

## Appendix A

# Capability, opulence and utility<sup>1</sup>

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The conceptual foundations of the capability approach can be found in Sen's critiques of traditional welfare economics, which typically conflate well-being with either opulence (income, commodity command) or utility (happiness, desire fulfilment)...Like Adam Smith, Sen (1983) emphasizes that economic growth and the expansion of goods and services are necessary for human development. However, like Aristotle, he reiterates the familiar argument that '...wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else' (Sen 1990, p. 44). In judging the quality of life we should consider what people are able to achieve. Sen then observes that different people and societies typically *differ* in their capacity to convert income and commodities into valuable achievements. For example, a disabled person may require extra resources (wheelchairs, ramps, lifts and so on) to achieve the same things (moving around) as an able-bodied person...In comparing the well-being of different people, not enough information is provided by looking only at the commodities each can successfully command. Instead we must consider how well people are able to function with the goods and services at their disposal.

Sen also challenges the welfare or utility approach, which concentrates on happiness, pleasure and desire fulfilment...Following Rawls he recognizes...that utility does not distinguish between different sources of pleasure and pain or different kinds of desires (Sen 1984, p. 308; Rawls 1971, pp. 30–31). In particular, utility fails to discriminate against offensive tastes...More fundamentally, Sen points out that there is more to life than achieving utility: 'Happiness or desire fulfilment represents only one aspect of human existence' (Sen 1984, p. 512). While it is important to take note of utility, there are many other things of intrinsic value (notably rights and positive freedoms) that are neglected by the welfare approach (Sen 1987, p. 8; 1992, p. 54; 1999, p. 62)...

These considerations lead to the conclusion that neither opulence (income, commodity command) nor utility (happiness, desire fulfilment) constitute or adequately represent human well-being and deprivation. Instead what is required is a more direct approach that focuses on human function(ing)s and the capability to achieve valuable function(ing)s...[For Sen,] '[a] functioning is an achievement of a person: what she or he manages to do or be. It reflects, as it were, a part of the "state" of that person' (Sen 1985a, p. 10). Achieving a functioning (e.g. being adequately nourished) with a given bundle of commodities (e.g. bread or rice) depends on a range of personal and social factors (e.g. metabolic rates, body size, age, gender, activity levels, health, access to medical services, nutritional knowledge and education, climatic conditions, etc.). A functioning therefore refers to the *use* a person makes of the commodities at his or her command. [Capability, on the other hand,] reflects a person's *ability* to achieve a given functioning ('doing' or 'being') (Saith 2001, p. 8)...For example, a person may have the ability to avoid hunger, but may choose to fast or go on hunger strike instead...In practice Sen uses the term 'capability' in a broader sense...to refer to 'the alternative combination of functionings the

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<sup>1</sup> This is an extract from Clark 2006, pp. 32–35. The references cited in this Appendix are found in the reference list for Chapter 1 of this book.

person can achieve, from which he or she can choose one collection' (Sen, 1993, p. 31; 1992, p. 40; 2005, p. 153)...Sen argues that capability or freedom has intrinsic value and should be regarded as 'the primary informational base' (Sen 1993, pp. 38–39).

One of the chief strengths of Sen's framework is that it is flexible and exhibits a considerable degree of internal pluralism, which allows researchers to develop and apply it in many different ways (Alkire 2002, pp. 8–11, 28–30)...Sen indicates that the capability approach can be used to assess individual advantage in a range of different spaces...For example, the assessment of poverty might involve concentrating on a relatively small sub-set of basic capabilities. Evaluating well-being or human development on the other hand seems to require a much longer and more diverse list of capabilities (see e.g. Sen 1993, pp. 31–2, 40–42). The focus of the capability approach can be broadened further to include 'agency', which recognizes that individuals often have values and goals (such as preserving the environment, purchasing free trade products or opposing injustice, tyranny and oppression) that transcend and sometimes even conflict with personal well-being (see Sen 1985a, 1985b, 1992). The capability approach has also been adjusted to focus on inequality, social justice, living standards and rights and duties (among other things). Finally, Sen (1999, p. 77) recognizes that the capability approach is not sufficient for all evaluative purposes. By itself the capability approach does not provide a complete theory of justice or development (see Sen 1983; 1988; 1992, p. 77; 2005).

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