Capabilities as Substantive Opportunities and the Robustness of Conversion Factors

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Abstract. According to the capability approach, human well-being should be conceptualized in terms of capabilities – the real freedoms of individuals to achieve certain doings and beings. Yet, what does it mean to have the ‘real freedom’ to achieve these things? In this chapter, we argue that ‘real freedom’ implies that someone has the substantive opportunity to do or be something (i.e., turn it into the corresponding functioning), in the sense that there is nothing or no one that impedes its achievement. We analyze this notion of ‘substantiveness’ and argue that the enabling and disabling factors can be conceptualized along three dimensions, namely (i) whether they are of a personal, social, or environmental nature; (ii) whether they are of a positive or negative nature; and (iii) whether they are of a tangible or intangible nature. Moreover, we argue that the substantiveness of someone’s opportunities could be called into question insofar as the capability – that is, the real freedom to achieve a certain doing or being – is not robust or secure. Consequently, we identify five conditions of robustness, which specify the robustness of a capability and/or its conversion factors, namely (i) non-competition for finite capabilities, (ii) permanence of enabling conversion factors, (iii) decisive control over the outcome and decisive preference over the choice, (iv) content- and context-independence, and (v) non-dependency on favors. Finally, we argue that this analysis reveals two ways of conceptualizing substantive opportunities. On the binary view of substantiveness, all conditions need to be met for someone to have the corresponding capability because only if all conditions are met can we say that the opportunity has been cleared of all obstacles to its realization and therefore be substantive. By contrast, on the incremental view of substantiveness, it is possible to hold that the opportunity to realize a certain doing or being is more or less substantive beyond either being present or not.

The capability approach has emerged as a popular framework for the empirical and normative analysis of human well-being. According to the capability approach, human well-being should be conceptualized in terms of capabilities – the real freedoms of individuals to achieve certain doings and beings, such as traveling, being educated, getting married, being well-nourished, and so on, as well as functionings – actually achieved doings and beings (Robeyns and Byskov 2020). Yet, what does it mean to have the ‘real freedom’ to achieve these things? What conditions need to be met for someone to have a capability and to turn them into functionings? Answering these questions is imperative in order to apply the capability approach in practice to, for example, the empirical assessment of people’s capability sets – the collections of real freedoms that a person has at a given point in time and make up the extent of that person’s real freedom. If we do not know what conditions need to be met for someone to have a capability, we cannot assess whether they have that capability or not, and hence not the extent of their real freedom of opportunity. Nor, by extension, can we make interpersonal comparisons between people’s opportunity sets. Unfortunately, within the
capability literature there is little analysis of what it means to conceptualize capabilities as real freedoms, including what conditions need to be met for a freedom to be real.

This chapter makes three contributions to the literature on the capability approach in relation to equality of freedom. First, we argue that ‘real freedom’ implies that someone has the substantive opportunity to do or be something (i.e., turn it into the corresponding functioning), in the sense that there is nothing or no one that impedes its achievement. In this way, we distinguish substantive opportunities from mere, or formal, opportunities, such as certain rights or services, that are not necessarily substantive, by arguing that capabilities require the presence of enabling factors and absence of disabling factors. We analyze this notion of ‘substantiveness’ and argue that the enabling and disabling factors can be conceptualized along three dimensions, namely (i) whether they are of a personal, social, or environmental nature; (ii) whether they are of a positive or negative nature; and (iii) whether they are of a tangible or intangible nature.

Moreover, we argue that the substantiveness of someone’s opportunities could be called into question insofar as the capability—that is, the real freedom to achieve a certain doing or being—is not robust or secure (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007 and 2013 and Nussbaum 2011, 43-45). Consider, for example, whether someone has access to decent roads to ride a bike on, yet lives in a warzone where crucial infrastructures are highly likely to perish, or consider cases such as some male-dominated societies where women’s real freedom to ride a bike depends on the goodwill of their husbands. Yet, no comprehensive analysis exists of what conditions need to be met in order for a capability, or its conversion factors, to be robust. Filling this lacuna, we identify five conditions of robustness, which specify the robustness of a capability and/or its conversion factors, namely (i) non-competition for finite capabilities, (ii) permanence of enabling conversion factors, (iii) decisive control over the outcome and decisive preference over the choice, (iv) content- and context-independence, and (v) non-dependency on favors.

Finally, we argue that this analysis reveals two ways of conceptualizing substantive opportunities. On the binary view of substantiveness, all conditions need to be met for someone to have the corresponding capability because only if all conditions are met can we say that the opportunity has been cleared of all obstacles to its realization and therefore be substantive. Conversely, if all relevant conditions are not met, then the opportunity is not substantive because there is still some obstacle to its realization. By contrast, on the incremental view of substantiveness, it is possible to hold that the opportunity to realize a certain doing or being is more or less substantive beyond either being present or not. That is, if none of the conditions are met, then the opportunity is completely closed off and the person does not have the capability. However, if some (but not all) of the conditions are met, we would intuitively say that that person has a more (substantive and robust) opportunity to achieve that particular doing or being than if none of the conditions were met. Consequently, assessments of substantiveness and robustness depend on which of the two views is in use in empirical assessments of human well-being.

The chapter is structured as follows. In the first section, we introduce the capability approach and its core concepts, including those of capabilities, functionings, and conversion factors. In the process, we argue that capabilities should be conceptualized as substantive opportunities. In the second section, we
argue that in order for something to be a substantive opportunity, various conditions of substantiveness must be met and we categorize these along three dimensions. In the third section, we further argue that the substantiveness of an opportunity depends on the robustness of these positive and negative conditions and identify five conditions of robustness. In the fourth section, we argue that our analysis reveals two distinct ways in which the capability approach can be used in practice to analyze the substantiveness of capability sets and, hence, what real freedom amounts to. In the fifth section, we discuss the relationship between the substantiveness and robustness conditions. The final section concludes.

1. Capabilities as substantive opportunities

The capability approach has its origins in a number of articles in which Sen (1974; 1979a; 1979b; 1979c) criticizes the limited informational bases of the traditional economic models and, later, evaluative accounts of well-being, namely resourcism and utilitarianism. Proponents of resourcism maintain that various kinds of means to ends, such as physical resources and primary goods, should be the focus of such models and accounts (Sen 2009, 231-238). By contrast, proponents of utilitarianism hold that utility, typically understood as pleasure, happiness, or desire-satisfaction, is the relevant metric (Sen 1992, 6). What these traditional models do not sufficiently consider, Sen argues, is people’s capabilities and functionings – the activities we can perform (our ‘doings’), such as traveling, reading, eating, working and so on, and the kinds of persons we can be (our ‘beings’), such as being married, being sheltered, being educated, being well-nourished, being healthy and so on, with a given set of resources. What equality should aim for, Sen argues, is equality of what people are able to do or be.

