

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

**Bell & Howell Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA**

UMI[®]
800-521-0600

**Amartya Sen's Capability Approach to Equality:
Is It Capable of Accommodating Human Diversity?**

Bonni Ellis

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Philosophy

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada**

August 1999

© Bonni Ellis, 1999



National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-43616-0

Canada

ABSTRACT

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach to Equality: Is It Capable of Accommodating Human Diversity?

Bonni Ellis

The development of Amartya Sen's capability approach to equality was motivated (at least in part) by the shortcomings which he perceived in the egalitarian models presented by his predecessors; namely, John Rawls and utilitarians. Sen's greatest criticism of these theories was that they failed to recognize the pervasiveness of human diversity and, as a result, were unable to accommodate the distinct needs created by such differences. These deficiencies, according to Sen, suggested that both projects had misidentified the appropriate space in which to evaluate human flourishing and advantage. Rather than measuring relative equality through an index of our stock of primary goods (Rawls) or by relying solely on the accuracy of subjective evaluations of our conditions (utilitarianism), Sen proposed that we should instead focus on what people could succeed at doing and being with the commodities at their disposal. To this end, he recommended a framework which evaluated people's ability to access the valuable "characteristics" of these commodities. Due to his essentialist definition of characteristics, however, I will argue that Sen's own egalitarian project fails to answer the very criticism which provided the impetus for his work: like the models provided by Rawls and utilitarians, Sen's own theory fails to fully accommodate the spectrum of needs created by human diversity.

**To Zoé and Sébastien,
Sandra and Gerson,
Sophie, Andrea and Jab**

—all of whom are in these pages in their own way.

My sincerest thanks to Dr. Kai Nielsen

—who taught me that “little p” philosophy could make the biggest difference.

Table of Contents

Introduction	pp. 1 - 7
Section I: The Ideal of Equality	pp. 8 - 20
Section II: The Genesis of Sen's Capability Approach to Equality	pp. 21 - 48
Section III: Sen's Capability Approach to Equality	pp. 49 - 64
Section IV: My Criticisms of Sen's Approach	pp. 65 - 83
Conclusion	pp. 84 - 85
Bibliography	pp. 86 - 88

Introduction

When Amartya Sen first presented *Equality of What?* in 1979, two types of answers to the question which formed the title of this seminal paper¹ dominated the literature on egalitarianism. In the first category were welfarist conceptions of equality and, of particular interest, utilitarian interpretations of welfarism. The second interpretation of equality was provided by John Rawls's conception of "justice as fairness" as outlined in his 1971 book *A Theory of Justice*. In Sen's opinion, both projects were deficient because neither conception of equality could accommodate the "fundamental diversity of human beings"—a shortcoming which suggested that both projects had misidentified the appropriate space in which to measure human flourishing and advantage.

Utilitarianism, according to Sen, not only ignored the extent to which people's expectations could be influenced by their living conditions, but was further misguided by its emphasis on subjective evaluations of well-being. Under the guidelines of utilitarianism, an unequal distribution of resources could be justified by appealing to an individual's personal evaluation of their situation—an evaluation which would reflect what was reasonable to expect given their circumstances. A person with an objectively lower standard of living, therefore, might be more easily satisfied and, as a result, entitled to less resources than a person

¹"Equality of What?" was initially presented as part of the Tanner Lecture series held at Stanford University in May of 1979. It was later published in the *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* in 1980.

accustomed to luxury. Utilitarian distribution schemes, Sen concluded, ran the risk of actually *compounding* the effects of existent inequalities instead of *mitigating* their influence.

Rawls's "primary goods" approach was also criticized by Sen for its failure to recognize the implications of human diversity. Different people, Sen argued, could have very different needs depending on a variety of both external and internal factors. A simple enumeration of their stock of primary goods, therefore, would not necessarily provide an accurate reflection of their well-being. Nor, for that matter, would an equal distribution of these resources necessarily ensure equality of the most fundamental aspects of human existence. While command over primary goods might indicate how *well-off* a person was, it would not necessarily provide an accurate indication of *how well* that individual was actually doing which, in Sen's opinion, provided an answer to a sufficiently distinct question.

Under Sen's analysis, both conceptions of equality failed to provide accurate measures of *relative* well-being; a consideration which, in his estimation, was of central importance to any serviceable theory of justice. What both theories had failed to notice was the extent to which human diversity could effect people's ability to *transform* resources into well-being. Rather than looking simply at either primary goods (which provide a *source* of well-being) or at subjective reports of utility (which exclude objective measures of people's states and interests) Sen suggested that we instead consider the *process itself* through which individuals

generate welfare from goods. As a result, he proposed a dimension of assessment which reflected those human achievements which were “posterior to having goods and prior to having well-being.”²

To capture this mediate process, Sen developed the concept of “functionings”. Functionings, as Sen described them, were representative of such achievements because they reflected the actual “doings” and “beings” of an individual. As such, they represented a measurable component of the states of persons. Functionings alone, however, failed to fully capture what Sen was really after as measurements of success in *actual* achievements could only be weighted relative to the alternative options available. In order to reflect this aspect of opportunity within his proposal Sen, therefore, introduced the concept of “capability”. So conceived, capabilities not only provided a broader and more accurate metric for well-being but also captured what, for Sen, was the most fundamental concern of equality. It is in this manner that Sen came to answer his own question (*Equality of What?*), and during nearly two decades of subsequent writing on the subject he has attempted to both refine that answer and respond to the criticisms generated by the widespread interest in his work.

While Sen’s question may have identified the fundamental concern of egalitarian theorists, there is another related (albeit distinct) question which rides on the coat tails of the first query; namely, once you have

²Amartya Sen (1985b), p.11.

identified the appropriate space in which *to measure* the level of equality between individuals (relative equality), how should the information provided by those evaluations *be used to design* an appropriate scheme of (re)distribution? If, in other words, we believe that people should be equal with respect to x and, according to our evaluations, we know that they are not, how should commodities be (re)distributed in order to approach equality in that respect?

My concern with Sen's proposal questions the effectiveness of his theory in providing a practical solution to that problem. At a general level, the difficulty is due to an inconsistency within his conceptual framework itself—an inconsistency between his commitment to accommodate human diversity and the extent to which his theory is successful in that regard. This shortcoming poses more specific problems, however, when one tries to use the assessments of relative equality determined at the evaluative stage of Sen's project as a basis for calculating the appropriate compensation for any disadvantages discovered therein.

In my opinion, the source of these difficulties derives from Sen's overly *rigid* characterization of commodities. According to this definition the valuable, welfare-bestowing properties of commodities (their "characteristics") adhere in the commodities themselves, irrespective of whether the person who owns these goods can actually access (benefit from) such characteristics. By this definition, therefore, "[a] bicycle is treated as having the characteristic of transportation, and this is the case whether or not the particular person happening to possess the bike is able-

bodied or crippled”.³ This characterization is, as I will argue, *itself* partially blind to the diversity of human beings (particularly in the context of resource distribution). The irony of this weakness is twofold in that, not only does it parallel Sen’s main criticism of both Rawlsian equality and utilitarianism but, in addition, it mirrors the very shortcoming which Sen’s formulation of an alternative theory was intended to avoid.

While this criticism may not seriously undermine Sen’s project, I do believe that he could and, indeed, *should* have provided a less essentialist characterization of goods. Such a description would not only have been more consistent with his overall approach to equality—an approach meant to avoid what he labelled Rawls’s commodity “fetishism” by focusing on the *relationship* between goods and people instead of the significance of goods *themselves*—but would be compatible with the rest of his framework as well.

Notwithstanding these minor reservations, however, I remain convinced that Sen’s overall project is successful in providing a unique and particularly germane interpretation of equality. The capability approach is exceptionally sensitive to the realities of human existence and, as a result, more amenable to implementation than the theories of most of his contemporaries. In addition, Sen’s decision to focus on functionings and capabilities is a highly credible one given that his

³Ibid., p.10.

perspective and thinking on the very idea of equality itself have been greatly influenced by his background in economics as well as his considerable research in the areas of poverty, famine, and gender discrimination in resource distribution.

Sen's formulation of basic-capability equality was, as the name suggests, forged with the reality of human misfortune and misery in mind. His methodology, therefore, reflects his belief that in order to be effective, a credible theory of equality would have to ensure that people's basic needs were met. While ideals such as self-respect play an integral role in Sen's discussions of equality, he recognizes that many of life's significant goals are difficult to achieve for those who have limited access to the most fundamental necessities for survival. In fact, part of the appeal of Sen's approach lies in his recommendation that "objective" measures of welfare be included in the evaluative process in order to determine whether or not these basic needs *are* being met. Only then, Sen suggests, does it make sense to consider the likelihood of other achievements.

Sen's proposal, in my opinion, offers much more than a series of hypothetical recommendations—the soundness of which can only be assessed in the realm of ideal theory. It is an approach which is motivated to provide practical advice on what could and can be done to mitigate the effects of inequality on people's capabilities. Put another way, Sen's capability approach is a theory which not only promotes equality in principle, but it suggests how we might actually move towards this ideal in practise.

Prior to discussing Sen's own particular conception of equality, however, I will first consider some of the arguments for and against egalitarianism in general. This brief discussion is necessary given that the very commitment to equality as an ideal can, itself, be questioned. Several authors have pursued this line of thinking and their question to egalitarians is not "Equality of what?", but rather, "Why equality?".

Section I: The Ideal of Equality

When accepted as a statement of fact the idea that *all human beings are equal* acquires incredible force. So much force, in fact, that this purely descriptive assessment of human relations is often presented in its prescriptive form, i.e., as the recommendation that all human beings *should* receive equal treatment.⁴ Those who defend prescriptive models of equality⁵ are commonly referred to as 'egalitarians' and, although they differ widely in opinion concerning *how* or *in what respect* people should be equal, they are united by their belief that equality itself is a worthwhile ideal.

This line of thinking, however, is not shared by all of those writing on the subject of equality. "Anti-egalitarians", as they are commonly (although somewhat incorrectly)⁶ referred to can be generally, albeit somewhat crudely, categorized into one of two groups. Members of the first school of thought believe that human beings are not (in any significant sense) equal. These anti-egalitarians are to be distinguished from those in the second group whose objections against equality are motivated by the

⁴Ironically, this line of thinking (using purely descriptive information to justify prescriptive, action-guiding principles) is often invoked as a justification for *inequality*. In such circumstances, unequal treatment of certain groups of people (classified by race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc.) is sanctioned by suggesting that such individuals do not possess all of the characteristics which define humanity. As a result, so the argument goes, it is not necessary to treat such people with the same level of respect accorded to "full" human beings.

⁵Although not all egalitarians appeal to the *fact* of human equality to support their normative claims. I will return to this point in the following pages.

⁶This point will be discussed in what follows.

belief that achieving equality in one realm of human existence will inevitably lead to inequality in another, more fundamental realm of human relations.⁷

While both lines of criticism raise some interesting points, it is the first concern which, in my opinion, poses the more serious challenge to egalitarian thinkers. The second criticism, while accurate, simply begs the question given that most egalitarian theorists are acutely aware of the fact that equality engenders inequality.⁸ The debate within egalitarian circles, therefore, is not about the inevitability of such compromises, but rather, how to justify such tradeoffs. Sen, for example, addresses this aspect of the egalitarian project with the following:

[I]t is important to recognize...the fact that demanding equality in one space—no matter how hallowed by tradition—can lead one to be anti-egalitarian in some other space, the comparative importance of which in the overall assessment has to be assessed.⁹

Different egalitarian theories promote the supremacy of different *realms* of human existence. In fact, the very nature of the question

⁷Louis Pojman and W.Letwin, for example, both use the first line of argument while anti-egalitarians such as Harry Frankfurt (see "Equality as a Moral Ideal", *Ethics*, Vol.98, October 1987, pp.21-43) and Robert Nozick (*Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Basic Books:1974). provide examples of two writers who appeal to the overriding importance of other areas. For Pojman's ideas on this topic see *On Equal Human Worth: A Critique of Contemporary Egalitarianism* in Louis Pojman and Robert Westmoreland (eds.)(1997). For Letwin's work on the subject see *A Theoretical Weakness of Egalitarianism* and *The Case Against Equality* both in Letwin, W. (ed.) (1983) *Against Equality* (London:Macmillan).

⁸See Amartya Sen (1992), p.20; G.A. Cohen (1989), p.906; Ronald Dworkin (1981a), p.185.

⁹Amartya Sen (1992), p.16.

“Equality of what?” requires egalitarians to designate one realm of human relations as more important than the others and to argue for this elevation in status. It requires, in other words, for them to determine which aspect of our lives is of such fundamental importance that the need for equal treatment in this realm (and the advantages which such equality generates) can be said to outweigh any of the inequalities which may occur in other realms as a result of its promotion.¹⁰ The real criticism of anti-egalitarians, therefore, is not that equality in one realm of human existence leads to inequality in other realms (for to require a balance between all realms would amount to promoting *total* equality which, is surely about as egalitarian as one can get), but rather, whether promoting a particular type of equality at the expense of what they perceive to be a more fundamental realm of existence is a legitimate exercise. They too, in other words, are embroiled in the debate over “Equality of what?”.

