Poverty, degrading inequality, violence, and tyranny continue to afflict the world. In spite of humankind’s efforts, these four interrelated scourges are in many places more rather than less pronounced than they were a decade ago. Even in rich countries, poverty and inequality have increased. Efforts to understand and reduce these scourges have taken many forms. Moral reflection on the ends and means of “development,” where “development” most generically means beneficial societal change, is one important effort. Such moral reflection, which includes the assessment of the present and the envisioning of better futures, increasingly is called “international development ethics” or the “ethics of global development.”

My forthcoming book, *Ethics of Global Development: Agency, Capability, and Deliberative Democracy*, is a work in global development ethics. It explains, justifies, applies, and extends ethical reflection on development goals, policies, projects, and institutions from the local to the global level. The volume is a new statement of my views on development ethics, the ethical foundations and applications of the capability approach, and deliberative democracy.

Central to the volume is my sympathetic and, at times, critical engagement with economist and philosopher Amartya Sen’s “capability” approach to development. Since my first encounter with Sen’s thought in the mid-seventies, I have increasingly come to recognize, as philosopher Hilary Putnam puts it, “the importance of what he [Sen] calls the ‘capabilities’ approach to welfare economics to perhaps the greatest problem facing humanity in our time, the problem of the immense disparities between richer and poorer parts of the globe.”

To introduce my forthcoming volume as a whole, I weave together my own intellectual journey, what I understand to be the evolving stages of development ethics, and the rationale for the volume’s additional chapters. Other development ethicists, such as Denis Goulet, Nigel Dower, Des Gasper, Martha Nussbaum, and Sabina Alkire would tell different personal stories and provide somewhat different accounts of the evolution of development ethics. My personal trajectory is only one of the ways development ethics has evolved. For example, some development ethicists have not engaged Sen’s capability approach or have done so in ways that differ from my own.

**Toward Development Ethics**

In spring of 1978, two Colorado State University colleagues, an economist and an historian, paid me an office visit that was to redirect my professional life. I had been teaching for 12 years in the Department of Philosophy at Colorado State University, my first position out of graduate school. The two colleagues came with good news and bad news.

The good news was that they had just received a two-year grant from the US Department of Education to establish a M.A. program in Comparative Rural Development, and that program was to include a graduate seminar in “Ethics and Rural Development.” The course was to treat the moral and value issues that emerge in Colorado’s impoverished rural and mountain towns as well as in CSU’s overseas projects in international rural development.

The bad news was that these colleagues wanted me to teach the course. Although flattered by the offer and attracted by the promise of a stipend, I responded incredulously. “You’ve got the wrong guy.” My intel-
lectual interests focused on the theories of justice of John Rawls and Robert Nozick, the social theory of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, and the Yugoslav Praxis Group’s vision of democratic and market socialism. What did such philosophical views have to do with rural development—whatever that was—at home or abroad or with “Third World” and North/South issues?

My two colleagues, however, persisted. Not only would I team-teach the course with two other CSU professors—an expert on India, who lived several years in India and Iran, and a professor of animal science, who had AID-funded projects throughout the developing world, but they also stressed the need for such a course to address questions of value and ethics. With misgivings, I accepted. But when we three co-teachers met to plan the new course, chaos ensued.

The professor of animal science didn’t know what ethics had to do with (rural) development and improvement of cattle strains in Bulgaria. The scholar of Indian and Persian culture was worried about Northern and Western ethnocentrism. I couldn’t figure out what Rawls’ argument from the abstract and hypothetical standpoint of the “original position” had to do with practical ethics or with “development.” And what, I asked myself, was “development” anyway? Writings in development economics or development policy scarcely mentioned ethics. The philosophers I admired never talked about development. Given the abstract, otherworldly way in which even applied ethics and sociopolitical philosophy was done in those days, this state of affairs was probably a good thing.

Only when the three of us discovered the work of development scholar and activist Denis Goulet and of sociologist Peter Berger did we begin to get some help on how we might proceed in our course. In different ways, both Goulet and Berger argued that ethics should be put on the development agenda—both for the sake of better development and for the sake of ethics.

Since the early 1960’s, Goulet—influenced by French economist Louis-Joseph Lebret and development economists such as Benjamin Higgins, Albert Hirschman, and Gunnar Myrdal—had argued that “development needs to be redefined, demystified, and thrust into the arena of moral debate.” Goulet, in such studies as The Cruel Choice: A New Concept in the Theory of Development (1971), made the important point that so-called “development,” because of its costs in human suffering and loss of meaning, can amount to “anti-development.” Similarly in the book Pyramids of Sacrifice (1974), Peter Berger argued that so-called “development” often sacrificed rather than benefited poor people and what was urgently needed was a marriage of political ethics and social change in the “Third World.”

