



INTERVIEW

Interview with Jonathan Wolff

	Jonathan Wolff¹
By/Par	Sandrine Berges

Pr. Jonathan Wolff
University College, London

INTERVIEW

Sandrine Berges (S.B.) :- “S.B.: In your forthcoming book, *Disadvantage*, which you co-wrote with Avner de-Shalit, you argue that the best way to promote equality, is to study the nature of disadvantage, specifically, to give an account of disadvantage rich enough to connect to the kind of things that real life people suffer from. One of the first conclusions you draw from your attempt at defining disadvantage is that disadvantage is ‘plural’ and that therefore compensation in the form of cash transfer cannot always be a good way of redressing disadvantage. Could you clarify this?”

Jonathan Wolff (J.W.) :-“ It is true that if disadvantage is plural, cash compensation cannot always be the right way of addressing disadvantage. In fact, though, in the first chapter of our book we argue for the opposite conditional: we try to argue for pluralism on the basis of the inappropriateness of cash compensation as an exclusive form of remedy. In essence, we think that if monism about well-being is true, then there could never be a principled objection to cash compensation (if it is acceptable in at least one case). But there are principled objections. Therefore, we argue, monism must be false.

¹ A short biography of Pr. Wolff follows the interview.

The idea that cash compensation cannot always be the right way to address injustice or some other form of disadvantage became apparent to me when I was working on my paper 'Fairness, Respect and the Egalitarian Ethos', published in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* in 1998. The main argument of that paper was that conditional schemes of benefits, as apparently recommended by those theories such as Dworkin's now known as luck egalitarianism, can be humiliating. There are circumstances in which people will have to argue that they are untalented in order to claim benefits, and this can undermine their self-respect and their standing in the eyes of others. I say much more about this in answer to question 4 below, but here the salient point is that in that paper I argued that it would do no good to recognize that detailed scrutiny is humiliating and then offer people cash to compensate them for this humiliation. It would not remove the humiliation but perhaps compound it. Rather we need to explore ways of arranging society so that people are not humiliated.

There are many similar examples. Children brought up in orphanages in the UK very rarely go to university. It seems clear that this is an injustice, but paying cash to compensate seems the wrong way to go about improving the situation. In fact, we argue that forms of remedy can go wrong in at least two different ways. First, there is the problem of 'mismatch': cash just won't solve the problem, in some cases. Second, there is the problem of stigma. Sometimes ways of helping people can be patronizing, humiliating or oppressive. For example providing soup kitchens for people who are poor and hungry does not suffer from the problem of mismatch, but instead announce to the world that anyone served is in poverty and in need of help. This is not something that everyone would want others to know about them. However the problem of stigma is an example of a broader phenomenon; that improving someone's life in one respect can make them worse off in others. This has both a practical and theoretical consequence.

In practical terms, governments have often been accused of taking steps in order to achieve one particular objective, but in doing so they can cause harms in other ways. One example we use in our book is the policy of clearing slum housing and re-housing the former residents in tower blocks, which took place in the UK during the 1960s and 1970s. People who had lived in very poor housing were given new homes with much better sanitation, heating, and cooking facilities, which should have improved their lives in significant ways. On the whole they did. But at the same time it uprooted people from their communities, increasing social isolation, leading to loneliness, alcohol and drug dependence, ill-health, and general lack of support.

In fact, however, quite often the bad effects are avoidable and are the result of a type of 'tunnel vision'. Sometimes policy makers have only a limited number of objectives in mind, and may be unaware of the costs of pursuing those objectives in the most 'efficient' way. It may be that taking some other route would have better side effects, and thereby would be clearly better all things considered, even if they don't meet that particular agency's goals in the very most cost-effective manner.

The contribution this type of example makes at the level of theory is that it encourages us to accept that well-being is plural. People can be made better off in one respect and worse off in another, at the same time and through the same policy, yet it may be hard to say – perhaps impossible to say – whether all things considered they have become better off or worse off, overall.”

