

Adaptive Preferences and Capabilities: preliminary considerations

Miriam TESCHL^{†?}

Flavio COMIM[‡]

[†] GREQAM, Université Aix-Marseille III, France, and University of Cambridge, UK

[‡] Capability and Sustainability Centre, St. Edmund's College, Cambridge, UK

Second Draft July 2004. A first draft was presented at the CSC
Workshop on “Capabilities and Happiness”, 18-19 March, 2004
(Please, don't quote without permission)

1. Introduction

The use of functionings and capabilities as a broader informational space for evaluating well-being and quality-of-life is based on a critique of Utilitarianism that highlights its limitations in disentangling different forms of subjective information. Sen (1999) notes how distinct forms of utilities in the form of happiness, desires or preferences are not adequate as informational spaces for normative evaluations. In particular, a core problem with the use of subjective information concerns one's ability to adapt to adverse situations and develop criteria that are deformed by one's negative experiences. Sen (1984: 309) criticises the problem of adaptive preferences or the idea that “[t]he underdog learns to bear the burden so well that he or she overlooks the burden itself”. Unfavourable social and economic circumstances as well as lifelong habituation to adverse environment might induce people to accept current negative situations and live through them with “cheerful endurance” [*ibid.*]. It is difficult within the Utilitarian space to make any distinction between an authentic cheerfulness and positive feelings, and those negative views that might come about by adapting to adverse living conditions. If utilitarianism had to assess the well-being of people living under difficult conditions, it might well focus on the positive aspects raised by those individuals who have adapted to adverse conditions. Indeed, utilitarianism focuses only on the mental states of individuals and does not look beyond this sort of information to evaluate physical and other conditions of a person. The problem of adaptation was promptly integrated into the justification for the use of the capability approach. Nussbaum (2000) developed more broadly this problem to justify the implementation of a normative and substantive theory of justice based on capabilities and not on preferences to improve the conditions of human development.

[?] Corresponding author: Miriam Teschl, GREQAM, 15-19 Allée Claude Forbin, 13627 Aix-en-Provence, France. miriam_teschl@hotmail.com

However, it must be noted that psychologists have actively been working on happiness and subjective well-being over the last decades [Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith 1999; Kahnemann, Diener and Schwarz (1999)] with impressive results. Emphasis is given to subjective well-being (SWB) and to its determinants. The processes that underlie happiness and their dynamics are also considered. The literature on happiness and SWB¹ acknowledges the limitations of evaluating subjective feelings, but is positive about augmenting the range of subjective as well as objective factors that may influence happiness, and achieving interesting and stable results. Research especially focus on the circumstances under which people seem to be happier and analyse the effects of happiness on people's lives. One general and seemingly obvious conclusion is that people are happier in a socially and economically stable environment [Diener et al. 1999] and when people are happy, they express a tendency to be more active, which again reverberates back to the favourable and prosperous circumstances in which people live [Diener and Oishi 2004]. However, it is clear that there is no single cause of happiness; instead, happiness relies on a "complex interplay of culture, personality, cognitions, goals and resources, and the objective environment" [Diener et al. 1999: 295].

Psychological research emphasises people's mental processes in relation to reasoning and thus choice behaviour by drawing attention to phenomena such as starting point bias, framing effects, endowment effect and loss aversion etc. [Kahneman et Tversky 2000]. Even more recently, interdisciplinary issues such as a person's self-image and self-esteem have been discussed in relation to economics [Bénabou and Tirole 2002, 2003]. A consistent literature on happiness has been structured by contributions such as Frey and Stutzer (2002). Therefore, not only the human psyche and its mental states and processes have become a growing concern for economists, but also a question such as "Is happiness the ultimate goal in life" is finally back into economics. This is insofar surprising, as any psychological account has been eliminated from economic modelling by basing its explanatory structure on an ordinally axiomatic approach. On the other hand, the welfare component of economics based on utilitarian thought did not go undamaged as it has been strongly criticised by the Rawlsian theory of justice and – of course – Sen's capability approach.

There are interesting similarities between the Capability Approach (CA) and the literature on SWB. Both are conducive to a departure from the standard picture of a consistent rational individual. More importantly, perhaps, they both emphasise multidimensional aspects of human well-being and new phenomena that illustrate how people's normative assessments involve a large array of elements and complex interactions. Still, a great divide exists between these two literatures regarding the use of subjective information on normative assessments. In particular, the issue of adaptation represents a dichotomy between the positive and negative aspects of subjective well-being. It is therefore important to clarify under what conditions preferences and SWB provide reliable and consistent guides to normative assessments.

One might wonder whether SWB theorists are not aware of the CA's critiques of subjective information? Similarly, one might consider why CA theorists are apparently reluctant to acknowledge the positive aspects of adaptation raised by the SWB literature. With this aim in mind, this paper explores the phenomenon of adaptation and the use of subjective information when using capability spaces for normative assessments.

¹ Some authors, such as Veenhoven [2000], seem to be almost "ideological" defenders of happiness by basing argumentations rather on what appears to be oversimplified generalisations and personal opinions.

The negative aspects of adaptation, emphasised by the Capability Approach, are confronted with its positive aspects, as examined by the SWB literature. Issues of adaptation and resignation are seen from the perspective of hedonic adaptation. This might help contextualising the issue of adaptation within a broader frame of analysis, seeing adaptation not simply as an outcome of a specific hostile environment. Rather, there are situations where adaptation can be seen as an attitude of an active person reacting against adverse conditions. This does not mean that there are not situations when adaptation comes closer to the phenomenon of resignation and people for whatever reasons simply comply with difficult situations by adjusting and accepting negative outcomes. Resignation would then be consistent with happiness without action and would go against SWB findings that happy people tend to be more active.

