Aristotle.

First, practical science acknowledges the inexact character of its conclusions, due to the contingency of human action, which stems from human freedom and from the singularity and complexity of human affairs. Secondly, practical science must be closely connected to the concrete case. An adaptation to the particular case, considering its cultural and historical environment, is necessary. A wise mix of adequately chosen scientific types and historic, cultural and empirical elements is the key to a correct interpretation of human action.

While inexactness and closeness to reality are features which derive from freedom and from the complexity of human affairs, the ethical engagement of practical science arises as a consequence of the other aspect of rationality, namely, normativeness. These ethical aspects are essential to human action. In human actions, a triple rationality may be distinguished: practical or moral, technical, and logical. Practical rationality permeates the whole action to the extent that the existence of a purely technical action cannot be sustained. Whatever may be the action, it is always essentially moral. Since human action is moral, human science has a moral commitment.

A fourth trait of practical science is its pragmatic aim. A social science may have a theoretical aim, but it is always virtually oriented to action due

to the essentially practical character of its subject, which defines its epistemological status.

These characteristics of practical sciences influence their methodology. The bibliography on this topic is rich and could be summarized in an interesting proposal of methodological pluralism. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* and in *Politics*, Aristotle admirably combines axiomatic deduction, inductive inference, dialectic arguments, rhetoric suggestions, imagination, examples, and topics. In a prudential science, all these methodological instruments add up.

At this point, the meaning of the term ‘rational’ needs to be clarified. One may ask, couldn’t persons decide to act irrationally? Strictly speaking they cannot, because human decisions always imply rationality. “Irrational” means instinctive, sensitive, “outside” reason. Classical philosophy distinguished between “human acts” –deliberately performed–, which are rational; and “acts of humans” –instinctive or mere reactions– which are irrational simply because they do not stem from reason and rational will. Actions stemming from instincts, passions or any irrational faculty are not determined by voluntary decisions and thus, considered in themselves, are not strictly “human actions”. Rationality however, embeds even these actions in such a way that we can also look for reasons for instincts, emotions, The affirmation of the rationality of any human action supposes the use of the term “rationality” in its broadest sense, without any qualification. If, for example, we define economic rationality as maximizing behaviour, we may find economically irrational human actions that, however, are not irrational from an unqualified concept of rationality. Or if we speak about a precise ethical rationality, we may act irrationally from an ethical point of view when we commit sin, while the action is unqualifiedly rational (persons have their reasons for committing sins).

However, within the field of practical science the term “rational” is often used in a more restricted way to mean an ethically good action. This is because the right or good action is the action according to nature, and only this kind of action is rational from the point of view of nature. Thus, strictly speaking within the practical field we call “practical truth” to the good action. From this perspective, practical reasoning leading to a bad action is a wrong

reasoning. According to Aristotle the mean in which virtue lies is determined by reason, the reason by which the prudent person would determine it. Moral good is not something extrinsic, added to the action, but rather its very rational order. Alkire develops another aspect of practical rationality:

The distinction between ‘rational’ and ‘ethical’ actions is *one of degree*. *Ethical* actions and practices make their way towards human flourishing coherently”. (This coherency implies an integral human fulfilment), “the realization, so far as possible, of all the basic goods in all persons [past, present and future], living together in complete harmony (2002: 106-7).

However, how we define or discover the concrete combination of different ends that constitute a plan for achieving integral human fulfilment? This definition needs a decision that is practical.

A final point concerning practical reason should be made. The structure or logic of practical reason is different from the structure or logic of technical or instrumental reason. Technical rationality is the order inscribed in the action so as to attain the sought external result; i.e. how means can be combined together to originate a product (or service). A deliberation about means is central to this kind of rationality. On the other hand, practical rationality entails a debate on the possible conformation of our constellation or order of ends. In other words, we use technical reason when we deliberate about the means-ends relation. And we use practical reason when we deliberate about the ends that we are choosing.²⁴ In classical philosophy, technical rationality, on the one hand, is considered to be the rationality of transitive actions, which are called *poiseis* or *facere* (to produce). Practical rationality (or ends rationality), on the other hand, is considered to be the rationality of immanent actions (when there is an inner result), which are called *praxis* or *agere* (to act).

The simplest and most easily understandable structure is the technical one: given a specific end, we look for the appropriate means or instruments to achieve it. This instrumental character of means explains the name “instrumental rationality”. Within this rationality one may ask which is the “best” use or allocation of means in order to achieve the end using the best

possible cost-benefit equation. Standard economic rationality is in line with this perspective which is called maximization or optimization.

