

# **On a (non-trivial) difference between Sen and Nussbaum on the capability approach\***

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**Abstract:**

While commenting on the capability approach, some scholars on 'development ethics' have indicated differences between Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. This essay further brings out the implications of their differences with the help of a framework of well-being assessment that makes a distinction between the two aspects of assessment, viz. identification and evaluation. While on identification Sen is somewhat close to an essentialist position, on evaluation he takes a more relativist position. Since Nussbaum does not recognize the possibility of trade-off between human functionings, the two aspects do not have distinct status in her view. We argue that while this difference leaves open the possibility of a non-essentialist capability approach in Sen's version, Nussbaum's version forecloses it.

**Key words:** Well-being, functioning, capability, development ethic, essentialism, relativism.

## **Introduction**

In a series of essays, Martha Nussbaum (1988, 1992, 1993, 1995) aims at complementing Amartya Sen's ideas on 'capability ethic' by drawing our attention to the Aristotelian tradition and

providing a kind of essentialist foundation to the capability approach. At the general level, for both Sen and Nussbaum development means expansion of human capabilities to function. And their moral inquiry leads to the evaluative approach that advocates the space of capabilities and functionings for assessing well-being. We do not find much difference between them at this very general level. Several scholars on development ethics, however, have attempted detailed assessment of contributions of Sen and Nussbaum to capability ethic and brought out the implications of the variety of their positions and foundational arguments. David Crocker, for example, in his earlier paper (Crocker, 1992), was more interested in forging their contributions together to characterize a joint vision rather than bringing out the differences between them. In a subsequent essay (Crocker, 1995), however, while indicating gaps and possibilities of extensions in the works of both, he brought out quite a few important differences between the two thinkers. Mozaffar Qizilbash (1996) identifies some differences, but feels that Nussbaum's is a better account because it aims at avoiding "many of the difficulties with Sen's approach". Des Gasper (1997), however, argues that Nussbaum's approach "could perhaps jeopardize gains from Sen's deliberately less ambitious version" (p 281).

In this essay, following the trail of some of these recent writings, we further bring out a few important points of difference between the two leading thinkers, and argue that the differences are not trivial as far as development theory-practice is concerned. While we agree with Gasper's characterization of Sen's version of the capability approach as a deliberately less ambitious one, the approach that we follow here differs significantly from Gasper's.

We view the whole exercise of assessing well-being as consisting of several separable aspects. Part of the purpose of taking this view is to offer a way of thinking about various evaluative positions.

### **Three aspects of well-being assessment**

We start from an individual's well-being. Assessment of an individual's well-being involves at least three distinct aspects<sup>1</sup>:

1. *Identification* of the characteristics or dimensions  $x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n$  which are considered to be relevant for the individual's well-being.
2. Obtaining some *measure* of the relevant characteristics (this will give a vector of numbers which we call, for convenience, the "profile" of the individual).
3. Specifying the manner in which the profile is *evaluated* (i.e. issues in valuation and aggregation).

The first aspect refers to the choice of an appropriate space in which the evaluative exercise is to be carried out. Well-known alternatives are utility, income, commodities, commodity characteristics, Rawlsian primary goods, functionings and capabilities. There is a fundamental difference between the approaches which are based on income, commodity, or commodity

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<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly modified way of stating the two questions that Sen asks in the context of an evaluative exercise: (1) *What* are the objects of value? (2) *How valuable* are the respective objects? (Sen, 1993, p 32).

characteristics as the relevant space and those which advocate utility or functionings and capabilities. Whereas income, commodities, and ‘characteristics’ are regarded as ‘inputs’ to achieve certain goals that an individual considers valuable, utility and functionings should be seen as ‘outcomes’ (Dasgupta, 1990). Sen and Nussbaum argue for their particular outcome-based approach on ethical ground. In practice, however, a typical multidimensional measure of well-being often takes a combination of both types of information in an eclectic fashion, sometimes using one type of information as a proxy for the other<sup>2</sup>.

Implicit in the choice of space is certain notion of ‘the good’. The capability approach sees the evaluative space in terms of functionings and capabilities to function. Sen has decisively argued against some of the alternative evaluative spaces like utility, commodities and Rawlsian primary goods<sup>3</sup>. Once the choice of the most appropriate space is made, the next step is to identify the elements –  $x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n$  – which are objects of value.