The Capability Approach leaves the issue of adaptation as an unsolved business: a critique without a solution. The problems with resignation and conformism in subjective information are highlighted but nothing ensures that adaptive preferences are not part of the capability space. In fact, those preferences should be part of the capability space given that the aim of the Capability Approach is to provide a broader informational space to include other sorts of information. To be philosophically and conceptually superior to utilitarianism, the question would really be how the capability approach is bringing back agency to resigned people. Neither Sen nor Nussbaum deal properly with this issue. Both seem to argue that it is finally up to the people to do and to be what they have reason to be and to do. Yet, those functionings and capabilities can be biased by the same sort of distortion found in subjective preferences. This paper argues that the proposal of anchoring capabilities on universal values does not provide a full solution to the problem of adaptive preferences. Rather, a solution might be found, as suggested here, on issues of personal identity.

If philosophers criticised utilitarianism for abstracting from the separateness and separated agency of people and if philosophers equally criticised Kantian and thus also Rawlsian philosophy for abstracting from the concrete identity of a person, then the CA might be exposed to the critique of abstracting from people altogether by eventually focussing primarily on the social level of freedom of choice [Williams 1976].

In the next section [2] we will explore in more detail the issue of adaptation. We will first start with what Jon Elster tells us about adaptation. He apparently was the first author to discuss the issue of adaptation in order to formulate a critique of utilitarianism and to underline the importance of autonomy in shaping the life of a person. His ideas about adaptation are interesting insofar as he takes a much broader stand on it than Sen or Nussbaum. He separates different processes, conscious and unconscious ones, that lead to the general phenomenon of adaptation, that is, the adjustment of wants to possibilities. We then explore Sen's original problem of adaptation and what he proposes as a solution to this problem. We will also investigate Nussbaum's stand on the issue of adaptation and discuss her proposition of how to solve this problem. Finally, we will examine some of the SWB literature on happiness and see what they can tell us about adaptation. We will also look at the results of some intercultural comparisons that are coupled with economic and social factors to characterise the issue of adaptation, with emphasis on the relation between adaptation and cultural phenomena. In section [3] then, we will discuss the issues that are involved by bringing together the concepts of adaptation and capabilities. We will especially consider the possibility of enriching the CA by incorporating insights from the SWB literature. In this section we will also investigate

likely connections between adaptation and the concept of a person and his or her identity. The concluding section [4] will summarise our main arguments.

2. What is Adaptation?

2.1. Jon Elster on Adaptation:

Sen as well as Nussbaum refer to Elster who discussed before them the issue of adaptation². Elster's main claim after having analysed the issue of adaptation in a utilitarian framework is that "ethics needs history" [Elster 1982: 238]. Utilitarianism only considers actual wants, but it is important to look at the genesis of these wants. The fox originally had a desire for grapes, but because it could not reach them, it turned them away concluding that they were sour anyway. The argument that the fox is excluded from the consumption of grapes does not bother utilitarians too much, because at the end the fox does not desire the grapes.

Injustice happens in this case because utilitarianism overlooks that the fox would have consumed those grapes if it had the choice to. However, injustice does not happen and indeed the fox's situation would have improved if it had turned away from its original desires in case they were "counteradaptive", i.e. if the fox always preferred what is impossible to achieve [Elster 1982: 235]³.

However, even though it seems to be straightforward to understand that adaptation is the adjustment of wants with possibilities, the issue is not so easy to be understood. Elster shows that there might be several different processes that end up with the same adapted result. He therefore draws first of all a distinction between what is consciously happening in people's mind by intentionally shaping their wants and what is happening, as it were, behind their backs when people are regulated by something like a drive [Elster 1982: 224]. Indeed, only the latter phenomenon induces preference changes in form of adaptation. The former, conscious modification in preferences, may lead to similar outcomes, but it is based on changes induced by learning and experiences, pre-commitment and deliberate character planning.

An important distinction should be made between the processes of 'adaptation' and 'quasi-adaptation'. Adaptation may downgrade one's wants to actual possibilities. Quasi-adaptation may change one's wants so that they may be fulfilled [Elster 1982: 224]. There are still other processes of changing preferences that have to be separated from adaptation. Deliberate external manipulation of a person's preferences is one of them. However, as Elster observes, it seems impossible that other people do have the power to purposefully induce certain beliefs and desires in people. Preference changes in other people do not directly react against someone's will, they only happen as a by-product, thus indirectly, to some other manipulator's objectives [Elster 1982: 223]. Elster's account of external deserves further scrutiny. It is not clear, for example, if Elster actually means that the result of indirect external manipulation is a form of adaptation. In any case he argues that, where, for example, the interests of an external person differs from that of oneself, it would be better for oneself to endogenously adapt to the actual situation in order to avoid psychological intolerable

² Sen [1984a: 309 FN 5]; Nussbaum [2000: 136-9].

³ Nussbaum's critique of Elster's account of adaptation does not take into account at all this distinction of adaptive and counteradaptive preferences and thus does not give him full justice for his ideas [Nussbaum 2000: 136-9]

situations [Elster 1982: 224]. But it is again not clear if this adaptation happens consciously or based on a drive-n-regulated behaviour. Another category that he distinguishes from adaptation is rationalisation. Rationalisation distorts the perception of a situation, whereas adaptation would distort its evaluation. However, Elster admits that it is often hard to tell what is the difference between these two phenomena. Misperceiving a situation can, however, when coupled with wishful thinking for example, create frustration in terms of excessive expectations or the inducement of new wants that remain unfulfilled [Elster 1982: 226]. In his book *Sour Grapes*, Elster also distinguishes adaptation from state-dependent or possibility dependent choices and from addiction. These are all elements that induce preferences to change over time. However, by adding these latter factors, he blurs the distinction between desire-based changes of preferences and drive-based changes of preferences and thus of adaptation with other adapting processes. It finally appears that to deal with adaptation in terms of a simple definition or of a simple classification in order to distinguish it from other processes is not easy. Adaptation cannot be seen solely as something happening “behind the back” that could be distinguished from some other conscious processes of voluntary adaptation. Adaptation is also not something that is primarily good or bad for human well-being. This is a general remark that is very important for a proper contextualisation of the phenomenon of adaptation.