Instead, practical rationality does not allow for maximization. Ends are not commensurable because they belong to different qualitative categories and thus cannot be interchangeable. They have to be harmonized or aligned. They can be ranked according to some criteria, but as also analysed, this ranking does not allow for a quantitative calculus.

NOTES

- 1 I prefer to speak about “capabilities approaches” in the plural, instead of “capability approach”. I use “capabilities” (also used by Sen, 1980: 218-9) to stress the plurality of capabilities that people need. I use “approaches” because this issue of lists establishes different points of view within the capability theory.
- 2 I leave this topic for a future paper.
- 3 I am adopting a non-inclusive view of happiness according to Aristotle. Thus, I do not follow J. L. Ackrill’s (1980) interpretation, but R. Kraut’s (1989). Ackrill holds that happiness is an inclusive end composed by second-order ends. Kraut holds that happiness is a dominant end (contemplative –*theoria*– and practical life), different from second-order ends, which are sought not only for the sake of themselves but also for the sake of the happiness to which they are subordinated. This difference will be shown to be relevant when the topic of incommensurability is addressed.
- 4 Scott MacDonald calls them purely instrumental ends, weak ultimate ends and strong ultimate ends, respectively (1991: 51). Henry Richardson speaks about final or intermediate final ends, and ultimate ends (corresponding to second and third order respectively) (1997:52,195).
- 5 At the present time there is a huge discussion about incommensurability. The main contributors are James Griffin, David Wiggins, John Broome, Elizabeth Anderson, Joseph Raz, Elijah Millgram, Charles Taylor, Steven Lukes, Michael Stocker, Martha Nussbaum, Henry Richardson, Mark Murphy, Mozaffar Qizilbash and John Finnis, among others. A “local discussion” would be to situate Aristotle’s ideas within this debate.
- 6 *NE*, V, 5, 1133b 1-3. By these statements Aristotle seems to be the first author simultaneously proposing the revealed preference theory and raising doubts about it.
- 7 I thank Alejandro Vigo for this example.
- 8 It may be that Keynes considers this situation when he speaks about probabilities that “do not belong to single set of magnitudes measurable in terms of a common unit” (1973a: 33). In these cases, “a degree of probability is not composed of some homogeneous material, and is not apparently divisible into parts of like character with one another” (1973a: 32).

- 9 Martha Nussbaum also holds incommensurability, when she speaks about heterogeneity and non-commensurability (Nussbaum, 2003: 34).
- 10 Sen has considered the possibility of viewing utility primarily as a vector with several distinct components (1980:1).
- 11 This quest has to do with her inclusive conception of happiness which clearly stems from Chang (2004).
- 12 Let us remember that for Keynes this intuition has a social component: it is influenced by the character, education, culture, social norms, and the institutional environment of the agent. See Crespo (2008).
- 13 This quotation has been reproduced in several sources, see the Wikipedia entry “More popular than Jesus”.
- 14 This example was originated in a suggestion by Henry Richardson (1997). It highlights Aristotle’s idea of filling in (*anagrapσαι*) the sketch (*perigraphon*) of the human good (*NE*, I 7, 1098a 20-1).
- 15 On the case of the application of law, see Finnis (1997), especially 219-20 and 228-32.
- 16 *De Anima* III, 11, 434a 9, as cited by Wiggins (2002: 258).
- 17 On this idea see also Taylor (1997: IV-V).
- 18 The use of the word “maximization” as rationality and of the word “interest” as intentionality are fallacies of ambiguity, often unconsciously committed. It involves the confusion and conflation of levels (Copi and Cohen, 1998: 6.4).
- 19 A right articulation between generality and individuality in probability and statistics is at the heart of the legitimacy of Economics. This is a paramount local discussion. See also Keynes (1973a:362, 368, 402, 428, 445, 461, 463).
- 20 Or, as James Griffin put it as a title to an article: “Incommensurability: What’s the Problem?” (1997).
- 21 I think that stressing this may be a way to overcome the suspicions of professional economists about the capabilities approaches: what these approaches propose is to do what they actually do with an eye attentively placed on a superior end. It is not mainly a matter of refining techniques, but of incorporating more sound concerns.
- 22 This quote is mentioned by Sen (1992: 39,91).
- 23 This is the attempt of Gary Becker (1976, 1996). Using an expression of John Davis, Economics should refrain from trying to “domesticate” practical rationality (2006:14).
- 24 I adopt the Aristotelian version of practical rationality. A “local discussion” would be to compare this conception with other conceptions of practical rationality (see Millgram, 2001).

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