S.B.: -“ Your work, whether in the above mentioned book, or in the many articles you have published on equality, tends to focus on addressing disadvantage within the nation state. In your book, however, you appeal to the capability approach which has been mainly used in global contexts. Did you encounter any difficulties in applying the views of Sen and Nussbaum to national problems?”

J.W.: -“ The capability approach suffers from a difficulty that all pluralist theories of equality share: if there is an irreducible plurality of sources of well-being, then how can we judge whether well-being is equal or unequal, or who is least advantaged amongst people who do badly in different ways? This is what we call the ‘indexing problem’. It seems as if some sort of weighting function is required with which to assign values to different categories if we are to produce an informative social ordering. Yet how is the theorist to derive a unique, firmly grounded, weighting function? However, in the context of the developing world this theoretical problem can be side-stepped. Where an individual falls below a very basic threshold level on a range of functionings – where they are in a form of absolute deprivation - it is clear that there is an urgent priority to bring that person up to the basic threshold, if that is possible. In the world’s poorest countries, and even in the developing world there are huge numbers of people in that position, and so from the point of view of egalitarian justice the urgent task is to overcome this sort of absolute deprivation. Once this has been done the challenge of meeting the indexing problem will arise, but for the foreseeable future this task can be put to one side.

When we move to the developed world thankfully relatively few people are in the position of absolute deprivation. However we can hardly argue that for this reason the task of egalitarian social justice is complete. Accordingly it is necessary to go further; we argue that the immediate task of governments is to identify the least advantaged and to take steps so that their lives are improved. This, it appears, heads us straight into the indexing problem.

To avoid this one possible response would be to appeal to a type of ‘spheres of justice’ approach, and argue that there is no need for an overall index of advantage and disadvantage. On such a view each type of disadvantage should be treated on its own merits. Those who are in poor health have a claim for medical assistance, whatever else is true of them; those who have poor housing have a claim for better housing, and so on. On such a view it is possible again, it seems, to define a threshold level for each functioning. This time the threshold would not be one of

overcoming absolute deprivation, but rather achieving a sufficiency on each functioning.

We are sympathetic to this type of approach, but unfortunately it seems to us not to work. The problem is that in a world of scarce resources it seems highly unlikely that society can bring everyone to a decently high level of sufficiency for all functionings. In such a case decisions have to be made about where it is most urgent for society to spend its resources. But it seems to us difficult to see how such decisions can be made – decisions about priorities in budget allocation – without some notion of overall advantage and disadvantage. In other words the indexing problem reappears in the context of priority setting.

However, we want to argue that the indexing problem is not as daunting as it may seem. This is not because we think that there is a privileged weighting functioning. Suppose a survey is made, of experts, of ordinary citizens, of journalists, of policy makers, and so on, in order to find out how each of these individuals weight different disadvantages. From this survey a range of weighting functions would be produced. It would then be possible to apply each weighting function to representative individuals and thereby arrive at a set of social orderings of advantage and disadvantage. Suppose we now compare those social orderings. It may well be that they are fairly similar. In our terms a social ordering is ‘robust’ to the degree that it remains the same with a change in weighting functions. Conversely, an ordering is ‘weighting sensitive’ if it regularly varies to a significant degree with every change in weighting function. If the ordering is at least reasonably robust, particularly in the lower range, then it is possible to identify the least advantaged in society without selecting a particular weighting function as the ‘correct’ one.

However to conduct this exercise would be a lengthy and expensive process. Luckily there is a short-cut. Consider what could make a social ordering robust. It seems that there are only two possibilities. One is that all the weighting functions under consideration are very similar; the other is that disadvantage ‘clusters’: a significant number of people are disadvantaged in a number of different ways. Hence, it turns out, all we need do is investigate these questions to identify the least advantaged. In particular we need to look for people who are disadvantaged in a number of ways; these will be among the least advantaged. In short, because people who are disadvantaged in one respect are also typically disadvantaged in many others, the indexing problem in effect solves itself. I’ll return to this in question 5 below.

In conclusion, applying the capability approach to developed societies does present a new theoretical challenge; however we feel it is a challenge that can be met”

S.B.: -“ Conversely could the conclusions you draw about problems specific to the UK or Israel be applied to global issues? Would it be a good thing if they could?”

