

Social Choice and Individual Capabilities.*

By Mozaffar Qizilbash**

Abstract.

This paper explores links and contrasts between social choice (SC) and Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA) and focuses on one link: pluralism. An analogue of Kenneth Arrow's theorem relating to the multi-dimensionality of advantage can be seen as underlying Sen's advocacy of partial orderings. In a SC perspective this advocacy is one amongst a range of possible responses to the analogue of Arrow's theorem. As regards interpersonal and intergroup comparisons, the CA may bypass problems that emerge for 'utility' based views. However, applications of the CA sometimes do not address multi-dimensionality and adopt strong measurement assumptions. In the context of good life and weight pluralism, Sen's SC perspective is related to Rawls's notion of 'public reason'. This perspective is compatible with various lists that have been advanced, though it suggests that such lists are best seen as objects of SC if they are to be used in public decision making. A SC perspective also helps to show why Sen's view is not methodologically individualistic.

Paper Prepared for the 4th Conference on the Capability Approach, Università degli Studi di Pavia, September 5-7, 2004.

Comments are very welcome, but please do not cite the text at this stage.

Draft of 11 August 2004.

* I am grateful to Amartya Sen for discussion on the subject of this paper. Any errors or omissions are mine.

** School of Economics, University of East Anglia, Norwich, NR4 7TJ. Tel: ++ 44 1603 593667; fax: ++ 44 1603 250434; and e-mail: m.qizilbash@uea.ac.uk.

Social Choice and Individual Capabilities.

0. Introduction

At first sight, the areas of social choice and the capability approach appear quite distinct. In his Nobel lecture, Amartya Sen writes that the ‘subject of “social choice” includes within its capacious frame various problems with the common feature of relating social judgements and group decisions to the views and interests of the individuals who make up the society or group’ (Sen, 1999b, p. 349). By contrast, the capability approach is about states of a *person* and different collections of ‘beings’ and ‘doings’ or ‘functionings’ which make up the lives from which she can choose, the person’s ‘capability’. In this sense, the capability approach focusses on the individual rather than society. Indeed, as a consequence of this focus, Amartya Sen’s writings on the capability approach have, on occasion, been charged with ‘methodological individualism’. One way of linking the two areas - articulated in Sen’s own work - sees the capability approach as expanding the informational basis of social choice. In this paper, I focus on another link between social choice theory and the capability approach - also implicit in some of Sen’s writings - which arises from the fact that both are deeply concerned with *pluralism*.

In Kenneth Arrow’s *Social Choice and Individual Values* - the pioneering contribution to modern social choice theory - a concern with reflecting the plurality of values in society in social judgements is central to Arrow’s project. To this degree, social choice theory is motivated by ‘value pluralism’. On the other hand, in Sen’s work on capability, the approach is seen as concerned with a heterogeneous set of functionings and capabilities. The components of the quality of life or ‘advantage’ are seen as plural. In this sense, Sen is committed to the multi-dimensionality of the quality of life or ‘component pluralism’. However, in merely advocating that one ought to be concerned with capability and

functionings as 'spaces' for evaluation, Sen does not take a strong stance on which capabilities or functionings matter, or on the relative importance of different capabilities and functionings. He does so, in part, to allow for the fact that various people have different conceptions of the good life - which I term 'good life pluralism' - and give different weights to the various values and components of advantage, which I term 'weight pluralism'.

Of course, Sen is aware that pluralism does make for a link between the realms of social choice and the capability approach. The connection has not, however, ever been explicitly set out or examined. Furthermore, exploring this link brings out the distinctive flavour of those parts Sen's own writings, which attempt to give the capability approach some flesh by bringing it to bear on issues such as inequality and development. In doing so, the relationship between Sen's writings on capability and the works of others - notably Martha Nussbaum - who are also concerned with pluralism in developing their views emerges more sharply. The paper is structured as follows: various contrasts and links between social choice theory and the capability approach are discussed in section 1; section two focusses on component pluralism and Arrow's general possibility theorem; interpersonal and intergroup comparisons are discussed in section 3; good life pluralism, public reason and methodological individualism are discussed in section 4; and section 5 concludes.

1. Some Contrasts and Linkages.

A central contrast that might be made between social choice theory and the capability approach relates to the central role of *preferences* in social choice theory. In Kenneth Arrow's classic formulation, social choice theory is concerned with the question of 'whether it is formally possible to construct a procedure for passing from a set of known individual tastes to a pattern of social decision making, the pattern being required to satisfy certain natural conditions' (Arrow, 1951, p.2). This procedure is the 'social welfare function' (Arrow, 1951,

p. 22) though it is also known by a variety of alternative names, such as the ‘collective choice rule’ or ‘constitution’, in the literature on social choice. However, soon after offering this formulation, Arrow distinguishes between the preference ordering which is relevant to consumer decision making - which reflects a person’s ‘tastes’ - and the ordering that goes further adding standards of equity etc. and which reflects her ‘values’ more broadly. He emphasises that ‘we must look at the entire system of values, including values about values, in seeking for a truly general theory of social choice’ (Arrow, 1951, 18).

There does seem to be a contrast with the capability approach here, because in making the case for spaces of capability and functioning Amartya Sen often expresses worries about utilitarian views that see well-being in terms of desire satisfaction, happiness or choice. In this context, Sen often worries about ‘adaptive’ preferences or desires. For example, he suggests that:

[t]he utility calculus can be deeply unfair to those who are persistently deprived: for example, the usual underdogs in stratified societies,...The deprived people tend to come to terms with their deprivation because of the sheer necessity of survival and they may, as a result, lack the courage to demand any radical change, and may even adjust their desires and expectations to what they unambitiously see as feasible. The metric of pleasure is just too malleable to be a firm guide to deprivation or disadvantage’ (Sen, 1999a, p. 63).

