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Sen's capability approach and the many spaces of human well-being

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Sen's Capability Approach and the Many Spaces of Human Well-being

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Following Amartya Sen, this paper contends that the capability approach provides a better framework for thinking about human well-being and development than more traditional approaches which typically focus on utility or resources. This is illustrated by drawing on the results of a survey which investigated how ordinary people in South Africa view human well-being (a 'good' form of life). However, the results of this exercise indicate that the capability approach overlaps with both utility (happiness, pleasure, etc) and resource-based concepts of well-being. The distinctions between commodities (and their characteristics), human functioning and utility is less robust than Sen implies. In particular, the capability approach needs to make more space for the role of utility (defined broadly to include all valuable mental states) and say more about the material basis of well-being.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last 45 years Amartya Sen has made several key contributions to Economics and Development Studies. He has written and lectured extensively on the choice of techniques, growth theory, social choice,

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opportunity, inequality, poverty and famine. In recognition of his work, Professor Sen was awarded the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economics – an honour that many of his followers and admirers felt was long overdue.[1]

A recurring theme in Sen's writings is the promotion of human well-being and development. What sets Sen apart from most other economists however, is the fact that he has played a significant role in moving the economics and development studies paradigms away from the exaggerated emphasis on growth and towards issues of personal well-being, agency and freedom. In a series of papers and books dating from the publication of 'Equality of What?' in 1980, Sen has examined the moral and political implications of viewing development in a variety of different spaces.[2]

This paper considers the merits of Sen's Capability Approach (CA) – particularly in relation to more traditional notions of opulence or utility – as an evaluative space for investigating human well-being. In particular, it asks if the CA is broad enough to capture the many different aspects of human poverty and well-being embodied in the development literature [*see, for example, Alkire, 2002a; Clark, 2002; Moore et al., 1998; Narayan et al., 2000; Saith, 2001; and Wilson and Ramphele, 1989*].[3] The discussion is illustrated by drawing on fieldwork among the South African poor, which investigated perceptions of 'development' (a good form of life) in a rural village and urban township [*see Clark, 2000; 2002; 2003*].[4]

The fieldwork results indicate that Sen's critiques of opulence and utility should be endorsed. Neither of these approaches have an informational base that is broad enough to represent all aspects of human development. The former is concerned with the material basis of well-being whereas the latter is preoccupied with mental states. Both these approaches can therefore provide fairly misleading guides to well-being (as Sen himself has argued). In contrast the CA is able to avoid these pitfalls as it concerns itself with the ability to live well across all spheres of life. It can accommodate material and mental aspects of development in addition to many other substantive freedoms, which are not directly covered by opulence or utility inspired frameworks (for example, physical health, literacy, personal security, civil liberties and so on).

However, a far more extensive list of functionings than Sen cares to provide is required before the CA can be used to evaluate well-being. Identifying examples of valuable capabilities through fieldwork (a project I have dubbed 'empirical philosophy') sheds light on the constituent elements of well-being and provides useful insights that help develop and refine the capability framework. While our survey findings suggest that most people would probably endorse most (but not all) of the capabilities advocated by scholars like Sen and Nussbaum, such accounts typically neglect many of the things we may have reason to value [*Clark, 2002: 136–46*].[5] Reflecting on

these results leads to the conclusion that there is greater overlap between the categories of commodities, functioning and utility than the current literature on the CA suggests. It is not always clear how certain things should be classified using these distinctions; and many things (irrespective of how they are classified) seem to be endowed with both intrinsic and instrumental value, to greater or lesser degrees.

This paper is structured as follows. Section II presents a detailed discussion of Sen's conception of human well-being; Section III considers possible reasons for valuing a selection of different commodities and activities among the South African poor; Section IV considers the implications for Sen's CA as a framework for considering well-being; and Section V concludes.

II. SEN'S CONCEPTION OF HUMAN WELL-BEING

Sen has written extensively about concepts of human well-being and development. His contribution basically consists of a critique of traditional notions of development (which conflate well-being with opulence or utility) and the development of an alternative framework for thinking about well-being, which concentrates on the human capabilities or substantive freedoms people have reason to value. I shall consider the merits of Sen's critiques of opulence (income, commodity command) and utility (happiness, desire fulfilment) before reviewing the CA in more detail.

Opulence and Entitlements

There is a long tradition of viewing development in terms of opulence. Ever since Adam Smith [*1776*] first wrote about the 'progress of opulence' economists and social scientists have been preoccupied with characterising and measuring living standards in terms of income and commodity command. There is a certain logic behind this approach. Economic growth and material prosperity are necessary (if not sufficient) for human development. People cannot live, let alone live well, without goods and services. In a classic paper in the *Economic Journal*, Sen [*1983*] comes close to adopting this position. He acknowledges the link between growth and living standards and praises traditional development economics for identifying the factors that facilitate growth in poor countries.[6]

In fact the ability to command resources is at the centre of Sen's [*1981*] pioneering analysis of poverty, starvation and famine. Sen refers to the capacity to command different bundles of commodities as *entitlements*. Entitlements depend not just on a person's commodity bundle (resource endowment), but their capacity to exchange that bundle for another through trade and production. Entitlements can also be reinforced by the state in times of economic crisis or social distress. Much then depends on the nature of the

entitlements system in force in a particular society. According to Sen [*1983: 755*] 'the failure to see the importance of entitlements has been responsible for millions of people dying in famines'. Notice that this approach goes beyond some crude focus on income and resources by providing a framework for analysing entitlement failure among disadvantaged groups of people [*Sen, 1984: 519*]. It also differs from the basic needs approach, which tends to view poverty in terms of the inability to command a minimum basket of goods [*Sen, 1984: 513–515*].

Yet when it comes to judging personal well-being or human development, Sen advances some compelling arguments for looking beyond crude notions of opulence (such as GNP per capita) and even entitlements to basic goods and services. Following Aristotle, Sen [*1990: 44*] argues that material things are not valuable in themselves. 'Commodities', he says, 'are no more than means to other ends' [*Sen, 1987: 16*]. Ultimately, the focus should be on what people manage to achieve with their resource endowment. Sen also observes that the income and commodity requirements of individuals depend on 'contingent circumstances' and can vary quite widely [*for example, Sen, 1999: 70–71*]. In fact, some people can live substantially better (achieve more) than others with a given bundle of goods and services. These insights suggest that any resource-based approach will provide an incomplete and unreliable guide to well-being.

Utility and Welfare

An alternative approach is to judge well-being in terms of utility, which is what traditional welfare economics tends to do. In contrast to the commodity approach, this perspective has the advantage of viewing well-being as features of persons themselves [*Sen, 1985: 23–24*]. But like the commodity approach, Sen argues the three most common interpretations of utility (in terms of happiness, desire fulfilment and choice) all provide unsatisfactory accounts of development. Sen dismisses the choice based approach as a 'non-starter' on the grounds that people do not always choose in accordance with their own personal interests, but often wish to take account of wider concerns [*Sen, 1985: 18–20*]. The bulk of his critique is therefore directed against the happiness and desire-fulfilment views, which he regards as more serious contenders.

For example, Sen endorses the criticism that utilitarianism is unable to distinguish between different types of pleasure and pain, or different kinds of desires [*Sen, 1982: 362–63*]. In particular the utilitarian account of the good fails to discriminate against perverse tastes. Sen is also largely responsible for reminding us that there is more to life than achieving utility.[7] He argues that many types of non-utility information have intrinsic importance for the assessment of well-being [*Sen, 1982: 363 and part 4*]. (Sen is particularly

concerned about utilitarianism's lack of interest in positive freedoms.) Notice that such arguments hold even if utility is defined broadly to include a range of valuable mental states. As the evidence considered below shows, any plausible concept of development must take account of a person's *physical* condition as well as his/her mental state. Sen [*1999: 62*] is also concerned that the utilitarian view may provide a misleading account of personal well-being that 'is easily swayed by mental conditioning and adaptive expectations'. There is some empirical evidence to support these concerns [*Sen, 1985: 82–83; Myers and Diener, 1996*].[8]

These arguments imply that the utility approach, like the commodity approach, provides an incomplete account of well-being that cannot be used as a reliable proxy for human development. It should be noted, however, that Sen only really considers standard views of utility. He is aware, however, that some forms of philosophical utilitarianism (such as those based on informed preferences, the objective realisation of desired states or reinterpretations of utility as 'usefulness' or the 'human good') depart significantly from standard utilitarianism and, in many ways, resemble the CA [*for example, Sen, 1985: 24; 1992: 54*].[9] It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider these forms of utilitarianism, but it is worth emphasising that the CA is perhaps better placed to incorporate the more 'objective' types of information that realistic accounts of development seem to demand.

