

Intuitions about human development

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Book review of Des Gasper (2004), The Ethics of Development: From Economism to Human Development, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

“Applied ethics” is en vogue, but it remains a difficult business. Bioethics, environmental ethics, research ethics, and, of course, business ethics are relatively young but vibrant fields of research. While their potential to provide valuable insights is enormous, the pitfalls in such undertakings are equally abundant, not least because one invites criticism from at least two fronts. Yet, a collocation such as “development ethics” is and remains, after all, ethics, and not a compromise or hybrid between two approaches or disciplines. There is a particular danger, though, to get carried away by one’s critique at existing concepts and practices (of development or otherwise) and to neglect the task of coming up with a well-argued concept of how ethical questions that arise in the particular context at issue should be dealt with. On this account, Des Gasper’s book “The Ethics of Development” does not deliver what its title promises. But books should not be evaluated only against the (imputed) promises their titles imply. Had Gasper called his book “Moral Issues in Development Theory and Practice: The Case for Human Development“, this would have pretty well characterized a book that many will find a valuable read.

Gasper’s literature basis is enormous, and his text stands out, and is enriched, by the large number of sources from the South that he cites. He gives a comprehensive overview and suggests a plausible classification of different conceptions of development and their normative stances (ch. 2). He then discusses three concepts he considers critical for development ethics: efficiency and effectiveness (ch. 3) and equity (ch. 4). He then describes the role of violence (ch. 5) and goes on to give a favorable account of needs-based approaches to development (ch. 6). In chapter seven, the climax of the book and the richest of all chapters, the author defends a concept of “human development” which he treats as basically synonymous with the capability approach (a usage which seems quite accepted by now). While being sympathetic to Amartya Sen’s capability theory, Gasper does not blindly adopt it but takes a well-argued critical stance. Chapter eight raises the cross-cutting issue of culture and addresses the position of cultural relativity while the epilogue (ch. 9) puts the presented ideas into perspective.

Gasper presents many valuable ideas, especially in the form of terminological distinctions and taxonomies of related concepts. The reader will find plausible tabular distinctions of different “varieties of suffering” (p. 8), “definitions of development” (p.

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32), “types of well-being measure” (p. 42), “lists of proposed universal values” (p. 45) and many more.

This strength, however, is at the same time the book’s weak spot. It remains very descriptive, classifying and explaining different theories but rarely defending a substantive position or reflecting on ethical orientating principles. There is a striking gap between, on the one hand, a willingness to make political judgments (e.g., for debt relief (p. 11) against insistence on patent rights of vital medicines (p. 5)) and, on the other, a lack of an argued ethical perspective beyond minimalist calls for consistency (pp. 20, 223) empty demands for “adequate” values (pp. 15, 20), and appeals to moral intuition (p. 70). Economics is criticized primarily for having a narrow value-basis rather than, e.g., for its failure to recognize the category of moral rights or for the way it deals with value conflicts. Moreover, the orientating function of ethics is repeatedly intermingled with the issue of feasibility. (“Too extended an interpretation of basic decency will undermine the political consensus required to legitimise and implement the claimed normative needs.” p. 156)

Again and again, economism, “the hypertrophy and overreliance on narrow economic ideas” (p. 81), is forcefully criticized. Yet, this fixation at one enemy is probably too much of an honor to economics and drags the author into enemy territory. He ends up allowing economics to effectively define his agenda and terminology. For example, “equity” is given centre stage and discussed primarily in terms of “distribution” and “equality” (ch. 4). Justice or legitimacy would have been ethically more central and richer concepts as they are not limited to questions of institutional ethics (as equity, distribution, equality are) but refer to the ethical quality of decisions and judgments in general.

On some occasions, the author touches upon the larger question of ethical orientation, but then fails to pursue that line of reasoning. E.g., commoditization of some rights should be prohibited “on grounds of moral repugnance” (p. 70). Unfortunately we are not offered further justification for his intuition. On another occasion, we are told that “inequality is not necessarily inequitable, but any inequality has to be specifically justified, whereas equality does not” (p. 108). Perhaps most people will share this intuition, but from a book that carries “ethics” in its title we may expect some reflection on moral intuitions.

Gasper’s discussion of the capability approach is much more convincing. In an original interpretation, he suggests a division of labor between the capability approach of Sen and the capabilities approach of Nussbaum. “Sen’s version well suits a conversation with the powerful tribe of economists; Nussbaum’s better suits an engagement with the humanities and human sciences” (p. 189). He convincingly criticizes Sen’s conception for an overemphasis on freedom at the expense of outcomes (p. 180) and thereby fortifies rather than abandons the idea of capabilities.

Gasper’s book falls short of what the title promises and in particular suffers from the lack of a conception of ethics. Apart from that, it provides an excellent overview of recent discussions around basic-needs and human-rights based approaches to development and in particular a mature and differentiated appraisal of the capability approach.