1.1. Beings, doings, capabilities, functionings, and conversion factors

Beings and doings are conceptually neutral (Nussbaum 2011, 28; Robeyns 2017, 41-45; Byskov 2020). Nothing dictates that they must be morally or prudentially valuable. For instance, one could do or be certain morally reprehensible things, such as stealing or being an adulterer. Moreover, one may do in some sense imprudent but morally laudable things such as intensively working to promote social justice even if doing so comes at a significant cost to one’s well-being. That said, the capability approach is sometimes applied to conceptualize a basic threshold for survival (e.g., Robeyns (2017, 94), Ruggeri Laderchi, Saith and Stewart (2003, 253-257), and Sen (1987, 25, 109)), and the notion of capabilities has also been used to conceptualize human flourishing (e.g. Nussbaum (2000, 78-80; 2011, 33-34)). In assessing human well-being, relevant positive doings and beings can include positive states such as appreciating art and enjoying a fine dinner with good friends, whereas similarly relevant negative states include having poor relationships and being treated like a second-class citizen. It is consequently possible, within the capability framework, to assess both individuals’ positive beings and doings and negative beings and doings to get a complete and detailed view about the positive doings and beings a person can attain, or fail to attain, alongside the various negative ones that a person may face (Byskov 2020; Östlund 2021). It is the conceptual neutrality of beings and
doings in the capability approach that facilitates this wide analytical scope for assessing both what is valuable and disvaluable well-being wise in someone’s life.

Sen calls the notion of being able to do or be something *capabilities*. Capabilities are the *real freedoms* that people have to achieve their potential doings and beings. Real freedom in this sense means that one has all the required means necessary to achieve that doing and being if one wishes to. *Functionings*, meanwhile, are doings and beings that someone has achieved or realized. For someone to have a capability it is necessary that she, in addition to not being interfered with, is provided with certain favorable conditions. In the capability language, *conversion factors* are the conditions that influence a person’s ability to make use of the value of some resource, good, or formal freedom that one has. To illustrate, consider how the possibility of converting the resource of a bicycle into the substantive opportunity to ride it depends on certain personal (e.g., two legs), social (e.g., cultural norms that allow women to ride bicycles), and environmental factors (e.g., decent roads) (Crocker and Robeyns 2010). A person’s real freedom to ride a bicycle thus depends on whether these types of conditions are met. In a society in which the capability of riding a bicycle is important (e.g., in order to get to work to support oneself and one’s family), it becomes crucial to provide decent roads and an adequate infrastructure (Crocker and Robeyns 2010, 68).

1.2. *Capabilities as a better measure of equality*

As mentioned, Sen (1979d) argues that the notion of capabilities provides a better measure of equality than equality of resources and equality of utility.

In the first regard, Sen asks us to consider two individuals with the same set of resources. While the first individual is able-bodied, the second individual suffers from a severe disability. This disability requires her to spend a significant amount of her resources on amenities and assistance (e.g., wheelchair, medication, live-in nurse) to function on the same level as the able-bodied individual. Consequently, Sen argues, equality of resources makes the disabled individual doubly worse-off: not only is she disabled; she also has fewer resources available to her to do or be the things that she wants to, while the able-bodied individual can spend all her resources on pursuing her valued doings and beings. This would be a counter-intuitive measure of equality, according to Sen.

Now, proponents of utilitarian measures of equality could argue that we should not aim for equality of resources, but rather for equality of utility. On that view, what matters is whether everyone derives the same amount of utility from a given distribution. For example, measuring utility by way of satisfaction would examine whether everyone is equally satisfied with their life. Accordingly, a proponent of this view could argue that it would make sense that the disabled individual would only be satisfied insofar as she could spend as much as the able-bodied on non-essential expenses. However, in response, Sen asks us to imagine how the disabled individual could be a ‘pleasure-wizard’ – someone who derives a lot of satisfaction from few resources. In such cases, a utilitarian measure of equality would lead us to allocate less to the disabled individual since she will be able to derive the same satisfaction from fewer resources and
opportunities than the less-easily satisfied able-bodied individual.¹ This would also be a counter-intuitive measure of equality, according to Sen.

Only by looking at the capabilities that people have – what they are able to do or be with their sets of goods, resources, rights, and services – can equality take into account the diversity of human beings in terms of their abilities, needs, and preferences. In this way, the capability approach focuses on ensuring that people have the equal opportunity to choose the lives that they want to lead. Crucially, someone may have the capability to do or be something, in the sense that she has the real freedom to achieve it if she so chooses, yet not have the corresponding functioning because she has simply chosen not to realize that doing or being. Consider, for example, how someone may have the capability to go to university and attain an education in the sense that there is nothing stopping her from going to university: there is a university nearby, she has the means of transportation to get there, she can afford the tuition costs along with her living expenses, she is able-minded and able to read, and so on. Yet, she might not have the corresponding functionings of going to university and being educated simply because she does not want to go to university and be educated. Perhaps she does not want an education because she stands to inherit a lot of money, perhaps she prefers pursuing some other line of career, such as being an artist, or perhaps she does not harbor any ambitions for employment that require higher education – and does thus choose not to realize this capability (i.e., turn it into the corresponding functioning) even if it is available to her. In other words, she has the real freedom to do or be something (i.e., go to university and be educated), yet chooses not to realize it and does therefore not have the functioning of going to university and being educated. Nevertheless, using capabilities as a metric helps ensure equal access to what people think matters to them.

1.3. Capabilities as substantive opportunities

In the above, we have argued that capabilities are real freedoms. Yet, what do we mean by that? What does it mean to have the ‘real freedom’ to do or be certain things? What conditions need to be met for someone to have a capability? Answering these questions is imperative in order to apply the capability approach in practice to, for example, empirical assessments of what people can actually be and do.

To answer these questions, we propose to use the notion of substantive opportunity to conceptualize capabilities. According to this view, substantive opportunities can be contrasted with mere, or formal, freedoms and opportunities. Mere freedoms and opportunities are the formal rights that someone has to do or be certain things. Yet, someone may have the mere freedom to do or be something, but not have the capability to do or be that thing. For example, a person might have the mere opportunity to purchase an expensive sports car, in the sense that the person is legally allowed to own a sports car, that there are sports cars being produced, and that they are sold to the public. Yet, this opportunity might not be substantive because the person simply cannot afford the costs of an expensive sports car. Conversely, the person might

¹This would also hold true for any other measure of utility, since some might derive more utility from the same good or resource than others.
be wealthy and have the formal right to spend money in any way he or she pleases, yet not have the substantive opportunity to purchase an expensive sports car because they are sold out.