Functioning and Capability

It follows that the appropriate 'space' for many evaluative exercises – including the assessment of human well-being and development – is neither that of utility (understood as happiness, desire-fulfilment or choice), nor that of resources (in terms of income, commodity command or entitlements), but that of capability to achieve valuable function(ing)s [*see Sen, 1999: 1, 74–76*]. A person's *functionings* reflect the collection of 'beings' and 'doings' s/he actually achieves. A person's *capabilities*, on the other hand, represents 'the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for [him or] her to achieve' [*ibid.: 75*]. It reflects the person's real opportunities or positive freedom of choice between possible life-styles [*see Sen, 1985; 1992; 1999*]. Sen [*1993: 39*] argues that this freedom must have intrinsic value if objects such as 'acting freely' and 'being able to choose' are important features of a good life.

The distinction between functioning (bare achievement) and capability (opportunity or freedom) probably deserves more attention than Sen provides [*on this see Clark 2002: 62–63*]. Sen has increasingly given priority to capabilities [*Sen, 1999: 74–76*] instead of functionings [*see Sen, 1985: 25; 1992: 39*] in discussions of human well-being and development.[10] Yet he points out that the 'evaluative focus' of the CA 'can be either on the *realized*

functionings . . . or on the *capability set* . . .' [*Sen, 1999: 75*]. I shall not take a stand on whether well-being should be viewed in terms of (1) functioning; (2) capability; or (3) some combination of these two concepts.[11] All three approaches are helpful and have been used in the literature [*see Sen, 1999, ch.3, n.49*]. For our purposes it does not really matter which version of the CA is adopted. While these approaches provide different information (relating to achievement, freedom, etc) [*Sen, 1999: 75*], they are defined in terms of the *same* focal variables [*see Sen, 1992: 50*]. This means that any account of human well-being and development (compatible with Sen's framework) can be viewed in either the *functioning* or the *capability* space.

The most comprehensive treatment of the philosophical foundations of, and justification for, the CA can be found in Sen's earlier writings [*most notably Sen, 1985*]. In this work Sen emphasises the importance of distinguishing between *commodities* (and their *characteristics*), *functionings* and *utility* [*for example, Sen, 1982; 1984; 1984a; 1985; 1988*]. The hypothetical examples Sen uses to illustrate these distinctions are summarised in Figure 1.[12] Following Gorman [*1956*] and Lancaster [*1966*], Sen recognises that characteristics are features or attributes of goods. While the ownership of goods and the corresponding characteristics (attributes and qualities) of goods is usually a personal matter, he observes that the 'quantification of characteristics does not vary with the personal features of

FIGURE 1
FROM RESOURCES TO FUNCTIONING – SEN'S CONCEPT OF HUMAN WELL-BEING

	Intervention of personal and social factors ↘		
Commodity → e.g., bicycle	Characteristic → e.g., transportation	Functioning → e.g., cycling around	Utility Happiness or desire-fulfilment
e.g., bread (or rice).	e.g., provides nutrition	e.g., living without calorie deficiency	" " " "
	e.g., facilitates social occasions	e.g., entertaining others	" " " "

Source: adapted from Sen [*1982: 31*] with examples taken from Sen [*1984; 1984a; 1985*].

the individual possessing the goods' [*Sen, 1985: 10*]. A bike, for example, is treated as having the characteristic of transportation regardless of whether or not the owner is able-bodied or disabled. A functioning, on the other hand, relates to the *use* a person can make of the commodities and characteristics at his or her command. In the case of a disabled person, for example, the notion of functioning acknowledges that s/he may be unable to do many of the things (for example, moving around) an able bodied person can achieve with the same commodities (for example, a bicycle).

On closer inspection it becomes clear that converting commodities (and their characteristics) into personal achievements of functionings is subject to a range of personal and social factors [*see Sen, 1985: 25–26; 1999: 70–71*]. Take a commodity like bread, which exhibits the attributes of: (a) yielding nutrition; and (b) facilitating social occasions (among other characteristics). According to Sen, the nutritional achievements derived from consuming bread (or food more generally) typically depend on factors such as: '(1) metabolic rates; (2) body size; (3) age; (4) sex (and, if a woman, whether pregnant or lactating); (5) activity levels; (6) health (including the presence or absence of parasites); (7) access to medical services and the ability to use them; (8) nutritional knowledge and education; and (9) climatic conditions'. In the case of functionings relating to social behaviour and entertaining friends and family, Sen notes that what a person is able to achieve will be determined by such influences as: '(1) the nature of social conventions in force in the society in which the person lives; (2) the position of the person in the family and in the society; (3) the presence or absence of festivities such as marriages, seasonal festivals and other occasions such as funerals; (4) the physical distance from the homes of friends and relatives, and so on' [*Sen, 1985: 25*]. In comparing the functionings of different people, not enough information is provided by looking only at the commodities each can successfully command.

On the other hand, Sen has remarkably little to say about the role of utility (and its bearing on well-being) in his discussions of the examples in Figure 1. He simply notes that a *functioning*, such as bicycling, 'has to be distinguished from' and 'must not be identified with' the happiness generated by that act [*Sen, 1985: 10*]. There will be further discussion of this below.

Completing the Capability Approach

While Sen's CA has a broader informational base than either of its main rivals, it has at least one crucial limitation as it currently stands: namely, that Sen does not provide a substantial list or taxonomy of valuable functionings or capabilities [*Doyal and Gough, 1991: 156; Clark, 2002: 65*]. Some commentators have urged Sen to be 'more radical . . . by introducing an objective normative account of human functioning . . .' [*Nussbaum, 1988:*

176], while others have argued that the open-endedness in Sen's list is, in many ways, his 'Achilles Heel' [*Qizilbash, 1998: 54*].

Yet this apparent weakness is also a crucial strength. Sen deliberately leaves the CA incomplete for strategic reasons [*see also Qizilbash, 2002*]. For example, he manages to avoid the charge of paternalism by leaving each and every person with the freedom to define his/her own set of functionings. Even though Sen believes 'there might well be considerable agreement as to what functionings are valuable' [*Sen, 1988: 18*], he refrains from endorsing a unique list of functionings or capabilities as 'objectively correct'. He is concerned that such a list 'may be tremendously over specified' [*Sen, 1993: 47*] and ensures his framework can accommodate divergent views of the good life [*Sen, 1985*, *Ch.7*]. Sen also wants to make sure that his approach can be extended in others ways, not all of which involve articulating a comprehensive account of development [*Sen, 1990: 46; 1993: 47; 1999: 86*].

Of course, a fairly substantial list of capabilities is required to evaluate well-being and guide development policy and thinking [*see Clark, 2002a*]. Countless lists of human capabilities and needs have now appeared in the well-being and development literature [*see Saith, 2001*; *Alkire*, *2002a*; *and Clark, 2002*, *ch.3*]. Many of these lists are meant to be *universal*. In other words they are supposed to capture agreement between different cultures and societies concerning the central components of a good life [*for example, Nussbaum, 1995; 2000*]. Yet such accounts are subject to criticism on the grounds they are objectionably paternalistic or overlook cultural and historical differences. One way of completing the CA that minimises the risk of imposing ethnocentric or elitist views on other people and societies involves drawing *directly* on the values and experiences of the poor [*for example, Clark, 2002*].[13] There is no guarantee, however, that such an approach will produce meaningful results – particularly if preferences adapt to match circumstances, or are distorted through indoctrination. In some places the poor may also lack the necessary knowledge and experience to make informed value judgements about alternative life styles.[14] Yet it is not difficult to find examples of reasonably successful studies that have focused on the aspirations of the poor (for example, consider the extensive list of participatory poverty studies cited in Narayan *et al*. [*2000*], appendix 6). It seems that we should take the results of these studies at face value unless there are clear grounds for believing value judgements are distorted in some way.