Elster also raises the issue of conformity, which he defines as “a desire caused by a drive to be like other people”, and conformism, which is “a desire to be like other people” [Elster 1983: 23]. Interestingly enough, these issues are not discussed in the context of adaptive preferences even though they are a crucial aspect of this problem. However, Elster’s categorisation of adaptive preference changes, based on his critique of utilitarianism, puts forward the problem of considering wants as given. His view that one has to include the genesis of wants into one’s evaluation provides a key for understanding the links between adaptive preferences and the other dimensions. This would allow us to distinguish adapted or non-autonomous wants (as he calls them) from autonomous wants [Elster 1982: 227-30]. Instead of a definition of autonomous wants, he gives a condition that should be fulfilled to at least ensure that adaptive preferences have been excluded from utilitarian evaluation. Thus, according to Elster, adaptive preferences are excluded when one (i) wants to do, (ii) is free to do, and (iii) is free not to do certain things [Elster 1982: 228]. Utilitarian decisions should be based on autonomous wants. To guarantee to be dealing with autonomous preferences, one has to include a “backward-looking” analysis to trace the development of preferences. Politics, therefore, should not only look at how to aggregate different preferences, but should also consider their transformation over time.

2.2. Amartya Sen on Adaptation:

Sen’s views on the problem of adaptive preferences are shaped by his critique of utilitarianism and his work on cooperative conflicts and sexual division of labour (within and outside families). The latter focuses on the issue of adaptive preferences via an account of adapted perceptions and people’s multiple identities. We will explore this issue later, exploring its links with Sen’s critique of utilitarianism.

As Sen puts forward, “Everyone has many identities” [Sen 1990: 125] and to be a man or a woman is one of them. “One’s individuality coexists with a variety of such [different] identities” [*ibid.*]. However, the importance attributed to certain identities as well as their influence on people’s behaviour differs from one social background to the other. *Personal* welfare, for example, is a less viable concept in some Indian societies and is overshadowed by the only understanding of family-welfare: “It has often been observed that if a typical Indian

rural woman was asked about her personal “welfare”, she would find the question unintelligible, and if she was able to reply, she might answer the question in terms of her reading of the welfare of the family” [Sen 1990: 126]. This issue is a major problem of perception, the perception of oneself, of the other, and of the importance of one’s role in society. Perception depends on social arrangements; for example, on how household activities are perceived and considered in a society by both, men and women. In traditional societies, most often they are considered to be unproductive labour that does not contribute to the family’s wealth. It is therefore seen as if the men, who are almost in every society those who constantly work outside the home, solely support the family and contributes to their well-being. The division into paid and unpaid labour and the importance of who earns the money also sustains this perception. Money is indeed a social recognition for the work done. If there is no money, there is no recognition. Moreover, money is power. If there is no money, there is no power. This explains the women’s inferior economic and consequently also social position, but also the perception of their interests and of who deserves what. Together with deeply rooted traditional biases such as giving precedence to the male heir instead of the female one, these perceptions have an influence on the intra-family distribution of food and health-care for example [Sen 1990].

All these issues will also influence the acceptance of the “legitimacy of the unequal order” [Sen 1990: 126]. “Adapted perception” [Sen 1985a: 196] might induce people to adhere to such an order and “the underdog [...] becomes an implicit accomplice” [Sen 1990: 126] of the system. In these circumstances, “self-perception” [*ibid.*] does not matter as much; evaluation of people’s well-being would have to go “*beyond* the primitive feelings” [Sen 1990: 127] a person may have concerning her state of being. These feelings would indeed be adapted to the social and economic circumstances. As Sen has emphasised, “The destitute thrown into beggary, the vulnerable landless labourer precariously surviving at the edge of subsistence, the overworked domestic servant working round the clock, the subdued and subjugated housewife reconciled to her role and her fate, all tend to come to terms with their respective predicaments” [Sen 1985b: 21]. All these persons seem to be satisfied with their lives even though they are not –if assessed by objective standards. Moreover, next to adapted satisfaction, they also tend to adapt their desires to what is feasible.

In general, people might have different goals other than the pursuit of their well-being. Sen remarks on the necessary differentiation of well-being and agency aim at highlighting this distinction among different goals. Indeed, the Indian woman is not concerned about her personal well-being, but the one of her family. Indeed, the problem again is that the agency aspect “is most influenced by a person’s sense of obligation and perception of legitimate behaviour” [Sen 190: 127]. So Sen’s understanding of adaptation is really the implicit and rather unquestioned acceptance of a given order, topped up with the fact that people become used to live in difficult situations. Adaptation thus seem to refer to the mental state of coming to terms with and accepting the traditional and habitual situation as an effect of an adverse social and economic environment that influences the person’s perceptions.

Sen pleads for the expansion of the evaluative space of well-being from the exclusive use of utilities to an approach based on functionings and capabilities. The utilitarian approach takes into account mental states and attitudes of people, without considering neither any other physical condition of the person, nor making any reference to the person’s evaluative exercise of comparing his or her life with another one [Sen 1985b: 20-1]. This argument follows the line originally suggested by Elster. Functionings, instead, refer to the more objective assessment of people’s state of existence in terms of people’s actual doings and beings. And capabilities are a perspective of freedom in a positive sense and represent the agency aspect of people’s behaviour by including all those doings and beings that people are able to choose and have reason to be and to do [e.g. Sen 1985b, 1987, 1999].

To be precise, the capability approach was also a response to Rawls, who sees people's advantage given by possessing certain primary goods. In that respect, Sen criticises the fact that possessing certain goods does not yet lead to people's functioning. If someone has a physical handicap and cannot cycle, possessing a bicycle will not be very helpful [Sen 1984a: 320]. Goods and commodities have certain characteristics. The capability approach is concerned about the conversion of these characteristics into functionings and capabilities, and not only about the possession of those goods and commodities [Sen 1985b: 25]. Therefore, the capability approach is really about "who can *do* what, rather than who has what bundle of commodities, or who gets how much *utilities*" [Sen 1984b: 376].

