

Gasper, Des

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## Human well-being: concepts and conceptualizations

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Discussion Paper No. 2004/06

## **Human Well-being: Concepts and Conceptualizations**

Des Gasper\*

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### **Abstract**

Economic measures of income have ignored large areas of human well-being and are poor measures of well-being in the areas to which they attend. Despite increased recognition of those distortions, ‘GNP per capita continues to be regarded as the quintessential indicator of a country’s living standard’ (Partha Dasgupta). Well-being seems to have intuitive plausibility as a concept, but in practice we encounter a bewilderingly diverse family of concepts and approaches, partly reflecting different contexts, purposes, and foci of attention. Is there a unifying framework that yet respects the complexity and diversity of well-being? This paper presents an imperfect comparative and integrative framework that builds on the contributions by Sen and others. We move toward the framework gradually, since well-being concepts are in fact complex entities which reflect pictures of personhood and of science. Insight grows through surveying a wide range of relevant experience and views, before risking blinkering one’s vision in a framework. The paper then uses the framework to examine conceptualizations of human well-being, by Dasgupta, Sen, Nussbaum, Doyal and Gough, and Alkire.

Keywords: well-being, welfare, happiness, objective, subjective, measurement

JEL classification: D63, I31, I32

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\* Institute for Social Studies, The Hague.

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UNU World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER)  
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## **Introduction**

What should well-being measurers try to measure? To address this question we must consider the nature of well-being, and the various purposes of the exercise of conceptualizing and measuring. This paper looks mostly at the nature of well-being, especially in earlier sections, but purposes will be discussed too, especially in the later sections.

Economics practitioners and their clients have for a long time been poorly served by economic theorists in the conceptualization of human well-being. The result has been measurement without theory, the distortion of well-being measurement by the presence since the 1940s of national accounts and related data, even though economic measures of income have ignored large areas of well-being and are poor measures of well-being in the areas to which they attend. Increasing recognition of those distortions has had relatively little practical impact: ‘GNP per capita continues to be regarded as the quintessential indicator of a country’s living standard’ (Dasgupta 2001: 53). One reason is that alternative measurement should be guided, indeed inspired, by a unifying alternative vision while respecting the complexity and diversity of well-being; hence the increasing interest now in, for example, Sen’s or Nussbaum’s approach.

This paper stresses the diversity in both well-being and the approaches to it. We will move towards a framework gradually, since, as Griffin (1986) argues, well-being concepts come as parts of complex conceptualizations which reflect pictures of personhood and of science. Insight grows through first surveying the terrain of well-being, as in section 1, and some of the range of concepts and conceptualizations, as in section 2, before risking blinkering one’s vision in a framework. Section 3 then presents an imperfect comparative and integrative framework. Section 4 uses the framework to examine some current re-conceptualizations of human well-being, by Dasgupta, Sen, Nussbaum, Doyal and Gough, and Alkire, and to compare their purposes. Section 5 offers some conclusions.

### **1 The nature of well-being: terms, foci and blind-spots**

Literature on ‘well-being’ is massive and diverse. A large part nowadays consists of books of advice on how to feel fine, through diet, exotic substances and aromas, music, posture techniques, exercise routines, giving more priority to one’s family and other personal relationships, or religion. The in-term is well-being, not happiness. Perhaps the Aristotelian standpoint is widely shared: that well-being is not merely a sensation of happiness. Human beings have more faculties than just feeling happiness, pleasure or pain; notably they are creatures of reasoning and of meaning-making, of imagination, and of intra- and inter-societal links and identities.

A smaller part of contemporary publication on well-being comes from academic philosophy, as in the work of James Griffin or Wayne Sumner, which examines a limited set of concepts with reference to a rather limited range of evidence and methods. One encounters few real people or cases and usually little behavioural science there. Their theories of the good have a narrow basis; ‘work’ does not figure in the indexes to

Griffin and Sumner's books. Such analysis does still probe and query assumptions behind the treatment of 'welfare', personal and social, in modern economics.