It is exactly this kind of approach (which encourages people to define their own list of capabilities) that Sen favours. By leaving the CA incomplete, he is able to avoid many of the criticisms levelled against thicker accounts of development. However, Sen does end up committing himself to a *partial* account of the good (incomplete list of capabilities), which perhaps starts to beg the question. For example, Sen claims that 'being able to live long,

escape avoidable morbidity, be well-nourished, be able to read, write and communicate and take part in literary and scientific pursuits and so forth' are all examples of valuable capabilities [*Sen, 1983: 754*]. He has also claimed that more complex social functionings such as achieving self respect, appearing in public without shame, entertaining family and friends and taking part in the life of the community are relevant for assessing poverty and human development [*for example, Sen, 1985a: 199; 1992: 39 and 110*].[15] Sen is compelled to appeal to these (and other) examples of intrinsically valuable ends to justify his critique of utility and resource-based accounts of well-being and provide the CA with normative force. The examples he provides, however, relate largely to the physical and social spheres of life and do not provide a comprehensive overview of well-being. Nor does Sen's work capture the complexity of, or interaction between, different forms of human functioning. The CA however, is broad enough to address the former and sophisticated enough to shed light on the latter.

III. VISIONS OF DEVELOPMENT: SOME EXAMPLES OF VALUED CAPABILITIES

This section considers the reasons for valuing some examples of specific commodities and activities (summarised in Table 1). It draws largely on the results of a survey on *Perceptions of Development* administered in South Africa in 1998, which investigated how the poor view a 'good' form of life. The survey involved a small number of high quality interviews using a special questionnaire (which included open-ended questions) administered by highly experienced interviewers specially trained to elicit information on perceptions of the good. This 'pioneering methodology' [*Nolan in Clark, 2002: x*] distinguishes this kind of approach from hasty enumerator surveys composed of closed questions and standard participatory research among small groups that is subject to power relations.

The Survey Areas, Questionnaire and Adequacy of Results

The survey was administered in two fundamentally different areas in terms of culture, race and occupation in an attempt to generate interesting comparisons. The first location, Wallacedene, is a new urban township located about 30 kilometres from the centre of Cape Town. It consists largely of black African migrant workers and their families, who travelled to Cape Town in search of work. The second location, Murraysburg, is a small isolated rural village situated on the cusp of the Northern, Eastern and Western Cape Provinces. The population of Murraysburg is predominately coloured with small black African and white minorities. Unemployment is high and local people are often forced to migrate to find work. Most of those

TABLE 1
SOME EXAMPLES OF COMMODITIES AND ACTIVITIES, THEIR CHARACTERISTICS AND THE ACHIEVEMENTS THEY CAN HELP TO FACILITATE

Commodity/ Activity	Characteristics	Functionings
1. Coca-Cola (and other soft drinks)	* low in protein and fat	* some nourishment
	* high in carbohydrates/sugar	* provides energy, but rots teeth
	* provides for liquid needs	* meets liquid needs, quenches thirst
	* clean, safe and hygienic	* avoid ill-health
	* medicinal properties	* relieves stomach ache, wind, diarrhoea
	* yields utility	* provides 'a simple moment of pleasure'
		* feelings of being 'transported' to the West
	* fashionable product	* being fashionable
	* social drink	* facilitates social activities
2. Clothing	* basic/ordinary clothing	* protection from the elements
		* avoid embarrassment
	* good quality clothing	* being smart, avoiding shame
		* being attractive or fashionable
		* achieve status
	* yields utility	* achieving happiness
3. Good housing	* solid, well constructed, properly insulated, spacious, clean and hygienic, etc.	* shelter from the elements
		* physical security/safety
		* self respect and privacy
		* peace of mind
		* feel proud, achieve status
		* being in good health
	* yields utility	* achieving happiness
4. Playing sports	* exercise	* physical fitness
	* learning skills	* acquiring skills
	* social activity	* enhancing social life
	* yields utility	* pleasure
	* team work	* develop team spirit
	* contest	* love of competition
	* facilitate status and prestige	* achieve status and prestige
5. Watching sports	* yields utility	* enjoyment, excitement and anticipation
		* fulfils desire for competition and gambling
		* dream of being a sports star
	* restful and relaxing	* facilitates relaxation
	* social activity	* facilitates social life
	* observe rules, tactics and new techniques	* learn about rules, tactics and new techniques
6. Television and cinema	* educational?	* learn new things
		* satisfy curiosity
		* misleading/undermines moral values
	* yields utility	* pleasure and entertainment
		* escapism (takes you away from reality)
		* facilitates daydreaming and imagination
	* recreational	* avoid boredom and mischief
	* social activity	* facilitates social life

(*continued*)

TABLE 1
(*Continued*)

Commodity/ Activity	Characteristics	Functionings
7. Alcohol and tobacco	* relaxing	* facilitates relaxation * relieves depression, calms nerves * drown sorrows and forget problems
	* yields utility	* pleasure * satisfies (urgent?) desires
	* social activity	* facilitates social interaction, e.g. dancing
	* bad for health (in large quantities)	* harmful to health
	* potentially anti-social	* jeopardises personal relationships * leads to crime and violence
8. Advertising	* provides information	* facilitates buying products * promotes choice (but some advertising can be misleading)
	* promotes economic activity	* facilitates economic activity (e.g., sales, market expansion, competition and profit)
	* yields utility	* pleasure, entertainment and amusement * dream of future

Source: Clark [*2002*], Tables I.2–I.4, I.8, I.12–I.16 and II.2–II.4, II.10–II.11.

fortunate enough to have found work in Murraysburg itself are employed as domestic servants, farm hands, contractors or municipality workers.

In total, 157 people (split roughly between the two survey sites) were interviewed using random sampling techniques [*see Clark, 2002: 96–101*]. Interviews were split into two separate parts consisting of open and closed questions respectively. This methodology allowed enumerators to avoid influencing initial responses (by asking open questions, such as 'what are the most important aspects of a good life?' and 'do you value x?' and 'why?'), look for consensus (by asking closed questions that request an assessment of pre-defined ends) and test for inconsistent responses (by comparing responses to open and closed questions) that might reflect adaptive preferences, *inter alia*.

The factors that influenced the survey results are discussed at length in Clark [*2000; 2002, ch.4*]. On the whole there is little evidence to support the idea that value judgements were distorted (see Section II). Most South Africans appear to have clear views about the things they have reason to value – a form of 'political consciousness' (as opposed to 'false consciousness') – that has roots in the struggle against apartheid [*Clark, 2002: 103, 129–31; see also Clark and Qizilbash, 2003*]. Moreover, the results of this survey seem to be confirmed by a range of empirical studies conducted in Southern Africa [*for example, Wilson and Ramphele, 1989*; *MEPD, 1997; SA-PPA, 1998; Clark and Qizilbash, 2003*] and other parts of the world [*for example, Moore et al., 1998; Narayan et al., 2000*].

The survey results have been discussed at length in other publications [*Clark, 2000; 2002; 2003*]. The following discussion merely draws on some concrete examples (summarised in Table 1), which are used to assess the adequacy of the capability framework as a conceptual space for evaluating human well-being (see Section IV). While some of the examples in Table 1 are provocative (for example, Coca-Cola, alcohol and advertising), they include several basic need goods (for example, food, clothing and housing) and help illustrate the entire range of human functionings and capabilities thought to contribute to well-being (some of which are not generally recognised in abstract accounts of human well-being and development). It should be emphasised that the examples presented in Table 1 are not exhaustive. Nor is it likely that all people would want to endorse them. In fact, some respondents advanced clear reasons for *not* valuing Coca-Cola, alcohol and advertising, among other things. The fact that substantial numbers of people often value these things, however, implies that any practical framework must be able to handle them.

Sen's Examples Reconsidered

Before proceeding, notice that the distinctions Sen draws between the categories in Figure 1 rest heavily upon two examples (having a bicycle, and having some bread[16]), which refer to only three possible functionings. Sen returns to these two examples again and again, but in order to make the distinctions between the categories stick, it is necessary to consider a much wider and more diverse range of commodities, activities and achievements.