Surprisingly, this line of criticism is occasionally used to argue against egalitarianism in general. “Surprising”, because any argument which cautions that achieving equality in *one* area can lead to inequality in *other* realms recognizes, by its very structure, the internal plurality of

¹⁰This, however, is not the only way which egalitarians avoid the problem of promoting inequalities. Writers, such as G.A. Cohen and Ronald Dworkin, for example, consider the role of concepts such as choice, luck, and exploitation in their analyses of equality. These theorists argue that it is only those inequalities which are *not* generated by irresponsible behaviour which deserve compensation. As a result, the distribution schemes which compensate for inequality do so more selectively and, given the (somewhat ironic) propensity of egalitarian distribution schemes to generate inequality (albeit in what is identified as a less fundamental realm of human existence), the risk of creating such inequalities is substantially diminished. On this see G.A. Cohen (1989), p.908 and Ronald Dworkin (1981b), p.293.

egalitarianism. Such claims acknowledge that egalitarianism embodies a general attitude which can be represented and articulated by reference to any one of a number of particular realms (equality of resources, well-being, capabilities, etc.) and yet, some critics argue as though the successful refutation of one particular form of egalitarianism undermines the credibility of egalitarianism in general.¹¹

Such conclusions are too hastily drawn, however, given that the choice of space (or focal variable)¹² in which an egalitarian chooses to promote equality indicates a significant difference between her and her fellow egalitarians. And, although one might be tempted to suggest that this choice of focal variable represents a relatively trivial difference between egalitarians who are otherwise united by their pursuit of equality, such a claim would misconstrue the extent to which egalitarians can actually be compared. Addressing this point, Sen writes;

Wanting equality of *something*—something seen as important—is undoubtedly a similarity of some kind, but that similarity does not put the warring camps on the same side. It only shows that the battle is not, in an important sense, about ‘why equality?’, but about ‘equality of what?’.¹³

¹¹For an example of this type of argument see Harry Frankfurt's article "Equality as a Moral Ideal" (*Ethics*, Vol.98, October 1987, pp.21-43) in which Frankfurt's arguments against economic egalitarianism are used to question the legitimacy of equality as a moral ideal in general.

¹²Sen uses this expression to refer to the different realms or spaces of human existence in which and, in virtue of which, people are measured and compared. See Amartya Sen (1992), p.2.

¹³Amartya Sen (1992), p.16.

Arguing successfully against equality in one of its many forms does not, as some writers suggest, mean that you have effectively refuted equality *tout court*. For, although it is true that all egalitarians believe that human beings should be equal in *some* respect, the choice of space through which they choose to articulate and defend that judgment provides a wholly unique conception of equality.

Although, the second anti-egalitarian criticism which initiated this discussion is thus fairly easily countered, the former concern—which questions whether human beings are, in any significant sense, equal—is not so readily dismissed. While very few, if any, egalitarians consider total equality (equality in all realms of existence) to be an attractive goal, many theorists defend their *prescriptive* models of equality by appealing (at least implicitly) to *descriptive* accounts of human relations.¹⁴

In an article entitled *Equal Human Worth: A Critique of Contemporary Egalitarianism*¹⁵, anti-egalitarian Louis Pojman explores this first line of criticism. Pojman begins his inquiry by admonishing those egalitarian theorists who simply *present* equality as an ideal rather than *defending* their belief that it should be treated as such. To do so, according to Pojman, is to build a theory on the back of an assumption such that the motive to approximate equality is founded on little more than

¹⁴For an insightful discussion on how ten of the more popular arguments for equal human rights are based (at least implicitly) on equal human worth see Louis Pojman (1997).

¹⁵Published in Louis Pojman and Robert Westmoreland (eds.) (1997).

an intuition. In such circumstances, the intuitive appeal of equality is derived from a belief that all human beings are of equal worth (or that it is useful to regard them as such)¹⁶ and the sense of justice which this sentiment arouses.

For Pojman, however, it seems equally reasonable to suggest that a doctrine of *inequality* would provide the most accurate reflection of human relations. If, for example, it were established that human beings are inherently *unequal*, then perhaps it would be more appropriate to found social policies on a corresponding model of humanity as opposed to a theory of equality. Under Pojman's analysis, the cardinal question of egalitarian debate is not "Equality of what?", but rather, "Why equality?" and he criticizes egalitarians for their failure to provide substantive answers for this first, more fundamental question before moving on to the second.¹⁷ The possibility that human relations are most accurately reflected by a prescriptive doctrine of *inequality* can only be dismissed if it can be proven that the *pro-egalitarian* impulse is grounded in a substantial metaphysical foundation as opposed to mere intuition.

My point is that you need some metaphysical explanation to ground the doctrine of equal worth, if it is to serve as a basis for equal human rights.¹⁸

¹⁶For Pojman's analysis of this "Pragmatic Argument" see Louis Pojman (1997), pp.287-288.

¹⁷Louis Pojman (1997), p.294.

¹⁸Ibid., p.296.

In order to avoid theistic metaphysical models, many egalitarians have attempted to ground their vindications of equality in a secular model of equal human worth. For Pojman, however, further probing of these secular models ultimately reveals either a thinly disguised theistic system (usually based on a "posit of faith") or a framework which claims to derive legitimacy from empirical evidence—empirical evidence which, according to Pojman, lends more credibility to a doctrine of inequality than one of equality.¹⁹ Human beings are *in fact* unequal and if egalitarian recommendations for treatment are to be based on empirical evidence, then this *fact* would seem to imply that they should receive unequal treatment.²⁰

Contrary to egalitarians there is good reason to believe that human beings are not of equal worth. Given the empirical observation, it is hard to believe that humans are equal in any way at all.²¹

While both of the anti-egalitarian critiques discussed in this section are aimed at different parts of the egalitarian project, they do, nonetheless, have one important feature in common: both criticisms, according to Pojman, suggest that egalitarians' preoccupation with the question

¹⁹Ibid., pp.295-296.

²⁰Pojman's purpose in making this point is neither to discourage equality nor to promote inequality. Rather, he wishes merely to suggest that both positions require defending and, in his opinion, it is inequality which more readily meets this requirement. For further reading on the topic of how equality (like inequality) needs to be justified see; John Kane (1996). For a more direct defense of inequality see W. Letwin, "A Theoretical Weakness of Egalitarianism", in *Against Equality*, W. Letwin (ed.) (1983) London: Macmillan.

²¹*Louis Pojman (1997), p.294.*

“Equality of what?” has blinded them to the importance of the more fundamental question “Why equality?”.

Sen, like Pojman, agrees that human diversity is a fundamental concern which must be addressed by egalitarians but, unlike Pojman, he does not believe that such diversity implies inequality. In fact, for Sen, it is the very fact that human beings are so different from one another which suggests that “the battle is not, in an important sense, about ‘why equality?’, but about ‘equality of what?’”²²

At the practical level, the importance of the question ‘equality of what?’ derives from the actual diversity of human beings, so that demanding equality in terms of one variable tends to clash *in fact* and not just *in theory* with wanting equality in terms of another. We are deeply diverse in terms of our internal characteristics (such as age, gender, general abilities, particular talents, proneness to illness, and so on) as well as in external circumstances (such as ownership of assets, social backgrounds, environmental predicaments, and so on) It is precisely because of such diversity that the insistence on egalitarianism in one field requires the rejection of egalitarianism in another. The *substantive* importance of the question ‘equality of what?’ relates, thus, to the empirical fact of pervasive human diversity. Investigations of equality—theoretical as well as practical—that proceed with the assumption of antecedent uniformity (including the presumption ‘that all men are created equal’) thus miss out on a major aspect of the problem. Human diversity is no secondary complication (to be ignored, or to be introduced ‘later on’), it is a fundamental aspect of our interest in equality.²³

This, however, is not the only reason why Sen defends the primacy of the question “Equality of what?”: he also considers the consequences of

²²Amartya Sen (1992), p.16.

²³*Ibid.*, pp.x-xi.

temporarily dispensing with that query in order to first debate “Why equality?” but such exercises lead him to the conclusion that the two questions can be collapsed into one. *By their very objections*, even anti-egalitarians, according to Sen, are arguing for equality of something.

[E]ven critiques of egalitarianism tend to take the form of being—instead—egalitarian in some *other* space. The problem again reduces implicitly, for a different answer to the question ‘Equality of what?’.²⁴

This general point is perhaps best illustrated by Sen’s interpretation of the work of Robert Nozick. Nozick, and other libertarian writers like him, are often characterized as anti-egalitarian because they argue for the primacy of freedom—an ideal which is often characterized as conflicting with the interests of equality. In order for equality to obtain, so the argument goes, the liberty of certain individuals would have to be restricted so as to ensure that their achievements remained at a level equal to those of their fellow citizens. Thus equality and liberty are characterized as incompatible ideals at both the theoretical and practical levels. People can either be equal in some chosen respect—having equal resources or equal levels of happiness, for example—or they can be equally free, but they cannot have both.

Sen, however, questions the accuracy of characterizing such criticisms as anti-egalitarian. Libertarian theories, according to Sen, are not really anti-egalitarian because they do, in fact, argue for equality of

²⁴ibid., p.15.

something—in this case liberty.²⁵

...liberty...who, how much, how distributed, how equal? Thus the issue of equality immediately arises as a *supplement* to the assertion of the importance of liberty...‘equal liberty’; e.g. The insistence on equal immunity from interference from others.²⁶

To place libertarians like Nozick in direct opposition to egalitarians is, according to Sen, to misunderstand the aims of both projects. Such a misunderstanding engenders the erroneous assumption that there is a “conflict between a person who argues for the equality of some variable *other than* liberty (such as income, wealth, or well-being) and someone who wants only equal liberty” which, for Sen, is really “a dispute over the question ‘Equality of what?’.”²⁷

Contemplating the relation between these two questions (“Equality of What?” and “Why equality?”) Sen concludes that anti-egalitarians have effectively reversed their proper sequence. For Sen, it is pointless to respond to the question “Why equality?” until you have identified “Equality of what?”. The notion of plain equality (not equality *of something* but *equality itself*) is, in Sen’s mind, too vague a concept to argue either for or against. The genesis of this idea derives from his belief that egalitarians have little in common and that it is the choice of space or focal variable which gives shape and meaning to each theory of equality.

²⁵Ibid., pp.21-23.

²⁶Ibid., p.22.

²⁷Ibid., p.22.

Two central questions for ethical analysis of equality are: (1) Why equality? (2) Equality of what? The two questions are distinct but thoroughly interdependent. We cannot begin to defend or criticize equality without knowing what on earth we are talking about, i.e. Equality of what features (e.g. Incomes, wealth, opportunities, achievements, freedoms, rights)? We cannot possibly answer the first question without answering the second.²⁸

In addition to these proclamations (which suggest that the question “Equality of what?” should be the cardinal focus of debate—not only amongst egalitarians but between egalitarians and so called “anti-egalitarians” as well), however, Sen suggests that the first question represents the *only* focus required—that the secondary query (“Why equality?”), is superfluous. Explaining this possibility Sen writes;

But if we *do* answer question (2), do we still *need* to address question (1)? If we have successfully argued in favour of equality of x (whatever that x is—some outcome, some right, some freedom, some respect, or something else), then we have already argued for equality in *that* form, with x as the standard for comparison. Similarly if we have rebutted the claim to equality of x , then we have already argued against equality in that form with x as the standard of comparison. There is, in this view, no ‘further’, no ‘deeper’, question to be answered about why—or why not—‘equality’. Question (1), in this analysis, looks very much like the poor man’s question (2).²⁹

Here, I think that Sen is mistaken given the differences between these two examples. For, while I agree with Sen that an argument which vindicates the superiority of one form of equality over another also

²⁸Ibid., p.12.

²⁹Ibid., p.12.

demonstrates why *some* level of equality is better than inequality, I do not find the converse argument convincing. While an answer to the question “Equality of what?” does, in effect, contain within itself an answer to the question “Why equality?”, the same result does not hold if the questions are addressed in the opposite sequence. To effectively argue against equality in one particular space does not preclude the possibility that compelling arguments for equality in another realm could be presented.

This is a very odd position for Sen to take³⁰ considering that he previously criticized anti-egalitarians for their failure to recognize the internal plurality of equality. Certain anti-egalitarian critiques, we may recall, were themselves criticized by Sen for failing to distinguish between i) the particular forms of equality and, ii) egalitarianism generally. Sen questioned the validity of arguments which used the criticisms applied to *one particular form* of equality to question the legitimacy of egalitarianism *in general*.

Despite this criticism, however, I do believe that Sen is correct to stress the importance of the question “Equality of what?”—an inquiry which he himself pursued in an article which bears this very question as its title. Prior to examining Sen’s own proposal, however, I will pursue a brief discussion of the two types of egalitarian models which existed prior to Sen’s article. This exercise will afford a better understanding of Sen’s

³⁰It should be noted, in Sen’s defense, that he does not actually *promote* this line of thinking, but rather, implicitly endorses this viewpoint by failing to consider the implications of such an argument. In fact, Sen’s only response to the above passage is provided by the following statement; “There is some sense in seeing the matter in this way...”. He provides no further comments on the validity of such an outlook.

own formulation of equality as his proposal was, to a large extent, prepared as a response to the perceived shortcomings of these other egalitarian theories.

Section II: The Genesis of Sen's Capability Approach to Equality

In 1979, when Sen first presented *Equality of What?*, two approaches to equality dominated the literature on distributive justice; the Rawlsian conception of equality as presented in his 1971 book *A Theory of Justice*, and utilitarian conceptions of welfarism. Each position identified what it deemed to be the appropriate metric for judging people's well-being and advantage. For Rawls, this translated into a focus on the holdings of "primary goods". Utilitarians, in contrast, maintained that equality should have the maximization of welfare (interpreted as either happiness, desire-fulfilment, or choice) as its end.

Rawls's innovative proposal was (at least partially) inspired by the deficiencies which he perceived in utilitarian conceptions of equality. As a result, he peppered his own theory of "justice as fairness" with criticisms of both utilitarianism and welfarism. Despite these objections, however, Rawls was himself impressed by the appeal and influence of utilitarian theories. Explaining this relationship between Rawls's work and utilitarianism—as well as the prominence of both theories—Will Kymlicka suggests the following;

[Rawls's] theory dominates contemporary debates, not because everyone accepts it, but because alternative views are best understood in terms of their relationship to Rawls, so understanding Rawls requires understanding the theory to which he was responding—namely, utilitarianism. Rawls believes, rightly I think, that in our society utilitarianism operates as a tacit background against which other theories have to assert and defend

themselves.³¹

Through the formulation of his own theory of justice, Rawls was motivated to provide a framework which avoided the same distributional results as those engendered by utilitarian principles. In this respect, there is an intimate connection between utilitarianism and Rawls's work—a connection which is illustrated by the process through which Rawls uses critiques of the former as stepping-stones to his own proposal.