J.W.: -“ I think that the question of global justice remains one of the most difficult issues in political philosophy. There is, I think, a basic dilemma. Those, especially egalitarians, who approach the issue in terms of thinking about justice, feel compelled to conclude that justice requires the same rules for those outside our national boundaries as well as within them, and therefore an absolutely massive programme of redistribution is necessary. Theorists who cannot accept this conclusion tend them to find a reason why justice is more restricted in scope and argue that our duties to those in other countries are duties of charity, not justice, and therefore not as extensive as might be feared. I find both approaches implausible, and think that what is needed is ‘justice but not the same justice’. I hope to address this in future work, but it is not something that our book considers.

There is, however, one element of the book which is relevant to global issues, and that is the issue of risk. In part one of the book we argue for a modification of the capability approach which we call the ‘genuine opportunity for secure functioning’ approach (more on this in answer to question 6). The issue of risk relates to ‘security’. We argue that one central aspect of disadvantage is that of having to face risks that others do not have to face. Even if one achieves a reasonable level of functioning, the insecurity of not being able to have a reasonable guarantee that it can be sustained is a disadvantage. Consider people who have temporary employment contracts. Even if the pay is the same as those on permanent contracts, and even if they never in fact have a period of unemployment, there is a clear sense in which they are disadvantaged in comparison to others. Sen’s work uses such examples to great effect; such as the honey gatherers of Bengal who in earning a living risk death from the Bengal tigers who live in the forests where they collect the honey. The odd thing is that Sen himself does not really dwell on this notion of exceptional risk.

In our view those who face risk suffer in a number of ways. First, the mere fact of being at risk, whether or not this is known by the agent, makes the person worse off. (We accept that this is a controversial claim.) Second, the stress and anxiety someone lives with can be very serious, and have a constantly depressing effect. This, of course, spreads to everyone who is anxious about risk, and not just those people who suffer the loss. Third, people can take steps to reduce the risk, perhaps by moving house, or changing jobs. However, taking steps to avoid one risk can sometimes expose people to other, even more serious risks. After all, the honey gatherers risk their lives to reduce the risk that their families will suffer malnutrition. Fourth, people can take expensive steps to reduce the impact of the harm, such as taking out insurance (although this is of less relevance to the developing world). Finally, those facing risk and vulnerability find it harder to plan their lives. For example, if a man is expected to pay for an expensive wedding on getting married, and needs to borrow money to be paid back over some years, it may be impossible, or at least extremely imprudent, to do this until secure employment has been found. Hence such decisions may be put off while one’s situation is vulnerable. We call this ‘planning blight’ and in extreme cases it can lead to a type of paralysis of the will.

This aspect of the analysis of disadvantage has been refined by looking at examples both from the developing world and the developed world. Our view is that this is a central, pervasive, and, to date, under-theorised, aspect of disadvantage, and our analysis should therefore also be of interest to theorists of global justice.”

S.B.: -“ *Some of our readers are particularly interested in the place of responsibility for ones’ own well being and for that of others in understanding social justice. You seem to think that appeals to responsibility can in fact be dangerous in assessing disadvantage and working out remedies. Do you think there is any place for responsibility in a theory of disadvantage?*”

J.W.: -“ In my earlier work, as mentioned in answer to question 1, I argued that investigating whether or not people are responsible for their misfortune can have undesirable effects. To use an example I have not used before, my mother suffered an industrial injury and could not work to the degree she had before. Every year she had to go to be examined by a panel of doctors who would in a rather mechanical, offensive and patronizing way, require her to undergo a series of tests to determine whether she was, in effect, unemployed merely by choice, or whether she had a good reason through incapacity. In her case she still suffered from a number of effects, and therefore continued to receive benefit, but she found the whole thing utterly humiliating. It was humiliating to be called to the panel. It was humiliating to strip off in front of them – in an office, rather than a hospital - and then being told to try to perform the various actions and exercises to determine her level of disability. And it was humiliating to be told that she was still 63% disabled, or whatever the judgement was, even though, of course, this is what she needed to be told. The general point is that any scheme of conditional benefits requires an investigation into who meets the conditions. The testing doesn’t have to be done as badly as it was in my mother’s case, but still, it does need to be done. And it can be humiliating for those who do meet the conditions. In sum, any system we use to try to filter out people who make false claims – or indeed any system to filter out free riders – has costs for people who are not free riders and indeed are making genuine claims. In many cases these people will also be among the worst off in society.