We now had valuable resources for getting ethics onto the agenda of development practitioners and policy analysts. But did philosophical ethics and sociopolitical philosophy have anything to contribute to “ethics and rural development” or—as we soon called it—“ethics and international development”?

In the 1970s three currents of Anglo-American philosophy appeared promising for our work: John Rawls’ theory of justice; Peter Singer’s challenging argument that the affluent had a duty to aid famine victims, and the life-boat ethics debate begun by Garrett Hardin.

The moral problem of world hunger and the ethics of famine relief were among the first practical issues that philosophers tackled after John Rawls’s pivotal 1971 study, A Theory of Justice, convinced them that reflection on normative issues should be part of the philosopher’s task. In the same year that Rawls’s volume appeared, Peter Singer first wrote about famine in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and, more generally, about “the obligations of the affluent to those in danger of starvation.” In a 1974 article in Psychology Today Magazine, Garrett Hardin argued against charitable aid. While Singer argued that moral duty, rather than charity, should be the basis for aid, Hardin argued that rich nations and individuals (living in lifeboats) have a duty not to help the needy (swimming in the sea). Aid would only worsen the problems of hunger, because it would result in more mouths to feed, and would cause other countries to become dependent on handouts rather than solving their own food and population problems.

Throughout the seventies (and on into the eighties), often in response to Singer, on the one hand, and Hardin, on the other, many philosophers investigated whether there exists a positive moral obligation to aid distant and hungry people and, if so, what is its nature, justification, and limits.

My teaching colleagues and I took full advantage of the Hardin-Singer debate and the philosophical dis-
Discussion it had provoked. Something, however, was missing in this literature. Preoccupied as they were with the task of justifying aid to distant people, philosophers paid scant attention to institutional and practical issues. In particular they almost totally ignored what happened to food aid or famine relief once it arrived in a stricken country. Did it go to the rich instead of its intended starving recipients? Did food aid glut the national and local markets with the result that food prices fell and local farmers suffered? Was food aid a cause of anti-development in rural areas, perhaps blinding donors to structural injustice that caused the famine in the first place? What role might the right kind of food aid have in national efforts to reduce chronic deprivation and wrenching inequality?

Singer was right that what was needed—and what philosophers could contribute to—was an ethics of food aid. But we quickly came to see such an ethic would be only one part of an ethics of and for national and local development. There would be (and still is) much work to do before development would be part of the philosophical agenda the way that environment and animal welfare were beginning to be.

Still harboring doubts that we could bring development and (philosophical) ethics into fruitful interaction, we launched our new graduate course in the fall of 1978 and placed ethics explicitly on the agenda of development policy and practice.

Deepening and Broadening Development Ethics: Costa Rica and the International Development Ethics Association

Despite the CSU course’s success during its initial years, it became increasingly clear that something was missing from the class and my work in this field. To make a contribution to what we began to call “development ethics,” I needed to live and work in a “developing country.” I would have to become less an “outsider” to what was increasingly called “the South,” given the pejorative connotations of “Third World.”

Attending a 1984 conference in Costa Rica, I discovered at the University of Costa Rica an exciting group of philosophers interested in applied philosophy and development. Notably, E. Roy Ramirez stressed the importance of forging a new concept of development “in order not to confuse it with modernization” and “because it is preferable to decide things for ourselves than to have others decide them for us.” And Luis Camacho contributed to an ethics of science and technology (especially) in developing countries, evaluating different notions of crisis and development, and proposing relations between advanced countries and Third World countries, including the treatment of the problem of individual development within socioeconomic development.

Supported by a Fulbright Research Award to study “Ethical Issues in Costa Rican Development,” I returned to Costa Rica for 12 months in 1986-87. These colleagues and I transformed the “Development Ethics Working Group,” formed after the 1984 conference, into the International Development Ethics Association (IDEA). Although the acronym represents the English word order, we always pronounced “IDEA,” which has the same meaning in English and Spanish, as a word in Spanish (ee-day-uh). At our First International Conference on Ethics and Development, held in June 1987, I discussed strengths but also weaknesses in traditional Costa Rican social democracy, the already ascendant free-market liberalism, and attempts to renovate social democracy. I argued for a fourth model that I called “just, participatory, eco-development.” This explicitly normative vision was a pluralism that asserted the moral importance of basic human needs, democratic self-determination and participation, respect for the natural world, and equal opportunity for self-development.

Unlike many of their fellow Central Americans in the late 1980s, most Costa Ricans were by and large friendly to US visitors. Yet I repeatedly was asked (and asked myself): What business does someone—especially with a name similar to a frontiersman who died at the Alamo—from the United States—especially with its unsavory history of intervening in Latin American affairs—have in evaluating and proposing alternatives to Costa Rica’s development model? This challenging question led me to distinguish between cultural insiders and outsiders and to argue that a certain outsider-insider hybrid clarifies a society’s options, reflecting the culture back to itself, synthesizing disparate ideas or interjecting novel ones, and saying what should be said but which insiders cannot say. A global ethic can be fashioned by insider-outsider hybrids from a variety of groups.