A third body of investigation consciously on well-being is the huge literature from other social sciences, especially psychology. These use a broader range of evidence and concepts. Whereas the 'ordinal revolution' in economics rejected cardinal measurement of utility and interpersonal utility comparisons, the other social science that matches it in scale, psychology, retained the study and measurement of subjective well-being (SWB). It shows that SWB is measurable, often relatively little related to consumption levels, and not simply imputable from choices—people do not try to maximize their own utility and/or are not very good at it (Kiron 1997, Kahneman 1994). Only exceptional cases in economics, such as Tibor Scitovsky's remarkable *The Joyless Economy*, have delved into these sources, until very recently. SWB work has long been available, and has grown greatly in the past generation, as in the so-called positive psychology movement (e.g. Seligman and Csikszentihalyi, 2000). 'Positive' refers here to the study of success, as Abraham Maslow stressed from the 1930s: study of mentally healthy people and high achievers, not only the sick and disturbed. What outsiders may call SWB research includes arguably at least two different streams, the hedonic and the eudaimonic, the latter of which may call itself well-being (WB) research or psychological WB research rather than SWB research (Ryan and Deci 2001). Also partly distinct are the great streams of research on Quality of Life (QOL) and social indicators, often from sociology, health sciences and related areas.<sup>1</sup>

Another philosophical style reflects less on generalized impersonal social science sources, and more, as done in the Aristotelian or existentialist traditions, on insights from history, fiction, drama, biography and the narrative study of lives; for example as in Theodore Zeldin's *An Intimate History of Humanity* or Andre Comte-Sponville's *A Short Treatise on The Great Virtues*. Martha Nussbaum's *The Intelligence of the Emotions* combines this tradition with intensive evidence from behavioural sciences.

A look across this variety of literatures generates many considerations, some of which we should mention here. We need to look at quantity as well as quality of life, at time budgets, and at the quality of death; and to acknowledge that 'well-being' refers to many different things.

### **1.1 The term 'well-being' is ambiguous: it has many usages, meanings, conceptions**

The category well-being seems to be used to refer to whatever is assessed in an evaluation of a person's situation, or, more fittingly and narrowly, in any such evaluation which is focused on the person's 'being' (Gasper 2002). The term 'welfare' can mean how well people live, or what is done by others to help the needy; these are the two OED meanings. In the former usage, 'welfare' is typically treated

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<sup>1</sup> We will see 'Quality of Life' referred to as concerning (1) self-report indicators or (2) non-self-report indicators or (3) both; and as identical to well-being (van Praag and Frijters, Dasgupta) or explicitly distinguished from it (Sen). Standardization of terms appears to be lacking.

interchangeably with WB; the OED defines it as ‘well-being; happiness; health and prosperity’.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of well-being is thus best seen as an abstraction; that is used to refer to any of many well-evaluated aspects of life (Travers and Richardson 1993). But it has often been reified as a single entity, especially in most utilitarianism and utilitarian-influenced economics. Most utilitarianism reduced well-being to *well-feeling* (typically seen as pleasure), and further reduced well-feeling to a scalar (unitary pleasure, ‘utility’).<sup>3</sup> People were presented as simple creatures, with just one sort of appreciative system, and with that one system having just one currency – as if we could only see and only see shades of one colour. In contrast, even the simpler, hedonic stream of SWB research distinguishes three major aspects of well-being which vary partly independently of each other: experiences of happiness, experiences of unhappiness, and experiences of contentment. A further ambiguity lurked in utilitarianism: was utility the psychic pay-off or was it the usefulness or pleasure-producing quality of the goods? (Bonner 1995). Lionel Robbins *et al.* claimed Pareto’s legacy but conflated his terms that distinguished these two: ophelimity versus utility (Cooter and Rappaport 1984). They thus obscured that even if pleasure is hard to measure, usefulness is not always so (e.g. we can measure mobility).

In practice, mainstream economics declared that each person’s utility (as ophelimity, this unitary well-feeling; or as preference fulfilment) is well reflected by income. Sen (1985) noted that this reduced well-being to being well-off, financially or materially; in other words to well-having or having much (cf. Fromm 1978). To test this reduction, one must consider how income is used. Some forms of consumption, like heavy alcohol intake and compulsive gambling, damage the consumers and those close to them. In countries with less margin for luxury expenditure, alcoholism has massive impact on families. Janakarajan and Seabright (1999: 341), for example, record the escalating alcohol abuse by men in an economically booming settlement in South India, and the ‘noticeably less positive’ responses from women than men about changes in their family’s situation.

