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Focussing on people who experience poverty and on poor-led social movements: the methodology of moral philosophy, collective capabilities, and solidarity

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ABSTRACT

In this commentary, I discuss three aspects of Monique Deveaux's account. First, the method of *Grounded Normative Theorizing* she adopts to engage directly with the contexts and views of those experiencing poverty fits within a range of proposals to enhance the methodology of moral and political philosophy, and I would call on all philosophers working in this space to further develop these innovative methodologies. Second, Deveaux extends the capabilities approach by focusing on the group-based character of poverty and making the case for building the collective capabilities of poor-led social movements. While I do not substantially disagree with this argument (in practice), I argue that we should be careful to avoid normative collectivism (as a theoretical assumption). Finally, Deveaux discusses political solidarity with people experiencing poverty. I argue that this should be based on esteeming each other's various contributions in more diverse ways than only in narrow economic terms. Treating people in poverty and poor-led social movements as agents of justice, as Deveaux advocates, is a significant step in this endeavour.

1. Introduction

Monique Deveaux's *Poverty, Solidarity, and Poor-Led Social Movements* delivers a significant contribution to normative theorizing about poverty and its alleviation. The main claim she defends is that poor-led social movements are vital for transformative poverty reduction. Therefore, moral and political philosophers should engage closely with poor-led organizations and put poor peoples' organized struggles at the center of normative theorizing about poverty (Deveaux 2021, 2).

Deveaux argues that moral and political philosophy, and especially ideal theorizing, has long overlooked poor-led social movements as agents of justice and that poverty has been treated as reducible to needs deprivation, even though such an approach

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shifts attention away from the unjust processes, structures, and relations of power that drive poverty. In contrast, Deveaux defends a relational approach to poverty:

> poor-led organizations and social movements not only play an indispensable role in identifying and advocating for genuinely pro-poor reforms, but their emancipation from relations and structures of exclusion, exploitation, and subordination is a *necessary* condition of poverty eradication insofar as their disempowerment vis à vis these structures is partially constitutive of what it is to be poor. (83, emphasis in original).

This relational approach builds on the capabilities approach, but also points out some of its limitations. Mainly, according to Deveaux, the capabilities approach insufficiently recognizes the group-based character of chronic poverty (101). This leads her to defend the concept of *collective capabilities*. Although I do not disagree with this argument in practice, and especially not with her critique of the capabilities approach as being too individualistic, I find it difficult to accept the concept of *collective capabilities* if this requires adopting normative collectivism. I will elaborate on this in the third section below.

In addition to drawing from the capabilities approach, Deveaux's relational approach also incorporates elements of critical poverty analyses which focus on social exclusion and (mis)recognition as well as critiques of the depoliticization of poverty by postcolonial and alternative development theorists. On this basis, we come to see durable poverty reduction as a process of exposing and reforming the structures and relations of inequality and subordination that underpin poverty and marginalization. Such a political understanding of the drivers of poverty also recognizes that adequate poverty reduction and social reform require that poor communities be centrally included in decision-making as stakeholders and equals (Deveaux 2021, 108–109). In this context, poor-led organizations exercise collective agency in generating transformative (political) solutions to alleviate poverty.

Hence, in elaborating this relational approach to poverty, Deveaux convincingly argues for the substantive claim that poor-led social movements are vital for transformative poverty reduction. In addition, she also achieves a methodological goal: put simply, if we want to talk about poverty, we should listen to people experiencing it. Poor people and poor-led organizations should be acknowledged as moral and political agents of justice, in practice —when developing policy measures and social reforms to alleviate poverty—as well as in theory—when developing normative theories about poverty and responsibilities of justice.

This methodological aspect will be the subject of the section that follows. In Section 3, I will return to the issue of collective capabilities. I will conclude with a brief note on solidarity and recognition.