Sen himself recognized this connection between Rawls's work and utilitarianism as well as the significance of both theories. Sen was aware, for example, that it would take more than criticism alone to cast doubt on these cornerstones of political morality—it would take an alternate vision. Sen eventually proposed such a vision but only after he, like Rawls before him, had first identified what he deemed to be the inherent flaws of those theories which preceded him—namely, Rawls's own vision of justice and utilitarian conceptions of equality.

I must stress that my references to these criticisms (Sen's as well as Rawls's) should not be perceived as a judgement about which metric (capabilities, primary goods, or welfare) best represents the ultimate target of our egalitarian concerns. My purpose here is not to resolve the dispute between Sen, Rawls, utilitarians and their respective critics, but rather, to demonstrate how some of the concerns generated by these disputes motivated and influenced the development of Sen's own conception of

³¹Will Kymlicka (1990), p.9.

equality. In order to respect the chronological order of this progression, therefore, I will begin by examining Rawls's criticisms of utilitarianism and welfarism respectively.

Utilitarianism is often described as a (strictly) moral philosophy, but the principles of utilitarianism can also be applied to what Rawls called "the basic structures" of society thereby providing a system of *political* morality. In this guise, utilitarianism can be characterized as an intersection between two different kinds of theory—namely, (i) *welfarism*, and (ii) *consequentialism*. According to the principles of welfarism, the correct way to judge a state of affairs is in terms of either (i) the level of happiness or satisfaction of desires generated by such states, or (ii) whether—and to what extent—such states result in people achieving what they desire. Consequentialism, on the other hand, is a theory of action-guiding principles. Actions are to be chosen and judged based on the state of affairs which they produce (their consequences). Sen sums up the role of these components within the utilitarian framework in the following manner;

Utilitarianism, in its central forms, recommends a choice of actions on the basis of consequences in terms of welfare. Utilitarianism is thus a species of *welfarist consequentialism*—that particular form of it which requires simply *adding up* individual welfare or utilities to assess the consequences, a property that is sometimes called *sum-ranking*.³²

As a form of welfarism, utilitarianism has certain features in

³²Amartya Sen, *Introduction* in Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (eds.) (1982), pp.3-4.

common with the former. Both theories, for example, insist that equality is best reflected by the well-being of individuals who make up a society. And, although welfarists and utilitarians use different terms to describe well-being ("welfare" and "utility", respectively) they both tend to interpret those valuable states of being in terms of either happiness, desire-fulfilment, or choice.³³ Utilitarianism, however, can be distinguished from welfarism by the fact that the latter generally promotes distribution schemes which ensure that citizens enjoy equal levels of welfare. For example, resources in the welfarist's scheme are distributed between the members of society in a way which ensures that they are equally happy or can be said to be equally satisfied. In contrast, the additional requirement of consequentialist sum-ranking in utilitarianism demands a very different distributional scheme. Resources are distributed between

³³Although the terms "happiness", "desire-fulfilment", and "choice" are commonly used in the literature (as well as by Sen) other egalitarian writers use different names when referring to these interpretations of utility. Ronald Dworkin and G.A. Cohen, for example, make similar distinctions between the two more popular interpretations of utility (happiness and desire-fulfilment) and, although there are some *minor* differences between their descriptions of these two categories, they are, nonetheless, essentially the same. What Sen refers to as the "happiness" interpretation of utility is roughly equivalent to what Cohen describes as "hedonic welfare" as well as Dworkin's "conscious state conception" of utility. Likewise, Sen's description of the "desire-fulfilment" conception of utility is similar to what Cohen refers to as "preference satisfaction" as well as what Dworkin describes as a "relative success" conception of utility. For a fuller description of Cohen's and Dworkin's respective interpretations of utility see G.A. Cohen (1989) pp.909-910 and Ronald Dworkin (1981a) pp. 191-194, 204-209, 220-221. For Sen's discussion of the third interpretation of utility (which he refers to as the "choice view") see Sen (1985a) pp.187-188. Under this reading of utility, well-being is assessed by assigning numerical representations to a person's *actual* choices as drawn from a sets of *potential* alternatives. He quickly dismisses this interpretation, however, arguing that there are an overabundance of motives which influence our choices. As a result, attempts to evaluate well-being on the basis of choice vectors alone will lead to inaccurate appraisals. As Sen suggests, "a person's choice may be guided by a number of motives of which the pursuit of personal well-being is only one". (p.188) Many egalitarians, including Cohen and Dworkin agree with Sen's criticisms of the "choice" interpretation of utility and, as a result, address only the first two interpretations.

individuals in whatever way guarantees an increase in the overall utility level of the society as a whole. As a result of this focus, unequal distributions of both resources and welfare levels are justified by appealing to the aggregate total of welfare generated by such actions.

As a caveat, to ensure equal treatment, utilitarianism requires that utility levels of equal magnitude be given equal weight regardless of who experiences them. This rule of “equal regard for all” lends an air of justice to the utilitarian framework, but by focusing on the maximization of the sum-total of utility, utilitarianism fails to consider how utility is distributed between individuals.³⁴ Sen quite effectively explains the difference in the following manner;

Welfarism is the view that the goodness of a state of affairs can be judged entirely by the goodness of the utilities in that state. This is a less demanding view than utilitarianism in that it does not demand—in addition—that the goodness of the utilities must be judged by their sum-total. Utilitarianism is, in this sense, a special case of welfarism, and provides one illustration of it.³⁵

Rawls raised two main objections to utilitarianism which G.A. Cohen quite appropriately labelled the “offensive tastes” and “expensive tastes” criticisms.³⁶ Both criticisms question utilitarianism’s tendency to indulge people’s preferences indiscriminately. The offensive tastes

³⁴This point hints at one of Rawls’s main concerns with utilitarianism and will be discussed in greater detail in the following pages.

³⁵Amartya Sen (1980), p.147.

³⁶G.A. Cohen (1989), p.912.

criticism³⁷ questions the single-mindedness of utilitarianism in promoting the maximization of welfare to the exclusion of other morally relevant considerations, such as the principles of justice and the role of merit³⁸ in resource distribution schemes. If one believes that egalitarian principles demand that we consider such factors, as Rawls does, then utilitarian and egalitarian principles will, in certain cases, conflict.

To illustrate this point, consider the case of an individual who derives great pleasure from inflicting unwanted pain and suffering on others. Imagine further that the pleasure which this individual derives from her behaviour is so great that her increased level of utility outweighs the total aggregate loss in utility experienced by her victims. According to the guidelines of utilitarianism, we would, Rawls insists, be required to indulge her morally reprehensible behaviour due to the *overall* utility benefit which it produces. Rawls objects to this outcome with the following:

The striking feature of the utilitarian view of justice is that it does not matter except indirectly, how this sum of satisfactions is distributed among individuals...[T]he correct distribution...is that which yields the maximum fulfilment. Society must allocate its means of satisfaction whatever these are, rights and duties, opportunities and privileges, and various forms of wealth, so as to achieve this maximum if it can. [T]he utilitarian believes that...just as it is rational for one man to maximize the fulfilment of his system of desires, it is right for a society to maximize the net balance of

³⁷For a well-developed extension of Rawls's "offensive tastes" criticism see Ronald Dworkin (1981a), pp.197-201.

³⁸For Rawls, a just social system would be one in which certain claims would, based on the priority of the principles of justice, have no merit and, as a result, not deserve compensation. On this see Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* reprinted in John Arthur and William Shaw (eds.) (1991), pp.44-46.

satisfaction taken over all of its members.³⁹

Utilitarianism, Rawls charges, does not distinguish between the moral character of different desires or pleasures. What matters in the utilitarian calculation is not whether the nature of the pleasures themselves under consideration demand censure or approval, but rather, whether the exercise of such pleasures results in an increase or decrease in overall utility.⁴⁰ G.A. Cohen's discussion of this criticism gets right to the heart of Rawls's point.

The offensive tastes criticism of welfarism is that the pleasure a person takes in discriminating against other people or in subjecting others to a lesser liberty should not count equally with other satisfactions in the calculus of justice. From the point of view of justice, such pleasures deserve condemnation, and the corresponding preferences have no claim to be satisfied.⁴¹

Like the argument against offensive tastes, Rawls's "expensive tastes" criticism questions the single-mindedness of welfare-based frameworks. This time, rather than focusing directly on the nature of the pleasures themselves, Rawls instead, directs our attention to the issue of agent responsibility. Once again, Rawls asks us to consider a hypothetical

³⁹John Rawls (1971), p. 26.

⁴⁰John Rawls (1971), pp.30-31. It should be noted that other egalitarian writers such as G.A. Cohen have questioned the strength of Rawls's "offensive tastes" criticism by suggesting that a welfare egalitarian could revise her focus to accommodate this concern by focusing on something like equality of *inoffensive* welfare. On this see G.A. Cohen (1989), pp.912-913.

⁴¹G.A. Cohen, *Equality of What? On Welfare, Goods, and Capabilities*, in Martha Nussbaum. and Amartya Sen (eds.) (1993) , p.12.

example to illustrate his point. "Imagine two persons, one satisfied with a diet of milk, bread and beans, while the other is distraught without expensive wines and exotic dishes. In short one has expensive tastes, the other does not."⁴² Welfarism, with its single-minded focus on equalizing welfare, Rawls suggests, would require that we indulge the *bon vivant*, as failing to do so would result in his experiencing a lower level of welfare than our ascetic.

Rawls himself objects to this outcome by arguing that moral citizens are (at least partially) responsible for the formation and cultivation of their tastes and ends and, as a result, such considerations should not be factored into distributional schemes. If one has cultivated expensive tastes they should, according to Rawls, bear the costs associated with such preferences—just as one who has learned to be satisfied with more moderate fare should benefit from such austerity by having a greater portion of their resources left over once these modest needs have been met.⁴³

Rawls's expensive tastes and offensive tastes criticisms, therefore,

⁴²John Rawls, "Social Unity and Primary Goods," in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (eds.) (1982).

⁴³On the issue of agent responsibility see John Rawls (1971), pp.30-31 as well as his "Social Unity and Primary Goods" in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (eds.) (1982) pp.168-169. It is worth noting that G.A.Cohen believes that Rawls's view on agent responsibility (as presented in this criticism) is at odds with his references to dessert in other sections of his writing. According to Cohen, Rawls's inconsistency lies in his suggestion that "partial responsibility for effort attracts no reward at all while merely partial responsibility for expensive taste formation attracts a full penalty (and those who keep their tastes moderate reap a reward)." On this see G.A. Cohen (1989), pp.913-915 as well as his *Equality of What? On Welfare, Goods, and Capabilities*, in Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (eds.) (1993), p.15.

both questioned the patterns of distribution recommended by both the utilitarian calculus and welfare equality. In the case of offensive tastes, Rawls questioned the *moral* rationale behind the recommended distribution scheme. In the case of expensive tastes, Rawls objected to the fact that scathingly unequal distributions of resources could be justified by appealing to welfarism's single-minded focus on equalizing well-being.

In voicing his "expensive tastes" criticism of welfarism and his "offensive tastes" criticism of utilitarianism, Rawls questioned the ramifications of following the procedural guidelines dictated by these theories. At a more general level, however, Rawls used the results of these hypothetical examples to object to the very *premise* of both theories; namely, the assumption that welfare (whether interpreted as happiness or desire-fulfilment) represents the most fundamental aspect of a person's condition and, as such, most urgently demands our normative attention. As a result, Rawls's own theory of justice not only replaced aggregation with equality⁴⁴, but it also demanded a change of focus from welfare to primary goods.

Rawls's dissatisfaction with the outcomes dictated by the guiding principles of welfarism in general and utilitarianism in particular, was (at least part of) his motivation to provide an alternative, more egalitarian conception of justice. In fact, Rawls himself states in the beginning pages of *A Theory of Justice* that his "aim is to work out a theory of justice that

⁴⁴Or, more accurately, equality tempered by "the difference principle" which recommends an unequal distribution of primary goods in situations where the worst-off in society will benefit as a result.

represents an alternative to utilitarian thought generally".⁴⁵ To this end, Rawls proposed "two principles of justice"—principles which suggested that "primary goods" would provide the most accurate measure of equality and that an equal distribution of those goods would best approximate equality itself. These principles are embodied in Rawls's "general conception" of justice, which suggests that;

[a]ll social primary goods—liberty and opportunity, income [a flow] and wealth [a stock], and the bases of self-respect—are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favoured.⁴⁶

Primary goods, as Rawls describes them, "are things that every rational man is presumed to want".⁴⁷ Rawls, therefore, builds rationality into his system by suggesting that his two principles of justice represent the principles which *would* be chosen by the members of a society who were situated in a hypothetical situation of equal liberty ("the original position") operating under a "veil of ignorance".⁴⁸ Such individuals would choose the guiding principles of their society without having any information about their personal identity. No one, as Rawls describes it, would know "his place in society, his class position or social status, nor

⁴⁵John Rawls (1971), p.22.

⁴⁶ibid., p.303 (The square brackets and the text within them represent my additions to this citation).

⁴⁷John Rawls (1971), p.62.

⁴⁸For a full explanation and justification of the "veil of ignorance" as it operates in the original position see: John Rawls (1971) pp.11-22.

does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength and the like.” Rawls further assumes “that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities.”⁴⁹Rawls is convinced that his general conception of justice embodies those principles which *would* be chosen in such circumstances because they ensure equality for all—in short, they are fair.⁵⁰

This ensures that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged in the choice of principles by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances. Since all are similarly situated and no one is able to design principles to favour his particular condition, the principles of justice are the result of a fair agreement or bargain.⁵¹

Rawls’s insistence that primary goods represent the main concern for justice indicates his first major departure from welfarism in general. The other significant difference between Rawls and utilitarianism, in particular, is embodied by the former’s recommendations that primary goods should, for the most part, be distributed *equally* throughout society. Exceptions to this rule can be accommodated by Rawls’s framework due to his inclusion of the “difference principle” which ensures that the only

⁴⁹John Rawls (1971), p.12.