The Aristotelian tradition takes well-being instead as *well-living*. People are seen as complex—reasoning, social, and thus in part moral—actors, who live in groups, for finite lives with an unavoidable rise and fall. In contrast to the abstracted utilitarian notion of a person as a smart rat who pulls the levers to maximize the reading on his utility meter, well-being is seen as the fulfilment of a deep and various nature, not just one particular type of sensation (Segal 1991). The range of important goods includes things which are not merely instrumental to our flourishing, as routes to our psychic utility, but which rather are ‘constitutive of our flourishing’ (O’Neill 1993: 24). Culyer (1990: 11) argues that ‘being reassured’ leads to ‘pleasure’; but does it, is there a single mental currency, or is being reassured itself the pay-off? One could distinguish many

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2 In the well-being literature we encounter various usages of ‘welfare’ besides (1) the same as well-being, including narrower meanings like (2) the valuation by a person of their own situation (Dasgupta 2001), and (3) ‘the evaluation assigned by the individual to income or, more generally, to the contribution to his well-being from those goods and services that he can buy with money’ (van Praag and Frijters 1999: 427).

3 Easterlin (2001: 206) equates six concepts in one sentence: ‘I use the terms happiness, subjective well-being, satisfaction, utility, well-being, and welfare interchangeably’.

aspects within well-living; perhaps well-thinking and well-doing, as emphasized in for example some religious and quasi-religious communities.

Well-living can become denigrated as an elitist notion. Distanced labels may aid calmer debate. Ryan and Deci (2001) call the conception of well-being as happiness or pleasure the *hedonic* conception; versus the *eudaimonic* conception of well-being as well-considered fulfilment.

## **1.2 Well-living is perhaps a superior term to well-being (at least for eudaimonists)**

‘Well-being’ is such an established term that we will use it too. However, ‘well-living’ has claims to be a better label for what most people conceive of as well-being. ‘Well-living’ is a more active term, and in economics the term ‘well-being’ still carries a utilitarian baggage. Thus even for Sen, coming out of the tradition of welfare economics, ‘well-being’ refers only to one’s own gratification, and is distinct from the pursuit and fulfilment of one’s ideals and commitments. To an Aristotelian this seems a strange usage. Max-Neef’s model of human needs illustrates a richer conception, with dimensions of *having*, *doing*, and *interacting*, as well as *being*, in each of a series of life spheres (see e.g. Ekins and Max-Neef 1992, which links this perspective to WB measurement).

## **1.3 Being is a prerequisite for, and central component of, well-being**

Lethal epidemics amongst the poor can raise average per capita income and other per capita indicators. Clearly, a well-being/well-living category should instead in some way reflect quantity of life as well as quality of life. The Human Development Index does this. The central importance of quantity is revealed in the oft-cited notional choice between a life of 70 years with pre-Industrial Revolution living standards in all non-mortality related aspects and one of 35 (or maybe even 55) years with contemporary rich country living standards (at an income level purportedly 100 times higher). The poor country dweller would live as a family- and community-member, not in a prison, but with few material comforts. Possibly most people would choose the non-opulent life of 70 years (which happens to be a reality in a few remote corners of the world). This puts opulence sharply into perspective.

## **1.4 Time-patterns in being/living are of central importance for well-being**

If we look empirically at quality of living, time-use too is central and little reflected in economic measures. Naila Kabeer’s study of women textile-workers in Bangladesh found many with 18 hour work days: a factory job preceded and followed by housework, sometimes even as a second job (Kabbeer 2000). ‘Housework’ for most women includes caring time, often including care for the handicapped, elderly, and sick. While, remarkably, the self-assessed well-being of some people handicapped by accidents can return to near their previous level, that of their unpaid carers is unlikely to. In low-income countries, unmanageable carer time-budgets can affect life-quantity of the cared-for; in India few of the mentally retarded survive to adulthood (Harriss-White 1999: 138-9).

In apartheid South Africa, many black workers commuted three hours each way each day. In contrast to that, first, the time required for material reproduction by some hunter-gatherer peoples historically has been strikingly low; second, commuting time in the North, while rarely paid by employers and hence liable to be unmeasured in economics, can evolve into a new life sphere of seclusion and self-cultivation: the car driver cocooned in his luxury vehicle on the freeway, replete with snacks and music-system, free from interruptions and duties. And what is one to make of figures of TV watching times in the North: four hours daily on average in the USA, with the set often switched on for longer (*The Economist*, 12 April 2002; and 3.5 hours daily in the UK for the middle-aged), or of the new mass opium of communing with the muse of pornography from the Internet—leading personal use of the most powerful new medium? The consensus academic reaction to Robert Nozick’s famous thought-experiment, the Experience Machine (Nozick 1974), was to assert that people will not choose to live cocooned in a world of electronic substitute experience, however high it raises their utility metre; yet perhaps many come to live so.