2. Alternative methodologies for moral and political philosophy

With her book, Deveaux illustrates rather convincingly why philosophers should leave their ivory tower occasionally, so to speak, when they are developing normative theories regarding real-world problems (*in casu* poverty). In this way, her approach can be situated within the growing branch of theorists and global ethicists who are critical of the standard methodology of moral and political philosophy. For example, Onora O'Neill (1987) famously discusses the charges that ethical reasoning is too abstract and idealizes human agents. Starting from a feminist perspective, Alison Jaggar and Theresa Tobin argue that the 'armchair' philosophical methods of reasoning in hypothetical examples

or ideal conditions are inadequate for understanding how moral claims can be justified in situations of cultural diversity and power inequality (2017, 511). Avner de-Shalit (2020) argues that there is a *political philosophy gap* in that political philosophers do not consult the public, even while there are good democratic and epistemological reasons to do so.

Abstracting from concrete and diverse contexts and idealizing people as perfectly rational moral agents have indeed led to unsatisfactory theory development. The standard philosophical methods have, at least to some extent, resulted in alienating other disciplines and the wider public from moral and political philosophy. These problems are illustrated by Deveaux: she convincingly argues that excluding poor people and communities from philosophical theorizing has led to some significant misframings of poverty. Poverty has often been treated as reducible to needs deprivation, thereby ignoring 'the unjust processes, structures, and relations of power that drive, and are partly constitutive of, poverty' (50). Established approaches to poverty (such as the debate on Singer's *Shallow Pond* case, Effective Altruism, sufficientarianism, obligation- and rights-centred approaches, and the nondomination view) insufficiently show how the relations and structures of social exclusion and powerlessness are constitutive of poverty and insufficiently acknowledge people living in poverty as key agents of justice (chapter 2). In Deveaux's words: 'the omission of people living in poverty as central agents of justice puts philosophers out of step with progressive, pro-poor approaches to poverty and development' (23). In addition, especially when the aim of one's normative proposals is precisely to empower people living in poverty, it is rather patronizing to not include them in the theoretical debate and to talk over their heads.[1]

The dissatisfaction with moral and political theorizing has led to several innovative approaches, and I believe Deveaux's book fits within this branch in that she adopts *Grounded Normative Theorizing* (GNT), based on the work by Brooke Ackerly et al. (2021), to engage directly with the contexts and views of those who are involved in political contestation or struggles against oppression. Mainly, Deveaux develops her normative arguments recursively 'insofar as [her] theoretical claims are grounded in an analysis of studies of poor-led organizing and community-led development' (8). The application of this methodological framework to the practice of development initiatives and social policy is made vivid in her examples and discussion of community-led organizations (such as the Landless Rural Worker's Movement in Brazil (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*) or the Self-Employed Women's Association in India). However, I do have some remaining questions regarding the utilization of this and similar novel methodologies in moral and political theory development.

One area about which some questions arise is the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory. Ideal theory is primarily devoted to developing normative principles for the ideally just society and abstracts from empirical contexts and questions regarding partial compliance. Non-ideal theory, in contrast, starts normative reflection from the world as it is, takes political practice as it actually exists as its point of departure, and presumes only partial compliance. Especially ideal theory has been criticized along the lines mentioned above for being too detached from reality, idealizing moral agents, and 'using hypothetical and constructivist reasoning' (Deveaux 2021, 8). It is then not surprising that methodological approaches which call for more attention to empirical contexts and the situated experience of agents in theory development are aligned most closely with

non-ideal theory. Deveaux indeed illustrates that GNT can be situated within non-ideal theory: 'a grounded approach seeks not only to make visible the power structures, norms and relations of oppression that underpin chronic poverty, but to engage with the ideas, aims, and interventions of poor and marginalized communities;' and 'the poor-led approach to global justice for which [she] argue[s] posits that waiting for legal and political institutions to enact social and economic rights is insufficient; these rights also need to be claimed, actualized, and defended through popular mobilization' (8–9). Although I fully agree with these claims and with the significance of non-ideal theory, I wonder whether GNT and similar methodological approaches need to be confined to the realm of non-ideal theory.