However, Sen makes considerable use of preference relations in his work on social choice - whether this relates to the definition of ‘minimal liberty’ in his famous ‘liberal paradox’ (Sen, 1970) or in work on the measurement of opportunity (especially his Arrow lectures, in Sen, 2002a). In discussing the basis of social choice in individual preferences, Sen (1997c) inevitably addresses some of these issues. He distinguishes various senses in which

‘preference’ is used. They include: mental satisfaction; choice; value; and desire (Sen, 2002a, p. 303). Sen rightly points out that these senses are often conflated in economics. In his work on the measurement of freedom, he (Sen, 2002a, p. 588) follows Arrow in stressing that it is the sense of preference as value rather than mental satisfaction or desire which is used. Inasmuch as this sense is distinct from mental satisfaction or desire this would seem to limit the relevance of adaptation to the use of preferences in social choice theory. The fact that values themselves can adapt and be socially conditioned remains,¹ nonetheless, and this is no doubt one reason why Sen suggests that there is good reason for social choice theory to investigate preference formation more deeply (Sen, 2002a, p. 310).

A second contrast between social choice theory and the capability approach is implicit in Kaushik Basu’s engaging review of Amartya Sen’s first monograph on the capability approach - *Commodities and Capabilities*. Basu rightly notes that Sen has ‘always been careful to make room for the imprecisions and inexactitudes which abound in life’ (Basu, 1987, p. 69). However, Basu finds the subject of Sen’s book ‘too diverse, too complex to be amenable to the relentless precision of social choice theory’ (Basu, 1987, p. 69). The key contrast here seems to lie in the fact that the method of modern social choice theory is, for the most part, *axiomatic* and relies heavily on formal techniques. It is unclear how far such techniques can take us in pursuing the capability approach, since substantive questions about which capabilities matter may not be solved by a formal, axiomatic method. However, there are now a number of contributions which attempt to use the axiomatic method in the context of attempts to make the capability approach operational (e.g. Chakraborty, 1996, Basu and Foster, 1998, Xu, 2002 and Bossert et al, 2004)² so that this contrast is less striking than it may have been when Basu wrote his review. Fuzzy set theory has also been used in both the provinces of social choice and the capability approach (Barrett and Pattanaik, 1989, Dasgupta

and Deb, 1991 and 1996, Chiappero-Martinetti, 1994, 1996 and 2000). The reason for the take up of this theory in both domains arises, in part, from Sen's influence on both fields and his argument that while we must allow for the fuzziness or ambiguity of notions such as poverty, inequality and well-being, a 'precise formulation' of such ideas 'must capture the ambiguity rather than lose it' (Sen, 1992, p. 49).

There is also an apparent contrast between the focus on social judgements in social choice theory and the focus on individuals in the capability approach. In Arrow's classic statement, the objects of social choice are 'social states'. He tells us that the 'most precise definition of a social state would be 'a complete description of the amount of each type of commodity in the hands of each individual, the amount of labor to be supplied by each individual, the amount of each productive resource invested in each type of productive activity, the amounts of various types of collective activity, such as municipal services, diplomacy and its continuation by other means, and the erection of statues to famous men.' (Arrow, 1951, 17). By way of contrast, in Sen's account of the capability approach, '[f]unctionings represent parts of the state of a person - in particular the various things that she manages to do or be in leading a life. The *capability* of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection.' (Sen, 1993, p. 31). Here the objects of choice are collections of states of a person. So choice appears to operate at different levels in social choice and the capability approach. Again this contrast becomes less striking if, like Sen, one takes capability or freedom to be a central consideration which should be taken into account in social choice. Sen suggests that freedoms can be included in Arrow's notion of a 'social state' and that 'preference or valuation over different social states can include assessment of different freedoms enjoyed by different persons.' (Sen, 2002a, p. 593). For this reason, the capability

approach and work based on it - such as the *Human Development Reports* published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) - can be seen as part of a programme in social choice theory which aims to expand the informational basis of social choice (Sen, 1999b, p.359).

Finally, there is the link between capability and social choice that I shall focus on in the rest of this paper: pluralism. The commitment to value pluralism in Arrow's system is clear from the start. In defining various reasonable conditions on the construction of a social welfare function, Arrow rules out the possibility that this function can be 'imposed' (Arrow, 1951, p. 28) - so that it is entirely dictated by tradition - or 'dictatorial' - so that it merely reflects the preferences of one person. He recognises that by defining these conditions he is committed to certain value judgements which might be questioned, and that 'taken together they express the doctrines of citizens' sovereignty and rationality in a very general form, with the citizens being allowed to have a wide range of values' (Arrow, 1951, p. 31). In explaining the capability approach, Sen also emphasises pluralism. The capability approach is - he suggests - 'inescapably pluralist' for a number of reasons. First there are a range of different functionings. Secondly, there is the issue of the weight to give to capability or opportunity as compared to achieved functionings. Finally, Sen allows for the fact that there are considerations other than capability - such as process - that matter for evaluative purposes (Sen, 1999a, p.77). In discussing the possibility of applying the capability approach, Sen also often suggests that weight pluralism gives rise to considerations relating to social choice (e.g. Sen, 2000, p. 21). However, the importance of pluralism for the capability approach relates to two different levels. At the first level, it relates to the advocacy of this approach as, what I call, a 'thin view' which does not include anything other than arguments for the importance of the spaces of capability and functioning. At the second level, it relates to actual attempts at

applying this approach, by using these spaces to evaluate well-being, inequality etc. I refer to the approach Sen takes in attempting to use the spaces of capability and functioning in his writings on the quality of life, equality and development *inter alia* as his ‘thick view.’

2. The Arrow Theorem and Component Pluralism.

The central result of modern social choice theory is Arrow’s general possibility theorem. There are a number of different expositions of this theorem, even in Arrow’s writings. I shall focus Amartya Sen’s well-known exposition in *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (Sen, 1979, pp. 33-40). As we have seen, Arrow was concerned with the possibility of a social choice function, which is (to recap) a procedure for moving from a set of preference orderings for individuals in society to one overall preference ordering for society. Arrow famously proved that there is no such procedure that meets four rather innocuous looking conditions: the weak Pareto principle; unrestricted domain; non-dictatorship; and the independence of irrelevant alternatives.