### **1.5 Concern for well-being and well-living must include central attention to people’s work involvements, and domestic involvements, not only their consumption**

Welfare economics has historically looked very largely at consumption (Goodwin 1997). For example, economic calculations and national income have ignored the unhappiness from involuntary unemployment (Clark and Oswald 1994) and the satisfactions (and dissatisfactions) from employment. The pattern found in *Voices of the Poor* and many other studies is however that ordinary people’s lists of priorities include both ‘material’ and ‘non-material’ aspects (Alkire 2002: 179-80). There is evidence for affluent countries that non-market sources—family, friends, health, recreation—are more important in general for happiness than are market sources, and that amongst the market sources, experiences during work hours or unemployment are more determinant of personal satisfaction than is the level of income or consumption (Oswald 1997, Lane 1998a, 1998b). We consider this more fully later.

External work is a major source of socializing, stimulation, challenge, and achievement (see e.g. Lane 1991, Parker and Gerard 1990); ‘freed’ from work, some lottery winners become miserable. Some of the low-income Bangladeshi women workers studied by Kabeer reported that they took their jobs for the non-monetary rewards: to avoid boredom and have company. The satisfactions from work are only slightly reflected in economic accounting. That applies the perspective of a capitalist to a nation, with work assumed to be a cost rather than a benefit.

### **1.6 Many aspects of well-being pass outside markets, and may be competitive with them**

Travers and Richardson (1993) summarize many findings that there are only weak observed correlations between all of the following: (1) material well-being (‘well-having’), (2) happiness, (3) health, and (4) participation in society. Concerning the link between material well-being and happiness/SWB, while the rich in all countries have higher SWB, there is surprisingly little difference between the SWB levels recorded in richer and poorer countries, and especially between middle-income, rich and very rich



countries. Myers and Diener (1995) report almost no relation between income and happiness over time in the postwar USA, suggesting that richer people enjoy their relative superiority rather than their opulence, and/or that expectations grow with opportunities and new unfulfilled ambitions emerge. Many other studies report similarly (e.g. Easterlin 2001).

Yet some other factors retain a stronger correlation with happiness. Lane (1991, 1998a) documents that considerably more important than wealth for happiness in America are (1) marital satisfaction, (2) self-esteem (and other psychological traits; Myers and Diener add: extraversion, optimism), (3) self-management skills, (4) financial stability, and (5) leisure. Myers and Diener add to such a list: (1a) other good personal relations, (3a) feelings of progress towards goals which one accepts, and (6) religious belief. (Camfield and Skevington 2003 give a similar recent multi-national survey.) Does a preoccupation with material opulence compete with these other factors, given the mind-set and time-use it may bring? Lane and others argue that the competition is serious.

All this goes against the expectations of the material Well-Being school represented by Marshall and Pigou (Cooter and Rappaport 1984). They expected material WB to correlate well with, or at least not interfere with, other sources so that they could focus on it alone.

## 1.7 Well-living includes well-becoming and well-dying

Even an utilitarian rat, assiduously pulling its pleasure-levers, exists in time. First the person must be created, formed, emerge. Interestingly, developmental psychology suggests that ‘well-becoming’, personal growth, requires pain.<sup>4</sup> And eventually each person must decline, cease, un-be. In grindingly poor mid-twentieth century China, the Communists gained much respect for their commitment to ensuring decent burials. The 1990s *Voices of the Poor* study shows the strong importance attached to funerals in most milieux (Narayan *et al.* 2000: 70). Funerals reflect death as a very special aspect of existence, both for those whose lives end and for their associates, not just ‘an external limit on existence’, suggests Hodge (1990: 52); thus they are less for the dead than for the living. Inability to cope with death represents an inability to face life. The hospices movement is one relevant response. A well-living perspective considers the life-cycles of real people, not only the imputed wish-fulfilment of faceless moneyed consumers. It must look at Quality of Death as part of the Quality of Life, including in particular the quality of decline, fade-out and departure (see e.g. Jennings *et al.* 2003). Ignoring the quality of death brutalizes both the ignored and the ignorers.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Ajeet Mathur for this observation and for the term ‘well-becoming’.

<sup>5</sup> Models for health policy analysis based on economics focus on the Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALY) returns from health expenditures; they look only to the future of the care-receiver, not also to the carers and survivors, or the meanings and obligations shared between the actors. The work of hospices might fail such an evaluation. Similarly, “distributive models” of health care justice cannot supply a rationale for expanded access to hospice care. These models fail because they are based on ... [a] picture of the moral agent, who resembles few of us as we lie dying...’ (Nelson 2003: S18). Rather than ‘fail’, one can say that their picture of living is too narrow—it ignores dying, and an inevitable stage for many old people of reduced autonomy.