Sen's first example involves the use an able-bodied person (in contrast to a disabled person) can make of a bicycle. Being able to move around – with or without a bicycle – is clearly an example of an essential human functioning, particularly in the context of development. John Iliffe [*1987: 114*] and Jan Breman [*1996, ch.1*], for example, have shown that the able-bodied among the poor can often escape extreme poverty through wage labour. Moreover, a bicycle was the quintessential 'basic need' good in Maoist China. Of course, being able to move around is only one aspect of human well-being. While the bicycle example serves its original purpose well (namely to illustrate the distinction between the categories in Figure 1), it can provide only limited insight into the nature and scope of human well-being. Yet it is worth considering how the bicycle example might be extended to glean additional insights.

First of all, moving around on a bicycle may not be the *only*, or perhaps even the most pertinent, object of (intrinsic) value in this particular example. For example, it is possible to argue that using the bicycle for exercise, to visit family and friends, to travel to work or go to the cinema or local dance are the kinds of 'beings' and 'doings' people value [*see Clark, 2002, table II.13*].

Cycling is a means to other ends as well as an end in itself. This point has particular relevance for many poor people, who are not in a position to use other forms of transport. In addition, cycling from A to B may become tedious and cause unhappiness if the function is performed on a regular basis. At the extreme, cycling long distances can be painful, physically exhausting and, in the long term, may even threaten health.[17] In these circumstances riding a bicycle generates *negative* functionings, which subtract from personal well-being. But in Sen's example, achieving the function of moving around on a bicycle is naturally assumed to enhance the cyclist's well-being (and also to yield utility), regardless of the purpose or motive behind the action.

Finally, a bicycle is not the only good that exhibits the characteristic of transportation. There are many other potential modes of transport, and good reasons for believing that a person may be better off travelling one way rather than another. Nearly all the people we interviewed insisted that they would prefer to travel by car instead of by bike. Being able to 'travel further' more quickly and efficiently was ranked as the single most important reason for favouring a car by the majority of people questioned. Many respondents also expressed a strong preference to travel by car to achieve happiness or realise a desire. This is an important part of development for many poor people who are not in a position to even think about buying a car. Several respondents also felt that a motorcar would enhance their status and help them to gain the respect of peers. According to one teenage male, cars are 'faster' and 'look better'.[18] These remarks suggest that a more thorough and comprehensive analysis of the functions of transport than Sen's bicycle example provides can help throw additional light on the things people value and ultimately on the merits of the CA for conceptualising well-being.

This brings us to Sen's second example. In general, a loaf of bread (or a bowl of rice) clearly does facilitate important functionings such as 'living without calorie deficiency' and 'entertaining others'.[19] These achievements also tend to facilitate pleasure and satisfy desires. Escaping from persistent hunger by consuming a wholesome and filling loaf of bread can be extremely satisfying. But Sen has little to say about the contribution of utility (happiness, desire-satisfaction and so on) when he discusses the example. Moreover, while few people want to dispute the importance of absorbing nutrients (in order to live without calorie deficiency) or disagree that a generally healthy diet is of value, many individuals do not actually *choose* to adopt a healthy diet. This implies that consuming food facilitates other functionings, some of which receive priority in many people's assessment of well-being [*see Clark, 2002: 119–21*]. While the failure to adopt a healthy diet may reflect weak will power in some cases or malformed preferences in others, there is no guarantee that a person will not *genuinely*

value certain meals over more healthy alternatives. At the extreme such considerations help explain the demand for junk food. Some additional examples help illustrate the point and provide further material for evaluating the relevance of different frameworks for considering human well-being (see Table 1).

Some Additional Examples

One product that has been immensely successful (even in some of the world's poorest countries[20]) is Coca-Cola. But Coca Cola, like most other soft drinks, is not a particularly good source of nutrition. The product is low in protein, fat and fibre – although it does have a high energy content derived from sugar and other carbohydrates. While Coca-Cola does have some nutritional value, it is unlikely that the product's ability to provide nourishment is a decisive factor behind its success.[21] Many products are rich in nutrition, but few are as successful as Coca-Cola. Soft drinks such as Coca-Cola (like many other products) can also harm health.[22] Some of the British Co-op's own brands of soft drinks carry the following advice for parents: 'Frequent drinking of sugary drinks and fruit juices may lead to tooth decay and poor nutrition. Try to restrict these drinks to meal times and replace them with sugar free drinks or water. Avoid giving sugary drinks or fruit juices to babies'. In stark contrast to the British Co-op, Coca-Cola product labels provide the consumer with no warning and the bare minimum in terms of nutritional information.[23] A few of the people we interviewed stated that they did not value the opportunity to drink Coca-Cola or consume other soft drinks on the grounds that these products are unhealthy, addictive, too acidic, 'blow you up' and cause wind. The vast majority of survey participants however, were not primarily concerned with the *possible* ill effects of these beverages.[24]

On the other hand, Coca-Cola products do cater for liquid needs. Many survey participants attached a great deal of value to a 'cool' and 'refreshing' glass of Coca-Cola that 'quenches thirst'. The Coca-Cola Company also produces a high quality product that is clean, hygienic and safe to consume.[25] Many of the people we interviewed valued Coca-Cola on the grounds that it is 'a healthy, clean drink'. Several respondents also acknowledged that Coca-Cola promotes health by relieving ailments such as stomach ache, wind and diarrhoea. One person described Coca-Cola as a medicine that can be used to treat migraine attacks. However, the extent to which Coca-Cola and related products are endowed with medicinal value is not clear.

Another important factor behind Coca-Cola's success was recently captured in a remark made by Curt Ferguson, the Director of Indochina Coca-Cola holdings, when he was interviewed on the subject of the product's expansion in Vietnam: 'For just 20 cents a bottle, or 45 cents a can,

consumers can enjoy a simple affordable *moment of pleasure*' [*APU, 1996: 10, emphasis added*]. The people we interviewed rated enjoyment well above other motives for consuming Coca-Cola and soft drinks. Several respondents particularly liked the gas in Coca-Cola ('fizz' of the product), as well as the taste.

For many poor people, however, the consumption of Coca-Cola is not just about obtaining a simple 'moment of pleasure'. Coca-Cola is widely perceived as a superior first world product. According to Nolan: 'A Chinese consumer on the streets of downtown Tianjin who buys a Coke for himself and his family from a post-mix machine, and stands to drink it in the street 'transports' his family to the advanced countries for the duration of the consumption of the product' [*Nolan, 1995: 11–12*]. The feeling of being 'transported' depends on the *quality* and the *image* of the product. The family's experience of being 'transported' would be reduced 'if the paper cup were not of high quality and turned to mush in their hands while the product was being consumed' [*Nolan, 1995: 12*]. Large scale advertising and marketing also play an important part in facilitating this experience:

> The product of local handicraft producers may be sold from dirty wooden boxes covered perhaps with a dirty damp towel containing the remnants of ice. Coca-Cola's products are all sold from packaging and surroundings emblazoned with the Coca-Cola logo, including umbrellas, tables and chairs, awnings covering vending points, cold cabinets, post-mix machines, and bicycles …. They are sold in recognisable distinctive 'Coke' designs, from paper cups, glass, and PET bottles, and cans with the Coke logo, to the 'Coke' crate with its distinctive colour and logo [*Nolan, 1995: 16*].

The visual impact of Coca-Cola in poor communities is enormous [*see Nolan, 1995; APU, 1996*]. Coca-Cola now plays an important role in the fashion culture of many countries. Reports from Vietnam indicate that growing international awareness and changing life styles have elevated Coca-Cola 'to the modern day symbol of refreshment' since the product re-entered the country after the lifting of the American trade embargo in 1994 [*APU, 1996: 10*]. Many of the South Africans we spoke to cited popularity or brand loyalty as important reasons for valuing and drinking Coca-Cola. Some respondents simply stated that 'Coke is best', 'Coke is top' or 'Coke is No.1'.[26] One or two respondents even claimed to value Coca-Cola because they 'liked the colour' or 'design on the can'.[27] These are key features of Coca-Cola's identity and marketing strategy. The 'redness' of the colour and the Spencerian script (curvy contour design denoting the 'Coca-Cola' logo) are

both important parts of the product's mystique and pleasure. For many of the world's poor, Coca-Cola represents a cheap, affordable and accessible piece of the good life.