Such questions and answers are the same ones that exercised many of us in the 1980’s and became central to IDEA-sponsored events. But there are new dimensions as well; one of them is the importance for development ethics of Amartya Sen and the capability approach.
Engaging the Capability Approach

In order to enhance one’s resources to confront development’s quandaries, one must first weigh the strengths and weaknesses of various development approaches or “theory-practices.” A crucial part of that evaluative exercise is what development ethicist Des Gasper calls the second stage of development ethics. For Gasper, the first stage is what I have called “putting ethics on the development agenda” and he calls presenting “ethical concerns about development experiences and actions.” Gasper’s second stage is the examination “of major valuable concepts and theories used to guide, interpret or critique those experiences and actions.”

In the next five years or so following my return from Costa Rica, I gradually came to see the importance of Amartya Sen’s and Martha Nussbaum’s ethically-based perspectives—both joint and separate—on international development.

Amartya Sen, since the 1970s, and Martha Nussbaum, since the mid-1980s, have been fashioning a new and important normative approach (Sen) or ethic (Nussbaum) for international development. Global hunger and other severe deprivations, they argue, indicate conceptual and ethical failures as well as scientific, technical, and political ones. Sen, the Indian-born economist, social choice theorist, and philosopher had evolved an original normative outlook, articulated in 1999 for the general public in Development as Freedom, for the improvement of the theory and practice of international development. Sen’s normative perspective owes much not only to Adam Smith and his concept of human freedom but also to the Aristotelian/Marxist tradition and its concept of human existence and well-being.

Nussbaum, a leading scholar of Greek thought and especially Aristotelian ethics, coauthored with Sen an important paper, “Internal Criticism and Indian Rationalist Traditions,” which concerned national and global development ethics, and with Sen Nussbaum edited and introduced a seminal anthology in development ethics, Quality of Life. Moreover, in a series of articles and in several books, Nussbaum compared Sen’s ideas with those of Aristotle, advocated what she called “Aristotelian moral inquiry” and “Aristotelian social democracy” as relevant for international development, and set forth her own robust versions of the capability approach.

In the early nineties I stressed what the two had in common and interpreted Sen as implicitly proposing something close to Nussbaum’s explicit pluralistic conception of the good or flourishing human life. I now argue that, in spite of ongoing shared commitments and concepts, Sen and Nussbaum have increasingly different normative outlooks. Sen’s rejection of a prescriptive list of valuable capabilities and functionings is part of his participatory and democratic turn. Nussbaum’s retention of a list, albeit in a somewhat more flexible form, is part of her view that philosophers (and institutions) have important prescriptive roles to play. Furthermore, although both have learned from Aristotle, Sen emphasizes Aristotle’s critique of material goods as nothing more than a means to good living while Nussbaum emphasizes Aristotle’s ideal of fully human flourishing. Although both continue to admire the work of John Rawls, in their recent writing they find stimulation in different aspects of Rawls’s perspective.

I also changed my comparative assessments of Sen’s and Nussbaum’s versions of the capability orientation. Whereas earlier I was attracted to Nussbaum’s ideal of the good or flourishing human life and her list of its components, now I argue that this approach has limitations. Previously I thought Nussbaum’s notion of capabilities as personal powers was unfortunately missing in Sen. Now I argue that his notion of capability as opportunity or freedom does justice to personal traits as well as to environmental constraints and future possibilities.

A portion of my book, then, crystallizes more than fifteen years of my understanding, probing, evaluating, and trying to strengthen the normative dimensions of the capability orientation. It became clear to me and to others, however, that it was not enough to clarify, appraise, and strengthen this development ethic. To provide the critical confrontation that the perspective deserved, one should also apply and extend the approach and then evaluate the results. And, more generally, development ethics, whether working within a capability theory-practice or not, should assess norms, policies, and institutions at all levels—local, societal, national, and global.

Applying and Strengthening the Capability Approach

In my present position as Senior Research Scholar at the University of Maryland’s Institute for Philosophy & Public Policy and School of Public Policy, my work increasingly focused on applying development ethics and especially capability norms to various public problems and policies.

In one part of the volume I apply development ethics and the capability approach to the urgent issues of, on the one hand, hunger and under-consumption,
and on the other hand, over-consumption in both the North and the South. If the problem in the North (and parts of the South) is often that people consume too much or the wrong things, the problem in the South (and parts of the North) is that the majority of people often lack access to those commodities needed for well-being.