## **1.8 Given the many relevant aspects of well-being, it seems better to use WB as an umbrella term rather than seek for a single key aspect or theme**

Feeling and thinking, becoming and living and dying, and more, make up being. Well-being thus has diverse aspects. Rather than set up a precisely delimited, narrow single notion of well-being, and then try to police its ‘correct’ usage, we will do better to see WB as an umbrella notion. The next section introduces the standard philosophy list of interpretations of well-being, only now that we have established this point.

A danger arises of disappearing as a result under an avalanche of indicators. Hodge argues that we must not isolate indicators from meanings and life-purposes in the situation concerned. We still need organizing frameworks. Section 2 goes on to the main dichotomy used to organize the field: between subjective and objective aspects or interpretations of well-being. Is this dichotomy itself objective?

## **2 Attempts to theorize and categorize**

### **2.1 A standard philosophy categorization of conceptions of well-being, and additions**

A categorization of conceptions of well-being by Derek Parfit (1984) has become widely used in philosophical ethics (see e.g. Griffin 1986, Crisp 2001). It contains both so-called subjective and objective conceptions. All make plausible claims.

- (1) *Hedonism*, well-being seen as pleasure. Hedonism fails as a full concept of well-being, due to both the diversity of our types of felt concern and the nature of some of the factors which strongly influence pleasure. It is only one part of (1\*) a family of conceptions of well-being as satisfaction or SWB. They all remain vulnerable to the significance of ‘framing’ and adaptive response, which we consider further later in this section. A severely retarded person might feel fine; likewise someone whose brain and nervous system have been damaged by drugs.
- (2) *Desire theories*: well-being seen as preference/desire fulfilment. One origin of this conception is in economists’ operationalization of the previous conception, well-being as pleasure or satisfaction. From the days before systematic SWB research this has been done by the assumption that preference fulfilment always or nearly always brings satisfaction.<sup>6</sup> In the attempt to in turn operationalize this second conception without even measuring preference fulfilment either, the stream evolved into (2\*) ‘revealed preference theory’, which imputes preference fulfilment from the fact of choice. That choices reveal preferences became taken as a tautology. So well-being was reduced to choice. Ironically, this was often done in a veiled way, such that many economists and their students and clients remained unclear about the methodological and value choices which were made. It in effect merged the preference fulfilment stream into a libertarian stream instead which insists on people’s right to make their own mistakes: to pursue their own goals, regardless of whether they are likely to fulfil them and of what that would bring. The libertarian

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<sup>6</sup> Conflation was eased by a linguistic trick: fulfilment of preferences was often described as ‘satisfaction of desires’, which could too easily be identified with ‘satisfaction’.

stream is not highlighted in Parfit's list; arguably it is not even a conception of well-being. Next, theories of well-being as desire fulfilment or desire pursuit are vulnerable, like hedonism, to the existence of perverted desires and of addictions like alcoholism (see e.g. Scanlon 1993, Sagoff 1994). So the more plausible versions (2\*\*) are formulated in terms of fully informed desires—which would have to be fully informed from birth in order to rule out all addictions. These versions are insufficient too (as well as hard to convert into well-being measures): people with perverse desires to damage others may not be put off by full information on how to avoid damage to themselves or about the harm they can bring others; nor would be any people who are inclined to damage themselves. Why would one consider such people's desires objectionable? In effect by claiming that there exists some 'objective list' of criteria, which is not identical to people's desires and excludes some types of desire pursuit and fulfilment.

- (3) *Objective list theories*. The term 'objective' can be misleading, as we see later; Scanlon (1993) offered the better title of 'substantive good conceptions'. Each such theory has a listing of (the) elements that make a life well lived; as for example in theories in the eudaimonic tradition, such as Nussbaum's. In a sense, satisfaction—and desire—theories are objective list theories which have just one element on their list. Crisp notes that while objective list theories of the good are elitist in one sense—based on tested knowledge rather than on desires or pleasures alone—they need not entail a Big Brother state. They may be combined with theories of the right which establish areas for individual self-determination.<sup>7</sup>

How a 'substantive list' is derived varies greatly. The following ideal types exist, amongst which mixtures are possible. (3a) Some lists are direct stipulations, drawn from intuition, religion, or tradition. (3b) Others are derived through formal analytical procedures, as we see later with Doyal and Gough's theory of need. That proffers objectively implied needs, derived from and conditional on some (not purely objective) more general specification of the good. And (3c) some lists are derived through consultation and perhaps debate within a particular political community. Nussbaum's list has aspects of all these types: it derives from the use of formal criteria combined with ethical intuitions, and is to be elaborated and operationalized in each political context.