Experiencing pleasure and feelings of 'transportation', however, are not the only valuable achievements Coca-Cola helps to facilitate. In keeping with Sen's approach (and theories of need more generally), we can also point to the value of using Coca-Cola to achieve other important functionings such as relaxing, facilitating social life and enhancing friendships. (More will be said about the value of these achievements below.) Moreover, while the nutritional value of soft drinks is questionable, Coca-Cola products do play an important role in terms of fulfilling basic liquid needs.

Similar points can be made about more basic goods, such as clothing and housing. The most basic function of clothing is to protect the body from the elements and avoid embarrassment. These achievements slot neatly into Sen's system alongside other basic functionings, such as 'living without calorie deficiency' and 'being in good health'. But in most cultures and societies there is also a strong desire to possess quality clothing in order to achieve a range of very different social, cultural and psychological functions. For example, many of the South Africans we interviewed valued clothing to look smart and presentable in public.[28] Teenagers and young adults in particular, wanted quality clothes to look 'good' and attract the opposite sex. Younger people were also particularly keen to wear good clothes in order to enhance their image, be fashionable and achieve status. These objectives are not unimportant. Some of the poorest people are extremely fashion conscious and find all sorts of inexpensive ways of establishing and reinforcing a personal identity. Something as simple as adding bobbles, flowers or feathers to hats, sewing attractive buckles and buttons onto garments and coats, and using a small slip of colourful material as a neck scarf can count as examples of major fashion statements.[29] Poor people, particularly women, also tend to supplement their clothing with costume jewellery, headbands and handkerchiefs (among other items). Several respondents reported that clothes bring happiness. Most poor people possess little clothing and are unable to achieve these functionings satisfactorily. So far Sen has not explicitly discussed these aspects of poverty.[30]

Good housing also makes it possible to achieve basic human functionings such as shelter from the elements and physical security. These items fit naturally into Sen's framework. (In fact, Sen often mentions the capability 'to have adequate shelter' [*for example, Sen, 1992: 110*].) Again, however, living in a well-constructed house with adequate living space helps promote an important range of social and psychological functionings such as privacy, self respect and peace of mind. Other important achievements connected with living in a good house include happiness, feeling proud and achieving status.

These observations stand in stark contrast to notions of basic need, physical functioning and virtuous living, which are typically used to augment the CA. On the other hand, good housing and quality clothing also contribute to physical well-being by improving hygiene, health and the quality of the environment.

Moreover, it is not clear how Sen's system should evaluate activities such as taking part in sport, which is particularly important for young people. Achieving physical fitness, acquiring skills and enhancing social life are examples of valuable functionings facilitated by participating in sports. Sen's system would probably regard these achievements as worthwhile ends, but they are not the only (or perhaps the most important) reasons for taking part in sport.[31] Achieving pleasure is also an important objective. Most of the people we spoke to also valued taking part in sports to develop a team spirit[32] and facilitate the love of competition. Winning and scoring goals were particularly important objectives. The majority of respondents also confirmed the value of participating in sports to gain status and prestige.

For many people *watching* sport is just as valuable as *playing* sport. In fact, some people prefer to watch sport in order to *avoid* physical exercise.[33] Watching sport (in contrast to taking part in sport) also makes it relatively difficult to acquire and cultivate skills. There is no substitute for the experience of spin bowling, taking a penalty kick or swinging a golf club. It is the social and psychological impact of watching sport that makes the activity so popular. The South African sports fans we spoke to indicated that it is the excitement, anticipation and enjoyment of these occasions that contribute the most to well-being. This begins to explain why countless thousands of people cram into football stadiums and millions around the globe tune into the world cup. The presentation of these events, which have increasingly made use of powerful imagery and technology (such as electronic score boards, flood lighting and big television screens for immediate action replays) adds much to the thrill, delight and excitement of watching sport. With the growth of television and satellite communications, many of the world's poor now have the chance to be part of a global audience for high profile sports events (such as the World Cup and Olympic games), and to participate in these events on an equal footing with sports fans in advanced countries. Big sports events also project powerful images of 'development' into the minds of sports fans, who sometimes strive to play for their own team or dream of becoming sport stars. The people we interviewed also confirmed that watching sport plays an important role in terms of facilitating relaxation and fulfilling the desire for competition and contest. People were keen to support their local team. One man emphasised the value of being able to gamble on the result. While these considerations push us in the direction of a utilitarian rather than an Aristotelian or Marxist ethic, it is worth bearing in mind that the CA can take

on these sentiments as well. Watching sport also facilitates social gatherings and friendship, provides a valuable topic of conversation and presents useful opportunities to learn the rules, tactics and new techniques of a game.

Sen's system also needs to deal with activities like watching television and visiting the cinema. These are incredibly important capabilities for poor as well as rich people. The diffusion of televisions, radios and other consumer durable goods in developing countries over the last twenty or thirty years has been remarkable [*see Wells, 1977; PSLSD, 1994, Table 8.8; UNDP, 1996, Tables 4 and 16*]. Some of the poorest households frequently forgo many of life's necessities in order to acquire a television or radio.[34] During the course of my fieldwork I visited several shacks that contained a colour television or hi-fi system, but had little in the way of quality furniture or other property. A television was a highly prized commodity. Urban respondents, in particular, were keen to emphasise the importance of watching television to relax or take their mind off worries. Television programmes and cinema trips were also regarded as important sources of pleasure and entertainment. Some respondents also pointed out that television and cinema provide important forms of *escapism*. These activities take you 'away from reality' and help you to 'imagine and daydream'.[35] Watching the television also helps to 'pass time' and avoid boredom and mischief. Nobody we spoke to mentioned the value of having a television to achieve self respect or gain status and prestige.[36] These are probably important reasons for desiring a television in many poor societies. On the other hand, a surprisingly large number of people pointed to the educational value of watching television.[37] Some people were simply curious about the outside world and wanted to 'see other places'. Several respondents also pointed out that watching television or going to the cinema is an important social activity that can be shared with family and friends. These objectives are much more consistent with the kinds of *functionings* Sen refers to in his writings.

Nor is it clear how Sen's system would deal with beer or cigarettes. The consumption of these products is widespread among the poor as well as the more affluent. Alcohol and tobacco play a particularly important role in terms of facilitating relaxation, providing pleasurable experiences and satisfying potentially frantic desires. The consumption of alcohol and tobacco also facilitate social interaction and assists with being 'cool' and fashionable. For the poor the consumption of beer, liquor and tobacco also play a crucial role in terms of calming nerves, relieving depression and drowning sorrows. Some people reported that they drink beer and smoke tobacco in order to 'forget problems' and 'feel better'. These activities however, also have the potential to generate *negative* functionings that undermine well-being. In particular, the excessive consumption of alcohol and tobacco threatens health. Many of the people we interviewed also pointed out that beer and liquor jeopardise

relationships with family and friends, encourage bad, abusive and violent behaviour and lead to crime. Some respondents were also concerned that the consumption of alcohol and tobacco may be addictive or would undermine their status as moral agents by encouraging them to do the wrong things.

Finally, it is also worth considering the role of advertising. Most of the people we spoke to thought advertising served a useful purpose. In particular, respondents valued advertising to 'view products' and gather information about relative prices, product use and the latest fashions. Several people also mentioned the value of finding out about new products and learning how to obtain existing products. This is probably because certain items are not readily available or easy to acquire in poor communities. Many respondents also valued advertising on the grounds that it promotes choice between products. Several respondents also pointed out that advertising facilitates economic activity. A few respondents valued advertising on the grounds that it is 'likeable', 'entertaining', 'amusing' and facilitates dreams of the future. On the other hand, a small minority of respondents refused to endorse advertising on the grounds that it wastes time and money, shows the wrong things and is misleading.[38]

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR SEN'S CONCEPT OF HUMAN WELL-BEING

The following conclusions can be drawn from the preceding discussion. In particular, the survey findings reviewed above imply that the distinctions between the categories in Figure 1 are fuzzier than Sen's own analysis suggests. Sen's conceptual framework may also have to deal with some antagonistic aspects of human development.