I believe there is a risk in emphasizing that these methodologies are to be situated in the realm of non-ideal theory, because it may give ideal theorists an excuse to remain focussed on hypothetical and constructivist reasoning and to ignore the critiques of abstraction and idealization. In contrast, I strongly believe that ideal theory would benefit significantly from similar grounding and from being informed by an interdisciplinary understanding of human behaviour and the contextual factors that shape it. There are interesting examples of this. For one, Martha Nussbaum finds fault with the way in which John Rawls idealizes parties in the original position and for failing to incorporate human dependency as among the circumstances of justice (2006, Chapter 3). She then attempts to address these issues in her version of the capabilities approach, which she, in contrast to Amartya Sen, nonetheless develops squarely within the realm of ideal theory. Another example is Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit's (2007) work, which shows how empirical research can significantly enhance the theoretical understanding of vulnerability and disadvantage, bridging the gap between ideal and non-ideal theory.[2] Finally, Lisa Herzog and Bernardo Zacka argue that the ethnographical turn they advocate can serve to anchor a more grounded approach to political theory, while still being compatible with Rawls' project in ideal theory (2017, 764).[3]

Another group of questions relates to the precise application of these innovative methods and methodologies, and their limitations. Deveaux admits that GNT 'loosely' informs her analysis and that she does not adhere to the rigorous commitments of epistemic inclusion and accountability central to GNT (8). However, the question then is: how can we make sure that the methodology used is justified and robust? To be clear, I do not intend to criticize Deveaux's approach here for three reasons. First, I believe that the demands of empirical research may be too stringent if we still want to make sufficient progress in the normative space. Second, the rigour of, for example, experimental or empirical ethics is not always necessary to achieve significant results. For example, even though Wolff and de-Shalit's methodology may not be perfect,[4] the way they integrate their research with more standard philosophical methods significantly enhances our conceptualization of disadvantage and vulnerability. Similarly, despite the methodological limitations she herself admits to, Deveaux's book significantly enriches our normative theorizing about poverty. Third, it would be unfair to demand such methodological rigour from innovative approaches while this seemingly is of no concern to those who limit themselves to the standard methods of hypothetical and constructivist reasoning.

Nonetheless, the justification and robustness of our methods remains a concern and I believe that we need to do more work to address it. What constitutes a good integration of empirical data and normative reflection? How can we avoid charges of anecdotalism or

cherry-picking when drawing inferences from real-world cases and practical examples? How can we avoid the dangers of biases, particularism, and special pleading (see Bell, Swaffield, and Peeters 2019, 619–620; Herzog and Zacka 2017, 779)? What are the role and authority of the moral philosopher in all of this?

It would be unfair to ask Deveaux to address all these questions on the spot. Substantially defending GNT as a methodological approach is not one of the main aims of the book, but I do believe that she, as Co-Director of the Grounded and Engaged Theory Lab at the University of Guelph, will have an interest in these questions as well. In each case, rather than a critique of her approach, this is a call to all philosophers working in this space (including myself) to further develop these innovative methodologies.[5]

3. Collectives and capabilities

As mentioned in the Introduction above, Deveaux extends the capabilities approach by focusing on the group-based character of poverty and making the case for building the collective capabilities of poor-led social movements. I am not in fundamental disagreement with her argument on a *practical level* when discussing how structures and relations disempower and subordinate people experiencing poverty collectively or how the collective agency of poor-led social movements is critical for poverty alleviation. Nonetheless, I think we should be careful when talking about *collective capabilities*, especially if this would imply a *theoretical* commitment to normative collectivism.

In the fifth chapter of the book, specifically, she explores the question of *how poor-led movements build collective capabilities*. The starting point here is the critique that the capabilities approach 'cannot fully explain or credit the vital importance of poor-led social movements in developing the full range of *collective capabilities* of poor communities for *social* empowerment' (151, emphasis in original). However, according to Ingrid Robeyns, the debate seems to conflate the following three distinct claims: (i) the capabilities approach is too individualistic; (ii) the capabilities approach does not pay sufficient attention to groups; and (iii) the capabilities approach does not pay sufficient attention to social structures (2005, 107–110; 2017, 183–189).