⁵⁰It is because of this fact Rawls refers to his theory as a conception of “justice as fairness”. On this see John Rawls (1971), pp.12 and 17.

⁵¹John Rawls (1971), p.12.

inequalities⁵² which can be tolerated are those which work to the benefit of those who are disadvantaged in society. Writing on these “twists” in Rawls’s theory, Will Kymlicka writes;

We treat people as equals by removing not all inequalities, but only those which disadvantage someone. If certain inequalities benefit everyone, by drawing out socially useful talents and energies, then they will be acceptable to everyone. If giving someone else more money than I have promotes my interests, then equal concern for my interests suggests that we allow, rather than prohibit, that inequality. Inequalities are allowed if they improve my initially equal share, but are not allowed if, as in utilitarianism, they invade my fair share. That is the single, simple idea at the heart of Rawls’s theory.⁵³

Rawls’s theory of “justice as fairness” is an exceptionally sophisticated and elaborate theory. The above explanation is crude and, as a result, fails to bring out the subtleties of Rawls’s work. For the purposes of this thesis, however, it is sufficient—it highlights some of the main ideas behind Rawls’s work including those aspects of his theory which Sen finds objectionable.

Sen, like Rawls, found certain aspects of the utilitarian position repugnant and, as a result, concluded that welfare simpliciter⁵⁴ failed to

⁵²Rawls is not here referring to “natural” inequalities such as differences in personal talents, but rather, to the unequal distribution of primary goods (including opportunities).

⁵³Will Kymlicka (1990), p.53.

⁵⁴While Sen believed that utility data which focused on welfare levels alone—to the *exclusion* of other information—provided an inadequate guide for assessing equality, he did think that such information was relevant. I will return to this point at the end of this section.

provide an appropriate metric for well-being. Although many of Sen's criticisms of utilitarianism mirror concerns expressed by Rawls, he nonetheless raised some additional doubts. In particular, Sen questioned the adequacy of utilitarianism to provide for the different needs of human beings based on their manifest diversity and, while Sen agreed that Rawls's alternative formulation of equality avoided some of the pitfalls inherent to the utilitarian framework, he nonetheless found the Rawlsian focus on primary goods to be vulnerable to a similar criticism. I shall begin, however, by examining Sen's criticisms of utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism, as was previously suggested, recommends both evaluative and distributive principles. At the evaluative stage, utilitarianism recommends a method for determining each individual's utility level. Utility is considered tantamount to well-being which is generally interpreted as either happiness or desire-fulfilment. At the distributive stage, two factors motivate decisions concerning resource disbursement; (i) the assessments of individual utility levels determined in the first stage, and (ii) the aim to maximize the aggregate level of total utility. Thus, it is the initial evaluations of *each individual's* utility level which allow for the assessments of *relative* utility required in the second stage. Given that the goal of utilitarian social policy is to maximize the level of utility enjoyed by society as a whole, it is, therefore, necessary to calculate how potential distribution schemes will affect individual utility levels.

Sen criticizes both the evaluative and distributive aspects of

utilitarian equality and, while each of his particular objections examine different facets of the utilitarian framework, his general concern at both levels is utilitarianism's failure to adequately account for the fundamental diversity of human beings.

In his assessment of the evaluative level, Sen voices two main objections to utilitarian conceptions of equality, both of which question the "informational monism" which, according to Sen, is implicitly advocated by utilitarianism. Sen, like utilitarians, believes that assessments of relative "well-being" provide important information for judging a person's states and interest, but unlike utilitarians, he remains convinced that utility cannot, by itself, capture the full range of our meaningful activities and states of being. To suggest that we should equate well-being with only one point of reference is, according to Sen, to suggest that only one source of information can provide an adequate measure of what is of intrinsic importance to human flourishing and advantage. Such an approach, Sen objects, would be unnecessarily restrictive—a point which he expresses by insisting that "we are not tied to informational monism and insisting on informational monism is a crude prejudice".⁵⁵ Utilitarianism, according to Sen, has left out two relevant, and indeed necessary sources of information.

The first oversight Sen refers to as "physical-condition neglect" while the second charges utilitarianism with what Sen calls "valuational

⁵⁵Amartya Sen (1985a), pp.185-186.

neglect". Sen's main contention is that the information reflected in the utility calculus is, by itself insufficient—it provide too narrow a conception of well-being due to the fact that it judges a person's states and interests using guidelines which ignore other relevant information. In addition, both criticisms are applicable regardless of whether utility is interpreted as happiness or desire-fulfilment. When applied to either interpretation, Sen believes that these criticisms illustrate "the poverty of the entire utility-based approach."

Both the views of utility have the twin characteristics of (1) being fully grounded in the mental attitude of the person, and (2) avoiding any direct reference to the person's own valuation exercise—the mental activity of valuing one kind of life rather than another.⁵⁶

Physical-condition neglect refers to utilitarianism's failure to include information other than first-person, subjective reports of well-being when assessing an individual's states and interests. In order for assessments of well-being to be complete and accurate, objective information—such as reports of the person's *actual* physical condition—must, in Sen's mind be included. The necessity of such information is demonstrated by the fact that people routinely adjust their expectations (upward or downward) to match the reality of their particular circumstances.⁵⁷ Writing on Sen's

⁵⁶Amartya Sen (1985b), pp.20-21.

⁵⁷Sen's extensive research in the areas of poverty, famine, and gender discrimination provided substantial bases for these concerns. See, for example Sen (1985b), pp. 81-104 where Sen refers to a study carried out by the All-India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health in Singur, India shortly after the Bengal Famine. This study compared people's own reports of their state of health to the physical assessments reported by physicians. See also Sen (1973), "Poverty, Inequality and Unemployment: Some Conceptual Issues in

objections to utilitarianism, G.A. Cohen captures the essence of Sen's criticism.

Utility is an unstable guide to policy if only because a person may adjust his expectations to his condition. The fact that a person has learned to live with adversity, and to smile courageously in the face of it, should not nullify his claim to compensation. His high welfare score is thus not a decisive reason for not assisting someone who labours under a severe disadvantage, which is recognizable as such from an objective point of view.⁵⁸

The line of criticism proposed by "valuation neglect", in contrast, suggests that, *even if* objective criteria were not required for an accurate report of well-being, the utilitarian measure of welfare would still be impoverished. Even from the first-person perspective it is hard to deny that individuals themselves might value things other than happiness and desire fulfilment. Other mental states, for example, might be important to them and to not consider these factors when evaluating "how they are doing" would lead to an inaccurate assessment of their welfare level.⁵⁹

Measurement", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 8; Sen (1979), "Issues in the Measurement of Poverty", *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, Vol. 81; Sen (1981) *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; Sen, (1983) "Poor, Relatively Speaking", *Oxford Economic Papers*, Vol. 35; reprinted in Sen (1997b); Sen (1992), "Missing Women", *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 304.

⁵⁸G.A. Cohen, *Equality of What? On Welfare, Goods, and Capabilities*, in Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (eds.) (1993), pp.16-17.

⁵⁹To be fair, Sen acknowledges the fact that there are utilitarians who, like himself, believe that promoting only one type of mental state (i.e., happiness to the exclusion of desire-fulfilment or vice-versa) is misguided. Such utilitarians argue that there are many types of valuable mental states and that these should all be promoted in order to provide a comprehensive indication of well-being. Sen's point, however, goes deeper than this by suggesting that mental states *in general* (whether taken separately or lumped together) are inadequate indicators of well-being due to their subjective nature. For Sen, objective measures need to be introduced as well

Utilitarians who promote the happiness interpretation of well-being are, according to Sen, right to suggest that happiness is an important aspect of well-being. But, as Sen continues, "although happiness is of obvious and direct relevance to well-being, it is inadequate as a *representation* of well-being."⁶⁰ Utilitarians who advocate the desire-fulfilment interpretation of utility face a similar problem. To illustrate his point, Sen once again refers to the extent to which people become conditioned by their circumstances.⁶¹

Our reading of what is feasible in our situation and station may be crucial to the intensities of our desires, and may even affect what we dare to desire. Desires reflect compromises with reality and reality is harsher to some than to others.⁶²

For Sen, this example suggests that even if happiness and desire-fulfilment were combined, utilitarianism would still remain an incomplete guide to assessing well-being. Consider once again, the plight of an individual living in destitution who, as a result of her misery, has very low expectations indeed. She desires little of life knowing that she will, in fact, receive very little. But there are still other things which she values irrespective of her desires. From Sen's perspective, such cases demonstrate all too clearly that "there are goals other than well-being and values other

⁶⁰Amartya Sen (1985a), p.188—emphasis added.

⁶¹For further developments of this point see Sen (1985b), pp.21-22, 29; *Rights and Capabilities* and *Goods and People* both in Sen (1997b), pp.308-309 and 512 respectively; as well as Sen's *Introduction* in Sen (1997b) p.34.

⁶²Amartya Sen (1985a), p.191.

than goals.”⁶³ Just like our desires, the exercise of valuing one type of life over another is a mental activity which can provide sources of either great comfort or discouragement. Such cognitive activities do, in other words, have a direct bearing on our states of being as well as our interests and should, therefore, be included in assessments of our well-being.

A person who is ill-fed, undernourished, unsheltered and ill can still be high up in the scale of happiness or desire fulfilment if she or he has learned to have ‘realistic’ desires and to take pleasure in small mercies. The physical conditions of a person do not enter into the view of well-being seen entirely in terms of happiness or desire fulfilment, except insofar as they are *indirectly* covered by the mental attitudes of happiness or desire. And this neglect is fortified by the lack of interest, of these two perspectives, in the person’s own valuation as to what kind of life would be worthwhile. Valuing is not the same as desiring, and the strength of desire is influenced by considerations of realism in one’s circumstances. Nor is valuing invariably reflected by the amount of pain if the valued object is not obtained. Considerations of feasibility and of practical possibility enter into what we dare to desire and what we are pained not to get.⁶⁴

Although Sen’s “physical-condition neglect” and “valuational neglect” criticisms focus on different aspects of the utilitarian evaluation process, they are nonetheless related by the fact that both ultimately question whether human diversity can be accommodated within a utilitarian framework. In the first example, utilitarian assessments of well-being fail to include valuable information concerning the person’s actual state of welfare. In the second, utilitarianism fails to consider the extent to

⁶³Ibid., p.186.

⁶⁴Amartya Sen (1985b), pp.20-21.

which people value different things, things other than but also including utility levels. The pervasiveness of human diversity, therefore, has profound implications for utilitarianism at the level of evaluation. There are, however, even more serious implications when the effects of such differences are considered in the context of utilitarian distribution schemes.

Resources according to utilitarian guidelines, are to be distributed in a manner which promotes the maximization of welfare (whether interpreted as happiness or desire-fulfilment). But welfare levels, as was previously discussed, are determined by each individual's subjective evaluation of their utility level. Given these assessments the proper distribution is that which maximizes overall utility. As a result, the possibility for blatant inequalities is compounded.

The limitations to the utility-based approach to well-being and advantage are particularly serious when we are concerned with *interpersonal* ranking rather than with comparisons of alternative possibilities for the *same* person.⁶⁵

This possibility is best illustrated by considering the progression from the evaluative stages of utilitarianism to the distributive stage. Initial assessments of personal well-being run the risk of being inaccurate for the reasons outlined above. As a result, assessments of relative advantage—how well each person's utility level compares to others—may also be skewed. These relative assessments, however, are used in

⁶⁵ibid., p.22.

determining how to distribute resources given that the goal of utilitarianism is to maximize the total aggregate utility across society. But, people achieve different levels of success in turning the resources at their disposal into well-being. Unequal distributions of resources, therefore, are almost inevitable—more resources will be allotted to those who are more efficient generators of utility. The end result for these people is bleak—not only do they experience an initial utility disadvantage, but they will be allotted even less resources and, thus, have less opportunity to generate welfare in the future, because of this.

To illustrate this point, Sen uses a case-implication technique. In Sen's hypothetical scenario we are asked to consider the fates of two individuals A and B as they would be determined in a utilitarian framework. A is physically handicapped and, as a result of her disability, generates only half of the utility from the same level of income as distributed to person B who, as a pleasure wizard, is extremely efficient at converting resources into utility. According to the guidelines of utilitarianism, person B would be allotted a greater portion of resources because such a distribution would generate a greater level of utility—the aggregate level of utility would be maximized.

Such an outcome, as Sen suggests, runs counter to our moral sensibilities in two ways; Not only does utilitarianism fail to accommodate the *initial* disadvantage of person A (her reduced ability to convert resources into utility), but it recommends a course of action which would *further compound* this disadvantage by giving her less income *in*

addition to her lower efficiency in generating utility from income.⁶⁶

Insofar as one is concerned with the distribution of utilities, it follows immediately that utilitarianism would in general give one little comfort. Even the minutest gain in total utility sum would be taken to outweigh distributional inequalities of the most blatant kind.⁶⁷

Due to these perceived deficiencies, Sen concludes that utility provides an inaccurate metric for judging people's states and interests. People, Sen insists, are very different from each other and neither the utility calculus nor welfarism can accommodate these differences. Sen's determination in proving that human diversity is an issue which requires attention within egalitarian frameworks represents more than a line of criticism—it represents a line of thinking. It is not surprising, then, that Sen sees this issue as a potential problem for Rawls's conception of justice as well.

The recognition of the fundamental diversity of human beings does, in fact, have very deep consequences, affecting not merely the utilitarian conception of social good, but others as well, including (as I shall argue presently) even the Rawlsian conception of equality.⁶⁸

Prior to discussing Sen's concerns with Rawlsian equality, however, it should first be noted that Sen both acknowledges and appreciates

⁶⁶Amartya Sen (1980), pp.145-146.

⁶⁷Ibid., pp.143-144.

⁶⁸Ibid., p.144.

Rawls's success in avoiding some of the difficulties previously discussed.