It might appear from what we have just discussed that an individual’s well-being is measured here by the vector of functioning levels achieved (or ‘chosen’) by the individual, which is a narrower notion than what Sen suggests. It is well-known that Sen’s emphasis is on the set of functioning bundles available to the individual rather than the achieved functioning bundle. It can be shown that both the narrower and the broader notions of well-being are consistent with our framework for assessment. The identification part of the exercise remains the same in both cases. Whether we measure an individual’s well-being by the achieved vector or the set of available vectors, we need to identify first the elements to be included in a typical vector of functionings.

Does the capabilities approach show a natural (or obvious) way to arrive at a common set of functionings which are considered valuable across societies? In an attempt to find an answer to this question we identify quite a few crucial differences between Sen and Nussbaum, which would have important implications. Before we deal with them we discuss in brief the second and the third aspects mentioned above. This will be of help later.

The second aspect refers to the measurement issues. Questions about measurement often take the form: Is  $X$  measurable (where  $X$  is some property such as happiness, desire, beauty, ‘being able to appear in public without shame’, and so forth)? According to the dominant conception of measurement, this question is not very meaningful, because everything is held to be capable of

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<sup>2</sup> While comparing living standards across countries, Dasgupta and Weale (1992) takes the position that neither a resource-based approach nor an outcome-based approach on its own adequately captures what we wish to see included in any conception of the standard of living. Dasgupta and Weale seem to be viewing the two approaches in terms of what Sen calls ‘constitutive plurality’. But conceptually speaking, these two approaches should rather be viewed in terms of ‘competitive plurality’, Sen would say. For a distinction between the two notions of plurality, see Sen (1987).

<sup>3</sup> Sen’s criticism of Rawlsian primary goods seems less decisive than that of utility and commodities. Rawls’s approach seems stronger than Sen’s charges of ‘fetishism’ and ‘inflexibility’ suggest. For a detailed discussion, see Chakraborty (1995), which draws on some argument found in Daniels (1990).

measurement of some sort (Savage and Ehrlich, 1992). By measurement what we mean here is assignment of numerals to objects or events according to any rule. Then, the relevant question for us would rather be: What sort of measurement is X capable of?

Once the evaluative space is decided upon and the measurement issues are adequately dealt with, we are left with (1) a vector representation of an individual's 'profile', if well-being is measured only by the levels of achieved functioning levels; or (2) a set representation if we take the set of available vectors as the measure of well-being; or, (3) an ordered pair of a set and a vector if well-being is measured by both the vector of achieved functionings and the set of available vectors of functionings.

We can stop at this point and assert that the individual's standard of living is given by her profile (which is a vector or a set or an ordered pair of a vector and a set). Do we have to somehow combine the elements of her profile into a unitary index of well-being? Clearly, such a procedure is not necessary. We can make interpersonal or intertemporal comparisons by the logic of vector dominance. There might be cases where one vector (or an ordered pair of a vector and a set) dominated – either weakly or strongly – another. In general, however, we cannot expect to find vector dominance to hold in most of the situations of comparisons. In other words, we end up with what is called a 'dominance partial order', instead of an ordering<sup>4</sup>. Sen suggests that this dominance ranking often takes us quite a distance. For good reason, he is not in favor of forcing an arbitrary aggregation procedure on the vector of functionings. Nevertheless, to aggregate or not to aggregate remains a question<sup>5</sup>.

### **Essentialism, perfectionism, and all that**

The brief discussion on the three aspects of assessment of an individual's living standard indicates that the foundational arguments for the capability approach at the general level may require further specification in order to deal with the questions thrown up at the specific levels of identification, measurement and valuation. One could provide foundational arguments for a variety of philosophical positions on each aspect. One could, for example, take an essentialist position while *identifying* the elements that constitute a person's living standard, and a relativist position on the question of *aggregation*. By essentialism what we mean here is the belief that there is a core cross-culturally invariant set of objects which every human being is supposed to value. A relativist would deny the existence of such a set.