In this way, conceptualizing capabilities in terms of substantive opportunities implies that the opportunity in question is substantive and genuinely possible for the person to realize – that is, that there is nothing or no one that stands in the way of realizing that opportunity. To illustrate, in order to have the capability to purchase an expensive sports car, it is not only necessary that a potential buyer has enough money and that there are sports cars being produced and sold. It is also necessary, for example, that the potential buyer has access to a car dealership that sells the sports car that the potential buyer wants, that the potential buyer is allowed – legally, culturally, and socially – to spend money on an expensive sports car, and that the seller accepts the payment and that there is an adequate financial infrastructure for the transfer of money. In other words, for all intents and purposes the person could, if he or she so chose, purchase a sports car.

In sum, to answer one of the above questions, whether someone has a particular capability to do or be a certain thing depends on whether they have the substantive opportunity to do or be that thing. In order for an opportunity to be substantive – as opposed to merely formal – certain enabling factors need to be in place and disabling factors absent. This is what Sen refers to as conversion factors, as explained above. In the following we argue that conceptualizing a capability as a substantive freedom means that the relevant conversion factors are similarly substantive. Yet, this raises the question that we address in the following section: what does it mean for a (set of) conversion factor(s) to be substantive? Under what conditions should we say that a (set of) conversion factor(s) is substantive to the extent that the capability in question is substantive?

2. Three dimensions of substantive opportunity

It is possible to conceptualize conversion factors as the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for substantive opportunities. That is, as explained, for someone to have the substantive opportunity to purchase a sports car, it is necessary that the jointly sufficient enabling factors are present and disabling factors are absent. However, given the number of potential capabilities, the number of particular conditions that enable and disable the conversion to capabilities can be almost endless: the conversion factors that are relevant for purchasing a sports car are arguably quite different from the conversion factors relevant for attaining a university education.

Because of this diversity, it is necessary to abstract from specific conversion factors of specific capabilities and instead consider different forms of conversion factors. For example, the conversion factors ‘having functioning legs with which to ride a bike’ and ‘having functioning arms with which to drive a sports car’ are both particular instantiations of a more abstract condition of substantiveness pertaining to one’s physical abilities for performing a certain capability. Accordingly, the account of substantiveness we provide in the following can be instantiated in various ways as it is a theory of substantiveness rather than a particular application or operationalization. Hence, we talk about, for example, physical infrastructures in
general, rather than roads, train connections, and airports, in particular. Likewise, we talk about physical and mental (dis)abilities as forms of personal conversion factors, instead of the more particular, but different physical and mental attributes, such as not being overweight/obese, being dexterous, being strong or weak, or having a particular skillset, knowledge, or education that enables one to do or be something.

As Table 1 shows, our categories of conversion factors are divided according to three dimensions: (i) whether they are of a personal, social, or environmental nature; (ii) whether they are of a positive or negative nature; and (iii) whether they are of a tangible or intangible nature. In the following, we discuss each of these dimensions in turn and examine how they influence the notion of substantiveness in relation to someone’s opportunities. In the process, we also show through examples how these more general conditions of substantiveness can be used in practice to analyze concrete cases by highlighting the many different forms of conversion factors that are necessary in order for someone to have a certain capability (albeit in practice one will still need to identify the more specific instantiations of these forms). The table could consequently be used as a checklist for identifying and analyzing conversion factors.

**(Table 1. The three dimensions of conversion factors, including examples.**

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Personal</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Environmental</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive</strong></td>
<td>Physical abilities</td>
<td>(Basic) services</td>
<td>Financial resources</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social relations</td>
<td>Natural resources</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Physical infrastructures</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mental capacities</td>
<td>Enabling social and cultural norms</td>
<td>Time</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional infrastructure</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rights (to)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative</strong></td>
<td>Absence of physical disabilities</td>
<td>Absence of (threats of) physical interventions</td>
<td>Absence of physical obstacles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Absence of poor environmental conditions (natural hazards, extreme weather)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absence of mental disabilities</td>
<td>Absence of disabling norms</td>
<td>Absence of time constraints</td>
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(i) **The personal, social, and environmental dimensions of substantiveness.** As shown in the previous section, whether someone has the capability to do or be something depends on certain conversion factors that determine whether someone can turn a resource, good, right, or service into a capability. Within the capability literature, conversion factors are often divided into personal, social, and environmental factors (Robeyns and Byskov 2020, section 2.3). In this way, capability scholars can distinguish between conversion factors that are internal to the person (e.g., personal skills or bodily health), conversion factors that emerge from the person’s socio-political embeddedness (e.g., social norms or public policies), and conversion factors that concern the physical or built environment in which a person lives (e.g., climate or infrastructure). By
differentiating between these three types of conversion factors, persons are referred to as independent of their context, as dependent on their socio-political milieu, and as dependent on their environment. Personal factors include people’s internal capacities in a broad sense, such as whether someone can see and move about. Social factors include the norms and policies that regulate people’s behavior, such as whether people are treated as equals. Environmental factors include the natural and built surroundings that facilitate or hamper a person’s efforts to reach his or her goals. For example, a person may have the physical skills to ride a bike, live in a society where norms support her safety in urban traffic, but beyond this the person still needs an infrastructure that allows her to get from A to B.

Conversion factors are thus crucial to ensure the substantiveness of a particular opportunity: only if the conversion factors are favorable to its realization, can it be said to be a substantive opportunity. In this way, conversion factors act as conditions of substantiveness: they determine under what conditions which set of conversion factors needs to be present or absent for a mere freedom to be substantive enough to be deemed a capability. The personal, social, and environmental conversion factors come in two different kinds, namely positive ones and negative ones. They may be understood as follows.

(ii) The positive and negative dimensions of substantiveness. Conversion factors can be either positive or negative. Positive conditions are the enabling factors of substantiveness. To illustrate, imagine someone who is formally eligible to vote in an election. In this example, positive conditions would be, say, the ability to use a pen to check a box on a ballot (a personal conversion factor), being considered part of the electorate (a social conversion factor) and having access to a polling station (an environmental conversion factor). As such, positive conditions are factors that need to be added to turn a mere freedom into a substantive opportunity. While positive conditions for substantiveness specify the presence of enabling factors, negative conditions denote the absence of factors that disable, restrict, or obstruct the conversion of a good, resource, or right into a capability. As such, while positive conditions denote factors that need to be added to turn a mere freedom into a substantive opportunity, negative conditions specify factors that need to be subtracted from the mere freedom to make it substantive. To illustrate, again using the example of having a capability to vote, consider three types of negative conditions that could stand in the way of someone having that capability. First, the person may be unable to check the ballot due to a physical disability or a condition that makes reading difficult. Second, a person may be able to check the ballot in accordance with their intentions but be deemed ineligible to vote because, say, he or she is considered too young (Brando 2022), or for instance because he or she has been convicted of crime and ended up disenfranchised. Third, if the person is of voting age but has moved abroad and remains formally allowed to vote but the government in the native country lacks sufficient time or infrastructure to handle mail-in votes, then the person cannot be said to have the capability to vote even though she may have a mere

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2 What we mean here is that if we have some conversion factor X present, then X will only facilitate the capability C if conversion factors Y and Z – or – V and W are also present (but not, say, if only F and G are also present). Whereas if conversion factor X is present, then F and G also being present may facilitate capability C. Hence, a capability depends on sets of conversion factors being present that are jointly sufficient for the capability. In our view, a capability is a higher-level phenomenon that can be broken down into different sets of conversion factors.
freedom to do so. Here, negative conditions in the form of physical attributes, social norms, or environmental factors obstruct the opportunity to vote from being substantive.