In discussing the (first) critique that the capabilities approach is too individualistic, Robeyns discerns multiple kinds of individualism (2005, 107–109; 2017, 184–186). *Ethical* or *normative individualism*, on the one hand, postulates that individuals are the ultimate units of moral concern. On the other hand, *ontological individualism* 'states that only individuals and their properties exist, and that all social entities and properties can be identified by reducing them to individuals and their properties' (Robeyns 2017, 184).[6] I agree with Robeyns that the capabilities approach embraces normative individualism but does not rely on ontological individualism.

More specifically, according to Nussbaum the central capabilities form 'a set of basic entitlements without which no society can lay claim to justice' (2003, 36). When we conceive capabilities as fundamental entitlements of justice, it is indeed hard to see how we can abandon normative individualism, which the terminology of *collective capabilities* seems to suggest. The main reason for this is that normative individualism protects the principle that each person counts as a moral equal, 'respecting each of them as an end, rather than simply as the agent or supporter of the ends of others' (Nussbaum 2000, 55). As Robeyns elaborates, if we see every human being as having equal moral

worth, then we must attach value to the interests of each and every one of them (2017, 58). This means taking individuals as ultimate units of moral concern. Moreover, Robeyns explains that normative individualism is also an unavoidable property: functionings are 'beings' and 'doings', which are dimensions of an embodied human being who is by definition separate from other embodied beings (2017, 58).

The term *collective capabilities*, in contrast, suggests adopting the possibility of what I would call *normative collectivism*, which can be defined as the view that a collective or group is a separate entity, the ultimate unit of moral concern irreducible to their individual members, and as having entitlements of justice in itself—at least in some respects. This is controversial for at least two main reasons.[7] The first is the risk of *homogenization*—the risk that such a focus on collectives will obfuscate the differences that exist between different members *within* a collective. For example, as Sen famously argues, taking the family as basic unit conceals the fact that the wellbeing or freedom of the individual family members depends on intrafamily distribution (1999, 71). Hence, even if a family is doing well on average, we cannot assume that all family members are doing well (see also Robeyns 2017, 58). Collectivization based on a particular politically relevant characteristic (for example, slum or shack dwellers) can be a powerful means to demand justice, as Deveaux indeed shows throughout her book. However, this should not obfuscate interpersonal differences between members of the group. For one, if a group claims an entitlement on the part of its members, the question still remains as to how this is fairly distributed or deployed among its members. Moreover, how are disagreements between members regarding the vision, goals, and strategies of the group addressed? To what extent is group membership voluntary, a matter of contingent factors (e.g. living in a particular slum), or even socially coerced? These are just some of the practical questions that the focus on the group level—how powerful collective agency may be—gives rise to.

Secondly, normative collectivism is controversial because a group or collective is not a closed system, isolated from other parts of (the global) society. There is not only a relation between a grassroots movement and public policy or institutional arrangements, but there are also social and economic relations between members of the group or the group at large and other individuals or groups in society. A focus on the first, political, relationship risks neglecting the effects of policy decisions taken to address the claims of this grassroots movement on other people or groups in society. For example, how do the claims of a group of slum dwellers relate to those of other subordinated groups?

Therefore, normative collectivism risks violating the principle that each person counts as a moral equal and should be respected as an end. This is not to say that I believe that Deveaux adopts normative collectivism because she also states that 'for members of subordinated groups, and for many who live in chronic poverty, collective agency is central to their agentic capabilities, allowing them to collectively resist aspects of their lives that undercut their well-being and individual agency' (156). Rather, she seems to criticize the capabilities approach in the second and third ways Robeyns distinguishes (mentioned at the start of this section), *viz.* that it does not pay sufficient attention to groups and social structures. Although this critique may be slightly too strong (see Robeyns 2017, 186–188), Deveaux makes an invaluable contribution to this debate by illuminating the critical role grassroots and poor-led movements play in the realization of individual capabilities.