Objective criteria can be directly accommodated within the index of primary goods. So can Mill's denial of the parity between pleasures from different sources, since the sources can be discriminated on the basis of the nature of the goods...Since advantage is not judged in terms of utilities at all, but through the index of primary goods, expensive tastes cease to provide a ground for getting more income.⁶⁹

Despite these words of praise, however, Sen remains convinced that Rawls's focus on primary goods fails to appreciate the extent to which people differ and how such differences can affect their ability to achieve valuable states of being.

Sen's main objection to Rawls's primary goods conception is a more elaborate form of a criticism originally made by Kenneth Arrow. Arrow suggested that certain factors might affect people's ability to *convert* primary goods into relative advantage or well-being. Someone who was ill or disabled, for example, might (as a result of their state of health) experience difficulties in generating welfare from the primary goods allotted to them. Such individuals might, as a result of their disability, enjoy a lower level of well-being than someone in good health despite the fact that they received equally valued bundles of primary goods.⁷⁰

Sen's criticism can be further illustrated with the help of either a prior-principle critique or a case-implication critique. In terms of the

⁶⁹Ibid., pp.156-157.

⁷⁰On this see Kenneth Arrow, "Some Ordinalist-Utilitarian Notes on Rawls's Theory of Justice" in *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 70, 1973, p. 253.

former, G.A. Cohen, I think, expresses the point best when he says that;

The principle of equality condemns equal goods provision to a sound-limbed person and a paraplegic, because greater resources are necessary to enable the latter to achieve mobility, a desideratum to which a metric of stock of wealth is blind.⁷¹

To illustrate this point, Sen refers again to the case of the disabled person who, as a result of her disability, is an inefficient converter of primary goods into well-being.⁷² In a Rawlsian framework, even with the help of the difference principle (which sanctions inequalities when they benefit the worst off), the disabled woman would not be compensated for any hardship which she experiences as a result of her disability. This is due to the fact that she would not be considered “worse-off” by Rawlsian standards. Rawls, we will remember, measures advantage and disadvantage by using an index of primary goods and the disabled woman in this hypothetical example does, in fact, have just as much in terms of primary goods as every one else. Her disadvantage, Sen concludes, has to do with something else—something which the Rawlsian framework ignores completely—namely, her ability to convert primary goods into a valuable state of being. By trying to avoid the problems associated with using utility information, Rawls, in Sen’s opinion, went too far—he made utility an irrelevant factor in judging the state of a

⁷¹G.A. Cohen, *Equality of What? On Welfare, Goods, and Capabilities*, in Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (eds.) (1993), p.16.

⁷²Amartya Sen (1980), p.157.

person.

It can also be argued that while utility in the form of happiness or desire fulfilment may be an *inadequate* guide to urgency, the Rawlsian framework asserts it to be *irrelevant* to urgency, which is, of course, a much stronger claim.⁷³

Rawls briefly addresses this point by suggesting that “hard cases” can “distract our moral perception by leading us to think of people distant from us whose fate arouses pity and anxiety”⁷⁴Sen, however, finds Rawls’s response to be inadequate for two reasons; firstly, because “hard cases exist and are morally relevant” and secondly, because Sen believes that Rawls has utterly underestimated the extent and magnitude of both intrapersonal and interpersonal diversity. Any number of factors ranging from internal differences (such as age, sex, health,) to external factors (such availability of natural resources, economic conditions, the existence of anti-endemic policies, etc) can affect people’s abilities to convert primary goods into valuable states of being. “The problem”, as Sen notes, “does not end with hard cases”.⁷⁵

If people were basically very similar, then an index of primary goods might be quite a good way of judging advantage. But, in fact, people seem to have very different needs varying from health,

⁷³Ibid., p.158.

⁷⁴John Rawls, “A Kantian Concept of Equality”, in *Cambridge Review*, February 1975, p.96. Rawls also briefly discusses his setting aside of “hard cases” in *Social Unity and Primary Goods*, in Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (eds.) (1982), pp.167-168.

⁷⁵Amartya Sen (1980), p.157.

longevity, climatic conditions, location, work conditions, temperament, and even body size (affecting food and clothing requirements). So what is involved is not merely ignoring a few hard cases, but overlooking very widespread and real differences. Judging advantage purely in terms of primary goods leads to a partially blind morality.⁷⁶

This, in Sen's mind, suggests that Rawls has misidentified the appropriate space for measuring well-being and advantage. Rawls's error in this respect, according to Sen, is due to his misunderstanding of the relationship between goods, people, and well-being. In particular, Sen questions Rawls's decision to focus on primary goods and his suggestion that an index of primary goods provides the best measurement of a person's states and interests. For Sen, Rawls's focus on primary goods indicates that his conception of "justice as fairness" is marred by an element of "fetishism".

Commodity command is a *means* to the end of well-being, but can scarcely be the end in itself. To think otherwise is to fall into the trap of what Marx (1887) called 'commodity fetishism'—to regard goods as valuable in themselves and not for (and to the extent that) they help the person.⁷⁷

Although Sen denies that either primary goods or first-person reports on utility levels enjoyed can, by themselves, represent or provide an accurate metric of well-being, he does not deny the important place which such information has in providing a more comprehensive account

⁷⁶ibid., p.157-158. See also *Ethical Issues in Income Distribution* in Sen (1997b), p.294; Sen, (1985b), p.23; and *The Standard of Living* pp.15-16 and 22.

⁷⁷Amartya Sen,(1985b), p.28.

of well-being. In fact, Sen insists that both methods of appraisal identify important *aspects* of well-being and, as such, *contribute* to a comprehensive index of well-being and advantage.

Insofar as opulence and utility have roles (and they certainly do), these can be seen in terms of their indirect connections with well-being and advantage, in particular, (i) the causal importance of opulence and, (ii) the evidential importance of utility (in its various forms, such as happiness, desire-fulfilment, and choice).⁷⁸

Sen's concern with providing a conception of equality which focuses on human diversity was, undoubtedly, inspired by his extensive research in the areas of poverty, famine, and gender discrimination. In fact, many of Sen's publications on these subjects address the extent to which people are denied the resources necessary for meeting their basic needs because of such factors.⁷⁹ Although the identification, evaluation, and fulfilment of needs and interests routinely appear as implicit conventions in most egalitarian theories, these issues are rarely directly addressed. Instead, they are typically discussed as peripheral issues of secondary importance. For Sen, however, such issues identify the central concern of equality.

Whereas welfarists focus on a conception of well-being which equates that notion with ends (defined as utility), Rawls directs his

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, *Preface*.

⁷⁹Again, see Sen (1985b), pp. 81-104; Sen (1973), "Poverty, Inequality and Unemployment: Some Conceptual Issues in Measurement", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 8; Sen (1979), "Issues in the Measurement of Poverty", *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, Vol. 81; Sen (1981) *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; Sen, (1983) "Poor, Relatively Speaking", *Oxford Economic Papers*, Vol. 35 (reprinted in Sen [1997b]); Sen (1992), "Missing Women", *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 304.

attention to the means to well-being, arguing that an analysis of the distribution of goods will provide the ideal metric. What is missing from both of these theories and, in fact, what is more important when considering the project of equality, according to Sen, is the process *itself* through which goods come to deliver well-being. This process reflects, among other things, people's ability to meet their basic needs—information which both the Rawlsian and utilitarian frameworks are, in Sen's opinion, at pains to provide.

My contention is that *even* the concept of *needs* does not get adequate coverage through the information on primary goods and utility.⁸⁰

For Sen, it is the concept of needs which demands our egalitarian concerns and any conception of equality which fails to address the urgency of these requirements is, therefore, inadequate. After all, the fulfilment of our interests does, to a large extent, depend on maintaining our health and well-being at an acceptable level. The egalitarian focus, therefore, should be to ensure that people have equal opportunities to meet those needs which affect their health and well-being. As a result of this perspective, Sen is suspicious of those theories which fail to ensure compensation for those whose ability to meet their basic needs has been diminished.

[T]he notion of urgency related to this is not fully captured by either utility or primary goods, or any combination of the two. Primary

⁸⁰Amartya Sen (1980), p.159.

goods suffers from a fetishist handicap in being concerned with goods, and even though the list of goods is specified in a broad and inclusive way, encompassing rights, liberties, opportunities, income, wealth, and the social basis for self-respect, it is still concerned with good things rather than with what these things *do* to human beings. Utility, on the other hand, is concerned with what these things do to human beings, but uses a metric that focuses not on the person's capabilities but on his mental reaction...If it is argued that resources should be devoted to remove or substantially reduce the handicap of the cripple... the case must rest on something else. I believe what is at issue is the interpretation of needs in the form of basic capabilities.⁸¹

In this section of my thesis I have attempted to suggest how and why Sen arrived at his "capability" conception of equality. Now, in the following section, I will attempt to do justice to a theory which, in my opinion, rivals Rawls's in terms of its complexity and level of sophistication.

⁸¹ibid., p.160.

Section III: Sen's Capability Approach to Equality

Answering the question "equality of what?", according to Sen, requires that one determine "how a person's interests may be judged and his or her personal state assessed".⁸² Such judgements, however, are not easily made—not only can a person's states and interests can be judged from many different perspectives but, in addition, several factors will influence which states a person does in fact achieve as well as the interests which they pursue. The first type of difficulty is essentially a question of which focus to use when assessing people's states and interests while the second concern reflects the difficulty of providing a framework which is sensitive to human diversity. Together, these two problems identify the concerns which Sen is most anxious to address with his own conception of equality.

Sen, as was previously mentioned, is suspicious of evaluative frameworks which advocate informational monism—frameworks which judge people's well-being in terms of one specific variable, such as the level happiness which they achieve. In promoting his own conception of equality, therefore, one of Sen's main concerns was to avoid a similar difficulty. To this end, Sen attempted to overcome the restrictions of informational monism by offering an approach which viewed well-being as a multi-faceted concept—an approach which, in short, was information pluralist.

⁸²Amartya Sen (1985b) , p.1.

Sen, however, was equally concerned to provide an evaluative framework which avoided the second difficulty as well. As a result, he attempted to provide a conception of well-being which was fully sensitive to those factors which affect people's achievements and interests. In this respect, Sen paid particular attention to the fundamental diversity of human beings—considering both the internal and external factors which affect people's ability to achieve valuable states of being and to pursue their interests. Sen, therefore, was interested in providing a framework which not only defined states and interests in a broad and inclusive manner, but which, in addition, could accommodate the fundamental diversity of human beings.

The need for information pluralism, according to Sen, is obvious when one considers that;

[g]iven the variety of contexts in which the assessment of interest is relevant, it is quite unlikely that we shall get some *one* measure of interest that is superior to all others and applicable in all contexts.⁸³

For Sen, it was obvious that there is more than one area of our lives which demands normative attention. The attempt to single out the one, most fundamental aspect of human existence without acknowledging the role which other aspects of our lives play in that domain was, in Sen's mind, wrong-headed. To address these concerns, Sen began by distinguishing between two areas of intrinsic importance to human

⁸³Ibid., pp.6-7.

flourishing which he called “achievement” and “advantage”.⁸⁴

I would distinguish broadly between two ways of seeing a person's interests and their fulfilment, and I shall call them respectively ‘well-being’ and ‘advantage’. ‘Well-being’ is concerned with a person's achievement: how ‘well’ is his or her ‘being’? ‘Advantage’ refers to the real opportunities that the person has, especially compared with others. The opportunities are not judged by the results achieved, and therefore not just by the level of well-being achieved. It is possible for a person to have genuine advantages *and* still to ‘muff’ them. Or to sacrifice one's own well-being for other goals, and not to make full use of one's freedom to achieve a high level of well-being. The notion of advantage deals with a person's real opportunities compared with others. The freedom to achieve well-being is closer to the notion of advantage than well-being itself.⁸⁵

To represent our achievements Sen introduced the concept of “functionings”. Advantage, in contrast, was embodied by what Sen referred to as “capabilities”. I shall begin with a discussion of the former.

Utility and opulence, as Sen has acknowledged, both provide relevant information for making judgements about people's quality of life but true well-being, in Sen's opinion, is most accurately represented by the *process* through which people generate valuable states of being from the resources available to them. It is this focus which Sen wants to capture with his concept of “functionings”.

Functionings, as Sen describes them, represent our “doings” and

⁸⁴This is a very general way of putting things. Sen, of course, also provides further distinctions between “well-being” and “agency” in the context of both achievements and freedoms. This is an important distinction but, for the purposes of this thesis, it is not necessary to explain these subtleties in detail. For Sen's distinctions between (i) well-being achievement, (ii) well-being freedom, (iii) agency achievement, and (iv) agency freedom see Sen (1985a), pp.185-220.

⁸⁵Amartya Sen (1985b), p.5.

“beings”. Or, put another way, they represent our achievements. In order to illustrate the contrast between functionings, utility, and primary goods, Sen often defines functionings in relation to these other focal variables;

A functioning is an achievement of a person: what he or she manages to do or be. It reflects, as it were, a part of the ‘state’ of that person. It has to be distinguished from the commodities which were used to achieve those functionings. For example a bicycle has to be distinguished from possessing a bike. It has to be distinguished also from the happiness generated by the functioning, for example, actually cycling around must not be identified with the pleasure obtained from that act. A functioning is thus different both from (i) having goods (and the corresponding characteristics), to which it is posterior, and (ii) having utility (in the form of happiness resulting from that functioning), to which it is, in an important way, prior.⁸⁶

Just as our functioning achievements are many and varied, so too are the values attributed to those achievements in determining well-being. Being well-nourished, as Sen points out, is obviously of greater importance to a person’s well-being than using one brand of washing powder over another, similar brand. But such judgements, Sen cautions, are necessarily context sensitive. It is important to consider, for example, the fact that even the state of being well-nourished, for example, can be measured in both relative and absolute terms.⁸⁷ For, although at one end

⁸⁶Ibid., pp.10-11.