While many capabilities require both positive and negative conditions to be present, it is important to note that for some capabilities only negative conditions are required to be met. First, consider an example involving both positive and negative conditions. A young woman’s capability to maintain a job may, positively, depend on her relevant skills, whether norms and policies allow people of her age to work, and whether she has the financial resources needed to travel to and from the workplace. Furthermore, there are negative conditions that must be met, such as the absence of mental disabilities like debilitating depression affecting her, that women are not systematically discriminated against and left unhired, and whether the road to work is unimpeded. Second, however, substantiveness of opportunity can also be obtained in less complex situations that only depend on relevant negative conditions being met. For example, a person’s capability to live secure from violence may only require that he or she has certain enforced rights, or that he or she lives isolated from other people. If a person’s rights are enforced in the sense that they have protections from others, then this is a negative condition as opposed to having a right to interfere in someone else’s life which would instead be a positive condition. Moreover, if a person has no one else around her then physical interventions will be absent – making up a negative condition – by default. Hence, sometimes capabilities depend on the balance of both the presence of positive conditions and the absence of negative conditions, whereas at other times meeting relevant negative conditions suffices for having the capability in question.

Moreover, while negative conditions can in some cases be reduced to their positive counterparts – say, the absence of time constraints would in many cases be interchangeable with having adequate time – this is not always as straightforward. The absence of a threat of domestic violence, for example, does not necessarily mean that the enabling conditions of bodily integrity are present: just because one is not threatened with, or subject to, violence does not mean that one is free to do what one wishes to do as there are other ways of exercising control over someone, such as isolating them from their social network or withholding financial means. Likewise, in some societies, (ex-)convicts are restricted from voting, yet it would be meaningless to merely replace the negative condition of ‘not being an ex-convict’ with the (seemingly) equivalent ‘being a law-abiding citizen.’ What these examples show is that it is necessary to at least analytically distinguish between positive and negative conditions, even if they in practice are often interchangeable, because qualitative content is gained or lost when describing a condition in positive or negative terms: not being an ex-convict (a negative condition) is a much more specific descriptor than being a law-abiding citizen (a positive condition) and having bodily integrity requires more than the absence of (threats of) physical violence.

(iii) The tangible and intangible dimensions of substantiveness. Conversion factors can also be either tangible or intangible in nature. In the first regard, the tangible dimension specifies conversion factors that can be physically observed or possessed, such as natural resources or physical infrastructures. Relevant positive tangible conditions include a person’s physical abilities such as whether he or she can move from place to
place, whether they communicate verbally or by sign-language, and so forth. Basic services such as income insurance or social relations such as well-meaning family members can, when in place, help a person have a substantive opportunity to eat enough even if he or she loses their job in a recession. In addition, consider how a person’s financial resources such as their accumulated money, or assets such as a house, facilitate a person’s substantive opportunity to sleep safe and sound. Natural resources such as safe drinking water and physical infrastructures such as plumbing help make a person’s opportunities to achieve a healthy hygiene substantive. These are all tangible conditions that matter for enabling someone’s capabilities. Relevant examples of negative tangible conditions include personal factors such as the absence of physical disabilities that impede someone’s ability to get from place to place. Negative social factors consist in, for example, the absence of imprisonment or subjection to police violence in case a person attempts to protest a violent or illegitimate government. Environmental examples include physical obstacles, such as poorly maintained or flooded roads that obstruct someone’s path to work and thereby make his or her opportunity to travel to and from work non-substantive.

In the second regard, intangible conversion factors do not have a similar physical presence and cannot be directly observed, as is the case for institutional infrastructures, rights, and social norms. Yet, they are no less real and influential on whether someone has a particular capability. Consider, for example, whether someone has the substantive opportunity to see their child grow up and succeed in life. This will depend on, for example, the person having the mental acuity to recognize the child as being their child, which may be hampered by conditions such as early-onset dementia. It also helps if social norms are such that one is allowed to procreate or is eligible to adopt a child. Similarly, regarding time, a person only has the genuine opportunity to see their child grow up, let alone succeed, if there is enough time for him or her to spend with their child, which may not be the case if the parent is incarcerated or severely ill. Intangible conversion factors can, consequently, also be either positive or negative in various ways.

Tangibility makes up a spectrum, where on one end we have objects such as food items, and on the other end we have abstract conditions such as time. In between there are factors that are intermediary. For example, access to knowledge relevant for being able to do a particular job consists of intangible aspects, such as ‘knowledge’ and more tangible aspects such as a way to access that knowledge (e.g., a database, a textbook, and/or a library). Determinations of the level of tangibility therefore depend on setting some threshold of quantifiability and observability. However, for current purposes it suffices to note that the capability approach recognizes features from any point on this spectrum and not just on one of the two poles, such as when resourcism focuses on mainly tangible means, or utilitarianism only on intangible satisfaction.

In sum, whether one is able to convert a resource, good, or service into a capability depends on certain personal, social, and environmental conversion factors, or conditions. Conversion factors can be either positive or negative and tangible or intangible. By making these dimensions explicit, we cast light on the disparate factors and conditions that underlie the conversion of mere means, such as the possession of a bike, into substantive opportunities, such as being mobile. This step is crucial in the analysis of people’s
capability sets and can help identify whether people have the required conversion factors that enable particular capabilities. Yet, even if these conditions are present, they do not in themselves guarantee that someone’s capability to do or be something will be around forever. To see what is required for such persistence, we need to analyze the robustness of conversion factors and, by extension, the capabilities that they support.

3. Five conditions of robustness

In the previous section, we argued that someone has the capability to do or be something if we determine that the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for being and doing that thing are met. However, meeting the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions is merely the minimum requirement of substantiveness. Substantive opportunities, we argue, can also be more or less robust (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007 and 2013; Nussbaum 2011, 43-45). Robustness denotes the extent to which a capability, and its set of positive and negative conditions, can be said to be secure and permanent. Consider, for example, whether someone has access to decent roads to ride a bike on, yet lives in a warzone where crucial infrastructures are highly likely to perish. Or consider cases where someone’s choice to ride a bike depends on the goodwill of someone else, for example in a male-dominated society where a husband must give permission for his wife to ride a bicycle. In these cases, the robustness of a substantive opportunity could be called into question.