Yet, the usage of the term *collective capabilities* remains slightly confusing if all that it refers to is the importance of *collective agency* and *collective action* for the realization of

many individual capabilities. To illustrate what I mean, Deveaux refers to Solava Ibrahim (2006, 398) to explain that collective capabilities are not simply collectivized forms of individual capabilities, but rather new functioning bundles obtained by virtue of one's engagement in a collective. Moreover, Deveaux argues that 'disempowerment and subordination are processes that afflict individuals *qua* members of particular social groups' (157), redress of which requires processes of collective social and political empowerment. I agree that it is important to emphasize how capabilities are impacted by social processes as well as the large extent to which the realization of many of them depends on collective agency. However, in my view, acknowledging this does not imply adopting *normative collectivism*—it still seems a far cry from treating a collective as an entity that has a capability or a claim to one as a fundamental entitlement of justice. To avoid confusion, I therefore believe that the terminology of *collective agency* or *the collective realization of individual capabilities* may be more accurate.

This is more than a matter of semantics, as the following passage shows: 'it is in cultivating and exercising collective—especially political—capabilities, I argue, that people living in poverty become agents of social and global justice' (Deveaux 2021, 161–162). Perhaps I am reading too much into this statement, but it seems to go beyond the true but merely *empirical* claim that people in poverty are only being considered when they organize themselves in (large) groups, if at all, to also suggest, *normatively*, that people in poverty become agents of justice only when they engage in a collective. If this is true, then this would come very close to normative collectivism. In contrast, in my view, the empirical fact that individuals *qua* individuals are not being heard while the wealthy and the elites wield much more political power individually or in much smaller groups than poor people, is a highly problematic injustice.[8] It seems a feature of exactly the oppressing and marginalizing social processes that Deveaux denounces in her book for disadvantaging and disempowering people in poverty. Hence, we should also address the social and political processes that disempower poor individuals and that create such injustices. Normatively speaking, then, I am firmly convinced that individuals *qua* individuals should be recognized as agents of social and global justice even if they do not engage with others in a group to form a collective claim (which indeed commits me to normative individualism).

To reiterate, I do not believe that Deveaux has truly adopted normative collectivism, and I believe her discussion of how collective action is critical in the realization of people's capabilities enhances the moral and political debate in multiple and significant ways. Hence, if this discussion amounts to philosophical hair-splitting, then I should probably plead guilty, but I would nonetheless welcome further clarification.

4. Conclusion: political solidarity with people experiencing poverty

To conclude, Deveaux's book is crucial for showing how normative theorizing is enriched by including the lived experience of people struggling with poverty. This, in itself, is an instance of the solidarity of (would-be) allies with poor-led organizations for which she argues in the final chapter of the book.

In practice, many forms of solidarity are based on particularities that people have in common, such as shared circumstances, shared or similar experiences of injustice or subordination, or a shared struggle. In contrast, Deveaux mostly focuses on how

(economically and politically more privileged) allies can stand in political solidarity with poor-led organizations, which constitutes solidarity *across social differences*.[9] In her view, this form of political solidarity should be central to our thinking regarding (political) responsibility vis à vis poverty and justice, rather than paradigms of charity or institutional change from above. It requires, she argues, *treating with respect* people living in poverty and *a stance of deference*.

From a recognition theory perspective, solidarity depends on mutual sympathy between people with their various ways of life because they esteem one another symmetrically (Honneth 1995, 128). This symmetrical esteem, as a prerequisite for solidarity, means 'to view one another in light of values that allow the abilities and traits of the other to appear significant for shared praxis' (Honneth 1995, 129). This, I would argue, is the core of the political solidarity that those who are more privileged can build with people living in poverty, but it is also the most challenging form of solidarity. For, while it is easy to stand in solidarity with people whose traits and abilities conform to one's own values in one way or another or who share a similar struggle, it is more difficult to value the contribution of members of society who are significantly different from us.