Applying the capability approach and strengthening it with an explicit attention to the ideal of agency, I argue that relative emphasis should be shifted (1) from moral foundations to interpretative and strategic concepts, (2) from famine to persistent malnutrition, (3) from remedy to prevention, (4) from food availability to food entitlements, (5) from food and entitlements to capability and agency, (6) from capability and agency to development as freedom. This last progression, I argue, goes beyond even the best recent work on world hunger and development aid. Overall, the progression I favor conceives an ethics of food aid as a part of a more basic and inclusive ethics for development.

I also turn my attention from under-consumption to over-consumption, showing that a suitably strengthened version of the capability approach can generate a valuable criticism of consumerism and over-consumption. What I have come to call the “prudential version of the capability approach” uses Sen’s notion of well-being and a Nussbaum-type list of features of human well-being to assess the impact of US consumption choices on the well-being of US consumers. Although I still believe the prudential account has some merit in appealing to the enlightened self-interest of American and other affluent consumers, I believe this prudential version of the capability approach to be seriously flawed as an ethic of consumption. It is especially weak in addressing the consumption choices of consumer-citizens and governments in the light of the effects of these choices not only on one’s own well-being but also on the environment, institutions, and especially the capabilities and agency of others.

New Directions: Deliberative Democracy, Participation, and Globalization

It is important that development ethicists in general and those working within the capability orientation in particular pursue new directions. Not only has the world changed in important ways since the origination of development ethics, but the field, in general, and the capability orientation, in particular, confronts certain new dangers. Among these are dogmatism, usurpation by mainstream institutions, and a recent fadishness concerning both development ethics and the capability approach.

I chart new directions to apply and strengthen the capability approach. What emerges—especially in dialogue with the Spanish philosophers Adela Cortina and Jesús Conill—is a agency and capability-oriented view of autonomous, just, co-responsible, and happiness-generating consumption. I also explicitly explore new directions in development and capability ethics, contending that democracy as public discussion is an important recent emphasis in Sen’s work and holds great promise for development theory, institutions, and practices. I argue for the importance of Sen’s recent stress on citizen voice and public discussion, the ways in which the theory and practice of deliberative democracy might strengthen Sen’s democratic turn, and the ways in which the theories of and experiments in deliberative democracy theories and practices further extend and strengthen the capability orientation.

Especially important in my own work is what I hope will be the fruitful interaction between the capability approach and the theory and practice of what political theorists Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright call “Empowered Participatory Governance” (EPG). This latter approach to robust democracy emphasizes deliberation in all democratic bodies, the vertical integration of local and higher level bodies, and the integration of, on the one hand, personal/collective agency and, on the other hand, institutional design. EPG and other experiments in local democracy become one basis for responding to criticisms that Sen’s democratic turn and deliberative democracy are underspecified, disrespectful of autonomy, and impractical.

I also argue that development ethics should take up, as Joseph Stiglitz and others have done, the new issue of globalization. Development ethicists should ethically assess the various faces of globalization. I argue for both the democratization of globalization and the globalizing of democracy. The former would include identifying morally acceptable and effective ways to democratize current global forces and institutions as well as morally acceptable (and unacceptable) ways to promote and deepen democracy on every level. I offer a concept of inclusive, wide-ranging, and deliberative democracy as both a fundamental end and means of local, national, and global development.

The volume as a whole emphasizes the ideal and practice of democracy, a thread that runs through my career as a teacher and scholar. From Reinhold Niebuhr, I learned (as an undergraduate in the late 1950s at De Pauw University) that because people are good, democracy is possible; but because they are evil, democracy is necessary. From William Lee Miller at Yale Divinity School, I grasped the importance of public argument for a democratic polity. In working with Cleveland’s inner city youth in 1961-62, I applied the new ideas of citizen participation that would soon flower in the New Left. From Richard J. Bernstein, then of Yale’s Department of Philosophy, and his hero
John Dewey, I grasped that philosophers should deal with human problems and that democracy was a way of life in which people deliberate together to solve common problems. My work with Habermas in the mid-1970s nurtured my commitments to the public sphere and the ideal of dialogue in which the only force was that of the better argument. The Yugoslav vision of democratic socialism led to my belief in the importance of a multi-leveled democratic self-management. This volume culminates with a conception of deliberative democracy that I hope will play an important role in the further evolution of both development ethics and the capability orientation.

Ethics of Global Development: Agency, Capability, and Deliberative Democracy conveys the book’s main themes. The four parts of the work represent the stages of development ethics, my professional trajectory in this field, and the organization of the volume’s chapters. First, it was and remains important to get ethics on the development agenda, address development as a philosophical topic, and gain cross-cultural perspectives. Second, development ethics benefits from the clarification, strengthening, application, and evaluation of the capability orientation, especially Sen’s and Nussbaum’s versions. Finally, the changing world situation offers development ethics and the capability orientation new challenges, among which is that of showing that development on all levels must be democratic as well as poverty-reducing and that democracy should be deliberative as well as electoral.

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