It is not hard to see that, if one adopts an account of the quality of life or advantage which involves multiple dimensions, there is a related result about multidimensional advantage. Each of the dimensions of the quality of life can be seen as being a ‘voice’ which must be reflected in any overall judgement of advantage. Suppose, for the moment, that there is a set of dimensions or components of advantage. These can be capabilities or functionings, though the result is sufficiently broad that it also applies to components of advantage in other multi-dimensional approaches (such as those involving needs or prudential values). The procedure which is relevant in the context of multi-dimensional advantage involves moving from a set of orderings based on each component of advantage to an overall advantage ordering. This procedure can be described as a ‘multi-dimensional advantage function’ (MAF). The objects which are of concern here are not necessarily ‘social states’ but rather

objects that can be judged as regards advantage. I refer to these objects as 'alternatives'. So individual people, or provinces, or nations whose quality of life or advantage is relevant, can be considered and we can write them as x , y etc. The requirement that the MAF involve orderings presupposes that this is some relation - such as 'at least as good as in terms of component i ' - as regards the components of advantage, as well as some overall relation - such as 'at least as good as in terms of overall advantage' - which is reflexive, transitive and complete.

The analogy between social choice and decision making in the context of multi-dimensionality has been much discussed (Arrow and Raynaud, 1986, Hurley, 1989, and Qizilbash, 1997 *inter alia*). Equivalents of the Arrow conditions have been defined for the case of multi-dimensional decision making, as well as for the case of a MAF. In the latter case one can define the relevant conditions as follows (modified from Qizilbash, 1997, p. 2013):

(Unrestricted domain): The MAF should be capable of defining an overall advantage ordering for any possible orderings based on the components of advantage.

(Weak Pareto Principle): If x ranks above y for all components of advantage, the MAF should rank x above y .

(Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives): The MAF over a set of alternatives depends only on the rankings of *those* alternatives in terms of the components of advantage.

(Non-Dictatorship): There is no single component of advantage such that if that x is ranked

above y according to that component, then x is ranked above y in terms of overall advantage.

Since these conditions have exactly the same form as Arrow's original conditions, and given that there is a direct analogy between the possibility of a MAF and that of a social welfare function, it follows that there is no MAF which meets these conditions. If we wish to apply an approach which embodies component pluralism, we must then ask which of these conditions we might relax. Before pursuing this question, it is worth recalling that Arrow's theorem was proven in a setting where interpersonal comparisons of well-being were taken to have no meaning (Arrow, 1951, p. 9) and therefore could play no role. In the present context, the analogous form of comparability is comparability between the components of advantage. This would be excluded by those who see values as 'incommensurable' in the sense that they are not comparable. However, there is nothing in the Sen's 'thin view' which rules out such comparability. Even if the components of advantage are seen as irreducible to a single value or component (i.e. so that component pluralism holds), they may nonetheless be comparable.³

There are a number of alternative ways of 'escaping' the 'impossibility of a MAF'. However, in this context, the weak Pareto principle looks fairly unassailable as it does in the context of Arrow's original theorem. To question it, one might look behind the valuations based on the components of advantage, just as looking into what lies behind preferences is one possible worry about the weak Pareto principle in the context of Arrow's original result and in the context of Sen's own 'impossibility of a Paretian liberal' (Sen, 1970 and 1979, pp.83-5 and 87-9). Another condition which looks unassailable is the non-dictatorship condition. It embodies a general implication of component pluralism: there is no single component of advantage which dictates the overall advantage ranking. If there were some such component, then component pluralism would hardly be a 'problem' and the analogue of

the Arrow theorem would be of no interest. So if we wish to defend the possibility of overall judgements of advantage, given component pluralism, we should accept the non-dictatorship condition.

If we do not give up the weak Pareto principle and non-dictatorship, what alternatives remain? One possibility is to sacrifice the demand for an ordering at the level of overall advantage. This involves giving up the search for a MAF altogether. For example, one might relax the requirement that the overall advantage relation (i.e. at least as good as in terms of overall advantage) is complete. If one takes this approach, one might look to see if we can find a procedure for getting from component advantage orderings to an overall advantage relation that is reflexive and transitive but not necessarily complete - a 'quasi-ordering'. Indeed, one might take this approach if one wishes to be 'silent' about some cases. If one takes this line then an analogue of the Pareto rule - which says that x is at least as good as y in terms of overall advantage if it is better in terms of at least one component of advantage, and at least as good in terms of all the components is acceptable. Sen suggests this as one possible 'partial ordering' (Sen, 1999a, p. 78). Elsewhere he suggests the possibility of a 'dominance partial order' (Sen, 1992, p. 46). In the present context, this would involve a rule which involves judging x to be better than y , if x is better than y in terms of all the components of advantage. This clearly does not violate any of the conditions described above. However, some worry about the extent of incompleteness implied by such rules (Chakraborty, 1996, p. 250).

Sen (1997a) himself has forcefully argued that incompleteness need not undermine rationality, and he has advanced a 'maximization' view of rationality which allows for such incompleteness. Furthermore, in Yongsheng Xu's attempt to axiomatise a capability measure - which imposes non-comparability of different functionings (Xu, 2002, p. 398) - the result is

also a quasi-ordering. Xu, nonetheless, accepts that if the informational base was richer - allowing for 'inter-functioning' comparisons - new possibilities may open up. This approach to axiomatising capability measures in terms of the informational basis for judgements of overall advantage mirrors Sen's own approach to the informational basis of social choice.

There are also arguments which suggest that the analogue of 'independence of irrelevant alternatives' is not an appropriate requirement to impose on deliberation in the context of multi-dimensional choice problems and a MAF (Hurley, 1989, pp. 234-241 and Qizilbash, 1997, p. 2013). One reason for this is that hypothetical alternatives may matter. Clearly, this would be relevant in the context of the condition of independence of irrelevant alternatives as a requirement on a MAF. For example, it might be that in considering two lives, w and z , I take w to be better than z as regards overall advantage. However, suppose that I am then asked to reconsider the value of two hypothetical lives: the lives of Socrates and the fool. If I change my overall evaluation of the quality of the lives of Socrates and the fool, it is quite plausible that I have altered my values, or the weights I give to different values, so that my ranking of w and z might also change. If one accepts this argument one might opt for rules which violate the independence condition. That would allow for the possibility of a MAF and one could adopt the 'rank-order' method developed by Jean-Charles de Borda. This method has proven to be very popular in the context of international comparisons of well-being (Dasgupta, 1993, Paul, 1997 and Qizilbash, 1997). One might, of course, go further and drop the requirement of non-comparability of the various dimensions of advantage. That would allow for the use of an aggregative index which might attach weights to different components. At the level of international rankings of the quality of life, the human development index (HDI) is one such index that can be seen as an application of the capability approach.