So, to accommodate current theories of well-being, Parfit's categorization should be extended. Let us underline and supplement the additional variants already mentioned.

- (1\*) Hedonism uses a language of pleasure, but is just one member of a family of related but significantly distinct theories. In other members there are many types of utility, pleasure, or satisfaction, not all of them reliably or meaningfully traded-off against each other.
- (4) The libertarian stance, wherein one's good means one's choice. This may be qualified by requirements of not harming others, but such requirements are not as part of the conception of one's own well-being.
- (5) Sen uses a conception of informed, rational preferences for functionings and 'capabilities', the latter meaning access to particular valued functionings. This is in contrast to desire theories, which use the language of pure preference and apply it to

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<sup>7</sup> Further, more complex pictures of WB such as Nussbaum's can perhaps incorporate rights and liberties, because they go beyond the crude picture of personhood that underpins a theory of the good that has no reference to those aspects.

alternative goods baskets. Capability is perhaps better seen as a criterion for personal advantage as opposed to well-being, we argue later. The theory might be classified as an objective list theory, but of a peculiar type, since Sen insists, at least formally, on not specifying what would or should be the outcome of informed and rational preference. To call it a desire theory is also unsatisfactory: it stresses public discussion and informed public decision for some priorities, rather than monetizable calculations based only on individuals' desires for themselves.

In contrast, Nussbaum (3\*) specifies a series of functionings to which, she argues, all persons should have access. But like Sen, she does not seek to enforce use of the access (except for the schooling of children, control of infectious diseases, and such like).

Within objective list theories we should thus distinguish those which assess well-being only or mainly by access, from those which look primarily at achievement of valued functionings. The latter is the approach to well-being in much (Physical) Quality of Life and social indicators research, with the values specified in some general (and thus 'objective', public) form rather than only by individual desire.

With Nussbaum and Quality of Life research we return to the richness and realism of discussion of well-being which we encountered earlier, from a wider range of literatures than the analytic philosophy tradition to which Parfit's list belongs. A considerable gulf has existed between most work in this tradition and substantive research on the content of well-being.<sup>8</sup>

Scanlon (1993) compares WB theories according to their relevance for different decision-makers: for oneself; for a policy-maker acting in relation to others; and for moral argument. He proposes that desire theories (#2) are only relevant in the political context, where political leaders may conclude to not interfere with many pernicious and damaging desires. In contrast, he argues, for moral argumentation we are led inexorably to a substantive good conception (#3). One might add that the informed desire (#2\*\*) conception seems more at home for the notional case of the individual choosing purely for him/her-self, and that the capability criterion appears more relevant to public decision-making about persons' advantage.

Kagan (1994) contextualizes the conceptions in a different, complementary way. He underlines that they describe different things. For him, (personal) well-being refers to feelings in a person's body and mind, in other words to well-feeling; and he adopts a common usage of 'Quality of Life', to refer instead to various availabilities and non-feeling functionings: in other words, (other aspects of) well-living. Many other authors employ a language of 'subjective versus objective' indicators of well-being.

## **2.2 The language of 'subjective versus objective' measures of WB is misused**

Economists often use a single contrast between 'subjective and objective indicators of welfare'. This tends to oversimplify. It misleads when combined with two tendentious assumptions: that WB is unitary and that the class of indicators derived without the

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Brandt was one notable exception; he enriched his theory of the good by considerable attention to evidence from psychology (Brandt 1979).

judgement of the subject have an epistemological privilege. We should instead use two more cautious contrasts.

- (1) Measures of subjective WB (SWB) versus measures of objective WB (OWB); in other words, measures of feelings versus measures of non-feeling aspects such as longevity. As the mass of non-economics literature notes, we have here measures of different (families of) things, not different measures of a single thing.
- (2) Self-report versus non self-report (subject-independent) measures of WB (Diener's terms; Camfield and Skevington 2003). Self-report can cover more than feelings of (dis)satisfaction; subjects can use other modes and criteria of judgement.