Sen's main focus in previous years was the introduction of the notion of "basic capabilities: a person being able to do certain basic things", a notion, so he says, that has not been taken account of in neither the utilitarian nor the primary goods framework [Sen 1982: 367]. Poverty, for example, is then to be defined as deprivation of basic capabilities [Sen 1999: 87]. In recent years, Sen began to broaden the idea of basic capabilities to substantive freedoms. In that respect, he became interested in the idea of a "public discussion" and argued that the formation of the values people have to be and to do "requires openness of communication and arguments" [Sen 1999: 152]. "[T]he identification of needs cannot but be influenced by the nature of public participation and dialogue" [Sen 1999: 158]. However, Sen never was interested in coming up with a specific index of basic capabilities or capabilities in general, as what people need in terms of capabilities will differ from person to person and from society to society [Sen 1982: 368]. The important point though is in Sen's view that "greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world" [Sen 1999: 18]. Thus people with adapted preferences to traditional environments will finally be able to leave their adaptation behind and to choose whatever they value to be and to do.

2.3. Martha Nussbaum on Adaptation:

Martha Nussbaum has also analysed the issue of adaptive preferences. Her work on the Capabilities Approach is very similar to Sen's but it takes another stand in relation to the implementation of the capability approach. Her proposal is best known for the defense of a list of 10 central human capabilities that she came up with by applying a methodology of cross-cultural and academic discussion with other people and women groups [e.g. Nussbaum 2000: 151]. Because the list is about capabilities and not about functionings, Nussbaum repudiates any claim of paternalism⁴ [Nussbaum 2000: 112]. This list represents the response to the need of a substantive theory of justice and central goods according to Nussbaum. Indeed, any form of proceduralism needs a substantive or normative theory. Utilitarianism, which seems to be one form of proceduralism for Nussbaum, has no such substantive theory. This is one reason indeed why it cannot tackle the issue of adaptive preferences. Because all preferences are taken to be on the same footing, it is difficult to differentiate between the different qualities of preferences. "The normative approach based on human functioning and capability [...] reject[s] utilitarian preference-based approaches as a basis for fundamental political principles precisely because they were unable to conduct a critical scrutiny of preference and desire that would reveal the many ways in which habit, fear, low expectations, and unjust background conditions deform people's choices and even their wishes for their own lives" [Nussbaum 2000: 114]. Adaptation, therefore, is, similarly to Sen's view, referring to the mental states and the acceptance of a given order that result from hostile circumstances. In a society where the normative approach based on capabilities is accepted, the issue of adapted preferences is then resolved – they are simply not taken into account for any social decisions [Nussbaum 2000: 149]. And because the list is about central goods, there is no

⁴ ... a bit too easily for our understanding.

tension between “a normative sorting of preferences and liberal-democratic values” [Nussbaum 2000: 115]. Indeed, Nussbaum reminds us that even other utilitarian philosophers implicitly admitted the problematic issue of people’s desires by “trying to smuggle in” some normative procedure “for winnowing desire” [Nussbaum 2000: 149]. The capability account “does not waste time” doing this by going “directly and forthrightly to the good (and the right)” [*ibid.*]. However, desires still play a stabilising and justifying role within the capability approach, as they have an epistemic and ancillary function. Desires have an epistemic role because when people come together “in conditions conducive to reflective criticism” [Nussbaum 2000: 151] they will intuitively converge towards the central goods on the list. That is, what people want, i.e. desire, is what they recognise as having substantive value [*ibid.*]. Nussbaum therefore claims that there is a “strong convergence between the substantive list of capabilities and the norms that shape a sensible informed-desire approach” [Nussbaum 2000: 161]. But desires have also an ancillary function of justification because of “the delight and satisfaction that makes people unwilling to go backward” to previous situations of tradition and habitual behaviour once the list had been introduced and accepted by all [Nussbaum 2000: 153]. Therefore, the list is stable because it is based on a reference to informed desires, developed in conducive circumstances, and being supported by the values attached to it once it has been put in place. However, “the appropriate political goal is capability and not functioning. This means that we leave a great deal of room for citizens to pursue their own desires, whatever they are, and however they are formed” [Nussbaum 2000: 160]. Thus, once the list is in place, people start valuing those freedoms and actually do not wish to return to the original position. Nobody would prefer adapted preferences to the freedom within the capability space.

2.4. Adaptation in the SWB-Literature:

Elster’s analysis has shown that to define the meaning of adaptation and characterise under what circumstances it tends to arise is a difficult task. This general conclusion is drawn in the SWB literature: “Existing research permits few general conclusions about hedonic adaptation” [Frederick and Loewenstein 1999: 320]. Of course, we first have to check if adaptation especially in Sen and Nussbaum’s sense, i.e. referring to people’s mental states and their acceptance of a given order as a consequence of lifelong habituation to adverse social, but also economic circumstances – can be compared to the SWB sense of adaptation. There, “[a]daptation, in its broadest sense, refers to any action, process, or mechanism that reduces the effects (perceptual, physiological, attentional, motivational, hedonic, and so on) of a constant or repeated stimulus” [Frederick and Loewenstein 1999: 302]. Hence, do these two versions of adaptation fit together?

We can certainly take the social and economic environment as “a constant or repeated stimulus”. Sen and Nussbaum would argue that adaptation refers especially to the mental “actions, processes and mechanisms” that are the effects of these stimuli. However, the SWB adaptation refers to the “actions, processes and mechanisms” that *reduce* the effects of a constant stimulus. So for example: somebody who had a car accident and now suffers from paraplegia would have a ‘constant stimulus’ in the form of diminished mobility. The effects of diminished mobility might include not only all sorts of bodily handicaps that influence his or her daily life, but also mental consequences such as depression and despair. This would be the point where Sen and Nussbaum’s analysis ends. However, it is interesting to note the emphasis given in the SWB literature tells us that adaptation is in those actions, processes, mechanisms that *reduce* the effects of diminished mobility. Indeed, they will be less important if the person concerned develops new and different interests that do not demand as much mobility, “such as playing Scrabble instead of tennis” [*ibid.*]. Now, the effects of Sen’s concept of person who adapts to hostile circumstances is not actually full despair – rather the contrary.