Nothing in Sen's 'thin view' commits one to following any one of these routes, since the thin view only advocates the spaces of capability and functioning. It is also worth noting that while Sen has focussed on the possibility of partial orderings - which do not depend on any inter-functioning comparisons - in his academic writings on capability and functioning, he was one of the creators of the HDI (Sen, 2000, p.22) so that he has himself taken different routes in applying the capability approach in different parts of his work.

3. Interpersonal and Intergroup Comparisons.

There are a number of levels at which interpersonal comparisons matter in the context of the capability approach. In advocating the significance of the 'spaces' of capability and functioning - i.e. in Sen's thin view - the importance of interpersonal variations in the conversion of resources or all-purpose means (i.e. John Rawls's 'primary goods') into the stuff of well-being or freedom is stressed (e.g. Sen, 1992 pp. 79-87). Equally, in explaining his thin view, Sen does not insist on any particular judgements on the relative value of various capabilities or functionings. His thin view is consistent with different evaluative judgements.

It is worth relating Sen's work on capability to some of his earlier work on social choice and inequality here. Sen's discussion of interpersonal comparisons of welfare in *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* and *On Economic Inequality* works within a framework for making comparisons which Sen inherited from others. It was something akin to the notion of one person thinking about what it would be like to be in another's shoes - formulated by William Vickrey (1945) and John Harsanyi (1955) - that underlies Sen's works on social choice and inequality. The relevant question for interpersonal comparisons is, essentially, whether one would prefer to be one person or another in some position (Sen, 1979, pp. 4-5 and 1997b, pp. 14-15). To make that judgement one may need to have a feel for what it would

be like to be in another person's shoes. However, Harsanyi's version of this argument was made in the context of worries about interpersonal comparisons of *welfare* - famously articulated by Lionel Robbins (1938) - which are particularly striking in the case of a preference based 'utility' calculus. Harsanyi famously responded to this problem by assuming a 'similarity postulate' - which states that once the differences that arise from our idiosyncratic tastes, upbringing etc. are removed we all have the same 'extended preferences' (Harsanyi, 1982, p. 103). It is not obvious that this problem carries over to the case of interpersonal comparisons in terms of capabilities and functionings.

In his later work, Harsanyi articulated a version of his account which invoked 'basic desires' which were common to all people (Harsanyi, 1995, pp. 23-4). The objects of these desires are, on his view, 'prudential values' which are constitutive of well-being. They include values such as: material comfort; physical security; freedom to control our lives; good health; a job suitable to our abilities and interests; deep personal relations in mutual love, in marriage, and in true friendship; to have children and be a good parent. (Harsanyi, 1997, p. 139). The list is a close relative of one developed by James Griffin (1986 and 1996). If one could find such a set of components which are shared across humanity, one would have the basis of a common currency of advantage. Of course, there are also variations on Sen's capability approach - such as that developed by Martha Nussbaum (1990, 1992 and 1995a) - which give an account of the components of a good life, based on an account of human nature. A 'list view' of this sort makes interpersonal comparisons less problematic, since it attempts to provide a list of goods which is relevant to, and shared by, all human beings. While Sen mentions various valuable capabilities, he does not offer a definitive list of such capabilities in his work. Part of the reason he has not offered such a list relates to social choice considerations which are discussed in the next section.

When it comes to how one actually makes interpersonal comparisons using the capability approach, Sen (1992, pp. 48-9 and 2002a, pp. 307-8) also explicitly refers to his work on social choice. In this part of his work, he distinguishes between various forms and degrees of interpersonal comparability - such as 'non-comparability', 'unit comparability' and 'full comparability' (Sen, 1979, chapters 7 and 8). There is, nonetheless, assumed to be a numerical representation of welfare in this discussion. Of course, given the earlier discussion of multi-dimensionality, such a representation may be out of reach. This point holds not just for capability or functioning measures, but also for measures based on a 'vector view' of utility (Sen, 1980-81) and other multi-dimensional accounts of advantage such as Rawls' 'primary goods' account. Nonetheless, even if one cannot arrive at a real number which captures overall advantage, one might nonetheless attempt measurement at the level of the individual components of advantage - such as literacy. Making a comparison in just one domain is what Sen terms a 'distinguished capability comparison' (Sen, 1999a, p. 82). So even with non-comparability of components, interpersonal comparisons based on a framework that uses numerical representation is not ruled out.

When the capability approach is actually used to examine issues which require interpersonal comparisons, it is hardly surprising that issues of multi-dimensionality are often set to one side and a capability index or functioning vector is simply taken to exist. An example of such an application is Herrero's exploration of the contrast between capability and 'utility' approaches to inequality. Herrero (1996, pp. 71-2) supposes that there are individual functioning indices - such as indices of health, education and so on - and assumes that a capability index exists, while allowing for different ways of arriving at such an index (Herrero, 1996, p. 75). Similarly, in their application of a functionings approach to the measurement of social exclusion, Bossert et al (2004, p.3) assume that 'there exists a measure

of functioning failure' for each individual, which allows for all the distinct functionings, and admit that as a consequence of this modelling choice, 'the multi-dimensionality aspect of social exclusion is not explicitly taken into consideration'.

The capability approach has also been applied at the group level. It has inspired work on international and inter-regional comparisons of the quality of life. In this context, inevitably, it matters a great deal if the various components of advantage are valued across the relevant regions or nations. It was argued earlier that a list of values or capabilities that might be endorsed by many or most human beings would be important for the possibility of interpersonal comparisons. Much the same holds for comparisons across groups (regions, nations etc.). Indeed, when the capability approach is used to make international comparisons using indices such as the HDI, one standard issue that is raised relates to differences in values across countries and groups and 'cultural relativism'.