⁸⁷Sen, it should be noted, is also aware of the cultural relativity which such an approach engenders. Certain functionings, such as being well-nourished, in a poor country will obviously be given greater weight because of the number of people who have difficulty achieving this basic need. In a country where under-nourishment presents very little problems for its citizens a different focus (such as taking part in the life of the community) might receive more attention. On this see *Poor, Relatively Speaking* in Amartya Sen (1997b).

of the spectrum there is the *absolute* achievement of being well-nourished (where a person is as “well-nourished” as they could possibly be), there are also, the more pressing cases (where, for example, individuals are undernourished) which must be considered. For these people, Sen insists, it is necessary to consider how well they are meeting their dietary needs in relative terms—comparing not only how well they fare compared to others, but also the difference between their *actual* achievement and what would be considered their *optimum* level of achievement given their individual needs.

Sen’s perspective, in this regard, demonstrates his sensitivity to human diversity. The critical comparison reflects not only the relationship *between* different people’s respective levels of nourishment, but also includes information which reflects each individual’s *actual* achievements compared to their *potential* achievements. The latter type of information is necessary for calculating well-being because simple comparisons of, for example, the relative levels of nourishment achieved between two people fail to provide a sense of what would be needed to bring them up to their optimum level. Even two individuals who, from a medical perspective, are equally undernourished might require very different amounts of nourishment to bring them up to their optimum level (perhaps one of the two suffers from a disease which affects their ability to absorb nutrients). In getting an idea of what people need (given their functioning achievements), therefore, it is the intrapersonal assessments which must be calculated first. Only then does it make sense to proceed

with interpersonal comparisons between individuals.

To return to Sen's initial point, not all functionings are relevant in assessing a person's well-being and, of those which are relevant, the extent of their impact on well-being will depend on a variety of factors. Despite these cautionary remarks, however, Sen does, nonetheless, provide a very broad (although incomplete) guide to the types of achievements which he is concerned about.

The relevant functionings can vary from such elementary things as being adequately nourished, being in good health, avoiding escapable morbidity and premature mortality, etc., to more complex achievements such as being happy, having self respect, taking part in the life of the community, and so on.⁸⁸

Given this view (which relates the "good life" to a collection of worthwhile achievements), it is obvious that Sen's philosophical foundation is motivated by Aristotelian influences.⁸⁹ The extent of this influence, however, is further evidenced by his claim that;

[L]iving may be seen as consisting of a set of interrelated functionings, consisting of beings and doings. A person's achievement in this respect can be seen as the vector of his or her functionings...The claim is that functionings are *constitutive* of a person's being, and an evaluation of well-being has to take the form

⁸⁸Sen (1992), p.39.

⁸⁹Sen acknowledges that his decision to concentrate on the achievements of individuals was influenced by Aristotle's writings and, in particular, his analysis of the "good man" in terms of "life in the sense of activity" as presented in *The Nichomachean Ethics*. On this connection see Sen (1992), p.38, fn3, as well as his *Capability and Well-Being* in Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (eds.) (1993), pp.46-47.

of an assessment of these constitutive elements.⁹⁰

Functionings alone, however, fail to fully capture what Sen is really after. For, although the value attributable to achievements is representative of well-being, achievements alone say little about what the person *could* have accomplished—what options were actually open to them. What matters in judging a person's interests, Sen suggests, is not merely their well-being but their *advantage*, which, put another way, indicates their “real opportunities compared to others”.

Well-being [is] an assessment of the particular achievements of the person—the kind of “being” he or she succeeds in having. On the other hand, advantage, it can be argued, has also to take note of the real opportunities faced by the person. Assessment of advantage must, in this view, involve the evaluation of a *set* of potential achievements and not just the actual one.⁹¹

To capture this distinction, Sen introduces the concept of “capabilities”. Capabilities reflect a person's freedom to lead one type of a life over another. In this sense, they reflect all of the various functionings which are within a person's grasp. Sen illustrates the distinction between functionings and capabilities with the following.

The information pluralism of the functioning approach to well-being has to be further extended if we shift attention from the person's actual functionings to his or her *capacity* to function. A person's capacity set can be defined as the set of functioning vectors within his or her reach. In examining the well-being aspect of a

⁹⁰Amartya Sen (1992), p.39.

⁹¹Amartya Sen, (1985b), p.51.

person attention can legitimately be paid to the capability set of the person and not just to the chosen functioning vector. This has the effect of taking note of the positive freedoms in a general sense (the freedom 'to do this,' or 'to be that') that a person has. Importance may well be attached to checking whether one person did have the opportunity of achieving the functioning vector that another actually achieved. This involves comparisons of actual opportunities that different persons have.⁹²

In defining capabilities, however, Sen is careful to distinguish between "formal" and "real" opportunities. Formal opportunities represent those options which are not *blocked* by external hindrances. Real opportunities, in contrast, represent only those options which are *truly* available—personal choice being the only factor which could prevent you from pursuing that option. Sen's refined conception of capabilities, therefore, acknowledges the fact that although certain alternatives are sometimes presented as "real" options, they do, in fact, represent only "formal" opportunities and, as such, provide an inaccurate indication of a person's freedom to pursue valuable options.

It is important to be careful in this context, not to define 'opportunity' in the limited way in which it is often defined, e.g., whether the doors of a school are formally open to John (and not whether John can financially afford to go through those doors), or—going further—whether John can attend a school (but not whether John has the real opportunity of using the facilities there, given his physical or mental handicap).⁹³

Capabilities, therefore, represent the real opportunities faced by the

⁹²Amartya Sen (1985a), pp.200-201.

⁹³Amartya Sen (1985b), p.5.

person. As a result, Sen's analysis of well-being is extended to include the evaluation of a set of *potential* achievements and not just the *actual* one. Capabilities, in this respect, provide a broader evaluative category than functionings and, in fact, necessarily include functioning information within them. "A person's capacity set", as Sen defines it, "can be defined as the set of functioning vectors within his or her reach."⁹⁴ The need to include freedom in a theory of equality, according to Sen, is illustrated by considering both its instrumental and intrinsic importance to well-being.

The instrumental value of capability analysis is that it provides the means (in the form of information) used to determine how good of a deal one has in society. In addition, the freedom which an individual enjoys (as represented by their capability set) can also be valued for its intrinsic importance to a valuable life. In this view, freedom is seen as an important component of "the good life" in and of itself.

The second connection between well-being and capability takes the direct form of making *achieved* well-being itself depend on the *capability* to function. Choosing itself may be a valuable part of living, and a life of genuine choice with serious options may be seen to be—for that reason—richer. In this view; at least some types of capabilities contribute *directly* to well-being, making one's life richer with the opportunity of reflective choice.⁹⁵

To better illustrate the distinction between achievement and advantage (including the different types of information which they

⁹⁴Amartya Sen (1985a), p.201.

⁹⁵Amartya Sen (1992), p.41.

provide) Sen asks us to consider a hypothetical situation involving two individuals who are “starving”.⁹⁶ This assessment pertains not only to their levels of hunger but to their levels of nourishment as well. In addition, it is based not only on subjective reports of well-being, but on empirical facts as well (the importance of which will be discussed in what follows). Let us suppose that both individuals have similar rankings in terms of their well-being achievement. But now, consider how we would view this case if it was suggested that only one of the two individuals was actually starving due to a lack of access to food (perhaps she is poor). The other person is not really “starving”, but rather, “fasting”—where the difference between the two is reflected by the role which “choice” plays in the latter (perhaps she is on a hunger strike, refusing nourishment in order to make a political statement).

Although the first individual has not chosen to starve, it could very easily be said of our hunger-striker that she has, in fact, opted for this state of undernourishment. It seems obvious that there is a substantial difference between the two cases, particularly in terms of how we would assess each individual's respective state of well-being. A further difference between the two cases is demonstrated by our feelings about how to address each situation: the urge to provide relief is stronger (or, at least, more pressing) in the case of the first person. The importance of making such distinctions should be obvious enough, but in order to fully capture

⁹⁶See Amartya Sen, (1985a), p.201.

this distinction it is necessary to consider each person's capability level. Although both may experience similar levels of well-being achievement, it is obvious that our hunger striker is in a better position to pursue her well-being than the second, poverty-stricken individual who, we can safely assume, would choose to eat were this option available to her. Sen, therefore, extended his conception of well-being in order to capture the information necessary for making such distinctions.

By distinguishing these categories of human action from one another, however, Sen does not mean to suggest that such activities occur in isolation from one another.⁹⁷ Our experiences (including our opportunities) influence each other and, as a result, gains in one area of our lives may affect result in losses in another. To better explain this connection, however, it will first be necessary to explain another of Sen's distinctions, this time between well-being and agency.

The level of well-being which a person experiences represents "how well" that person is doing. Such assessments, according to Sen, should include objective information so as not to rely solely on first-person reports (as was one of the problems with utilitarianism). Objective information might include such facts as how well a person is nourished from a medical perspective and not just how well-nourished a person feels himself to be. Now well-being, as was previously mentioned, can be distinguished in terms of achievements and advantage. The distinction,

⁹⁷On this see Amartya Sen (1985a), p.187.

though obvious, is necessary due to the fact that an accurate assessment of relative well-being requires not only information concerning each individual's achievements, but also requires that we consider the opportunities which were open to them.

The same distinction holds in relation to what Sen refers to as the agency aspect of persons. Whereas well-being goals reflect the interests of the individual in question, the agency aspect of a person need not be so directly motivated by self-interest. While our agency interests may (and generally will) include the interest which we have for our personal well-being, this is not necessarily the case.

People have aspects other than well-being. Not all their activities are aimed at maximizing well-being (nor do all activities always contribute to it), no matter how we define well-being within the limits of that general concept. There are goals other than well-being and values other than goals.⁹⁸

The agency aspect of our lives, therefore, reflects all of our goals and values—the pursuit of which may or may not conflict with our interest in increasing our personal well-being. Agency goals may inspire us to pursue very different activities than those which we would have pursued were we interested only in pursuing our own self-interest. Commitments to family members, friends, political affiliations, community members and even feelings of responsibility to all fellow human beings or all living creatures may cause us to risk our own well-being in order to be “true to ourselves” and do what we think is right.

⁹⁸Amartya Sen (1985a), p.186.

A person's 'agency freedom' refers to what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important. A person's agency aspect cannot be understood without taking note of his or her aims, objectives, allegiances, obligations, and—in a broad sense—the person's conception of the good. Whereas well-being freedom is freedom to achieve something in particular, viz., well-being, the idea of agency freedom is more general, since it is not tied to any one type of aim. Agency freedom is freedom to achieve whatever the person, as a responsible agent, decides he or she should achieve. That open-conditionality makes the nature of agency freedom quite different from that of well-being freedom, which concentrates on a particular type of objective and judges opportunities correspondingly.⁹⁹

The agency role, as Sen points out, is of particular importance in terms of a person's own life and, in particular, with their conception of "the good". Agency is directly related to the concepts of autonomy and personal liberty. If such ideals are of any importance (as Sen thinks they are), then they must figure prominently in a credible egalitarian theory. That they are important is, in Sen's opinion, evidenced by their long history in the field of ethics.

I would argue that the conception of "persons" in moral analysis cannot be so reduced so as to attach no intrinsic importance to this agency role, seeing them ultimately only in terms of their well-being.¹⁰⁰

Within the category of agency, Sen again distinguishes between achievement and freedom. The distinction is important for reasons similar to those previously discussed in reference to the distinction

⁹⁹Ibid., pp203-204.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p.186.

between well-being achievement and well-being freedom. I do believe, however, that it is worthwhile to illustrate the relevance of both agency aspects. Consider the following two possible scenarios, both of which arise in a situation where a woman sees somebody caught in a burning house. In our first scenario, the woman can (and, indeed, does) rescue the individual from certain death by rushing into the burning building and pulling him or her to safety. In another case, however, the woman, whose mobility is impaired due to a recent injury, cannot gain access to the building despite her desire to save the individual. In this second situation, the woman's level of agency freedom is severely compromised compared to that of the woman in the first example. Her level of well-being freedom and achievement, however, may be higher than that of our heroine who, not only risked her life but, in addition, perhaps suffered smoke inhalation as a result of her efforts.

While the agency and well-being aspects of human existence are related, it is important to not get confused into thinking that the importance of the agency aspect is calculated in terms of its impact on well-being. The agency aspect is important in and of itself. Whether or not agency roles affect well-being and, to what extent, is a separate issue. Some agency roles will have a negative impact on a person's well-being while others will have a positive effect but, as Sen cautions, "*the importance of the agency aspect has to be distinguished from the importance of the impact of agency on well-being.*"¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹Ibid., p.187.

The above characterization of Sen's capability approach to equality represents the evolution of his view from 1979 until the present. It includes recent developments in his thought, many of which have been presented in the form of responses to criticisms. Unfortunately, however, the above exegesis fails to capture both the complexity and subtlety of Sen's theory. Only a doctoral dissertation or a work of comparable length would, in this respect, be able to do justice to Sen's life-long project. Despite these shortcomings, however, the preceding pages have remained true to my particular purposes for this thesis—providing insight into Sen's motivation for his capability approach to equality and suggesting how the urge to accommodate human diversity through an information pluralist foundation permeates all of his work.

The detail of the preceding sections has, in this respect, been necessary in order to fully explore the extent of Sen's commitment to providing a theory which is fully sensitive to how the differences between human beings can affect a theory of equality. Not only should such differences be considered in determining how to evaluate their states and interests, but by considering the effects of human diversity we are also provided with important information for determining how to rectify inequality through the use of distribution schemes. While I do believe that Sen's own theory provides an exceptionally rich conception of well-being and advantage at the evaluative level, I am concerned about the repercussions of using such assessments as a *basis* for resource distribution. The final section of my thesis will be devoted to explaining

and substantiating this claim.

Section IV: My Criticisms of Sen's Approach

Not all well-being and agency goals require the use of commodities or resources¹⁰² for their fulfilment. Happiness (which represents only one aspect of well-being), for example, can be achieved by recalling pleasant memories. The use of a commodity, in such circumstances, is not required for well-being to occur. There are, however, many instances in which our well-being and advantage can be measured in terms of our access to commodities. This is especially true for people who have limited access to those goods and resources which provide the most basic necessities for life.