What does it mean for a capability, and its set of substantiveness conditions, to be robust? In the following, we identify a set of five conditions of robustness, which specify the extent to which conversion factors and, by extension, the capabilities that they support, are robust, namely (i) non-competition for finite capabilities, (ii) permanence of enabling conversion factors, (iii) decisive control over the outcome and decisive preference over the choice, (iv) content- and context-independence, and (v) non-dependency on favors. It should be noted that this list is open-ended and not exhaustive of possible conditions. That said, the items on this list are particularly salient for the analysis of the robustness of conversion factors and capabilities.

3.1. The non-competition/non-exclusiveness condition

The first condition of robustness holds that there should be no one else that competes for the same capability, such that if they realize their capability to the same doing or being, I can no longer realize it (Sen 1992). We call this the non-competition/non-exclusiveness condition. To illustrate, consider for example two individuals in a garage. In the garage only one bike is left, which one of the two individuals could use to cycle to work. On the face of it, both individuals have the capability to ride a bike: the bike is there, neither of them is going to stop the other one from using it, they both possess the requisite physical skills, there are no social norms that prevent them from cycling, and the roads are well-maintained. Yet, since there is only one bike for two individuals, it would be impossible for both of them to actually achieve this capability (i.e., turn it into the functioning of riding a bike).
In this case, we hold, although both have the formal freedom to ride a bike, only one of them can have the capability to pursue this opportunity (Pattanaik and Xu 2017, 33; Basu 1987, 74-75). However, since it is undetermined which of the two has this capability, we should actually say that this capability is less robust for each of the two individuals than if there had been no competition for its realization (for example, if there were two bikes – one for each person to use). In other words, the capability to ride a bike lacks robustness due to the competition for the same capability: since the opportunity to ride a bike is dependent on whether the other person in the room chooses to pursue their opportunity to ride a bike.

The non-competition/non-exclusiveness condition has its roots in the literature on public goods (Miller and Taylor 2018). We can draw a distinction between non-rivalrous public goods (e.g., walking in a public park) and rivalrous public goods (e.g., using a public bicycle-sharing service). In the case of non-rivalrous public goods, one person can enjoy the good without reducing the enjoyment of others, and hence several people can enjoy the same capability, whereas in the case of rivalrous public goods the value of the good diminishes when people make use of it. Consequently, two or more people can compete for the capability to make use of a rivalrous public good. However, such competition can often be avoided by establishing norms or rules of how a public good should be used. For example, the capability to use a bicycle from a public bicycle-sharing service can become more robust if a framework of norms and rules coordinates the way in which this public good is used.

3.2. The non-perishability/permanence of conversion factors condition

In the introduction to this section, we mentioned the example of crucial infrastructures perishing due to war with the consequence that someone’s capability to ride a bike on decent roads would disappear. This example highlights that for a capability to be robust, the conversion factors that enable the conversion of a resource or good into a capability must also be more or less permanent or unlikely to perish. Accordingly, we call the second condition of robustness the non-perishability/permanence of conversion factors condition.

Both positive and negative conversion factors can be perishable or impermanent. In the first regard, consider how someone’s ability to see may initially facilitate cycling, but as the person ages his or her eyesight becomes significantly worse over time. Hence, the person’s capabilities to navigate from place to place, and others that depend on it, are made less robust because her internal capacities perish. In the second regard, negative conditions can also perish independently of an agent’s choice. To illustrate, consider how a change in government might lead to changes in policy. We could, for example, imagine how a new government rises to power on the promise to combat terrorism. As part of these efforts, the government introduces a curfew from early evening to late morning. Because such a policy would make it more likely that government actors could stop early commuters on their way to work, we should say that citizens’ capability to cycle to their workplace has been made less robust. Similarly, with the increased risk of flooding and wildfires spurred by climate change, a person’s capability can be made impermanent by the destruction of the physical or built environment that, prior to its destruction, facilitated travels to and from work.
It is important to note that the impermanence of a capability supervenes on the impermanence of individual conversion factors. The impermanence of various conversion factors can make a capability less robust in the sense that insofar as a capability is nothing above and beyond conversion factors, the impermanence of some of its constituents will in turn lead to the capability being less robust. If people only have one path for traveling to and from work, say, then the destruction of that path will make the opportunity to travel there by bike non-substantive. However, if there are two paths available, and only one of them has been destroyed so far, then we might say that the person still has a substantive opportunity to travel to work that is merely less robust, and could even be made non-substantive if that second path is subsequently destroyed as well. Thus, a capability can be robust if at least one set of individual conversion factors that facilitate it is robust, even if another similar set that the capability could be constituted by happens to be comparatively unreliable.

3.3. The decisive choice and decisive preference condition

The third condition holds that the robustness of a capability depends on whether someone actually has direct control over the choice to achieve that capability or not. Sen (1983) has argued that such freedom can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, someone is free to exercise control over the outcome – is decisive – insofar as she can choose between the various options. On the other interpretation, however, freedom only requires indirect control over the outcome. That is, someone is free to choose (i.e., has the robust capability) in the relevant sense insofar as the outcome respects what she would have chosen if she had had the ability to exercise direct control over the choice. Pettit (2001, 3) argues that the difference in the conception of freedom between the two can be summarized as whether someone enjoys, on the first interpretation, decisive choice or, on the latter, decisive preference over an outcome. In other words, someone is free, on the first interpretation, insofar as her preference determines the outcome. Accordingly, we call this the decisive choice and decisive preference condition.

In the first regard, to be decisive in regard to a choice between two options, a person must be free to choose between the options. Thus, her capability is robust to the extent that she has direct control over the outcome. Consider, for example, someone deciding between traveling to one city or another one. If the person can simply rent a bike and cycle to either of them, then she has direct control in the relevant sense. She would lack this direct control if, for instance, it was up to her employer to decide where she is to go.

Sen (1983, 19-20), however, also argues that having the decisive choice is not always necessary: “To see liberty exclusively in terms of who is exercising control is inadequate […] The social-choice characterization of liberty compares what emerges with what a person would have chosen, whether or not he

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3 By the impermanence of a capability supervening on the impermanence of individual conversion factors, we mean that a change in the capability’s level of impermanence requires a change in the impermanence of the individual conversion factors that it is constituted by. Hence, we could not have a change in the capability’s level of impermanence without at least some of its constituent parts being similarly changed.

4 For a further discussion, see Nozick (1974), Gärdenfors (1981), and Sugden (1981).
actually does the choosing.” To illustrate, we can consider the example of a cyclist who had an accident and whose medical preferences are respected even if he is unconscious. While the unconscious cyclist does not enjoy direct control over the choice, we should nevertheless say that he has freedom to decide over the outcome because it respects his preferences.