Sen's unsurprisingly adopts a social choice approach in responding to the plurality of values. The standard concerns of social choice are relevant here at (at least) two levels. First, they may be relevant to the selection of components of advantage which are adopted in intergroup comparisons. I discuss this issue in the next section. There is also the question of the weights that ought to be attached to the various components of advantage in rankings that are used to make decisions. Here Sen suggests that if different people have different weights, we may still be able to pin down a range of weights within which their weights fall, and make judgements which hold for this range of weights. This is the so-called 'intersection' approach (Sen, 1992, pp. 46-49). The aim is to arrive at judgements that are widely shared. The approach is only relevant, of course, if one is willing to 'weight' the different components, which requires comparability of these components. Here we are in the realm of Sen's thick view. This view looks for consensus and judgements that are widely shared. The thin view, by

contrast, does not commit one to taking an intersection approach or indeed stop one from going for just one set of weights, with no further concern about agreement. Sen's discussion of weight pluralism has increasingly emphasised participation and social choice, and I now take up these issues.

4. Good Life Pluralism, Public Reason and Methodological Individualism.

As we have seen, Sen has avoided articulating a definitive list of functionings or capabilities. There is now a considerable literature on this subject. On the one hand, there are those who argue that one needs a list of some sort to operationalise the capability approach. Indeed, without a list, the capability approach might even be used in ways which conflict with the values and goals - such as development and gender equality - which the approach has helped to analyse (Nussbaum, 2003 and Robeyns, 2003). In this context, Martha Nussbaum has developed her own list of capabilities, which she accepts is open-ended and tentative. She argues that 'the capabilities approach will supply definite guidance, and prove an ally in the pursuit of sex equality, only if we formulate a definite list of the most central capabilities, even one that is tentative and revisable'. (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 36) Others have developed methodologies for the articulation of lists that can be used in particular contexts (Alkire, 2002 and Robeyns 2003). Similarly lists of the components of well-being are used in related accounts (Finnis, 1979, Griffin, 1986 and 1996, and Qizilbash, 1998). In most of these accounts there is some specific approach to dealing with the fact that people have different conceptions of the good life. Nussbaum has, in recent years, modified her list - which initially emerged from a reading of Aristotle - through discussion and dialogue with others and presented it as a list that can be part of an 'overlapping consensus' amongst people with different conceptions of the good life. Her search for consensus is heavily influenced by John Rawls' account of political liberalism (Rawls, 1993), which sees principles of justice as the

outcome of an agreement between citizens with different conceptions of the good.

While in his *Political Liberalism* Rawls restricts his account exclusively to liberal democracies, Nussbaum takes her view to apply universally. She deliberately leaves her list of capabilities vague so that it can be specified differently by various people (see particularly, Nussbaum, 1995a and 2000). To this extent, she allows for good life pluralism. Sen's strategy in developing the capability approach avoids such a list and involves simply giving examples of valuable capabilities - such as the ability to appear in public without shame, the ability to be adequately nourished and so on. There are a number of reasons why Sen avoids (or may wish to avoid) providing a definitive list. He is concerned that by providing such a list one might end up overspecifying the capability approach (Sen, 1993, p. 47). One of his reasons for being concerned about this is practical. He thinks that in different applications of the capability approach, different capabilities are relevant. In an application which relates to gender inequality in Britain, one list might be appropriate, while in another application relating to international comparisons of development by an international agency, another might be appropriate. He articulates the capability approach so that it is compatible with a wide range of lists and contexts of application. He also no doubt wishes, in many contexts, to leave it to others to define the list that is relevant to their context. This is clearly how his approach - as a thin view - deals with pluralism. However, a related reason for worrying about specifying a list in advocating the capability approach is that it runs the risk of alienating those who do not share some conception of the good life implicit in the list which is put forward. That could undermine the advocacy of the spaces of capability and functioning which is central in Sen's thin view. Sen has many reasons for leaving his approach 'incomplete' by not articulating a list. A similar point can be made about the different weights one might attach to valuable functionings or capabilities. Not endorsing any specific view of

the relative weights to be attached to any set of capabilities or functionings again allows Sen to leave his approach ‘incomplete’ but open to various different routes to ‘completion’. Good life pluralism is one of a range of reasons that leads Sen not to endorse any specific list.

However, Sen also has some relevant thoughts about how a list might actually be articulated. These thoughts are, I suggest, best thought of as part of his thick view. He is concerned about the different values that people have, and the way in which these values are filtered through into the process of public decision making. Given the broad sense of ‘social choice’ that he uses in his Nobel lecture, the selection of a list for use in public decision making is a problem of social choice. It is a question of coming to a list of items which people with a variety of values and conceptions of the good might endorse in some context. As regards consensus about functionings, he tells us that some functionings, such as being adequately nourished, being in good health etc. are ‘very elementary’ and ‘may be strongly valued by all, for obvious reasons’. Others may be ‘more complex, but still widely valued’ (Sen, 1993, p. 31).

Nonetheless, Sen typically worries about disagreement and lack of consensus at the level of *weights* rather than the selection of valued capabilities and functionings. What he says here is informative and also relevant to the issue of lists. He writes that:

It is of course crucial to ask, in any evaluative exercise of this kind, how the weights are to be selected. The judgmental exercise can be resolved only through reasoned evaluation. For a particular person, who is making his or her own judgements, the selection of weights will require reflection, rather than any interpersonal agreement (or consensus). However, in arriving at an ‘agreed’ range for *social evaluation* (for example, in social studies of poverty), there has to be some sort of consensus on weights, or at least on a range of weights. This is a social choice exercise, and it

requires public discussion and a democratic understanding and acceptance. (Sen, 1999a, pp. 78-9).

Sen's argument here is also relevant to lists. A list which some particular person uses to plan her life no doubt emerges from reflection and experience. Such reflection may lead members of society to endorse a wide range of lists of capabilities or functionings. For public decision making, the identification of a list would require a procedure for filtering these diverse lists into a widely shared list. For this to be a genuine exercise in social choice, one must allow for a wide range of 'voices' in determining the list through public discussion.