At this point it would be useful to introduce another kind of binary classification of different approaches to the notion of the good. One of the major themes in ancient moral and political thinking seems to be an ethical reasoning of the following kind. The starting point is a view about

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<sup>4</sup> An ordering is defined as a binary relation which is reflexive, transitive and complete. If a binary relation is reflexive and transitive but not complete, it is called a partial ordering.

<sup>5</sup> These issues are discussed in Chakraborty (1995). For an axiomatic characterization of an aggregation rule for functionings, see Chakraborty (1996).

human nature. It is generally assumed that human beings, by nature, are endowed with certain property. The life of a human being is considered to have attained its best if this property is exemplified to the highest degree achievable by the species. Not all political systems are favorable to this end. The best political structure is one in which this property is exemplified to the highest degree possible by all who participate in it. Since, according to this view, the objective of ethics and politics is considered to be perfection of human nature, this view is called perfectionism. This idea is to be found in philosophers whose ideas are otherwise diametrically opposed to each other. For example, both Marx and Aristotle may be interpreted as perfectionists. Their different ethical and political conclusions, one might argue, followed from their contrasting views of human nature<sup>6</sup>.

What does this have to do with assessment of well-being? According to a perfectionist account, the nature of well-being is determined by the choice of the theory of human nature. Utilitarianism is a non-perfectionist theory of the good since it is not grounded on any notion of human nature. Considerations of human nature within utilitarianism are relevant only in so far as they contribute to the production of pleasure or happiness. Can there be a conflict between the two? What happens if what is good according to human nature does not produce happiness? A utilitarian would go by happiness (or desire fulfillment) rather than what is good according to certain notion of human nature. Sen, however, rejects happiness or desire fulfillment as the appropriate metric for reckoning well-being. Is the alternative Sen proposes perfectionist? It is not clear from Sen's writings. In his attempt to provide a foundational theory of the good, he carefully leaves several possibilities open. However, his occasional reference to an Aristotelian connection apparently brings him close to perfectionism, although he carefully distances himself from Nussbaum's invocation of 'Aristotelian essentialism', which is unambiguously perfectionist.

Perfectionism provides what is commonly understood as an objective account of the good life. A perfectionist would deny the possibility of any conflict between the well-being of an individual and her perfectionist values. But this might go against our intuition about what an adequate concept of well-being should include. Consider a person convicted on the charges of blasphemy in a religious state. A perfectionist position derived from certain notion of human nature may suggest that it would be 'good' for the person if he spent some time in prison. But as far as his well-being is concerned, we would hesitate to say that he is having a good life. And this seems to be the major weakness of a perfectionist theory of the good. This is so because a perfectionist evaluation imposes on an individual standards derived from the species as a whole. In an attempt to get around the problems emanating from the subjective nature of welfarism, perfectionism tends to impose a rigid objective account of well-being which may give rise to troublesome implications<sup>7</sup>. With these general observations let us now turn to the arguments that Nussbaum has advanced in defense of the capabilities approach.

### **Nussbaum's non-metaphysical essentialism**

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<sup>6</sup> Whether or not Marx consistently maintained a view on human nature throughout his life is a matter of intense debate. See Geras (1983) for references to various positions and defense of a particular position on this.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the contrast between perfectionism and welfarism, see Sumner (1992).

As we noted earlier, the crucial question is: To evaluate an individual's well-being, how does one arrive at a set of relevant functionings or capabilities? Sen clearly rejects the view that his approach requires that there is just one list of functionings (Sen, 1993, p 47). Although an interpersonal comparison of well-being requires there be a common set of functionings which all the individuals within a group share, there is no unique way of arriving at this common set. And this seems to be a matter of strength of Sen's approach for reasons we discuss later in this paper. Ironically, Qizilbash (1996) criticizes Sen precisely on this ground. He says "[Sen] fails to give a list of capabilities, or functionings, associated with human flourishing, a complete account of interpersonal comparisons..." (p1212).

Nussbaum too is not in favor of leaving it where Sen does. In her attempt to 'close' the open ends of Sen's approach she puts forward a perfectionist kind of defense of the functionings and capabilities approach by invoking what she calls 'Aristotelian essentialism'. She urges that "Sen needs to be more radical than he has been so far...by introducing an objective normative account of human functioning and by describing a procedure of objective evaluation by which functionings can be assessed for their contribution to the good human life (Nussbaum, 1988, p 176)".