On this second aspect of the condition, robustness only requires *indirect* control over the outcome. That is, someone has a capability in the relevant sense insofar as the outcome respects what he or she *would have* chosen if he or she had the ability to exercise direct control over the choice. Although Pettit (2001, 4) would agree with Sen that the first interpretation of robust opportunity (i.e., as direct, decisive choice) is inadequate and that we therefore should prefer the latter interpretation (i.e., as decisive preferences), he adds that we should recognize that having the decisive preference is more than merely having one’s preferences satisfied. To illustrate, we could imagine that the doctors, after all, are not intent on respecting the unconscious cyclist’s medical preferences—he may, for example, have rejected a blood transfusion, which would have saved his life—yet satisfy them out of neglect. The cyclist’s medical preferences would be satisfied if a careless doctor forgets to give the cyclist a blood transfusion, but surely we should not say in this case that the cyclist enjoyed the *decisive* preference. Thus, as Pettit (2001, 4) argues, “I do not enjoy decisive preference in regard to certain alternatives just so far as my preference happens to be satisfied, even routinely satisfied. It must be that my preference is satisfied *because* it is my preference, and not for any other reason. It must be that my preference is in control, so that what I get is robustly connected, not just connected by chance, with what I prefer” (italics added). Hence, if one’s preference for X over Y is satisfied only by chance, then one’s substantive opportunity to realize X is less robust than in the case in which one’s preference for X over Y is satisfied *because it is one’s preference* and there is a person who is accountable for realizing that preference.

3.4. The content- and context-independence condition

That said, according to Pettit (2001, 5-7; 2009, 96-100) there are two aspects that need to be fulfilled in order for someone to enjoy decisive preference in this way: a preference is decisive if its satisfaction is independent of both its content and its context. We therefore call the fourth condition of robustness the *content- and context-independence condition*. According to this condition, someone is free to decide on a certain issue—that is, has a robust capability that they can achieve—insofar as her preferences will be satisfied regardless of their content and the context. A preference is content- and context-independently decisive if it would be satisfied had it been in favor of any other alternative option than the one preferred. As Pettit (2001, 5) puts it, “it will not be enough for freedom that I get A if my preference is for A, when it is not the case that I get B if my preference is for B.” I only enjoy decisiveness over a decision insofar as my preference is satisfied regardless of whether I prefer A or B.

Sen (2001, 52) explicitly endorses content- and context-independence as a necessary part of his conception of freedom as capabilities: if we put an intrinsic value on freedom (i.e., that the freedom to choose between different options is in *itself* valuable), then, Sen argues, we should reject the view that it
does not matter whether we actually had alternative, open options when choosing. In other words, regardless of whether one has a preference for A and not B, one is arguably more free when one can realize both A and B — though not necessarily at the same time — rather than only being able to realize A and not B. In fact, if the freedom to choose between different options is intrinsically valuable, as Sen argues it is, we should say that only when we have the choice between both A and B (i.e., independently of the content and context of our preference) are we free to choose, since the latter situation does not involve a choice at all (i.e., had I chosen B, my preferences would not be satisfied and they would thus not be decisive for the outcome).5

3.5. The non-dependency/favor-independence condition

Pettit (2001, 6-7; 2009, 98-100) argues, meanwhile, that it is not enough that the outcome is independent of the content of our preferences, since whether our preferences are satisfied or not may depend on the goodwill or favor of someone else. In such cases, a capability’s robustness is merely contingent upon the will of another person — his good grace or my ability to please him (Pettit 2001, 6; 2009, 98-99). As an example, recall the example of a male-dominated society in which women must gain the permission of their husbands to ride bicycles. As Pettit argues, freedom in the relevant sense — that is, as decisive control over the outcome — requires favor- or permit-independence.6 For my preference to be decisive, it must be enough that it in itself determines the outcome, independently, that is, of the goodwill or favor of someone else (Pettit 2001, 7). Accordingly, we call the fifth and final condition of robustness the non-dependency/favor-independence condition.

Pettit (2009, 98) and Alexander (2008, 168-69)7 take it as a shortcoming of the capability approach that favor-independence is not explicitly addressed in Sen’s work. List (2004, 11-13), meanwhile, shows that favor-independence is an implicit part of Sen’s (1970) ‘liberal paradox.’ Favor-independence, List argues, is a supportive requirement for content-independent decisiveness on Sen’s account. I may prefer to realize my preference of A over B but be dependent on someone else to realize A for me. Luckily, this other person is willing to grant both A and B for me and I thus enjoy content-independent decisiveness over the choice between A or B. My benefactor, however, may come to change his own preferences about A and B. Let us say that he comes to prefer B over A and, as a consequence, he now refuses to realize A for me. My content-independent decisiveness, as it turns out, was not robust. Thus, on Sen’s conception of freedom, List (2004, 13) argues, it is necessary that I enjoy content-independence regardless of the preferences of my benefactor.

5 Furthermore, as both Sen (1999, 76) and Pettit (2001, 97) point out, in the absence of content-independence someone may enjoy the decisive preference insofar as she just happens to prefer the open alternative.
6 The former term, favor-independence, is used in Pettit (2001) — in which the synonym context-independence is further invoked — while Pettit (2009) uses the latter term, permit-independence. Sen (2001, 56) uses the term context-independence.
7 As Alexander (2008, 168) argues, “the republican theory goes further [than the capability approach] in order to inquire whether or not the life of ‘real freedom’ and the corresponding capabilities that the person enjoys are conditional on the favour or the goodwill of others.”
8 We shall not discuss Sen’s liberal paradox in detail here. In short, the liberal paradox states that a liberal theory of freedom cannot in a collective preference ordering simultaneously satisfy commitments to Pareto optimality and minimal liberalism (Sen 1970).
Robust opportunity on Sen’s account – that is, understood as enjoying decisive preference – therefore requires both content- and favor-independence.9

For his part, Sen (2001, 55-56) does recognize that favor-independence represents “an important aspect of freedom.” Yet Sen qualifies his assent in two respects. First, freedom should not be evaluated as an amalgamation of content- and favor-independence. Rather, we should evaluate the robustness of freedom of opportunity in terms of how much each kind of independence is realized as they both contain important information about a person’s freedom. Secondly, the realization of a capability sometimes depends on the goodwill of others: “For example, a person may not be able to set up her own school, may be dependent on public policy, and may not even be able to have much influence on her own on the public policy for a region […] and yet the establishment of a school in that region can be said to increase this person’s freedom to be educated” (Sen 2001, 55-56). The example leads Sen (2001, 56) to conclude that “[w]e live in a world in which being completely independent of the help and goodwill of others may be particularly difficult to achieve, and sometimes may not even be the most important thing to achieve.”10

Pettit (2009, 98, fn. 6) could concede Sen’s point: we do sometimes depend on the actions of a proxy or a caretaker in order to have our preferences satisfied, such as in the example of the unconscious cyclist mentioned above (Pettit 2009, 101). Yet he would argue that there is an important difference between whether these actions are undertaken because the proxy just happens to favor her subjects (such as in the case of the power that a husband wields over his wife in a male-dominated society) or whether she undertakes them because she is somehow accountable for realizing their preferences (such as in the case of policy-makers’ obligation to build a school for their constituents in a democratic society). Only in the latter case do the subjects enjoy favor-independence.