Here Sen's concern with social choice is related to John Rawls' notion of 'public reason' in *Political Liberalism*. Rawls (1993, pp. 212-3) writes that:

A political society, and indeed, every reasonable and rational agent, whether it be an individual, family, or an association, or even a confederation of political societies, has a way of formulating its plans, of putting its ends in an order of priority and of making its decisions accordingly. The way a political society does this is its reason, its ability to do these things is also its reason, though in a different sense: it is an intellectual and moral power rooted in the capacities of its human members.

In some of his recent writings, particularly his writings on democracy, Sen focusses on Rawls' idea of the 'exercise of public reason' which, for Sen, 'includes the opportunity for citizens to participate in political discussions and so to be in a position to influence public choice' (Sen, 2003, p. 29). Part of Sen's motivation for taking this approach is that it is 'broader' than approaches that see democracy exclusively in terms of voting. Furthermore, on Sen's view this view of public reason allows for what Rawls calls the 'fact of pluralism' which includes a 'diversity of doctrines' (Sen, 2003, 29) and different conceptions of the good. Sen's discussion of Rawls' notion of 'the exercise of public reason' thus gives a central

role to participation, public discussion and tolerance of a broad range of views. It is this notion which also underlies Sen's view of lists and weights.

No doubt the 'exercise of public reason' that Sen has in mind must be different in various contexts. An international organisation, deciding on the components of advantage that should play a role in evaluating progress in reducing poverty, might consult and seek the endorsement of various country representatives and experts. It may also consult participatory studies which attempt to capture the voices of the less advantaged. Without such a process of participation by various relevant country representatives or citizens, the list which is used to evaluate progress in poverty reduction may be of little use because it lacks legitimacy. In a different context, such as the choice of a poverty index for the purposes of inter-provincial rankings of poverty at the national level, a different procedure might be appropriate.

Of course, this 'public reason approach' need not rule out any specific list of capabilities - such as Nussbaum's list or any particular methodology for arriving at a list. Rather, it suggests that for Nussbaum's list, and other lists and methodologies, to play a role in some specific context would require endorsement through a process which involves relevant parties. As a matter of accountability, furthermore, the list used (and other evaluative decisions) ought to be transparent and open for public discussion. This is the approach that Sen takes - for example - in the context of the weights used in the HDI and other indices developed by the UNDP.

An approach which sees a list of capabilities or components of advantage as an object of social choice and public reasoning is, nonetheless, quite different from various alternative approaches. So, for example, in some of Nussbaum's work (especially Nussbaum, 1995b), as well as the works of others like James Griffin and John Harsanyi, the relevant capabilities (in Nussbaum's case) and prudential values (for Griffin and Harsanyi) are identified through an

abstract account of human nature (in Griffin's case, see Griffin, 1996, pp. 53-4) or through some presumption about the relation between basic desires and human nature based on empirical observation (Harsanyi, 1995, p. 323). In as much as these capabilities or values are thought of as universal, the items on these lists are strong contenders for consideration in any list which might be considered in public debate where one is concerned with shared values.⁴ In fact, the list that emerges from the sort of exercise of public reasoning that Sen has in mind may actually be closely related to a list which attempts to capture universal values. Furthermore, the lists we adopt (explicitly or implicitly) in defining our own life plans are not inconsistent with the social choice approach. In fact, the social choice approach described here *assumes* that we all have such values. The issue for social choice, at one level, is to decide on how we can come to a list of values to be used in public decision making given value and good life pluralism.⁵

Similar considerations are relevant to weight pluralism. Of course, axiomatic social choice theory can offer some insights here. For example, Achin Chakraborty (1996) has attempted to provide a solution to the problem of arriving at a 'common set of weights attached to the set of functionings by all the individuals in society' (Chakraborty, 1996, p. 245). He does so by finding a set of reasonable axioms which imply that the common set of weights should just be the average of the set of weights endorsed by different people (Chakraborty, 1996, p. 247). If one has information on the weights attached by different people, this is an attractive solution. However, this solution is not in the spirit of Sen's discussion. In applying his 'intersection approach' Sen clearly has in mind a less formal, potentially more messy, approach. He writes that :

There is an interesting choice between 'technocracy and 'democracy' in the selection of weights... A choice procedure that relies on a democratic search for agreement or

consensus can be extremely messy, and many technocrats are sufficiently disgusted with its messiness to pine for some magic formula that would give us ready-made weights that are 'just right.' However, no such magic formula does, of course, exist, since the issue of weighting is one of valuation and judgement, and not one of some impersonal technology. We are not prevented, by any means, from proposing that some particular formula - rather than any alternative formula - be used for aggregation, but in this inescapably social-choice exercise its status must depend on its acceptability to others. Sen (1999a, p. 79)

Sen clearly has in mind something akin to a process of public reasoning here, rather than a set of axioms that can identify an aggregation procedure for weights. Such an aggregation procedure, and composite indicators based on it, can nonetheless play a role in public discussion and social choice. So while the standard tools of modern social choice theory may be useful, Sen's thick view stresses the importance of forms of public reasoning that are not necessarily best understood through a formal axiomatic approach.

One might criticise Sen's thick view by arguing that if a list of capabilities which is to be used to evaluate the quality of life emerges from public debate and scrutiny, the list that will reflect the power inequalities that exist in political life. That may be a problem when it comes to attempting to root out poverty and so on. This is certainly an important caveat about participation as an appropriate process of arriving at a list of capabilities or functionings. Yet it is not clear that *avoiding* participation and public debate will necessarily bypass this problem. Leaving an expert or a philosopher to 'dictate' the list may itself involve importing distortions which arise from the status quo in society into the list. If one is seriously concerned about this problem, a more plausible response to it might involve being concerned about the nature of the process of participation and ensuring that it does not exclude or

marginalise certain groups. Of course, on Sen's account of public reasoning, a wide range of viewpoints must be allowed for, so that this point is explicitly addressed.

Finally, it was earlier noted that Sen's capability approach is on occasion accused of 'methodological individualism'. One version of this accusation is articulated by Frances Stewart and Severine Deneulin (2002). Here the distinction between the thin and thick views is relevant. On Sen's thin view the capability approach is concerned with states of a person and the collections of functionings from which she can choose, and the central claim is about the significance of the 'spaces' of capability and functioning. This thin view can be seen as individualistic, in as much as it does not, in itself stress (or even mention) the importance of social institutions which make the exercise of capabilities possible. It is only meant to provide a general framework. However, this is too simple because as Sen notes, his worries about mental conditioning and 'adaptive preferences' - which are invoked in his thin view to discredit the 'utility' space - involve the relationship between individual attitudes and social structures in a way which is far from individualistic (Sen, 2002b, pp. 80-1).