The challenge of political solidarity with people experiencing poverty is to break through social differences that are constructed along the lines of economic differences, because it denigrates poor people collectively. Rather, we should more accurately esteem each other's various contributions in much more diverse ways than only in economic terms. Treating people in poverty and poor-led social movements as agents of justice, as Deveaux advocates, is a significant step towards more accurately exhibiting social esteem for people living in poverty. Moreover, the way in which she engages with the ideas, experiences, and interventions of people living in poverty and marginalized communities illustrates how we can esteem them in our normative theorizing about poverty and the solidarity we as moral philosophers who aspire to be allies with poor people should practise.

Notes

1. Being much more diplomatic than I, Deveaux leaves this last part of the critique implicit.
2. They state: 'from the start we have indicated that our project has been to try to understand what a society of greater equality may be [referring to ideal theory], and to consider what steps could bring society closer to that ideal [referring to non-ideal theory]' (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007, 182).
3. Herzog and Zacka (2017, 763–764) rightly point out that Rawls believed that reflective equilibrium involves the moral theorist as an observer of other people's moral conceptions and attitudes (Rawls 1975, 7). Wolff and de-Shalit (2007) and de-Shalit (2020, 17) expand Rawls' reflective equilibrium to *public reflective equilibrium* – involving the public's intuitions as well as theories. I would add the importance of an inter-/multidisciplinary approach to form a robust understanding of 'relevant background theories' that figure in wide reflective equilibrium (Daniels 1979), which is in line with Rawls' (1975, 225) own brief remark that philosophers should not turn away from the inquiry into the structure of moral conceptions and of their connections with human sensibility merely because it appears to belong to psychology or social theory rather than philosophy.
4. For example, Ackerly and colleagues (2021, 11, 1) rightly criticize Wolff and de-Shalit's methodology for focussing too much on the views of those who work with people who are

disadvantaged (for example, providers of social services) rather than those who experience disadvantage. In addition, it could be objected that Wolff and de-Shalit (i) mainly relied on qualitative methods; and (ii) only investigated Israel and England.

5. In my (collaborative) work, I have mainly advocated for, and exemplified, an interdisciplinary approach to questions in climate ethics (Peeters, Bell, and Swaffield 2019; Peeters et al. 2015; Peeters, Diependaele, and Sterckx 2019). In addition, in Bell, Swaffield, and Peeters (2019), we illustrate how the application of Herzog and Zacka's *ethnographic sensibility* can significantly enrich climate ethics. While the latter may be a clearer example of using an innovative methodology in philosophy, I consider the interdisciplinary approach to fit within this branch as well, because it similarly seeks to enhance normative analysis.

6. Robeyns (2005; 2017) lists further kinds of individualism, which have been the subject of a complex debate. For simplicity, I focus here only on the main distinction between normative and ontological individualism since it is the most relevant for my argument.

7. These reasons are inspired by Samuel Scheffler's (1995) and Amartya Sen's (2009, chapter 6) critiques of liberalism's (and in particular Rawls') treatment of the individual society or nation state as the unit of justification.

8. For example, OpenSecrets (a nonpartisan, independent and nonprofit research group that tracks money in USA politics) reports that 'the 10 most generous donors and their spouses *injected $1.2 billion into federal elections* over the last decade' (Evers-Hillstrom 2020, para. 6, emphasis in original). Granted, most campaign donations are done by groups, but these groups obviously do not consist of poor people. Moreover, these groups are much smaller (and are often dominated by a few extremely generous individual donors) than grassroots, pro-poor movements, while wielding much more political influence. In contrast, small-scale donations, while not insignificant, have been much more dispersed or consolidated in much larger organizations (such as trade unions).

9. Deveaux (2021, especially 201–202) also mentions political solidarity among members of poor-led movements which is a requirement for activism and collective agency. My focus here, however, is on the political solidarity across social differences because it poses some philosophical questions in which I am interested.

Acknowledgments

Notes on Contributor

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