In sum, the substantiveness of a capability not only depends on whether enabling factors are present and disabling factors absent. Even if someone had a capability, in the sense that she had the positive and negative conditions necessary to achieve it and turn it into its corresponding functioning, this capability could still be more or less robust depending on several conditions of robustness. While none of the conditions are sufficient or necessary for someone to have a capability, they do establish when a particular capability can be expected to be sustained or whether it is only temporary and likely to perish. As such, a capability that satisfies all five conditions is more robust and more likely to be permanent than a capability that satisfies fewer of the conditions.

9 It should be noted, though, that it is a matter of contention whether we should consider Sen’s work on the liberal paradox as a part of his work on the capability approach given his different foci in these works. Thus, whether List’s claim that Sen also endorses favor-independence (in addition to merely content-independence) depends on the claim that Sen’s body of work should be read as a connected whole. Walsh (2003), in particular, lends credence to this reading. Here Walsh shows how Sen’s solution to Arrow’s impossibility theorem – a broadening of the informational basis to include epistemic information about interpersonal comparisons of well-being and personal value judgments, rather than merely preferences (Fleurbaey 2002) – provided the groundwork for the capability approach’s pluralist and contextualist account of well-being.

10 See also Sen (1983, 19; 1993, 44).
4. Are capabilities binary or incremental?

If capabilities are defined as substantive opportunities – that is, as opportunities that are cleared of all obstacles, allowing the holder to realize it (turn it into its corresponding functioning) should they so choose to – it raises the question of whether capabilities are binary or incremental. That is, is there a minimal threshold of substantiveness and/or robustness above which we can say that someone is more likely to be able to achieve a doing and being?

On what we may call the binary view, a person has a capability to do or be something only if a set of conditions that are jointly sufficient to do or be that thing is met. In effect, the binary view maintains that capabilities require that all relevant obstacles to someone’s achieving a doing or being – if they so choose – are cleared. If, however, some condition in the set of jointly sufficient conditions is not met, then according to the binary view the person does not have the corresponding capability. In other words, substantiveness is treated as a threshold concept on the binary view, and one either falls above or below its limit. By contrast, on what we may call the incremental view, substantiveness is treated as a gradual concept. On the incremental view, someone’s opportunity to do or be something can consequently be more or less substantive instead of merely (fully) substantive or otherwise non-substantive. On this view, the more conditions that are met to do or be something, the more opportunity the person has to realize that doing or being. If none of the relevant jointly sufficient conditions are met, then the opportunity is closed off.

To illustrate the difference between the binary view and incremental view, consider whether someone who cannot afford to pay the full tuition fee has the capability of getting a university-education, even if she has the mental capacities to study for a university degree, she has the required primary and secondary education, lives close to the university and is able to get there for classes, has been accepted for her preferred program, and so on. On the binary view, which holds that all conditions need to be satisfied in order for someone to have a capability, she does not have the capability to get a university-education because she does not fulfill the requirement to be able to pay for her studies. On the incremental view, however, we should say that she has a more substantive and robust capability to get a university-education than someone whose situation, everything else being equal, satisfies even fewer conversion factors. Say, she does not have the required primary and secondary education or cannot attend most classes because they clash with her part-time job. Likewise, someone who, in addition to all the other requirements, is able to pay the full tuition fee would, on the incremental view, be considered to have an even more substantive and robust capability to get a university-education.

Whether the binary or the incremental view is correct, or whether we prefer the one or the other, depends on our interpretations of ‘substantiveness’ and ‘robustness,’ as we have analyzed them in the previous sections, and whether we think that the conditions are necessary for an opportunity to be substantive and robust. There are good reasons to prefer either interpretation. In the first case, as we have seen, what differentiates capabilities from mere freedoms and opportunities is the fact that they are somehow substantive in the sense that they can be achieved if one so chooses. This seems to imply that capabilities are binary – either one has a particular capability or not – as it would otherwise concede that a
capability is not always immediately achievable. Recall the example of voting: we would struggle to say that someone has the capability to vote if they are not actually able to get to the polling station to cast their vote, even if they have the formal opportunity to do so. Either they are able to get to the polling station should they so choose, in which case they have the capability to vote, or they do not have the means to get there, in which case they cannot actually exercise their formal right to vote and do not, therefore, have the capability to vote.

However, it is also intuitively clear that someone can have a better or worse prospect of achieving a particular opportunity than someone else: someone with a higher income is more likely to be able to pay the down-payment on, or to put in a higher bid for, a house than someone with a lower income. While a lower income does not by default exclude that person from making an acceptable bid, be approved for a mortgage, or pay a down-payment, the higher income individual would all things being equal be more likely to do so. (Of course, conversely, we could imagine that the lower income individual was much more responsible with her money than the higher income individual and would have saved up for the required down-payment, which only illustrates how different conversion factors – here, personal factors, such as financial literacy and frugality – can shape a person’s capability set.)

Consequently, the two views can serve different purposes of capability analysis and theoretical development. For example, the binary view is especially useful for developing capability theories of ideal justice because it establishes the ideal conditions under which someone has a capability or not. Moreover, as shown above, the binary view also distinguishes what is special about using capabilities to conceptualize and analyze human well-being, as opposed to other forms of equality of opportunity theories, namely because it focuses on realizable/achievable ends – whether someone is actually, substantively, able to do or be something. As such, the binary view is useful for interpersonal analyses of capability sets because it asks to what extent someone meets all of the necessary conditions needed for them to do or be something, which can then be compared between individuals to reveal their actual capability sets.

The incremental view, meanwhile, could be especially useful for the analysis of public programs and policies and the extent to which they promote people’s capabilities. Consider, for example, two policies aimed at reducing violence and promoting the safety of citizens. Even if neither policy were entirely successful in enabling citizens’ capabilities to walk around safely at night, it is entirely possible to imagine that one of them is more effective in reducing violence. Likewise, the incremental view could also be useful for setting out a capability theory of distributive justice. In the face of limited resources where a distribution cannot ensure that everyone gets what they need, it would be especially relevant to ask how much it would be fair that everyone gets – even if this is insufficient for them to have the capability in the sense that they can achieve it – such that those already above that threshold would have less of a claim to receive something as part of the distribution.