Utility and Functioning

There is a great deal of overlap between the concepts of utility and functioning. Experiencing happiness is an important aspect of well-being that features prominently in most activities (see Table 1; and Clark [*2002, ch.4*]). Notice that utility consists of much more than feeling happy and avoiding pain in the examples discussed above. The concept can be extended to include a wide range of mental states including pleasure, excitement and the fulfilment of desires. In fact, the concept of utility could even be stretched to cover psychological functionings as diverse as feeling relaxed, achieving peace of mind, daydreaming and experiencing pride. It follows that utility should be: (a) broadly construed to include all hedonistic ends that are valuable; and (b) regarded as an essential part of good functioning.[39]

Sen does acknowledge the value of utility. In fact, he refers to being happy as a 'momentous functioning' that 'has importance on its own'. Happiness,

he says, 'can certainly be seen as one of many capabilities of relevance to development' [*Sen, 1984: 513; 1985a: 200*]. But Sen does tend to conflate utility as an object of value with achieving happiness or pleasure. Most of the time he appears to regard modern conceptions of utility (in terms of desire fulfilment or choice) as little more than a problematic 'valuation device' [*for example, Sen, 1987, ch.1; 1992: 54–55*]. In principle, the strength of a desire for object x provides a rough and ready guide to the value a person attaches to x. Of course, satisfying the *desire* for x (realising the utility or satisfaction that goes with x) can be just as valuable as the mere achievement of x itself. Desires carry intrinsic value in addition to providing a crude practical guide to the value of the object that allows the satisfaction of that desire. Other forms of satisfaction are not discussed in Sen's writings on well-being. In the Dewey Lectures Sen [*1985a: 188–89*] remarks that 'there are mental states other than being just happy, that is, stimulation, excitement etc., which are of direct relevance to a person's well-being'. But this is all he has to say on the subject.[40]

Moreover, despite having recognised that utility has intrinsic value of its own, Sen devotes little attention to the realisation of this 'momentous' functioning in his accounts of well-being. Consider the hypothetical examples Sen puts forward to justify focusing on the evaluative space of *functioning* (see Figure 1 and Section II above). Utility barely gets mentioned, and when it does the implications for personal well-being are not spelt out. Sen does not explicitly say that consuming a loaf of bread can yield a great deal of pleasure and satisfy potentially desperate desires (especially if the person in question is starving or hungry). Nor does he acknowledge that these achievements make a separate and distinct contribution to the quality of life.[41] He simply points out that achieving important functionings such as 'moving around' on a bicycle yields utility [*Sen, 1985: 27*], which is not always so (see above). In the two examples devised by Sen, utility is effectively divorced from the category of functioning, and well-being is made completely dependent upon the latter, that is, other non-hedonistic ends. This implies that utility has no real bearing on matters of personal well-being – a position that Sen himself does not maintain or wish to take.

There is another dimension to the problem. Commodities (bikes and bread) contribute to well-being by facilitating certain achievements (moving around, avoiding calorie deficiency, etc.), which in turn generate utility. In these examples utility is portrayed as by-product of human functioning (although elsewhere Sen recognises that utility itself is a valuable functioning). More generally we can observe that achieving certain functionings of value (for example, 'moving around') may have a positive or negative effect on utility (depending on contingent circumstances). We have argued that the utility consequences of these acts (and not just the acts themselves) have intrinsic significance for good living. Notice, however, that utility may also

have considerable *instrumental* importance for human functioning and well-being. Taking pleasure from some activity (for example, riding a bicycle) helps to facilitate the realisation of other achievements (for example moving around). At the extreme a happy or content person with a positive attitude is likely to function much better than a manic-depressive who has lost the will to get out of bed. Part of the problem then is that Sen does not sufficiently see that some of the functionings themselves come into being and depend intimately upon mental attitudes[42] (see Table 1).

In fairness, the two examples Sen constructs are designed to: (1) introduce the concept of functioning; and (2) illustrate the category's strengths vis-à-vis utility. In consequence, we would not expect Sen to devote much space to the significance of utility in these passages. But while Sen frequently maintains that utility (in terms of happiness or pleasure) is important, this achievement receives remarkably little emphasis in his writings on well-being and development. His work on well-being also says little about the heterogeneity of utility, which cannot be reduced to a single mental state such as happiness or pleasure. Sen is aware of these issues [*for example, Sen, 1980–81*]. So far he has focused on the physical condition and basic needs of the disadvantaged and deprived in his work on poverty, development and justice. But he has expressed an interest in the psychology and motivation behind choice. In a paper that deals with some of the methodological issues involved in description Sen remarks:

> The joys and suffering of human beings and their deprivations and fulfilments have interest of their own .... It is this part of descriptive motivation that has been least well served by recent developments of utility theory, most notably by the theory of revealed preference. Focusing only on predicting behaviour, the richness of human psychology has been substantially ignored, refusing to see anything in utility or happiness other than choice [*Sen, 1980a: 362*].

Moreover, in a footnote tucked away in an early paper, Sen [*1984, n.16*] writes that 'utility ... [itself] can be given some room within the general approach of capabilities'.

Some of Sen followers on the other hand, have adopted what they believe to be a less utilitarian and more Aristotelian position. For example, although Martha Nussbaum includes being able to 'have pleasurable experiences' on her list of functional capabilities [*Nussbaum, 1995: 83*],[43] she refuses to make pleasure a separable functioning on the grounds that it supervenes human activity:

> According to EN X [Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X] pleasure supervenes upon the activity to which it attaches, like the bloom on the

> cheek of a healthy young person, completing or perfecting it. Here pleasure is not identical with activity; but it cannot be identified without reference to the activity to which it attaches. It cannot be pursued on its own without conceptual incoherence, any more than blooming cheeks can be cultivated in isolation from health and bodily fitness with which they belong. Still less could there be a single item, pleasure, that is separable from *all* the activities and yielded up by all of them in differing quantities [*Nussbaum quoted in Crocker, 1995: 155*].

In contrast to standard utilitarianism however, which ultimately reduces the concept of well-being to a single category ('utility', defined in terms of some mental condition, such as pleasure, happiness or desire), Sen's framework can comfortably accommodate the entire range of objects that make a good life [*Sen, 1992: 43–44, 53–55*]. Well-being is defined in terms of functionings or states of a person, which make it possible to distinguish between different categories (covering say, mental and physical states). Notice that the CA can therefore handle complex notions of utility (like the ones described above) relatively easily by treating different mental states as examples of valuable functionings. In stark contrast utilitarianism tends to conflate utility with a single mental state (such as happiness or desire) and neglects non-hedonistic objectives altogether. Sen has emphasised the importance of basic physical functionings such as being adequately nourished, being in good health, and avoiding premature mortality. He has also pointed to the value of some more sophisticated social achievements such as self-respect and taking part in the life of the community (see Section II). In practice, a diverse range of complex social and mental functionings such as being happy, relaxing, having friends and an active social life, achieving self respect, being fashionable and possessing status make a phenomenal contribution to a good life style. A more substantial account of the psychology of well-being is developed in Table 1 [*see also Clark, 2002*].

Resources and Functioning

Apart from the fact that people typically differ in their capacity to convert a given bundle of commodities (and characteristics) into intrinsically valuable achievements – as Sen explicitly recognises – it follows that:

(a) Many commodities share similar characteristics and can therefore be used to facilitate the *same* functionings[44] (see Table 1). This does not mean that a person can get by without access to a reasonably *diverse* range of resources. Man cannot live on bread and water alone. A *balanced* diet is required to be properly nourished. Moreover, even a hungry person may eventually fail to take pleasure from the consumption of bread (or rice)

if s/he repeatedly has little else to eat. The same can be said about other commodities and their use(s). For example, good quality clothing helps to facilitate being fashionable and achieving status. But, in order to realise these ends adequately, a person may also require a good job, decent house and fast car (among other things). In short, a person needs a *combination* of commodities before s/he can achieve specific functionings satisfactorily.[45]

(b) It is unlikely that any combination of relevant inputs will do. Some items appear to be necessary (but not by themselves sufficient) for good functioning. For example, even a person who possesses protective clothing still needs solid, well-insulated and properly heated housing to insure adequate shelter from the forces of nature. More fundamentally, a person cannot manage without water or salt if s/he wants to go on living. It is possible that some of these essential inputs are endowed with *intrinsic* value[46] and should therefore count as examples of important functionings. Sen is reluctant to acknowledge this possibility. For example, he notes that: 'Commodity command is a means to the end of well-being, but can scarcely be the end itself . . .' [*Sen, 1985: 28*].