On the other hand, Sen's thick view does emphasise the importance of social choice and participation in a way that is not especially individualistic. Stewart and Deneulin suggest that the capability approach involves a form of individualism in which 'individuals are assumed to come together for instrumental reasons only, and not as an intrinsic aspect of their way of life' (Stewart and Deneulin, 2002, p. 66). This suggestion lacks force in the context of Sen's thick view. It is also an odd criticism of Sen's approach, inasmuch as Sen often mentions the ability to participate in the life of the community as an example of a valuable capability, and he clearly sees such participation as intrinsically, rather than merely instrumentally, valuable. So when, in his response to Stewart and Deneulin's criticism, Sen suggests that 'democratic freedom is a significant *ingredient* - a critically important

component - of individual capabilities' he goes on to add that 'human beings live and interact in societies, and are, in fact societal creatures. It is not surprising that they cannot fully flourish without participating in political and social affairs, and without being effectively involved in joint decision making' (Sen, 2002b, p. 79).

In the context of 'individualism', Peter Evans (2002) has also argued that Sen's focus on individual capability fails to see 'collective capabilities' as important. In fact, in his response to Evans, Sen (2002b, p. 85) articulates a useful definition of a 'collective capability': a capability which we cannot exercise as individuals but only as a collective. Evans sees such capabilities as especially important in relation to collective action which can play a role in poverty reduction. However, there is no inconsistency between advocating the capability approach and at the same time seeing the importance of collective action. The question is whether adding the notion of 'collective capability' is a fruitful way of extending the capability approach.

In addressing this question, it is worth considering various forms of 'collective capability'. Sen considers some which are negative and one which is positive. Under the first category, he lists the ability to destroy the world with nuclear weapons, and 'the capability of Hutu activists to decimate the Tutsis'. In the second category, he includes the ability to cut child mortality drastically (Sen, 2002b, p. 85). Clearly, the priorities that governments set can affect whether a society can exercise one or other of these 'collective capabilities'. In fact, one might even see one of the negative 'collective capabilities' mentioned above in a positive light, relating to the security offered by a nuclear deterrent. If we do, then within the framework of social choice, various dimensions of advantage - such as security and health - can be thought of as being realised in different social states (broadly conceived) which may be potential options. Suppose that one set of government priorities would be more likely to

make a social state which involves drastically cutting child mortality a genuine alternative. Citizens might easily act to favour some policy - through political participation - to make the realisation of this state more likely. They might do so because they think that health is more important than security, or because they conclude that nuclear weapons do not really enhance security by offering a deterrent. This description of the recognition of the importance a society, and its members, give to a state of affairs in which child mortality can be reduced and actions that may be taken to make the realisation of that state more likely seems to capture all that is important about the relevant 'collective capability' without actually using the notion of a 'collective capability'. To the extent that this is so, a social choice perspective suggests that there is no strong reason to expand the language of capability to allow for considerations which relate to 'collective capabilities'.

4. Conclusions.

This paper has explored links and contrasts between social choice theory and the capability approach, and has focussed, for the most part, on one link - pluralism. By doing so, it has clarified some levels at which the Amartya Sen's work on capability is informed by a social choice perspective. It has distinguished Sen's thin view - which merely advocates the importance of capability and functioning as 'spaces' for evaluation - from his thick view, which goes beyond such a narrow advocacy in suggesting particular methods of using and applying the capability and functioning spaces for making social judgements. Since the capability approach suggests that advantage is multi-dimensional, there is also an impossibility result relating to a MAF which is analogous to Arrow's famous result. A social choice perspective suggests ways of responding to this result. Resorting to partial or quasi-orderings is one relevant response which Sen favours. In developing his thick view, Sen also invokes his earlier work on social choice theory in the context of inter-personal comparisons,

though he does not focus on the possibility that a shared realm of human capabilities and functionings may in itself facilitate the making of interpersonal comparisons. In responding to issues relating to weight pluralism and good life pluralism, Sen shies away from evaluative judgements in articulating his thin view. However, his thick view is based on a social choice perspective which involves the Rawlsian notion of public reason. This view is not obviously individualistic, and a social choice perspective can make space for concerns that are discussed under the notion of ‘collective capabilities.’

References

- Alkire, S. (2002) *Valuing Freedoms: Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Arrow, K.J. (1951) *Social Choice and Individual Values*, New York, London and Sidney: John Wiley&Sons.
- Arrow, K.J. and Raynaud, H. (1986) *Social Choice and Multicriterion Decision-Making*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press.
- Barrett C.R and Pattanaik, P.K. (1989) Fuzzy Sets, preference and choice: some conceptual issues, *Bulletin of Economic Research*, 41, 229-53.
- Basu, K. (1987) Achievements, capabilities and well-being: A Review of *Commodities and Capabilities* by Amartya Sen, *Social Choice and Welfare*, 4, 69-76.
- Basu, K. and Foster, J. (1998) On measuring literacy, *Economic Journal*, 108, 1733-49.
- Bossert, W. D'Ambrosio and Peragine, V. (2004) Deprivation and Social Exclusion, CIREQ, Cahier 02-2004: Montreal.
- Chiappero-Martinetti, E. (1994) A new approach to the evaluation of well-being and poverty by fuzzy set theory, *Giornale Degli Economisti e Annali di Economia*, 53: 367-88.
- Chiappero-Martinetti, E. (1996) Standard of living evaluation based on Sen's approach: some

methodological suggestions, *Notizie di Politeia* 12 (Special Issue): 37-53.

Chiappero-Martinetti, E. (2000) A multi-dimensional assessment of well-being and poverty by fuzzy set theory,' *Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Sociali*, CVIII: 207-31.

Chakraborty, A. (1996) On the possibility of a weighting system for functionings, *Indian Economic Review*, XXXI, No.2.: 241-50.