Taking again his example of the subjugated housewife, her adaptation might therefore also be seen as a reduction of the effects tradition and habit has on her. She puts up with it and “reconciles her role and her fate” [Sen 1985b: 21]. However, putting up with fate is certainly not newly developed interests that achieve a rather positive result, given the stimulus – which in that case is neither judged to be good nor bad. Moreover, to put up with something would really require that one first understands to be in a bad or, say, depressive situation. On the other hand, one might claim that somebody that suffers from paraplegia is aware of his or her stimulus, whereas the subjugated housewife is not. But we might also claim that there is no reason why paraplegia should *a priori* make people more aware of their constant stimulus than hostile circumstances. However we turn the issue, it seems that Sen and Nussbaum’s vision of adaptation is slightly problematic, or to say the least, seems not to fit entirely to what is understood adaptation to be in psychological research. Indeed, one becomes the awkward feeling that Sen and Nussbaum are not really having adaptation in mind when they tell us their different examples of especially women’s behaviour, but rather resignation!

But what are psychologists saying other than how they define adaptation? They for example note the difficulties in the measurement of adaptation. “Adaptation is well defined only when a response diminishes or remains the same despite constant or increasing stimulus level” [Frederick and Loewenstein 1999: 310]. As soon as response and stimulus level move in the same direction, one cannot be sure of talking about adaptation or about some other responsive behaviour, such as, for example, sensitisation. This happens when “a response increases or stays the same despite a constant or decreasing stimulus” [Frederick and Loewenstein 1999: 310]. In that respect, it makes also sense to talk about things to which people cannot adapt. For example, somebody who lives near a highway and constantly has the noise of passing cars may become ever less able to cope with the noise even though the number of cars remains the same [Frederick and Loewenstein 1999: 310]. However, also surveys about issues such as adaptation do have their difficulties. The evaluation of surveys about well-being necessarily has to be aware of semantic conventions, reference groups, personal reference points, the context in which questions is asked and other influences on people’s judgement that may not only distort answers but also make it difficult to aggregate them in order to give a general picture [Frederick and Loewenstein 1999: 308-9].

It is interesting to look at what psychologists have to say about culture and SWB. The main question is if a society is happy. Of course, psychologists admit that SWB is necessary, but not sufficient to a society’s well-being. It is not only about feeling happy; psychologists are aware of the fact that people have to feel happy about the right things [Diener and Oishi 2004: 2]. It is this relationship that they try to analyse. “One clear policy implication of the SWB findings is not surprising: provide peace, stability, and economic prosperity and SWB will follow” [Diener and Oishi 2004: 15]. There thus seems to be a general positive relation between social and economic circumstances and subjective feelings about one’s own well-being. This, obviously very general result, does at first view therefore argue against Sen and Nussbaum’s vision of unreliable personal preferences. However, it is in this respect interesting to observe for example that different cultures tend to show either lower or higher SWB than what one would expect given their average income. Also, some cultures tend to focus on the more difficult aspects of their life when evaluating their self-satisfaction than others [Diener and Oishi 2004: 4]. In individualistic societies, self-esteem tends to be a stronger predictor of life satisfaction than in more collectivistic societies, whereas satisfaction with finances tends to be a stronger predictor of life satisfaction in poorer than in richer countries [Diener and Oishi 2004: 5]. An interesting result is also that according to the cultural background it is a more or less important factor for happiness to feel self-consistency across different social roles. On the other hand consistent persons are more appreciated in certain societies, an aspect that is less important in others. For some cultures, it is more

important to fulfil the expectations of others, other cultures value more the autonomy of the person and give more importance to internal factors such as emotions. And correspondingly, some cultures tend to define the person more for his or her internal attributes and to consider them positively has more importance for life satisfaction [Diener and Oishi 2004: 5]. Comparing these emotional experiences among cultures bears of course a lot of difficulties, but having them in mind, psychologists try “to use the survey cautiously”, but argue that some valid conclusions can certainly drawn from it [Diener and Oishi 2004: 9]. What of course is interesting in this respect, is that because psychologists cannot take SWB findings at face value, they first have to explore what the concept of happiness in a society is, if the concept of happiness is changing over time, what it means to be satisfied with life, what the concept of emotion is, how emotions are considered to affect people, what shades of meaning different emotions have in different cultures, what the self is understood to be etc. These issues certainly influence the experience that people have with the phenomenon of happiness. It must be noted, that adaptation also changes over time and has shades of meaning according to different circumstances and contexts. Psychologists claim that happiness is not just an issue of culture or of personality and temperament. Societal circumstances can substantially influence SWB [Diener and Oishi 2004: 13]. On the other hand, economic and social prosperity must be defined within the framework of people’s desires [Diener and Oishi 2004: 15]. It is therefore interesting to analyse the factors that correlate with happiness and the processes within the individual that underlie it [Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith 1999]. And it turns out that societies whose individuals are happy and in a good mood tend to affect positively their environment, which again reverberates back to the society’s economical and social situation. “It appears that individuals who are put into a happy mood are more flexible, active and energetic, sociable, generous, helpful, and creative” [Diener and Oishi 2004: 14]. Happy people tend to approach goals actively, trying to see how far they can solve difficulties with solutions and habits that worked in the past, but also turning to new concepts if the old ones would not be working [*ibid.*].

Now, this all seems to rather evident and obvious. However, we can deduce two important aspects for the discussion of adaptation as Sen and Nussbaum presented it. First, feelings and emotions are important ingredients for people’s well-being and should therefore not simply not taken into account on the ground that they might be distorted. If an evaluation of people’s well-being registered distorted emotions and feelings without any deeper analysis, then it is actually a very bad survey on which this evaluation is based. Emotions have their right to be taken seriously and not only used as epistemic or ancillary devices to justify a list of central goods. However, emotions have always to be considered and analysed in a broader context of philosophical, psychological and cultural aspects such as the sense of the self and the understanding of it, the weight people attribute to family, friends and communities, the social positions that people inhere and the status they transmit and much more. Research made interesting advances on that account in recent years and there is no justification anymore of dismissing emotions and desires simply on grounds of being not truthfully reported. The capability approach has finally to open up to the vast areas of psychological, ethno-psychological and even psychoanalytical research if it does not want to loose its credulity. The second point worth being mentioned is the relationship between happiness and action. Happy people tend to be more active. In the Sen-Nussbaum sense however, even adapted persons are saying to be happy. However, adaptation, as we have seen, in their sense is putting up with fate, is accepting the given order. This acceptance seems to be the contrary of action⁵. Thus, the Sen-Nussbaum person is happy, but inactive. It once again reminds us more

⁵ One might of course say that even putting up with fate is an action. However, there is nothing that follows this action other than a continuous status quo. In that sense it is not an action, which is normally supposed to bring about changes.

of resignation than of adaptation that in the psychological sense requires action or at least reaction.