Essentialism, in the sense Nussbaum uses the word, refers to the "view that human life has certain central defining features (Nussbaum, 1992, p 205)". The standard attack on this form of essentialism runs in terms of an ignorance of history, lack of sensitivity to diversity of cultural practices, lack of sensitivity to the voices of women and minorities, and so on. Nussbaum argues that "the legitimate criticisms of essentialism still leave room for essentialism of a kind: for a historically sensitive account of the most basic human needs and human functions (Nussbaum 1992, p 205)". Thus she makes a distinction between two kinds of essentialism – "metaphysical-realist" and "internalist" -- and argues that the latter can survive through some of the attacks usually leveled against the former. According to her, it is possible to think about a more or less determinate account of the human being which might emerge from an examination of human history and human cognition. Such an examination, she argues, need not presuppose an external metaphysical foundation. And she proposes a version of such a "historically grounded essentialism".

Nussbaum (1992) makes an attempt to construct a list of the most important functions of the human being in terms of which human life is defined. For our purpose it is not necessary to reproduce the list here. We rather make a few observations on the notion of human being that Nussbaum seems to hold. She writes

All animals nourish themselves, use their senses, move about, and so forth; what is distinctive and distinctively valuable to us about the human way of doing all this is that each and every one of these functions is, first of all, planned and organized by practical reason and, second, done with and to others. Human nourishing is not like animal nourishing, nor human sex like animal sex, because human beings can choose to regulate their nutrition and their sexual activity by their very own practical reason; also because they do so not as solitary Cyclopes (who would eat anything at all, even their own guests) but as beings who are bound to other human beings by ties of mutual attention and concern (Nussbaum 1992, pp 222-3).

## Essentialism of Aristotle or Marx?

At a superficial level one can notice very broad similarities between the account quoted above and that found in the early works of Marx. But at a deeper level the two accounts direct us to distinctly different implications. We briefly discuss how Marx distanced himself from the earlier philosophical tradition as far as the concept of human nature is concerned<sup>8</sup>. The critical word in the passage quoted above is 'reason'. According to Aristotle, 'life according to reason' is the defining characteristic of human beings. Marx's notion of 'free conscious activity', however, can be viewed as a generalization of 'reason' or 'practical reason'. The central point that Marx makes is that it is through productive activity that human beings actualize themselves as human beings. In other words, it is not thought per se or a contemplative life that constitutes the good for human beings. Rather, it is our ability to structure the material world in accordance with our own purposes that is distinctive about human beings. Thought or 'reason' is considered to be one of the elements of such self-realization<sup>9</sup>.

Marx's theory, on this interpretation, is clearly in contrast with the standard approach to economic welfare. The models of economic activity treat all human activities as consumptive, where leisure is treated as pleasure. Although Nussbaum's Aristotelianism clearly departs from a consumptive view of human essence, one might argue that her 'thick vague conception' could possibly be enriched by an explicit recognition of the centrality of 'free conscious labor' as put forward by Marx. Jon Elster (1986) too has attempted to defend 'active self-realization' as 'the Marxist conception of the good life' both on welfarist and nonwelfarist grounds.

At this point, it may appear to the reader that we are arguing in favor of one kind of essentialism in opposition to another. On the contrary, what we are trying to show is that, without the help of a meta-theoretical argument, there is no way to settle on one kind of essentialism vis-a-vis another. Besides, essentialism of different forms share some common problems, and any attempt to get around those problems would eventually take us to a position which can no longer be meaningfully called essentialist. This point will be further elaborated in the next section.

Nussbaum's Aristotelian essentialism is undoubtedly an important intervention in the development discourse. One is, however, troubled by the fact that Aristotle sanctions a vast array of invidious social, racial, and sexual prejudices too. How does one then deal with this anachronism that pervades Aristotle's thought? This question should rather be left to the scholars of Aristotle who have been debating on whether or not Aristotle's entire family of thought should be treated as a totality<sup>10</sup>.

For us what is relevant is that in modern societies we encounter a pluralism of individual lifestyles

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<sup>8</sup> Opinions, however, differ on whether Marx continued to hold his view about human nature in his later work. The belief that Marx's historical materialism entailed a denial of the concept of human nature is held by some prominent Marxists like Althusser (1969). We need not enter into that controversy here. See Geras (1983), Wartenberg (1982) for 'pro-human nature' positions.