In sum, our analysis in this chapter reveals two different interpretations of capabilities as substantive opportunities, namely the binary view and the incremental view. Either interpretation has its own view of how necessary the different conditions of substantiveness and robustness are for the analysis.
of capabilities, yet they both serve important roles and can illuminate different aspects of what it means to conceptualize capabilities as substantive opportunities and what this means for the practical application of the capability approach.

5. Substantiveness, robustness, and the identification of capabilities

Before we can conclude this chapter, we still need to address two questions that affect the practical application of our analysis to the identification of substantive opportunities (that is, capabilities) in practice. The first question concerns the relationship between the dimensions of substantiveness and the conditions of robustness and asks whether the robustness conditions only apply to capabilities as a whole or whether they are also modifiers of individual positive and negative factors of substantiveness. If the robustness conditions apply only to capabilities as a whole—that is, they say something about the extent to which a particular capability is robust—then robustness is a fully separate thing from substantiveness. However, if robustness conditions also apply in terms of degree to individual positive and negative conversion factors, which in turn facilitate capabilities, then substantiveness and robustness are more closely linked, even if they do not fully coincide.

Our view is that the conditions of robustness can be used either or both to analyze the substantiveness of capabilities as a whole and/or to analyze the substantiveness of individual conversion factors that enable, or disable, capabilities. With regard to how the conditions of robustness relate to individual conversion factors, recall how personal capacities such as eyesight and mobility often degrade over time, rendering them impermanent. Social conversion factors may also be perishable, such as when norms regulating the status or use of public transport shift over time. Environmental conversion factors, similarly, can be differently permanent, depending on, for example, whether the nearby roads are maintained or left to degrade. With regard to how the robustness conditions relate to capabilities as a whole, we should note that a capability can still be robust even if not all seemingly relevant individual positive and negative conditions are so. To illustrate, consider that someone’s capability to ride a bike in the winter may to some extent depend on snow being cleared from the roads. Next, imagine that there is a fuel shortage that limits how much snow can be cleared. Nevertheless, that person can still have a robust opportunity to ride a bike to work because the person has equipped her bike with studded tires that help with traction even in slippery weather conditions. Hence, even if a particular conversion factor for a capability is not robust, such as the environmental conversion factor involved in clearing snow, what matters is that there is some set of robust personal, social, and environmental conversion factors that are jointly sufficient for the person to do or be something for the capability to be robust. The upshot is that the robustness of capabilities can be said to supervene on the robustness of various combinations of individual conversion factors (Kramm 2019, 188).

Consequently, on our view, a capability can obtain in several ways by meeting different sets of positive and negative conditions. To illustrate this, consider that it will be required, for instance, that a person is able to check the box on their ballot whether they decide to vote in-person or by mail, but he or
she is only required to get to a polling station as per one of the sets of conditions. Hence, if someone’s personal capacities to move about is less robust – impermanent, for instance, because he or she has an illness that impacts her ability to walk long distances – she may still be able to walk to a nearby post box and hence have a robust capability to vote.

Having established that robustness conditions can apply both to individual conversion factors and capabilities as a whole, the second question that we need to answer concerns whether some robustness conditions apply mainly to the constitutive parts of capabilities (i.e., conversion factors), while others mainly apply to capabilities as a whole. Alternatively, do all of the robustness conditions apply equally to capabilities as a whole and the underlying individual conversion factors? Although we hold that all of the robustness conditions can be applied to the analysis of both whole capabilities and individual conversion factors, we acknowledge that some of the conditions are more useful in either respect. What determines whether a particular robustness condition should, in some context, be assessed in terms of its application to an individual conversion factor, or to a capability as a whole, depends on whether one is interested in assessing the outcome, or in what underlies that outcome.

In the first regard, robustness conditions that are often suitably applied to capabilities as a whole are the decisive choice and decisive preference condition, the content- and context-independence condition, and the favor-independence condition. The reason for this is that these outcomes can be seen as less important than how they are realized. For example, when it comes to education, it may be more important to a person that she is able to attend university because she chooses and desires it rather than because someone else imposes the choice on her. Similarly, it may be more important that the person has a genuine choice in terms of whether to be educated, or, say, going into a trade that only requires training. In addition, it matters that her outcome does not depend on the favor of someone else. Hence, if two political parties agree that education should be accessible to all prospective students but differ in how to accomplish this, the person’s capability to be educated may be favor-independently robust even if the particular means of achieving that capability do not remain the same after a regime change.

Conversely, in the second regard, levels of non-competition and non-perishability/permanence are often suitably applied to the analysis of individual conversion factors’ robustness. To illustrate, consider parental leave as a capability that involves time as a factor for which parents could compete. That is to say, they are in a zero-sum game of allotted time off from work to care for their child. Hence, the time condition can be more or less met depending on how robust it is in terms of non-competition. Similarly, non-perishability often impacts our personal capacities in significant ways, such as when our mobility or eyesight degrades over time. However, these robustness conditions may also be applied to capabilities as a whole. For instance, when a person’s robust opportunity to find employment depends on the extent to which others apply for the position (competition), the capability to be employed will be more or less robust. Moreover, a capability may be more or less perishable depending on how many independent ways it can be achieved. If a person has an opportunity to do their work by, for example, meeting clients in person, meeting
them online, or even by sending letters, then its perishability increases the fewer of those ways of working are available.

To sum, a comprehensive analysis of the substantiveness of someone’s capability set should include analyses of the robustness of both the individual factors that enable, or disable, the particular capabilities and of the robustness of the capabilities themselves due to their multiple realizability. That is, on the one hand, as mentioned, even if not all of the underlying conditions are robust, a capability may nonetheless be robust, such as in the multiple realizable ways people can vote, work, or travel. On the other hand, even if most of the underlying conditions are robust, a capability may nonetheless be fragile, say, if only one way of voting is available to a person and one or more of the relevant positive or negative conditions ends up going unmet.

6. Concluding remarks

The capability approach is a framework for analyzing, among other things, human well-being. On this view, human well-being is said to consist in the real freedom a person has to do and be various things, alongside their achievement. What it means to achieve something appears relatively clear. By contrast, what it means to have a ‘real freedom’ has remained comparatively elusive. In this chapter, we proffered an analysis of real freedom in terms of substantive opportunities. A substantive opportunity depends on various enabling factors being met and disabling factors being avoided. The degree to which they are met or avoided can be assessed in terms of their robustness, both assessed one by one, but also in collections that facilitate someone’s relevant doings and beings. The upshot is that we can view a person’s real freedom as either fully present or absent, on what we call the binary view, or as a matter of degree, on what we call the incremental view. As we argue, the two views are differently suitable for different purposes, depending on whether we are formulating, for example, ideal theories of justice or comparatively non-ideal comparisons of how much or little certain opportunities are made substantive. On both views, the various conditions of substantiveness and their robustness determine the extent of a person’s real freedom to do and be the things that make up well-being.

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