Critical voices may now rise and say that this is all very well, that the only change should comprise a new denomination for what Sen and Nussbaum mean by adaptation (i.e., resignation). However, this does not change the fact that there is, out there in the world, the phenomenon of resignation. Now, utilitarianism does not take them into account, or, say, they take resigned preferences for true preferences and nothing changes therefore in the Sen-Nussbaum justification to turn away from a utilitarian space of evaluation towards an evaluative space of functionings and capabilities.

All right, but the question now turns up, what is the capability approach actually doing to resigned people other than evaluating more objectively their well-being? The same critics may rise their voice again and say, well, in a society with certain substantive freedoms for people to be and to do, or a society that adopted the list of central goods, resigned people will turn away from their resignation and become active people. To this we might reply that it seems to be a common sense argument that in a society with given central goods and substantive freedoms, people might be able to choose what they have reason to value to be and to do. However, what guarantees that they actually *do* choose? So far it seems as if the capability account approaches the resigned person with lots of freedoms to be and to do and says “take it or leave it, it is up to you to choose!” It seems, therefore, as if the capability approach *does* nothing to the resigned person other than proposing freedoms. If the person is able to use these freedoms or not, is not of its concern. It appears that the capability approach is in a sense repeating “negatively” the critique it advances towards utilitarianism, but also Rawlsian primary goods approach. Whereas utilitarianism is rebuked because it takes people’s feelings and mental states too seriously without questioning their formation, the capability approach does not value feelings and mental states at all or reduce its importance to an auxiliary status. And whereas the primary goods approach is reproached because it provides people with goods without taking into account if people can actually use these goods, the capability approach provides people with freedoms without taking into account if people can actually use these freedoms. There is something, which definitely seems to go wrong.

3. Capabilities and Adaptation

To understand the limited view of adaptation presented by the capability approach, we should go back to Jon Elster’s concern about adaptation and autonomous wants. Elster goes on to confront the issue of adaptation with the issue of freedom. Generally speaking, to be free means to do what one wants to do. However, says Elster, a problem arises if wants are the result of adaptation. If I am free to do what I want, but my wants are not my autonomous wants, then I am to some extent less free. To have an autonomous want means that I want to do x , I am free to do x , and I am free not to do x [Elster 1982: 228]. Therefore, if this is the condition for autonomous wants, we can say that “one’s freedom is a function of the number and the importance of things that one (i) wants to do, (ii) is free to do and (iii) is free not to do [*ibid.*]. This is a slightly awkward and circular definition as it eventually turns out that to be free means to do what one freely wants to do, given that autonomy and freedom seem be based on the same condition. And yet, there is an intuitive difference between being free to do something and having autonomous wants⁶. Indeed, one might be free to do things, but does

⁶ We can of course ask if being free to do something means the same thing as being free to be able to do something. The latter seems to make more explicit the choice between wanting to be able or not to be able to do

not have autonomous wants. On the other hand, one might have autonomous wants, but not being able to do them freely. Indeed, Elster insists that the more I autonomously want to do that I am not free to do, the more the autonomy of a person is emphasised [*ibid.*]. Given all that, Elster would come up with the following ordering of circumstances. He prefers in the following descending order:

1. Being free to do what one autonomously wants to do
2. Not being free to do what one autonomously wants to do
3. Being free to do what one non-autonomously wants to do.

Now, we can of course convert these sentences in a capability-context by saying that to be free means to do what one has reason to value to be and to do. We can also introduce the emphasis of being free to do what one autonomously values to be and to do. Now, given that we may transpose the freedom as understood in the capability context into Elster's framework, we might wonder how Sen and Nussbaum would rank these different situations. We propose that according to our previous discussion of Sen and Nussbaum's conception of the capability approach, they would rank the situations in the following descending order:

1. Being free to do what one autonomously wants to do
2. Being free to do what one non-autonomously wants to do.
3. Not being free to do what one autonomously wants to do,

adding the option that they might be indifferent between option 2 and 3.

If we are correct, then this is certainly an interesting aspect. It emphasises our intuitive idea that being free to do certain things is more important than the person's wants or reasons to value to be and to do. It is true that neither Elster's account nor the Sen-Nussbaum account guarantee that the person is actually able to do what he or she wants to do or what he or she might have reason to value to be and to do. But the importance here is that Elster gives more weight to the person's autonomous wants than to the freedom he or she enjoys. If autonomous wants are the central element that characterises the person in Elster's account, then the more wants are free of adaptation and based on an intentional and free basis, the more autonomous is the person and the more the person is defined. However, this person can only be defined within the social space and not independently of it because it is the social space that offers (or not) certain freedoms that the person uses to define herself. Adaptation in Elster's sense can only be seen in comparison to a fully defined, i.e. autonomous person within a given space of freedoms. The less he or she is defined, the more he or she seems to be adapted.

Sen and Nussbaum place more value on the freedoms than on the wants and reasons people may have to be and to do. In that sense they place more value on the space within which persons could be defined, without considering what a person actually is. It is the same if people are adapted or not, if they live in a society with substantive freedoms. The negligence to consider what and who the person is, is especially true for Nussbaum, a little bit less so for Sen.

3.1. Nussbaum's definition of a person:

something. However, given that choice, it might arguably also be included in the former view of simply being free to do something. However, we might also ask not only if one is free to do something, but also if that person is able to be free to do something. This question seems to raise the issue of the capacity and liberty of people to do certain things in general (among them choosing) and includes their psychological and cognitive aspects, but also questions about the free will. These are interesting aspects, but will here not be explored further.