When Sen first began writing about equality, his initial concern was to provide a framework which could recognize the injustice of such situations. In fact, when Sen first proposed his alternative to Rawlsian and utilitarian conceptions of equality he referred to his own work as a "*basic capability*" approach to equality. Although the information captured by his basic capability analysis provided a fairly broad and inclusive interpretation of welfare and advantage, Sen's main concern was to address those inequalities which require urgent attention. In many ways, Sen's earlier conception of basic-capabilities referred to those realms of achievement which are required for survival itself.

Sen was aware that such judgements—at least those concerning

¹⁰²For the sake of simplicity, my references to commodities and resources in this section should be taken to stand for commodities and resources as used in the economist's sense.

certain capabilities—would have to be culturally relative.¹⁰³ The resources required to “appear in public without shame”,¹⁰⁴ for example, could vary considerably depending on the cultural norms of where one lives. Similarly, whether or not a bicycle is considered to be an *adequate* form of transportation will depend on whether one lives in Siberia or Brazil.

[I]t is clear that whatever partial orderings can be done on the basis of broad uniformity of personal preferences must be supplemented by certain established conventions of relative importance. The ideas of relative importance are, of course, conditional on the nature of the society. The notion of equality of basic capabilities is a very general one, but any application of it must be rather culture-dependent, especially in the weighting of different capabilities. While Rawlsian equality has the characteristic of being both culture-dependent and fetishistic, basic capability equality avoids fetishism, but remains culture dependent. Indeed, basic capability equality can be seen as essentially an extension to the Rawlsian approach in a non-fetishistic direction.¹⁰⁵

These considerations, therefore, take note of *objective* measures of capability but, as Sen cautions, such objective measurements of well-being and advantage are often tempered by relativity, taking note of people’s particular circumstances and the resources required to accommodate such circumstances—taking note, in short, of human diversity.

The well-being of a person is best seen as an index of the person’s “functioning vector” which represents not only their actual achievements

¹⁰³On this see Sen’s *Poor, Relatively Speaking* in Amartya Sen (1997b).

¹⁰⁴This example was first used by Adam Smith in his 1776 book *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (reprinted in *Everyman’s Library* [London: Dent, 1954], vol 1). Sen, however, refers to it often throughout his work.

¹⁰⁵Amartya Sen (1980), p.161.

but their capability set as well. The functioning achievements which a person actually attains will depend on a number of factors which may include i) the commodity used in achieving that functioning and, ii) the choice of utilization function.

In terms of commodity use, several factors must be considered when evaluating both the achievements and the advantage which such resources provide. For one thing, commodity usage often involves choice. If the desired functioning achievement is to be nourished, for example, then the individual may have certain options in terms of what to eat. The extent of one's options in this regard, however, will be dictated by the limits of the person's command over commodities—influenced, for example, by their level of income relative to the price of that commodity. This suggests that one's choices concerning which commodities to use are limited to choices from within the commodity set available to them.

Similar variations occur at the level of utilization function. The choice of what to do (which functioning to achieve) is also limited to a selection from among the feasible set of utilization functionings. There is not only what *you did*, but also what *you could have done*—where the possibilities given by the second realm are limited by your personal circumstances. In light of these contingent circumstances (which vary from individual to individual) there is a set of options which represent “[t]he totality of all the alternative functioning vectors a person can choose from.” It is this set, according to Sen, which reflects “a person's capabilities, i.e., the various alternative functioning bundles he or she can

achieve through choice.”¹⁰⁶

Commodities, therefore, play an important role in Sen’s framework but, unlike Rawls, Sen insists that commodities have no intrinsic value in the realm of well-being assessment. The only value of such goods and resources in this regard, according to Sen, derives from the instrumental role which they play in contributing to well-being and advantage.

What is important about commodities when assessing a person’s states and interests, according to Sen, is not a simple enumeration of the resources which one possesses, but rather (i) the characteristics of the commodities themselves, and (ii) facts about the personal and social situation of the individual who will use that commodity—factors which determine how effectively that person will convert the commodities at their disposal into well-being.

The characteristics of commodities, as Sen describes them, are properties of the commodities themselves. It is these properties, as opposed to the commodities proper, which do, in fact, offer well-being and advantage. Simply looking at how commodities are used or which characteristic of a good has been accessed will not necessarily provide accurate information in terms of how one’s well-being and advantage has been affected. Take the commodity rice as an example. Rice has the *characteristic* of providing nourishment. When ingested, therefore, rice (or, more accurately, the nourishing *properties* of rice) allow one to

¹⁰⁶Amartya Sen (1985b), pp.26-27.

achieve a valuable functioning—in this case, being nourished. In determining an individual's achievements, therefore, what is intrinsically important is not that they possess the rice (although this is of instrumental importance), but rather, their ability to get nutrition out of the rice—to access the valuable characteristic of that commodity. Access to commodities, therefore, is an important part of the process involved in the fulfilment of an individual's interests. The advantage to the individual, however, cannot be judged in terms of ownership of the commodities themselves, but rather, in terms of the individual's ability to access the valuable characteristics of those commodities.

Now, one of Sen's criticisms of Rawls, we will remember, was that different individuals will have different levels of success in converting resources into well-being depending on a number of internal and external factors. To distribute food equally amongst the members of a society will, in no way, ensure that they are all equally nourished. A woman who is pregnant, for example, might require more than food than a woman who is not. Or, consider the differences in the amount of food required to nourish an eighteen-year-old and an eighty-year-old. Such differences, Sen maintains, are not rare and, as a result, he attempts to offer the same context-dependent treatment of characteristics as he did for goods.

The conversion of commodity-characteristics into personal achievements or functionings depends on a variety of factors—personal and social.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ibid., p.26.

Having switched the focus from commodities to the characteristics of commodities, Sen maintains that it is not the welfare-bestowing characteristics which provide the necessary information for evaluating well-being and advantage. It is only by measuring an individual's functioning achievements that we will know how effectively they accessed the characteristic in question.

In an approach pioneered by Gorman (1956) and Lancaster (1966), commodities are seen in terms of their characteristics. The characteristics are the various desirable properties of the commodities in question. Securing amounts of these commodities gives the person command over the corresponding characteristics...However, the characteristics of the goods do not tell us what the person will be able to do with those properties. For example, if a person has a parasitic disease that makes the absorption of nutrients difficult, then that person may suffer from undernourishment even though he may consume the same amount of food as another person for whom the food is more than adequate. In judging the well-being of the person it would be premature to limit the analysis to the characteristics of the goods possessed.¹⁰⁸

According to Sen, an analysis of capabilities when applied in conjunction with an analysis of the characteristics of commodities most effectively allows us to determine both (i) *which* characteristics an individual can access, and (ii) the *degree* to which they can be benefitted by those characteristics. Sen asks us to consider the commodity "bread" to illustrate this point. Bread, according to Sen, has several desirable properties which may vary depending on the circumstances of its usage; (i) it can provide nutrition when ingested, (ii) it can serve as a symbol

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p.9.

when used in a religious ceremony and, (iii) it can carry social significance when shared at a gathering, etc. One can easily imagine situations where all of these characteristics provide their respective benefits to an individual during one comprehensive event. Take, for example the celebration of "Shabbat" in the Jewish tradition.

If the host of such a ceremony invites some friends to share in the celebration then that individual will convert the desirable properties of bread into well-being in all three of the ways previously mentioned; (i) they will eat the bread and benefit from its nutritional properties, (ii) they will use the bread as a religious symbol when saying the prayer which gives thanks for food, and (iii) they will receive the social benefit provided by sharing the bread with others. In such circumstances it is plainly obvious that one who uses a loaf of bread in these circumstances benefits to a greater extent from the characteristics of bread than another individual who simply uses it for nourishment. When investigating *which* characteristic this individual was able to convert into well-being, it is obvious that this enumeration will be greater than the same list provided by the individual who was only able to benefit from the nutritional value of that same commodity.

In addition, further differences between individuals' capability levels, particularly in respect to the *degree* to which they can benefit from the *same* characteristic, can be illustrated by a similar example. Compare two individuals, one in excellent health and the other suffering from an illness which negatively affects their ability to absorb the nutrients from

their food. Although both of these people, if given the same quantity of bread, will convert the nutritional characteristics of their meal into well-being, the individual with the illness will be much less successful in this process due to a diminished capability to perform such conversions.

Because the differences between people can affect their ability to access the valuable characteristics of commodities—as illustrated by the outcomes in the above two situations—Sen offers the following suggestion;

In getting an idea of the well-being of the person, we clearly have to move on to 'functionings', to wit, what the person succeeds in *doing* with the commodities and characteristics at his or her command. For example, we must take note that a disabled person may not be able to do many things an able-bodied individual can, with the same bundle of commodities.¹⁰⁹

Sen's approach, therefore, acknowledges that people get different things out of commodities and, as a result, may generate different levels of well-being in spite of the fact that they are similarly situated with respect to commodity command. In addition, Sen's focus on functionings provides a conception of equality which acknowledges the *role* which commodities play in shaping the quality of our lives without focusing *exclusively* on commodity command. Sen's concern here was obviously to avoid the same type of commodity fetishism which he found so repugnant in Rawls. The characteristics of goods do not and, indeed, cannot represent or indicate well-being. And, while I do agree with Sen on this point, I believe that the definition which he attributes to characteristics

¹⁰⁹Ibid., pp. 9-10.

is over-cautious in this regard. Consider, for example, his remarks on characteristics in the following passage.

While the ownership of commodities is a personal matter¹¹⁰ and thus the command over characteristics of goods owned is also a personal matter, *the quantification of characteristics does not vary with the personal features of the individual possessing the goods.* A bicycle is treated as having the characteristic of transportation, and this is the case *whether or not the particular person happening to possess the bike is able-bodied or crippled.* In getting an idea of the well-being of the person, we clearly have to move on to 'functionings', to wit, what the person succeeds in doing with the commodities and characteristics at her command.¹¹¹

Because of this rigid definition of characteristics, I believe that Sen himself has inadvertently failed to consider the implications of human diversity on every aspect of his theory. When Sen insists that the characteristics of commodities are "quantificationally fixed" he must mean that the characteristics of goods are determined by looking at how they have been used in the past. Such a characterization is, however, in my opinion, deeply problematic—especially given Sen's commitment to acknowledge the *effects* of human diversity.

According to Sen's interpretation, the characteristics of a commodity are determined by looking at the traditional uses of the resource in question. A bicycle, to borrow Sen's own example, is typically used for transportation and, as a result, all bicycles, according to Sen, would have

¹¹⁰Sen is careful to remark in a footnote that ownership is not, strictly speaking always a personal matter. Sen refers to instances of joint ownership as well as communal use within a family (which is not, necessarily, considered an instance of joint ownership per se) to illustrate this point. See Amartya Sen (1985b), p.10 *fn* 3.

¹¹¹Amartya Sen (1985b), p.10—emphasis added.

this characteristic. I would argue, however, that "transportation" is really only a *potential* characteristic of bicycles and whether we can say that it is an *actual* characteristic depends not on the fact that it is a bicycle, but rather on the particular circumstances of the individual who uses it. In order to determine the characteristics of a commodity, different types of information are required depending on whether the analysis of a person's functioning achievements is being used to evaluate well-being, or whether such assessments are being used to determine how to compensate individuals through a distributive scheme.

In terms of the former, I would argue that the characteristics of a commodity can only be determined by looking at how the commodity was, in fact, actually used. In other words, characteristics are determined *after* the commodity has been used. Such a move is necessary so as to ensure that novel applications of commodities are recognized as valuable functioning achievements. Under Sen's treatment, characteristics are pre-determined and, as a result, any use of a commodity which converts a previously *undiscovered* characteristic into well-being cannot count as a legitimate functioning. If I use an old tire as a sculpture, for example, it is doubtful that I would be accessing one of the traditionally recognized characteristics of that tire, even though my functioning achievement in producing the art, may increase my level of well-being. The fact that a commodity is what it is may limit its uses but that fact does not necessarily preclude the possibility of novel applications. There are, for example, a number of uses which one cannot make of a bicycle (you

can't, for example, eat it) but its "bicycleness" does not preclude the fact that you may use it in other, non-traditional ways. Although Sen does not explicitly state that characteristics are determined by the *conventional* functions and applications of commodities, I cannot see how it is possible to make sense of the idea that characteristics are "quantificationally fixed" (i.e., "predetermined"), in any other manner.

When characteristics provide relevant information at the level of distribution, other factors must be considered. Sen's approach, as was previously mentioned, allows for measurements of well-being which not only compare people's achievements relative to each other, but which also gauge what a person manages to achieve compared to what they could have achieved. Such descriptions of equality and equality assessment are used to determine which aspects of a person's life put them at a disadvantage. Not only do they identify *which* disadvantages deserve compensation but they also give us an idea of *how* to compensate them—they identify in Sen's case, for example, what we need to give people who are disadvantaged in order to ensure that they have a more equal level of functioning and capability.

Due to Sen's "rigid" definition of characteristics, however, such attempts at compensation might prove ineffective. Again, if "a bicycle is treated as having the characteristic of transportation, and this is the case whether or not the particular person happening to possess the bike is able-bodied or crippled," then how can we assure that people get the commodities which they need *given their personal circumstances*. If it is

determined at the level of functioning evaluation, for example, that a paraplegic is at a disadvantage because she has no form of transportation would we really want to compensate her with a bicycle? A bicycle does not have the characteristic of transportation to a paraplegic because somebody who's physical mobility is impaired in this way can not *access* this characteristic. They may, of course, be able to use a bicycle in other, welfare-bestowing ways, but not as a form of transportation.

At the level of distribution, therefore, the characteristics of commodities can only be determined by considering the *capabilities* of the person who is to use them. What characteristics really refer to, in my opinion, is the relationship between people and commodities. A bicycle can only be said to have the characteristic of transportation if the appropriate relationship between the bike and the person who uses it holds. A bicycle, therefore, does not have this relationship to a paraplegic regardless of whether this relationship holds for others.