<sup>9</sup> This line of argument has been drawn from Wartenberg (1982).

<sup>10</sup> See Wallach (1992) for an overview of various 'Aristotelianisms'.

and collective forms of life and a corresponding multiplicity of ideas of the good life. Does Nussbaum's non-metaphysical essentialism help us find a way to deal with this plural conception of good life? Faced with this plurality, one can think of two possible positions. One possibility is supporting the claim of classical philosophy that it is possible to place competing ways of life in a hierarchy and establish at its top one privileged way of life over against all others. Alternatively, one has to accept the principle of tolerance according to which one view of life is as good as any other, or at least has equal right to exist and be recognized. Although Nussbaum has chosen the first route, she is not insensitive to diversities. To make her approach sensitive to diversities, what she proposes is that one should work one's way through a proliferating multiplicity of practices, traditions, and biographical patterns of life in order to reach a single privileged complex of distinguishing characteristics of good life. Relativists would argue that such a cross-culturally common set of characteristics hardly exists. Both Sen and Nussbaum, however, are optimistic about the possibility of an agreement on a common set. Where do they differ, then?

### **One kind of difference and what it implies**

Although Sen believes in the possibility of an objective theory of the good, he does not seem to extend his objectivity as far as the question of valuation. By valuation we mean a rule which would enable us to attach relative weights to the diverse array of "doings" and "beings" that an individual is able to achieve. The question of valuation arises from the fact that relative valuation of different functionings might be different. In other words, Sen allows the possibility of trade-off between functionings.

Nussbaum, on the contrary, notes that "(t)he Aristotelian is profoundly opposed to this idea (that is, the idea that a trade-off between various functionings is possible)". She insists that each item in the set of basic human functionings be represented in a fully human life. Thus she ignores the question of placing a relative value on each functioning and the problems involved in arriving at a set of relative weights which would reflect the relative valuation of each functioning vis-a-vis others. We illustrate this point by considering the following two items from her list of "basic human functional capabilities" (Nussbaum 1995, p 84):

6. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's own life.
7. Being able to live for and with others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of familial and social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation; to have the capability for both justice and friendship.

Whereas the first refers to an individual's autonomy, the second indicates sociability. The conditions for strong autonomy might well on occasion conflict with those for strong sociability. Even if there was no conflict, two societies, which valued them differently, might differ significantly in terms of outcome. For example, consider the fact that a variety of family structures exist across societies. Take two societies, A and B. Suppose in society A most of the people live in extended joint families, and in society B, the nuclear family is the most common form. One could expect to see people in society B attach higher relative value to (6) compared to their counterpart in society

A, although both (6) and (7) are valued functionings in both societies. This possibility finds no place in Nussbaum's Aristotelian essentialism.

Having listed all the ten basic human functional capabilities, Nussbaum notes, “[m]y claim is that a life that *lacks* any one of these capabilities, no matter what else it has, will fall short of being a good human life” [emphasis ours]. A little reflection reveals that it is not generally the case that a life either lacks or does not lack any of these functional capabilities. The answer to the question “does a person lack the ability to have good health?”, for example, is not clearly ‘yes’ or ‘no’, even if there is agreement on the meaning of ‘good health’. More often than not a functional capability of this type is *partially* present in a life, and the ‘degree’ of its presence varies from person to person.

While criticizing cultural relativists Nussbaum rather overreacts to her colleagues on the other side who question binary oppositions. In her sharp indictment she seems to have conflated two different things – binaryness in defining concepts and categories, and belongingness of actual objects to categories. Even if categories are defined in binary ways, different objects belong to these categories with different degrees of belongingness. This is somewhat similar to the concept of fuzzy set that generalizes the binary membership function of the ‘crisp set’<sup>11</sup>. Thus, even if one agrees with her position that, at the conceptual level, freedom is opposed to slavery or death is opposed to life in a very binary way, one feels uncomfortable if she asserts that one can either be a ‘free’ person or a ‘slave’ – nothing in between is possible. Besides, the defense of binary opposition need not be extended to such a length as to argue that the valuation function that assigns different values to the objects of value takes only two values – zero and unity. This is where Sen clearly maintains his difference with Nussbaum.