Nussbaum says that the capability account “is respectful of [people’s] personalities” [Nussbaum 2000: 154] because it respects people’s “emotions, desires and even appetites”, which are all “humanly significant parts of [people’s] personality” [Nussbaum 2000: 155]. Within this context, people’s preferences and desires only serve as an epistemic and ancillary role to justify the capability account, inspiring questions about the status of the concept of *personality*⁷ within Nussbaum’s view. However, according to her, “personality is unity” and each person is able to apply practical reasoning, which “suffuses all of its parts, making them all human rather than animal” [*ibid.*]. Indeed, “human personality has a structure that is at least to some extent independent of culture” [*ibid.*], meaning that there are some “permanent features of our makeup as humans”, which cannot be “thoroughly the creation of power” [*ibid.*]. These features are “desires for food, for mobility, for security, for health, and for the use of reason” [*ibid.*]. But even though this is the case, people’s desires can be influenced and distorted. This is true even to such an extent that people “let tradition become the self”⁸ [Nussbaum 2000: 165]. Indeed, Nussbaum criticises Elster by saying that his “romantic view [...] according to which the adaptive preferences are false and beneath them lie true authentic preferences, is not a true account of the way many people are” [Nussbaum 2000: 164]. There is nothing such as authentic preferences, people have only a personality with a “definite structure, to the extent that they want food, and shelter, and stability, and perhaps⁹ even liberty, for themselves” [*ibid.*]. People “just *are* their adaptive habits, and [...] there is no autonomous person beneath the weight of those habits” [*ibid.* Her italics]. Therefore, “autonomy has to be constructed by laws and institutions” [Nussbaum 2000: 165], because if people are habits, then they should rather be habits that are based on central goods.

Well, if one has such a vision of the person, it is clear why freedoms are more important than the person him or herself. Equally, if one has such a vision of individuals, then it is clear why she thinks that the problem of adaptive preferences is resolved by adopting a list of central goods. However, in such a situation, one cannot hold back with asking if she thinks that this account of a person is also applying to herself. Actually, it is not even an account of a person, but an account of a bundle of habits with a personality, which is the same for everybody, a desire for shelter and food etc. However, if she thinks that this account is also applying to herself, then how can she justify that the list of central goods which she developed with other people is really the one that everybody wants? Arguably, if she *is* habits, then she is applying her habits to others. It is true that the list is fine-tuned with other habits, i.e. persons. However, if by fine-tuning the list with other people, one would finally come up with a universal list, then people cannot be so much habits as rather some underlying desire that thrives for those central goods, which maybe is part of their personality. But we should not forget that people can only fine-tune the list “under appropriate conditions” [Nussbaum 2000: 160]. So we first need an appropriate situation so that people can decide about what they consider to be central goods. If there is no appropriate situation, people let tradition become their selves. We really run in circles. In summary it says that the structure affects the desires. We therefore should give more weight to structures, than to desires.

3.2. Sen’s definition of a person:

Sen is a little bit subtler on that point. Indeed, one may identify two levels within his capability approach, a personal and a social one [Luchini and Teschl 2003]. The personal level deals with functionings, that is, actual states of people’s doings and beings. It also includes capabilities that stand for all those valuable functionings people can choose from.

⁷ Why not person?

⁸ What is the difference between personality and self?

⁹ sic!

The personal level therefore analyses the reasons people may have to value to be and to certain things by concentrating on the ends people want to achieve. The social level on the other hand analyses the social opportunities people enjoy and evaluate people's access to them in terms of people's functionings and capabilities. This level therefore focuses on the substantive freedoms people are able to achieve. However, even though Sen's capability approach claims to analyse people's capabilities, thus their personal level, and to see if they can achieve what they have reason to value to be and to do, what it really does is to analyse the capabilities of people, i.e. what substantive freedoms people enjoy, thus emphasising the social level of capabilities. Hence, Sen's capability approach is finally less about people's ends and if they are able to achieve them, it is more about freedoms, because "[...] the exercise of that enhanced freedom is ultimately a matter for the person herself" [Sen 1999: 289]. Given the right freedoms, people will then act. "[...] An approach to justice and development that concentrates on substantive freedoms inescapably focuses on the agency and judgement of individuals; they cannot be seen merely as patients to whom benefits will be dispensed by the process of development" [Sen 1999: 288]. However, Sen remains silent as to what makes patients to agents other than by presupposing people's agency. In that sense, he presents us with the same account as Nussbaum does by saying that if the substantive freedoms are guaranteed, people's action will follow. However, this view does not tell us what people do and are when these freedoms are not guaranteed. Are they then all patients? If yes, it does again not wonder why Sen is interested in adaptation or, say, resignation. His view of adaptation, as we said before, refers to inaction. Thus, he is ultimately concerned with inactive people and what might be done to bring them agency. He thus argues for the capability approach in terms of substantive freedoms. However, we have to ask again what it guarantees that people start acting given substantive freedoms. If the only guarantee is the passage from traditional structures to the substantive freedoms, even Sen's concept of a person seems to be a bundle of habits.

However, in recent years, Sen turned back again to his previous concerns of people's identities – a question still unexplored within his capability approach. As we have seen, in his earlier writings, Sen was very much concerned about people's self-perception, about what the self is perceived to be, if it was a more personal concept that would be linked with self-interested behaviour, or a more extended, social concept that resulted in more "committed"¹⁰ behaviour. However, because there were distortions in the perception of these concepts that led to disregard especially women's (self-)interest, he argued that one had to drop the self-evaluative basis for the analysis of well-being. This suspicion has certainly something to it, but to drop the whole issue at once was maybe too hastily done. In any case, Sen did now start anew with those questions concerning people's social identity. Indeed, the major question he asks is "how our identities emerge – whether by choice or by passive recognition – and how much reasoning can enter into the development of identity" [Sen 1999b: 6]. Because a person has different identities, i.e. belongs to different social groups that will impose competing loyalties on him or her, the individual will always have to choose and to determine how much recognition and priority he or she gives to these different affiliations. He therefore argues against a vision of social identity that he calls "oversimplified" [Sen 2000] which sees the individual fully determined by their social memberships and where the individual passively recognises his or her identity [Sen 1999: 6]. Sen instead argues that even though our membership in different groups will shape to some extent our perceptions of the world, it never does this fully [Sen 1999: 22-7]. Indeed, the individual is always able to "Reason before Identity" because "the so-called "cultures" need not involve any *uniquely* defined set of attitudes and beliefs that can shape our reasoning" [Sen 1999: 24. His italics]. An adult

¹⁰ "Committed" in Sen's sense, i.e. doing things that might not always benefit one's own personal well-being [Sen 1977]

person, says Sen, is always able to doubt. “While circumstances may not encourage a person to do such questioning, the ability to doubt and to question is within each person’s capacity. Indeed, it is not absurd to claim that being able to doubt is one of the things that make us human beings, rather than unquestioning animals” [Sen 2000: 24].