At this point, it might be argued that the above criticism applies only to a few, exceptional cases—that, in general, most people can use a bicycle for transportation and, as a result, it would be more expedient to use Sen's rigid interpretation of characteristics in a distribution scheme. Sen himself, however, would surely balk at this suggestion as it is dangerously similar to a criticism which he himself levied against Rawls. "Hard cases", as Sen insisted, are important. And, in addition, there are a number of factors (age, level of fitness, health, climatic conditions) which might hinder somebody who possesses a bike (or any other commodity)

from using it for transportation (or in a way which allows the individual to access any of its pre-determined, quantificationally fixed, value-bestowing characteristics). To deny the fact that i) "hard cases" exist (and that these situations require our attention), and ii) that (due to the *fundamental* diversity of human beings) they occur more frequently than one would expect, would, as Sen himself suggested, be shortsighted.

Approaching my analysis from a different angle, however, one might suggest that it is vulnerable to a further criticism and so, I would like to take this opportunity to address this potential concern here as well. According to this line of criticism it might be suggested that my review of Sen does not point to as glaring an inconsistency as the foregoing analysis has suggested. Why, for example, one might ask, can Sen not overcome these concerns by resorting to a "common-sense" approach when making distributive decisions based on the information provided at the level of assessment? What is truly important and, indeed, difficult to determine with any accuracy, according to this line of thinking, is an assessment of people's functioning achievements. Once that information has been calculated, we can simply use a common sense approach at the distributive stage: once we have determined that a bicycle-owning paraplegic has scored a substandard level of functioning achievement in relation to her efforts to travel we can simply use common sense to infer that she will require a wheelchair to rectify this inequality.

Despite the initial appeal of the simplicity of this suggestion, however, this line of reasoning (when followed through to its logical

conclusion) defeats itself. For, if we can reduce the process of (re)distribution to this level of simplicity, than why not apply the same common sense approach to the level of evaluation. Why bother evaluating the paraplegic's functioning achievements in the first place? After all, if common sense can be used to guide our decisions at the level of (re)distribution (to tell us which commodity the paraplegic needs and, therefore, should be given in order to achieve a functioning related to travel), then we should be able to use a similar approach at the evaluative stage as well (to look at their commodity bundle and determine that their bicycle will be of little value in this regard).

Common sense tells us that a paraplegic who owns a bicycle will not be able to access the "transportation" characteristic of that vehicle. As a result, we do not really need to wait until they have failed in this regard to evaluate their achievements related to transportation—we know that a paraplegic who owns a bicycle (or, more precisely, whose commodity bundle contains only one commodity with the characteristic of transportation) will not be able to access that characteristic. As a result, the only information which the common sense approach would require would be i)an enumeration of the individual's commodity bundle (and the corresponding characteristics of those commodities), and ii)information about the particular state of that individual (such as their level of (dis)ability).

In other words, the common sense approach would recommend that the process of evaluating certain of an individual's functionings (the

ones for which it can be foreseen that achievement will measure zero) occur *prior* to their use of (or, more precisely, their failure to use) the commodities at their disposal. The implication of this criticism, therefore, is to suggest that at least for certain functioning achievements, both the evaluations of relative well-being and the (re)distribution schemes designed to correct any inequalities discovered therein can be calculated according to a common sense approach.

Sen, however, is concerned to maintain both the subjective and objective components of well-being evaluations. The common-sense method can only accommodate the objective portion of that analysis. Subjective testimonies are, after all, superfluous in the common-sense approach because it is inherently *obvious* that a paraplegic cannot, for example, use a bicycle to travel. Although Sen wanted to avoid the problems faced by utilitarianism by incorporating objectivity into the evaluative stage of his project, he did not intend to do so at the expense of subjective assessments.

Although first-person reports on well-being and advantage may not always provide the most *accurate* information, they offer an important type of information which objective assessment could never provide. We are, after all, human beings and part of how we are “doing” is a direct result of how we feel. I would highly doubt that Sen’s intention in formulating this theory was to recommend a paternalistic system in which how a person feels about the quality of their life is inconsequential compared to how others think that they ought to feel in those

circumstances.

In addition, the common sense approach affords too much discretion to the “objective” third parties involved. There is, in my opinion, a grave danger that the decision concerning *which* functioning failures could (and, subsequently should) be calculated according to the common sense approach will be quickly overextended to include not only functionings which common sense tells us are *never* successful i.e., people in a particular state of being (such as paraplegics) who own certain commodities (such as bicycles), but those functionings which are *rarely* successful as well. If it is simply *assumed* that certain conditions or states of being *tend* to render individuals ineffective in their efforts to access the characteristics of certain commodities will these functioning efforts be subject to the common sense approach in the name of expediency as well? Does the fact that certain individuals in certain circumstances tend to fail in respect to certain functioning achievement imply that everybody who is in similar circumstances will also fail? Persistence often pays off. It is through trying to do things over and over again that people often meet with success in areas where accomplishments were hitherto unexpected. Most importantly, however, the very prospect of using one human being as a template for another runs counter to Sen’s premise that human beings are different—not only in the ways which are immediately apparent, but in a myriad of ways which mere appearances (based on both subjective and objective evaluations) fail to suggest.

At this stage, I would like to suggest that a more flexible, context-

relative description of characteristics would be more compatible with Sen's overall approach to equality than his own rigid interpretation. Given what has already been said, take, for example, the difficulties presented by the following, brief passage.

The characteristics are the various desirable properties of the commodities in question.¹¹²

The fact that characteristics are desirable implies that they are desirable *to somebody*. It is impossible that Sen is implying that there should be an overlapping consensus as to what is desirable as this is too easily countered. Consider the commodity sugar. Sugar has both desirable and undesirable characteristics depending on (i) who ingests the sugar, and, in certain circumstances, (ii) when they ingest it. This second point further illustrates the extent to which human diversity can affect the conversion of commodities into valuable states of being. People are not only different from each other, but they themselves, including their needs and interests, also change throughout their lives.

While the fattening properties of sugar may be considered exceptionally desirable for an individual who is actively trying to gain weight, these same properties are completely undesirable for the person who is trying desperately to lose weight. Further if we examine one characteristic of sugar as related to the same individual we can see that one characteristic may be desirable at one time and undesirable at

¹¹²ibid., p.9.

another. Consider the effects of sugar on the diabetic; in one instance the insulin-producing property of sugar can save the individual's life, in another it could potentially kill the same person.

Human beings are rather complex organisms which are continuously changing within themselves, in relation to each other, and in how they react to their environment. It is surprising that Sen's commitment to recognize and accommodate the pervasiveness of human diversity did not carry his attention to such factors into his interpretation of characteristics. This is especially surprising given that Sen's main concern at the time that he wrote these definitions of characteristics was to address inequalities with regard to *basic* capabilities. That a distribution scheme which was based on his own evaluative framework could result in people being given resources which they couldn't use to meet such basic requirements as being adequately nourished, for example, would seem to run counter to Sen's own self-avowed purpose.

Given these difficulties, it is hard to understand why Sen gave such an Aristotelian twist to his definition of characteristics. I believe, however, that the answer lies in his characterization of functionings and, in particular, his suggestion that functioning achievements are to be judged in terms of people's *success* in achieving valuable states of being. Whether one is adequately nourished, for example, will depend on whether or not one successfully accesses the nourishing properties of the food which they consume. Success, in this sense, requires a standard for comparison. In order to judge whether somebody has been successful in their

achievements, one must first know what it would *mean* to be successful—a previously established standard is required.

We can only *assess* functioning achievements in relative terms, even though the terms of comparison may themselves be either absolute or relative. When judging whether a person has achieved their maximum level of nourishment, for example, their level of achievement can be judged *relative* to their potential level of maximum nourishment (even though the yardstick of comparison, in such cases, is based on an *absolute* level of achievement). Similarly, whether or not one owns the clothing required to appear in public without shame can only be judged in *relative* terms (how your apparel compares to what others wear). Again, one's achievements in this respect are judged in terms of one's success at meeting a previously established standard even though the standard itself may be established by considering the average level of achievement for a group of people.

Sen, as we may recall, had some very harsh criticisms for Rawls due to what he called elements of “commodity fetishism” in Rawls's theory—Rawls, as Sen described it, was focusing on goods as ends in themselves as opposed to what goods do for people. I believe that Sen himself, however, is guilty of a similar charge in terms of his description of the “characteristics” of goods. If I am correct, then it might be said of Sen's own theory that it replaces “commodity fetishism” with elements of “characteristic fetishism”.

Conclusion

Despite these criticisms, I remain convinced that Sen's capability approach to equality offers an important contribution to the current body of work on egalitarian theories. Even a cursory reading of material on egalitarian thought published after Sen's seminal article (and continuing thereafter) demonstrates the enormous impact that he has had on the way in which both egalitarians and their critics think about equality. I believe that Sen's contributions (both his criticisms of other theories as well as his own proposal) have vastly improved both the depth and quality of debate on egalitarian issues.

Much of Sen's work has been directed at defending his conception of equality from its critics. While many contemporary egalitarians have criticized Sen's proposal, the extent of this attention (both positive and negative) is an indication of the strength of his approach. Sen's focus on functionings and capabilities has proven to be a formidable opponent to the most seasoned of egalitarian writers. It is considered to be one of the main theories in egalitarian literature and is viewed by many to be rivalled only by Rawls's theory of justice as fairness—a position which, in my opinion, is well-deserved.

If nothing else, Sen's writings on equality in general and his focus on the effects of human diversity in particular, have helped to steer egalitarian discourse in new directions. By confronting the issue of equality from his unique perspective and insisting that the primary

concern of egalitarian thought is to ensure that people are able to meet their basic needs, Sen's approach has motivated a shift in how egalitarian discourse can and, indeed, should be perceived—from a subject relegated to the realm of ideal theory to a topic more amenable to the sphere of political debate and action. Sen's contributions have, in this respect, imbued egalitarian discourse with a sense of urgency. He has reminded us that real disadvantage is often measured in terms of pain and suffering and not just through an index of holdings or a calculus of happiness. Most importantly, however, Sen has reminded us that we are *capable* of doing something about inequality.

Bibliography

- Arneson, Richard J. (1993) "Equality" in Robert F. Goodin and Philip Pettit (eds), *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*. Blackwell Publishing: Cambridge, Mass.
- Arthur, John and Shaw, William H. (eds.) (1991) *Justice and Economic Distribution*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, second edition.
- Cohen, G.A. (1989) "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice", *Ethics*. Vol. 99, July, pp.906-944.
- . (1990) "Incentives, Inequality, and Community", *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values-Volume 10*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, pp.263-329.
- . (1994) "Amartya Sen's Unequal World", *New Left Review*. No. 203, Jan/Feb, pp.117-129.
- Cohen, Joshua. (1995) "Review of Inequality Reexamined", *The Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 92, No. 5, May, pp.275-288.
- Crocker, David A. (1992) "Functioning and Capability: The Foundations of Sen's and Nussbaum's Developmental Ethic", *Political Theory*. Vol. 20, No. 4, November, pp.584-612.
- Daniels, Norman. (1990) "Equality of What: Welfare, Resources, or Capabilities?", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. Vol. L, Supplement, Fall pp.273-296.
- Dworkin, Ronald. (1981a) "What is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. Vol. 10, No. 3, Summer, pp.185-246.
- . (1981b) "What is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. Vol. 10, No. 3, Summer, pp.283-345.
- . (1987a) "What is Equality? Part 3: The Place of Liberty", *The Iowa Law Review*. Vol. 73, No. 1, 1987, pp.1-54.
- . (1987b) "What is Equality? Part 4: Political Equality", *The University of San Fransisco Law Review*. Vol. 22, No. 1, 1987, pp.1-30.
- Kane, John. (1996) "Justice, Impartiality, and Equality: Why the Concept of Justice does not presume Equality", *Political Theory*. Vol. 24, No. 3, August, pp.375-393.

- Kymlicka, Will. (1990) *Contemporary Political Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, Andrew. (1994) "Review of Inequality Reexamined", *Philosophical Book*. Vol. 35, No. 1, pp.65-67.
- Nielsen, Kai. (1996) "Radical Egalitarianism Revisited: On Going Beyond the Difference Principle", *The Windsor Yearbook of Access to Justice*. Vol. 15, 1996, pp.121-158.
- Nussbaum, Martha and Sen, Amartya (eds.) (1993) *The Quality of Life*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- O'Neill, Mike and Smith, Steven R. (1997) "Equality of What and the Disability Rights Movement", *Imprints*. Vol. 2, No. 2, October, pp.123-144.
- Pojman, Louis. (1997) "On Equal Human Worth: A Critique of Contemporary Egalitarianism" in Louis P. Pojman and Robert Westmoreland (eds.), *Equality: Selected Readings*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Pojman, Louis P. and Westmoreland, Robert (eds.) (1997) *Equality: Selected Readings*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Rawls, John. (1971) *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Roemer, John. (1994) "Review of Inequality Reexamined", *The Philosophical Review*. Vol. 103, No. 3, July, pp.554-557.
- Sen, Amartya K. (1980) "Equality of What?" in Sterling McMurrin (ed.), *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values-Vol I*. University of Utah Press: Salt Lake City.
- . (1985a) "Well-Being, Agency and Freedom: the Dewey Lectures 1984", *The Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 82, No. 4, April, pp.169-221.
- . (1985b) *Commodities and Capabilities*. Amsterdam: North Holland.
- . (1992) *Inequality Reexamined*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- . (1996) "On the Status of Inequality", *Political Theory*. Vol. 24, No. 3, August, pp.394-400.

———. (1997a) *Choice, Welfare, and Measurement*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, paperback edition.

———. (1997b) *Resources, Values, and Development*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, paperback edition.

Sen, Amartya and Williams, Bernard (eds.) (1982) *Utilitarianism and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.