While evaluating the well-being of an individual, Sen asks the question “Is the relevant valuation function that of the person whose standard of living is being assessed, or is it some general valuation function reflecting accepted ‘standards’ (e.g. those widely shared in the society)”? (Sen 1987, p 30). Accordingly, Sen makes a distinction between what he calls the ‘self-evaluation’ approach and the ‘standard evaluation’ approach, and argues that both have some relevance of their own. Furthermore, he notes that the use of accepted social standards has both subjective and objective features. Presumably he is holding on to certain essentialist notion of human being while referring to the ‘objective’ features. Invocation of Aristotle serves the purpose of persuasion at this point. But when he refers to the subjective features of the ‘standard-evaluation’ approach, by the word ‘subjective’ he means “the building blocks of judgement are the opinions held in a particular community (Sen 1987, p 30)”. And here Aristotelian defense does not seem to have the same degree of relevance. Thus Sen appears to allow a bit of relativism as far as the evaluative aspect is concerned. This point perhaps requires further elaboration.

We noted earlier that different vectors of functionings representing different individuals’ profiles

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<sup>11</sup> Fuzzy set theory replaces the characteristic function of a crisp set by a function that can take any value between zero and one. In the crisp set case, an element is either a member or a non-member of a set, i.e. the characteristic function takes only two values, zero and one. Chiappero Martinetti (2000) has discussed the usefulness of fuzzy set theoretic concept in the context of functioning-based conceptualization of well-being.

would yield a partial order, and Sen is not in favor of making it complete by applying certain aggregation procedure. Sen's preference for partial order is presumably due to his sensitivity to the complexities involved in discovering a single valuation function across societies. He divides the problem of assessing an individual's living standard into two distinct exercises, namely, identification of the relevant functionings and evaluation. He then argues that while identification can be done on the basis of some common set of values, on the question of evaluation we must allow for the possibility of both "objective" and "subjective" factors. In other words, like Nussbaum, Sen too is taking an essentialist position as far as the question of identification is concerned, but unlike Nussbaum, he is taking a relativist position on the question of evaluation. Sen's attempt to defend such a combination seems to be very much in line with his overall project. At the broadest level, the underlying philosophy of Sen's entire corpus of work in moral philosophy can be interpreted as the philosophy of the middle ground (Chakraborty, 1998). At one level, his contributions can be seen as his attempts to seek a conceptual space between a purely objective account of human well-being and the subjectivism of welfarism. At another level, he seeks to question the dichotomy that separates those who give priority to the right over the good (deontologists) and those who do its opposite (consequentialist). I am not sure if Sen himself would like to endorse this attribution.

### **Towards a non-essentialist capability approach**

One interesting implication of this particular selective entry of relativism into an otherwise essentialist conceptualization is that if one pushes the logic of relativism to its limits one ends up with a position that no longer looks essentialist. I shall argue that this possibility is implicit in Sen's conceptualization, and Nussbaum's attempt to 'close' the open-endedness of the capability approach may deprive us of the possibility of a non-essentialist conceptual development taking off from the capability approach.

Earlier we presented the two aspects viz. identification and evaluation as distinctly different. In a sense, however, they are not. Identification of valued functionings is equivalent to asserting that the identified functionings have positive weights. Evaluation, on the other hand, requires a set of numbers indicating specific weights or the specific form of the evaluation function. If we allow for a wide range of relative weights then in the limit some societies may be seen attaching zero weight to some functionings. Sen would perhaps say that if we were so unlucky, then the functionings to which some societies would attach zero weight would naturally not be in the list of common functionings. Thus the set shrinks, and there is a possibility that we end up with an empty set. Sen, however, rules out this possibility on historico-empirical ground. He arrives at this position by 'digging' from within human experience and engaging himself in an evaluative inquiry about what things are valuable in our lives. The problem with this kind of argument seems to have revealed itself in the difference between Sen and Nussbaum. Although both of them are appealing to a similar combination of intuition and empirical observation over a long period in history and across societies, they conclude differently. Whereas Nussbaum arrives at a list of inviolable functionings among which no trade-off is possible, Sen recognizes the possibility of trade-off.