Well, what a difference to the subjugated housewife that troubles him in the capability approach! It seems that the issue of adaptation resolves itself by basing the consideration on an individual, capable of doubt and reasoning, and who is not simply a bundle of habits!

Critical voices might now say that it seems obvious that the capability approach presupposes a person who has the capacity of reason and doubt. However, as argued here, especially in the context of Nussbaum’s interpretation of the capability approach, this might be different. And even Sen does address these issues in articles that are written independently of his capability approach. Moreover, if he always had this vision of the individual, why was he discussing the issue of adaptation in the first place? Arguably, the subjugated housewife would not exist if she would apply the same reasoning as described above.

And yet, it is true that when Sen is talking about the subjugated housewife, he refers also to situations in which people live in absolute destitution and where people do not have the choice to live a better life because of economical constraints and socially repressive traditions. However, there is no reason to believe that people living in these circumstances are so adapted or resigned as they turn out to be in Sen and Nussbaum’s depiction. If the capability approach is really about well-being and agency, then one has to consider a person to be an actor in the first place. Even in destitute situations, people are acting, they have their projects of life, they have their desires and emotions, and they have their hopes and sorrows. Without seeing people as agents in the first place, as reasoning agents who are motivated to live their life as best as they can, it makes no sense to think that the capability space enhances their agency. Agency, though, has not simply to be presupposed, but put into a context of a person’s identity. If persons are agents, this relationship has to be more closely defined and presented.

A person’s identity is neither solely the bundle of habits Nussbaum is talking about, nor solely a reasoning person within a social space as Sen presents it. A person’s identity is much more than that. A person’s identity in the sense of *what* a person is tells us about the criteria that define a person and according to which we can reidentify the person through time. Such criteria are his or her body, his or her consciousness and memory, and even to some extent his or her social identities. However, in order to know not only *what* a person is, but also *who* she or he is, we have to add that a person has projects for his or her life, has an imagination, has the capacity to create, to think and to invent new strategies of life. *Who* the person is sees the person as an agent of his or her life, who is able to reflect about the social structures he or she lives in and that affect his or her perceptions, and who in turn is thus able influence this structure. A personal identity in the sense of *who* is the person, is thus a combination of his or her sense of self, his or her projects and desires of life, his or her reflected position within the social space with its habits and traditions, and of course of his or her body that need to be nourished and looked after. The first two elements have certainly been neglected within the capability approach, the third one raises different interpretations and views, and the fourth is the one that has been most extensively treated with, because it is also the objectively easiest part of someone’s identity to deal with. To understand properly the first two elements of personal identity, one has to look far beyond of what the capability approach hitherto has focused on. As in the SWB literature, one has to explore questions such as what it means to have a sense of self, what concept of self prevails, what the consistency of the self through different social positions means, what relation the self has to the family or group, what influences self-esteem, but also what emotions prevail, what is their importance and much more. Sen therefore touched important issues when he was discussing the problems related to

self-perception. However, instead of dropping them, it is important to scrutinise their main elements and subject them to a philosophical, psychological as well as cultural analyses. The capability approach and its related focuses on motivational and evaluative aspects of human life will change accordingly. As we have seen before, depending on the concept of *what* and *who* a person is, the problematic of adaptation changes its outlook. Adaptation in the sense given by Sen-Nussbaum of “subjugated housewives” is a phenomenon that exists only when they have a specific understanding of *what* a person is, i.e. if the person is constituted primarily by habits and is not seen as an agent that can affect the social structure in which she lives. The subjugated housewife though stops to exist if we grant her doubt and reasoning.

However, it is obvious that in the real world, there are many situations in which people live a destitute life to which they have to adapt (in the psychological sense) in order to survive. If they would have the choice, they would prefer another life. It is certainly true that in those circumstances, to have as the only evaluative criterion people’s happiness or desire-fulfilment will disregard many other basic aspects of people’s life that are necessary to be included into the evaluation. The expansion of the utility space to functionings and capabilities is therefore a necessary and important move. This is coherent with the SWB literature.

4. Conclusion

This paper explored different meanings of the notion of adaptation and adaptive preferences. It focused on the contributions of John Elster, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. The objective was to compare different aspects of adaptation. The paper has argued that the negative meanings attributed to adaptation within the Capability Approach do not exhaust the possible positive meanings of adaptation given by the SWB literature. Furthermore, it suggests that a possible solution to the problem of adaptive preferences depends on different concepts of identity.

Bibliography:

Kahneman, Daniel et Amos Tversky (eds). 2000. *Choices, Values and Frames*. Cambridge University Press.

Sen, Amartya. 1985a. "Women, Technology and Sexual Division". *Trade and Development* 6. pp. 195-222.

Sen, Amartya. 1985b. *Commodity and Capabilities*. North Holland.

Sen, Amartya. 1984a. "Rights and Capabilities". In: *Resources, Values and Development*. Basil Blackwell.

Sen, Amartya. 1984b. "Economics and the Family". In: *Resources, Values and Development*. Basil Blackwell.

Sen, Amartya. 1982. "Equality of What?". In: *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*. Harvard University Press.

Sen, Amartya. 1999a. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press

Sen, Amartya. 1999b. *Reason before Identity: The Romanes Lecture*. Oxford University Press