It is tempting to argue that a system of unconditional benefits – such as a basic income scheme – should replace conditional schemes, and certainly they would be an improvement in the respect of avoiding humiliation. However, although I am highly sympathetic to the theory of basic income – and I think it is one of the most inspiring things to emerge from political philosophy in the last few decades – nevertheless I have never been entirely comfortable with it. I do not think that it has any real chance of being implemented on any scale that would make a significant difference. This, I think, is for two related reasons. One is that the cost, and the increased tax for the wealthy, make it impossible. In a global economy the most likely outcome is that ever more sophisticated forms of tax evasion would result. There would not be ‘buy in’ by the rich. And the reason for this may in part be a

general feeling that we should not subsidise those who could work but do not: i.e. those who are responsible for their own misfortune. Now, we could argue about how likely it is that significant numbers of people would exploit a basic income system, but there is no getting away from the fact that a very large number of people think that a very large number of people (perhaps including themselves) would exploit such a system. Therefore, they argue, we cannot do without a theory of responsibility.

At one level, my answer is that this is an experimental question. If we introduced a system of unconditional benefits and there was a lot of free riding, then we have better change it to a more conditional system. However it is highly unlikely that we are ever going to be able to conduct that experiment, and furthermore we need to have to hand a theory of responsibility to fall back on, just in case. Now although the issue of responsibility has dominated egalitarian theory for more than two decades, our view is that egalitarianism hasn't so far delivered what is necessary here. Most theories have, in some way, attempted to provide an acceptable version of the theory that people should bear the costs of their freely made choices. Suppose we accept that this is a good theory. What are its consequences if we actually try to apply it to the real world of inequality in which we live? In our book we use the example of a single mother, with school age children, who chooses to remain unemployed rather than take a low paid job which involves a long commute. According to the choice theory of responsibility she should have no right to welfare benefits, as she made a free choice. This seems unreasonably harsh.

There seem to be two types of possible response. The first is to argue that she didn't make a free choice. However this places us in what we call a 'metaphysical swamp' in which impossible decisions need to be made about when people act with freedom. Alternatively it might be said that because she has lower well-being, or resources, or whatever, than she would have in an equal society, then her choices should be subsidised to bring her closer to equality. But the implication of this is that those below the level of equality would never have to bear any of the costs of their actions, however negligent, stupid or easily avoided. This seems too soft. Hence there is a trilemma for the choice view applied to the real world: either too harsh or too metaphysically demanding or too soft.

We sketch out an alternative view, where we ask whether it is reasonable for someone to bear all, or part, of the cost of their actions. The factors to take into account include the cost for them – in terms of its impact on their other functionings – of following a particular course of action; the costs for others of their doing so; the similar costs of other possible courses of action; and whether they have a social duty to act in any particular way. They may be other contextual factors to take into account too, and, of course for policy reasons we would need rules of thumb. Nevertheless this is what we call the theory of 'genuine opportunity'. In sum, though, our objection is not so much to the idea of responsibility – although we think its importance has been

greatly exaggerated – but more to the existing egalitarian theories of responsibility, which, we feel, would be greatly damaging if applied to the real world.”

S.B.: -“ One of the most novel and exciting ideas you put forward in your book is that disadvantages tend to cluster. That is, people who do badly in one respect, tend to do badly in others, so that typically, no matter what category of disadvantage we look at, the same people tend to end up at the bottom. Could you say a few words about this. Could you also explain how you think this might in practice help us redress disadvantages?”