Sen has all along been seeking a conceptual space between the kind of perfectionism that is based on a metaphysical notion of human nature and the subjectivism of welfarism. The problems that this attempt poses are less serious when one looks at 'basic capabilities' only. In the matter of most basic human functionings and capabilities there is less ambiguity about the common set. But

functionings and capabilities refer to human flourishing and well-being rather than mere survival in the biological sense. Thus the objectivity bias in the conceptualization may lead to the development practice where complex functionings (such as achieving self-respect, being socially integrated, or participating in some major aspects of life) are likely to be systematically ignored. For in the case of such a functioning subjective feelings are practically indistinguishable from the 'objective' accounts of living standard. The state of Kerala in India is a case in point. For a rather long time Kerala has been bathing in the glory of exceptional achievements on certain objective dimensions of social development, such as longevity, literacy, and the absence of gender gap along these dimensions. In the recent years, however, there has been a growing concern among the scholars and social activists in Kerala about certain dimensions of living, particularly the issue of the hidden gender inequalities under the veil of much-discussed 'high status' of women<sup>12</sup>. The objectivity bias in conceptualization and measurement had till recently ignored this side of Kerala's development.

This complexity has presumably forced Sen to leave his version of the capability approach deliberately incomplete. Our reading of Sen's 'incomplete' version of the capability approach thus goes against what some of the criticisms (such as Qizilbash's) suggest. Sen should be commended for resisting the temptation to give an exhaustive list of capabilities. Sabina Alkire has listed the following points that have been advanced by Sen to justify why he has not been more specific on the list of functionings and capabilities: a unique list 'may be tremendously overspecified'; the capability approach does not require taking that route; such a list would require 'a great deal of extension as a theory for practical evaluation'; such a list may not have wide relevance; there is a positive value in an incomplete theory which is 'consistent and combinable with several different substantive theories' and which may be filled in by reasoned public debate (Alkire 2002, p29).

Ironically, to some extent, Sen himself may be held responsible for creating the wrong impression that a few indicators, such as life expectancy at birth and adult literacy rate, are what capabilities should be all about. His enthusiastic endorsement of UNDP's Human Development Index has largely contributed to this confusion. Even though the Human Development Reports clearly state that there is no general theory that would tell us what should or should not be included in the index, little attempt has so far been made to explore various other possibilities. If the capability approach is aimed at highlighting the importance of freedom in human well-being, then various ways must be sought to capture different quantitative aspects of freedom. Unfreedom in the world comes in many different forms. We illustrate this point here with a striking piece of evidence. Maternal mortality rate is now considered to be an important indicator to express the condition of women in the developing world. Historical evidence from the United States, however, shows that the mortality rate in childbearing was higher for southern white women than for slaves (Barzel, 1977). Unfreedom indeed comes in different forms, and a list of capabilities derived from an essentialist (Aristotelian or otherwise) foundation may lead to unwarranted implications.

Clearly, at issue here is the appropriate basis of interpersonal comparison. The same kind of motivation is behind the human development index at the level of countries. The strong requirement of interpersonal (or inter-country) comparability conflicts with the need for a non-essentialist conceptualization of well-being. At various places Sen has expressed his coyness about forcing any

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<sup>12</sup> See Eapen and Kodoth (2002), for example.

kind of completeness on comparability by means of either invoking an objective list conception of well-being or applying any arbitrary valuation function for aggregation. Even on this, one can think of the possibility of a middle ground – between full comparability that requires a common list and full non-comparability that results from an extreme form of relativism. And again Nussbaum’s binary way of looking at things does not seem to be very promising in making any progress in this direction. If we ask the question: Is well-being interpersonally comparable according to a particular conceptualization? The answer would not be a clear ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Most of the notions of well-being can be shown to conform to some form of partial comparability<sup>13</sup>. Sen is clearly reluctant to ensure full comparability, neither does he endorse complete impossibility of comparability. His position is somewhere in between, but deliberately *unspecified*. It seems that according to Sen’s scheme it is *not known beforehand* where exactly the balance between the two extremes will be struck in any concrete evaluative context.

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<sup>13</sup> On the notion of partial comparability, see Sen (1970), Ch.7.

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