(c) Commodities are not the only things that facilitate important functionings. We have already seen that some functionings depend intimately upon mental attitudes. This is only the tip of the iceberg. In more general terms we can observe that many activities (beings and doings) themselves have considerable *instrumental* importance. Playing football, watching television and drinking beer are all examples of activities that promote valuable achievements (Table 1). Many important functionings are derived from recreational activities and various forms of interaction with family and friends. Religious and educational activities can also facilitate worthwhile ends[47] [*see Clark, 2002, ch.4*]. In this respect many human activities share the characteristics of resources (broadly construed), in the sense that these 'beings' and 'doings' *also* represent necessary inputs for good living.[48] In consequence, it is difficult to know how to classify these items in Sen's system.

(d) Finally, in many cases, the link between specific characteristics of a good and a particular functioning is less robust than Table 1 suggests. Some characteristics clearly facilitate more than one functioning, while some achievements ultimately depend on more than one commodity characteristic.[49]

Negative Functionings

Another difficulty with Sen's approach relates to the treatment of *negative* functionings. Sen does not discuss the very real possibility that some

achievements may actually reduce well-being (see Table 1); and it is not entirely clear how his system is supposed to deal with these harmful functionings. One possibility is to exclude all intrinsically bad 'beings' and 'doings' from the concept of the human good. This approach does not seem to be practical or desirable. For example, there is no such thing as a *completely* healthy diet. Moreover, today's knowledge of healthy eating may turn out to be quite wrong. In practice, it is not possible to achieve *pure* functioning. A person may also be compelled to give up many of the good things in life in order to avoid the bad things. Losing weight, for example, is often achieved at the expense of adhering to a strict diet and forgoing the satisfaction and pleasure derived from the consumption of things like chocolate cake, ice cream and Coca-Cola. So even if all of the intrinsically bad 'beings' and 'doings' could be successfully purged from a person's life, there is no guarantee that the results will add up to a good life.[50]

A more realistic and plausible approach (that Sen would probably endorse) is to attach negative weights (reflecting the degree of badness) to harmful functionings,[51] rather than to strike them from the system altogether. This has the advantage of permitting individuals to get the most out of life by allowing each person to maximise his or her net well-being.

V. SUMMARY

The CA provides a framework with an evaluative space that is broad enough to capture all aspects of human well-being and development. In contrast accounts based on utility or resources only capture part of the picture. The former (utility) is preoccupied with mental states while the latter (income, commodity command) is concerned with the material requirements for good living. Sen helps to fill the gap between these two perspectives by voicing the value of certain basic capabilities together with some more complex social achievements. However, a more extensive list of capabilities is required before Sen's framework can be used to evaluate well-being. Attempts to identify valuable capabilities through empirical work imply that there is a great deal of overlap between these three frameworks. Ultimately, the CA must make more space for utility (defined broadly to include all valuable mental states) and say something more concrete about the role of material things (which may have intrinsic value in addition to considerable instrumental significance). Sen's framework also requires refining to accommodate some antagonistic aspects of good living. More generally we can observe that there is a *prima facie* case for encouraging Marxist and Aristotelian inspired ethics to look beyond notions of excellent functioning and virtuous living.

More research is required to consider the various interconnections between different capabilities, which can reinforce (or conflict with) one another.

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NOTES

1. See Amiya Bagchi [*1998*] and Carl Riskin [*forthcoming*] on Sen's contribution to development studies.
2. This paper concentrates on the well-being rather than the agency aspect of Sen's work. In the context of development it is perhaps more appropriate to focus on the values and goals connected with a person's own well-being. Of course, people often pursue objectives that reflect broader concerns, which may or may not coincide with personal well-being (e.g., the hungry faster or malnourished hunger striker who chooses not to eat). These issues are not discussed in this paper. On this see Sen [*1985a*].
3. Other aspects of the CA have been discussed by Alkire [*2002a*], Clark [*2002*], Gasper [*2002; 2004*] and Qizilbash [*1996*], amongst others. A guide to literature on the CA can be found on the Capability Association's website: http://www.capabilityapproach.org Corbridge [*2002*] considers the CA in relation to the spaces of geography, culture and politics as well as the space of 'economic or moral evaluation'.
4. The results of this fieldwork are supported by the findings of other empirical studies (see Section III above).
5. Sen's examples of 'intrinsically valuable' capabilities (summarised in Section II) are somewhat selective. This is partly because Sen's goal is to distinguish the CA from rival frameworks. He is concerned with proposing and defending a conceptual space for evaluating development rather than articulating a theory of good living. Yet his discussion of different frameworks and, perhaps more noticeably, his examples of valuable capabilities seem to imply a fairly specific vision of development (even though this vision is *never* explicitly endorsed). It is worth keeping this in mind as Sen writes extremely persuasively on such matters, and it is not difficult for the reader to come away with the impression that certain fundamental capabilities *ought* to be included in any rational view of a good life. In contrast Nussbaum [*2000*] explicitly endorses a list of valuable capabilities. Of course, some theories of well-being and need are decisively more paternalistic than the CA, which is at least supposed to be grounded on some sort of public debate and internal consensus. Notable examples include Baran and Sweezy [*1966*] theory of 'genuine human needs' and Goulet's [*1997*] recent interpretation of the theory of 'scaled needs' [*see Clark 2002; 2002a*].
6. Sen does not really distinguish between 'commodities' and 'goods and services' when he discusses the concept of well-being; instead he tends to use these terms interchangeably [*e.g., Sen, 1985*]. By 'opulence' Sen typically means income and wealth [*e.g., Sen, 1987*]. As Sen advances similar argument in relation to all resource-based concepts of well-being it makes sense to treat them as a single category (resources) for our purposes.
7. 'Happiness or desire fulfilment represents only one aspect of human existence' [*Sen, 1984: 512*].
8. Clark and Qizilbash [*2003*] could find no empirical evidence of 'adaptive expectations' in South Africa.
9. Broome [*1991*] has taken issue with Sen on the use of utility and Sen [*1991*] has responded.
10. Sen would also require a just concept of development to promote capability equality [*see Sen, 1980; 1992*]. He is also aware that there is a distinction between development *broadly* defined (to include economic progress), and improvements in the quality of life [*see Sen, 1983; 1988*].