J.W.: -“ The main point of the observation that disadvantages cluster is that because of this there is little difficulty in identifying the least advantaged, even if there is disagreement about which particular disadvantage is the most serious. However, after having made this point it is interesting to reflect on the converse situation: one in which disadvantages do not cluster. In such a world it is very unclear who is the least advantaged in society; according to one weighting function it would be one group, according to another a different one, and so on. Such a world, we conclude, is in some sense much closer to equality than the actual world. Hence we derive a policy proposal: governments should attempt to decluster disadvantage: to make a matter of controversy whether each group in society is near the top or near the bottom of the heap.

Of course there are good ways and bad ways of attempting to decluster disadvantage. We argue that a good way would be for governments to identify what we call ‘corrosive disadvantages’ and ‘fertile functionings’. The former are those disadvantages which lead to further disadvantages; the latter are functionings which assist the achievement of other functionings. It is for social scientists to tell us which disadvantages are corrosive and which functionings fertile (we have some discussion of this), and for government to boost spending to prevent people developing corrosive disadvantages and to encourage them to develop fertile functionings.”

S.B.: -“ *Although you say a lot of good things about the capability approach and seem mostly sympathetic with the work of Sen and Nussbaum, you also express a certain amount of skepticism about the need to introduce a concept of capabilities over and beyond functionings. Could you please explain this?*”

J.W.: -“ Very many people seem to have accepted with little question that the concept of capability to function is the right way to understand a theory of well-being: what matters is what people are capable of, rather than what they achieve. There seem to be a number of advantages here: it emphasises freedom, allows space for individual responsibility, and seems anti-paternalistic. Nevertheless it does introduce huge complexities into the theory. It may be hard to measure an individual’s functioning level, but it is much harder to measure their capability to function, given that a ‘capability set’ allows an individual to achieve a wide array of different sets of functionings – that is its point. It is not straightforward even thinking how to

represent an individual's capability set. Measuring capabilities, and implementing policies on this basis seems very difficult.

That difficulty, though, is not a sufficient reason for abandoning capability theory. However it is a good reason for re-examining its motivations. Sen introduces the distinction in the context of discussing a wealthy person who is fasting, and hence has a low level of nutrition. Sen compares this person to someone who is equally poorly-nourished, but in this case because of poverty and lack of access to food. Sen rightly says that the rich person does not have an equal claim for government help. Yet for a theorist who generally has such a good feel for empirical reality one has to ask whether he has produced an example which will generalise. Voluntarily malnourished wealthy people are fairly rare. Given the complexity it introduces into the theory, one wonders whether this is a sufficient reason for moving to a capability approach.

But of course there are more significant cases of a similar type. I have already mentioned voluntary unemployment. Some conservatives believe that the world is full of people who could work but choose not to. It is also widely believed that many people bring ill health upon themselves through poor lifestyle choices. In these cases, then, do we want to say that such people had a capability for a better functioning, and therefore the government owes them nothing? Or do we prefer to say that in many cases, actually, they don't have the capability? How do we decide?

When we start to look at these issues we see that the capability approach is much more vague than people have assumed. Roughly a capability is an opportunity to function, and to have an opportunity for x , roughly again, is to be able to achieve x on fulfillment of a particular condition. So now everything comes down to what we put into those conditions. Here the capability view is typically silent (although there may be some theorists who have addressed this in detail). The conditions can be simple (just raise your hand!) or very demanding (change your diet, your job and your social life). In place of the idea of capability we offer our 'genuine opportunity view', or rather the 'genuine opportunity for secure functioning' taking account of risk too. We offer this in the spirit of a friendly modification and development of the capability theory, rather than supposing that we have, in some way, refuted the capability view. We have uncovered some gaps and have tried to sketch a way of filling them in."

Jonathan Wolff is Professor at the University College, London since 2000. His latest work is the forthcoming book *DISADVANTAGE* cowritten with Avner de-Shalit (Political Science, Hebrew University) for Oxford University Press.

The list of his publications in distributive justice, both applied and theoretical can be viewed on his webpage:

<http://www.homepages.ucl.ac.uk/~uctyjow>