Some people propose (opposite to Kagan) that we reserve the term QOL for self-report judgements, perhaps on the grounds that quality of *life* is about the nature of perceived or felt experience. Yet the QOL term has been so long and diversely used that it may be beyond purification through stipulation; and further, life involves also the unperceived, the unconscious, and the unfelt.

Figure 1 then distinguishes four types of indicator.<sup>9</sup> Such a table adds non self-report measures of subjective well-being (the top right quadrant) to the three categories which Camfield and Skevington (2003) use. I have used their titles in quote-marks, while the examples are mine; in similar vein one could label the top-right quadrant 'objective indicators of perceptions'.

Figure 1 Refined terms for subjective/objective

	<i>Self-report (SR) indicators</i>	<i>Non self-report (NSR; subject-independent) indicators</i>
<i>Measures of subjective WB</i>	'Self-report subjective' (e.g.: 'I am very satisfied with how far I can walk')	E.g. monitoring of types of brain function and physiological indicator that express SWB
<i>Measures of objective WB</i>	'Self-report objective' (e.g.: 'I can walk 100 metres')	'Objective'—observing how far people really (can) walk, etc.

We need at least one more distinction: (3) between measures which are applied to all times and places ('universalist'), and measures chosen per time and place ('relativist'). If we look at it closely we may find a continuum rather than a dichotomy, but this continuum is worth at least one distinction rather than none. One source of the popularity of the GNP per capita measure for measuring human well-being, a task for which it was not devised and is fundamentally unsuited, has been its combination of two appeals, as a universal and 'objective' measure which yet in principle is derived from consumer's subjective wishes. But it only refers to wishes that achieve expression in market terms. Things only enter GNP calculations in proportion to how much people are willing *and able* to pay for them.

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<sup>9</sup> Veenhoven (2004) gives a more refined, 3 × 3, classification, which distinguishes also an intermediate option in each of the dimensions.

Shaffer (1996) makes a composite contrast, between economists' income/consumption approach and the alternative participatory approach to the study of poverty. In the income/consumption approach well-being/poverty is determined by an external expert who, typically by use of a questionnaire survey, measures degrees of basic needs fulfilment/deprivation, by reference to the proxies of income and/or consumption of goods and services. S/he usually takes no critical stance towards consumer preferences, seeing one's work and role as descriptive.

In the participatory approach well-being/poverty is investigated by interactive internal and external discussion and participation in assessment, to look at multiple aspects of deprivation, employing multiple criteria and a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. There is a critical dialogue about current preferences, and the objective is to contribute to both understanding and empowerment of the people whose situation is studied. Chambers and others have influentially collected and disseminated examples of local people's own criteria of well-being and ill-being (see e.g. UNDP 1997: 17).

Social exclusion theory gives a third perspective on poverty/well-being. It looks at the nature of a person's social relationships with others; and at illicit discrimination (e.g. on grounds of caste or gender) and unequal access to benefits which are supposed to be available to everyone.<sup>10</sup> It uses a norm of citizenship and estimates its prerequisites; different conceptions of citizenship lead to different interpretations of social exclusion (Gore 1996). Further, social exclusion can be assessed in a participatory or a subject-independent way.

Shaffer outlines how such approaches in poverty studies reflect different ways of looking at life, each of which may have strengths and weaknesses. The participatory approach and social exclusion approach use more complex pictures of persons and of human lives than does the income/consumption approach. The approaches also use different philosophies of knowledge and different ethics. They will not therefore easily displace each other. Each has its own audience (cf. Dean 2003).

### **2.3 We must consider both SWB and OWB**

Measures of SWB can be valid and reliable: they can acceptably measure certain perceptions (Myers and Diener 1995, Camfield and Skeffington 2003). This finding concerns the focus and quality of the measurement, not *necessarily* the stability or good judgement of the perception that is measured.

First, psychology research shows that SWB is highly conditional on 'framing effects'; for example, conditional on with whom/when/where one compares one's present situation. For example, Frank (1997) notes how strongly in the US the satisfaction from consumption depends on how the consumer's consumption level compares to his/her previous consumption level and to the consumption level of his/her reference group.

Second, adaptive preference (sometimes called 'response shift') is widespread, notably where one's preferences and perceptions adjust to one's situation, however good or bad,

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<sup>10</sup> It already contains explicitly two specifications: one for full participation in one's society, and one for liberation, which requires critical autonomy in addition to autonomy of agency.

to reinterpret it as normal and tolerable. Cummins, Gullone, and Lau (2002) and others hold that this adjustment is not merely widespread but normal.<sup>11</sup> Such shifts would strengthen the case for subject-independent measures, as Sen, Nussbaum, Sunstein and others have argued.