Dasgupta, P. (1993) *An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Dasgupta, M. and Deb, R., (1991) Fuzzy choice functions, *Social Choice and Welfare*, 8: 171-182.

Dasgupta, M. and Deb, R., (1996) Transitivity and fuzzy preferences, *Social Choice and Welfare*, 13: 305-318.

Evans, P. (2002) Collective Capabilities, Culture, and Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom*, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 37, No.2: 54-60.

Finnis, J. (1979) *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Griffin, J. (1986) *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance*, Clarendon Press: Oxford.

Griffin, J. (1996) *Value Judgement: Improving Our Ethical Beliefs*, Clarendon Press Oxford.

Harsanyi, J. (1955) Cardinal welfare, individualistic ethics and interpersonal comparisons of utility, *Journal of Political Economy* 63: 309-321.

Harsanyi, J. (1982) Morality and the theory of rational behaviour, in A.K. Sen and B.A.O. Williams (eds) *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Harsanyi, J. (1995) A theory of prudential values and a rule utilitarian theory of morality, *Social Choice and Welfare*, 12: 319-33.

Harsanyi, J. (1997) Utilities, preferences and substantive goods, *Social Choice and Welfare*,

14: 129-145.

Herrero, C. (1996) Capabilities and utilities, *Economic Design*, 2: 69-88.

Hurley, S. (1989) *Natural Reasons*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Nussbaum, M.C. (1990) Aristotelian social democracy, in B. Douglass, G. Mara and H. Richardson (eds) *Liberalism and the Good*, Routledge: London.

Nussbaum, M.C. (1992) Human functioning and social justice. In defence of Aristotelian essentialism, *Political Theory*, 20: 202-46.

Nussbaum, M.C. (1995a) Human capabilities, female human beings, in M. C. Nussbaum and J. Glover (eds) *Women, Culture and Development*, Clarendon Press: Oxford.

Nussbaum, M.C. (1995b) Aristotle on human nature and the foundations of ethics, in J.E.J. Altham and R. Harrison (eds) *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Nussbaum, M.C. (2000) *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Nussbaum, M.C. (2003) Capabilities as fundamental entitlements, *Feminist Economics*, 9, Nos.2-3: 33-59.

Pattanaik, P.K. and Xu, Y. (1990) On ranking opportunity sets in terms of freedom of choice, *Recherches Economique de Louvain*, 56: 383-390.

Paul, S. (1997) The quality of life: an international comparison based on ordinal measures, *Applied Economic Letters*, 4: 411-14.

Qizilbash, M. (1997) Pluralism and well-being indices, *World Development*, 25, No. 12: 2009-26.

Qizilbash, M. (1998) The concept of well-being, *Economics and Philosophy*, 14: 51-73.

Qizilbash, M. (2002) Development, common foes and shared values, *Review of Political*

Economy, 14, No. 4: 463-480.

Qizilbash, M. (2004) Well-being, adaptation and human limitations, Paper presented at the conference on Preference Formation and Well-Being, St. John's College, Cambridge, 16 July 2004.

Rawls, J. (1993) *Political Liberalism*, Columbia: Columbia University Press.

Robeyns, I., (2003) Sen's capability approach and gender inequality: selecting relevant capabilities, *Feminist Economics*, 9, Nos. 2-3: 61-92.

Robbins, L.C. (1938) On interpersonal comparisons of utility, *Economic Journal*, 48: 638-41.

Sen, A.K. (1970) The impossibility of a Paretian liberal, *Journal of Political Economy* 78, No.1: 152-57.

Sen, A.K. (1979) *Collective Choice and Social Welfare*, North Holland: Amsterdam.

Sen, A.K (1980-1) Plural utility, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 81:193-215.

Sen, A.K. (1985) *Commodities and capabilities*, Amsterdam: North Holland.

Sen, A.K. (1992) *Inequality Reexamined* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sen, A.K. (1993) Capability and well-being, in: M. C. Nussbaum and A. K. Sen (Eds), *The Quality of Life* Clarendon Press: Oxford.

Sen, A.K. (1995) Rationality and social choice, *American Economic Review*, 85, No. 1: 1-24.

Sen, A.K. (1997a) Maximization and the act of choice, *Econometrica*, 65: 745-779.

Sen, A.K. (1997b) *On Economic Inequality*, Expanded Edition with a Substantial Annexe by James E. Foster and Amartya Sen, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sen, A.K. (1997c) Individual preference as the basis of social choice, in K.J. Arrow, A.K. Sen and K. Suzumura (eds.) *Social Choice Re-examined* Vol.2 New York: St. Martin's Press.

Sen, A.K (1999a), *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press: Oxford..

Sen, A.K. (1999b), The possibility of social choice, *American Economic Review*, 89, No. 3:

349-378.

Sen, A.K (2000) A decade of human development, *Journal of Human Development*, (1), 17-23.

Sen, A.K (2002a) *Rationality and Freedom*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge Mass. and London.

Sen, A.K. (2002b) Response to commentaries, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 37, No.2: 78-86.

Sen, A.K. (2003) Democracy and its global roots. Why democratization is not the same as Westernization. *The New Republic* October 6, pp. 28-35.

Stewart, F. and Deneulin, S. (2002) Amartya Sen's contribution to development thinking, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 37, No.2: 61-70.

Vickrey, W (1945) Measuring marginal utility by reactions to risk, *Econometrica*, 13.

Xu, Y. (2002) Functioning, capability and the standard of living - an axiomatic approach, *Economic Theory*, 20: 387-399.

Notes.

1. On the relevance of this point to Sen's capability approach see Sumner (1996) and Qizilbash (2004).
2. This is quite aside from the considerable literature on the measurement of opportunity and freedom. On this see Pattanaik and Xu (1990) and Sen's first and third Arrow lectures (Sen 2002a) *inter alia*.
3. Sen allows for this distinction between plurality of components and non-comparability of these components in his 'vector view' of utility (Sen, 1980-1). It is made much more explicitly by James Griffin (1986).
4. On the complex relationship between various lists and shared values, see Qizilbash (2002).
5. Nonetheless, Sen typically reminds us that democratic processes and participation may also have an instrumental role in helping us to *form* some of our values. See, for example, Sen (1995, p.16)