11. There are elements in Sen's writings that define well-being in terms of all three of these categories [*see Clark, 2002: 36*].
12. Sen's original discussions take place with reference to 'functioning' rather than 'capability', although similar arguments can be made for distinguishing between commodities, capability and utility. Figure 1, which is based on Sen's original discussions, could be redrawn to incorporate capability as follows:
    commodities → *characteristics* → *capability* → *functioning* → *utility*
    I have stuck with the original formulation in the discussion. In what follows 'functioning' could be read as 'capability' or 'functioning and capability'.
13. Nussbaum [*2000: 76*] claims the latest version of her list represent a kind of 'overlapping consensus' derived from 'years of cross cultural discussion'. On closer inspection, however, Nussbaum's conception of the good turns out to be largely based on the writings of Aristotle and the Ancient Greeks instead of concrete studies of human values [*see Clark, 2002, ch.3*].
14. On the other hand, people may wish to conceal certain preferences (e.g., those of an embarrassing or humiliating nature), provide answers that are politically motivated (e.g., geared towards extracting resources from the government) or offer the required response to particular questions – *inter alia* [*see Clark, 2002, ch.4*]. Preferences can also be corrupted through addiction (see the alcohol example below).
15. Sen's examples of valuable capabilities are scattered throughout his writings. For a summary of the various lists he provides see Clark [*2002, table 3.1*].
16. Sen also considers the example of rice. But the rice example turns out to be the same as the bread example, in that both goods are said to exhibit the same characteristics and functionings.
17. In poor countries labourers often have to cycle long distances on poor quality bicycles and roads to get to and from work.
18. Some people also pointed out that travelling by car is more comfortable, more convenient, *safer*, saves time and avoids having to use unreliable public transport or unruly taxi services.
19. These examples can be queried. A loaf of bread is of little use to a person who suffers from a serious allergy to wheat (at least for promoting health). Moreover, in some social contexts (e.g., Christmas in England) a bowl of rice may be inappropriate for entertaining family and friends. The CA dispenses with these difficulties by focusing on potential achievements.
20. APU [*1996*] charts Coke's continuing success in developing countries, and reports on the official launch of Coca-Cola Beverages Pakistan. From 1980 there has been a rapid expansion in the consumption of Coca-Cola and soft drinks in China [*Nolan, 1995: 5*]. See Nolan [*1999*] for an extensive discussion of Coca-Cola.
21. Sugar free coke is also very successful, but much less nutritious.
22. It is not my intention to imply that soft drinks are more harmful than many other products, such as sweets or chocolate. Taking sugar in tea and coffee or consuming too much bread can also 'harm health'.
23. The average Coca-Cola label includes a list of ingredients and a free phone information line, but does not tell the consumer if the product is high or low in protein, energy, carbohydrates and fat, etc. Interestingly, the labels on diet Coca-Cola bottles includes this information.
24. On the basis of available data, it is not possible to say if those who valued Coca-Cola and soft drinks were largely unaware of the possible ill effects of these products (which could reflect 'distorted' preferences), or if they were unconcerned because they regard the risks as negligible or judged the benefits to outweigh any costs. Further probing on this matter would have been instructive. Unfortunately, respondents were only asked about the reasons for either *valuing* or *not valuing* these products [*see Clark, 2002, Annex, Part 3*].
25. The hygiene and quality of small-scale soft drinks products in poor countries are often questionable. In contrast, the minimum hygiene and quality standards for *all* of Coca-Cola's products and plants are set internationally. Growing concern about the health and quality standards of soft drinks in China prompted the government to adopt 'Coca-Cola's quality standards as the norm for the whole soft drinks industry' [*Nolan, 1995: 15, 32*].

26. In a survey of more than 1,000 Korean consumers by the *Choongang Ilbo* newspaper, 'Coca-Cola emerged as the leading top of mind product in the country' [*APU, 1996: 3*].
27. When asked, several respondents were reluctant to endorse the value of using Coca-Cola to be fashionable or enhance their status. These objectives however, *were* openly endorsed by more than two-fifths of teenagers, young adults (aged 20–34), and men.
28. Several respondents emphasised the value of being able to dress properly for church. Following Adam Smith [*1776, vol.2: 399–400*], Sen often mentions the importance of being able to 'appear in public without shame'.
29. I am reliably informed that some of these activities were common in Britain during World War II and lasted at least until the suspension of rationing in the early 1950s. It was also common to dye old clothes and sew lace collars and cuffs into shirts and blouses.
30. Sen [*1982: 367*] briefly mentions the value of being able to 'fulfil one's requirements for clothing'. In recent lectures Sen also implicitly relates the CA to identity [*e.g., Sen, 1998*].
31. Some popular sports such as cricket, golf, snooker and darts involve little physically challenging exercise.
32. While I neglected to ask about this item in my interviews with the South African poor, it was clear that most respondents probably would value the development of a team spirit.
33. The motive for avoiding physical exercise matters. Some of the people we interviewed genuinely did *not* value the capability to participate in sports. Others, however, preferred not to take part in physically challenging activities because they were 'too old', 'lacked energy' or were in 'ill-health'. Some people complained about the lack of opportunities for playing sports.
34. Wells [*1977: 273*] found that the poorest households in the city of Sao Paulo typically allocate 'a higher proportion of expenditure to the acquisition of household goods and appliances' such as televisions and radios, than the richer ones did.
35. In some cases choosing to exercise certain capabilities (e.g., escapism) might be a symptom of poverty. I owe this insight to Mozaffar Qizilbash.
36. One coloured woman however, stated that she did not watch television because this would mean having 'to go to other people's houses to watch'.
37. Most people would probably weigh the satisfaction and relaxation derived from watching television or going to the cinema more highly than their estimate of its educational value in their account of what makes a good life. This is almost certainly why the majority of ordinary people tend to spend more time watching movies, sport, soap-operas, comedy and sitcoms than watching the news, current affairs programmes and documentaries. None of the people we interviewed expressed concern about the social consequences of watching violent or sexually explicit programmes. But two or three people did reject the value of watching television on the grounds that TV is 'bad for the eyes' and 'misleading'. One person also observed that 'there are no good programmes'.
38. Some respondents also claimed not to understand advertising or complained that it interrupts their television programmes. As with the Coca-Cola example (see note 25 above), it is not possible to say if *all* of the people who claimed to value television, alcohol and advertising *fully* appreciated the possible ill-effects of these products (as respondents only gave reasons for either valuing or not valuing these products). Further investigation may reveal how people weigh the negative and positive aspects of human functioning associated with these things. It may also shed further light on the nature of preference formation and adaptation.
39. There is a vast literature of empirical research in the field of psychology that examines utility conceptions across cultures [*e.g., Diener and Suh, 2000*]. However, 'there is an unfortunate lack of awareness of the more subjective and psychological studies in development circles' [*Alkire, 2002: 183*]. For an introduction to the relevant literature see Alkire [*2002*] or Camfield and Skevigton [*2003*].
40. However, in an early paper Sen [*1980–81: 193*] proposes 'viewing utility primarily as a vector (with several distinct components) and only secondarily as some homogenous magnitude'. Although he recognises that such an approach has the advantage of yielding 'a significantly richer descriptive account of a person's well-being' than the secondary view, he is primarily interested in considering the moral arguments for using the vector view to evaluate states of affairs.

41. By this I do not mean to imply that utility is generated independently of other functionings. The point is that whatever utility flows from a set of functionings makes an intrinsically valuable contribution to a person's well-being. In Table 1 I have recorded utility as a separate characteristic (and functioning) for each item. This is because utility is inextricably bound up with most (if not all) doings and beings: it is impossible to specify the precise nature of the relationship between each *functioning* and utility, which depends upon personal circumstances and typically varies between people and over time. For example, while I may derive a good deal of pleasure from cycling through the streets of Cambridge in my free time, the migrant labourer, who is compelled to cycle long distances to work every day, may derive a considerable degree of dis-utility from riding his bicycle.
42. I owe the final point in this paragraph to Gay Meeks who has helped clarify my thoughts on some of these matters.
43. 'Being able to have pleasurable experiences, and to avoid non-necessary pain' features much less prominently in later versions of Nussbaum's list. Instead of occupying its own distinct space (as in previous lists), the ability to achieve pleasure and avoid non-beneficial pain is treated as an 'add on' to the description of the cognitive capacities and senses of human beings [*Nussbaum, 2000: 78–79*]. Pleasure does not feature at all according to Finnis [*1980*].
44. Sen [*1984: 513–14*] is aware that different commodity bundles can promote the same human functionings. He refers to this as a 'many-one correspondence' between combinations of goods and services and given capabilities.
45. Of course, it is commodity fetishism (rather than access to the necessary material things for good living) that typically bothers critics of resource based accounts of well-being.
46. Rightly or wrongly many poor people perceive basic economic resources such as food, water and electricity as valuable ends in their own right. Many of the justifications that have been put forward for valuing these things, however, are clearly instrumental. For example, after we explained the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value to a local community leader in Murraysburg he insisted 'water is valuable in its own right because nothing can or will happen without it' (Interview with Isaac Dokter, 26 May, *1999*).
47. Of course, there is a material dimension behind some of these activities. A person needs a football to play football, a television to watch television, and so on. On the other hand, a person does not need any material goods in order to achieve important functionings such as *being loved* or *cared for*.
48. More recently Sen [*1999, ch.2*] has discussed the instrumental role of freedom (human capabilities) in development.
49. Housing, for example, must be (1) constructed from solid materials; and (2) properly insulated before it can guarantee adequate protection from the elements. (Heating may also be required.)
50. In this context there may be important short-term versus long-term trade-offs to consider. This aspect of the CA needs to be developed.
51. Sen believes these weights should be determined by the values of the people in questions.

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