Third, more generally, one can simply mis-assess one's situation (Kagan). So measures of SWB cannot be identical to those for QOL. This is quite apart from the possibility, recognised in tragedy and also by Sen, that one may be committed to goals which do not give one SWB.

It must be stressed however that 'objective' measures of WB always reflect a set of values—we only measure there what is proposed as of value; objective *well-being* is a normative concept. The question is how well-argued and/or widely-accepted those values are. For example, assessing lives in terms of longevity, morbidity, and the requirements for autonomy of agency gives a value-laden but cogent, widely accepted, subject-independent, conception of well-being (cf. Doyal and Gough 1991).

We must not ignore the information in measures of SWB. They tell us about something(s) different and important, people's feelings. If people did not feel, then we would be much less likely to feel for and with them and to be motivated to help the disadvantaged. And the messages which these measures have brought concerning such important variables are massively significant.

First, even if preferences are often adaptive, the gap that SWB data shows between the weak or negligible impact of increases in measured real income and the substantial impacts of other promotor factors on SWB in richer countries is one of the major findings of modern social science (Easterlin 2002a).

Second, while such impact findings are less common (although so is the research, notes Easterlin) they sometimes also occur in poorer countries. They should lead us to review the measures for income and other 'objective' aspects of well-being, the values and assumptions hidden in the choice of indicators, and the uses made of income. For example, Janakarajan and Seabright compare the changes between 1985 and 1992 in two areas of Tamil Nadu (India) which had experienced contrasting recent economic fortunes. They find no strong and easily explainable correlations between the levels of various 'objective' welfare indicators and the perceptions of change. 'There is [also] a striking difference between the answers given to questions about respondents' own families and questions about the fortunes of the village as a whole. The latter are markedly more positive' (2002b: 339-40), about matters of which the respondents probably knew less. Some 'objective' measures of improved welfare in these villages, notably the shift to supposedly preferred, higher status, foods, may instead 'owe a good deal to social and life style pressures and are not necessarily perceived as bringing benefits to the household' (Easterlin 2002b: 342).

Quite different discrepancies can occur, equally significant. N. S. Jodha found major divergences between the stagnant figures for real rural incomes in a set of North Indian villages, provided by India's relatively well-respected economic statistics bureaucracy,

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<sup>11</sup> David Clark queries this, including from his work in South Africa (e.g. Clark 2003). Elster (1983) examines adaptive preferences in detail.

and the declarations by the majority of villagers of improved well-being. In this case the gains in SWB were strongly related by the villagers to changes in objective but non-monetized aspects of their lives: diversity of diet, ability to send children to school, increased access to cheap but life-changing products such as transistor radios, and increased ability to survive without labouring for others, even if this meant a fall in monetary income. Such patterns of affect are widespread, not specific to a few villages or to India. Here there was no discrepancy between SWB and non-income OWB, but a divergence between their trends and those in income.

## 2.4 Well-being is a vector

### *Utilities not utility, and life spheres not only the market*

At least three types of fundamental plurality are relevant here. One is well-known in economics and sometimes misinterpreted: that there are diverse individuals, not only a societal aggregate. The other two have been neglected (despite e.g. Sen 1981): that there are various types of mental attitude, not a single ‘utility’, and various spheres of life with distinct forms of thought, not only the impersonal utilitarian market.

The language of ‘weighing up’ conflicting considerations (e.g. Crisp 2001) presumes commensurability and aggregation, rather than some other form of choice. But psychology confirms what introspection and the arts always suggested: we have diverse types of psychic ‘currency’, not only one.<sup>12</sup> Scitovsky (1976/1992), for example, considerably deepened the economics of welfare by distinguishing the ‘currencies’ of comfort and stimulation. Eudaimonic-WB research covers a range of emotional, cognitive and existential dimensions. Even the simpler palette of hedonic-WB research distinguishes positive emotions, negative emotions, and life satisfaction, as basic dimensions of subjective well-being (e.g. Myers and Diener 1995: 174, ‘Positive and negative emotions are only weakly correlated with one another’).

Different spheres of life can involve different types of thinking and feeling (see e.g. Anderson 1993, van Staveren 2001, Walzer 1983). As elucidated by authors like Isaiah Berlin, Bernard Williams and Amartya Sen, these cannot be all subsumed by a single type of calculation (see e.g. Gray 1993, Sen and Williams 1982). Alkire surveys 39 lists, largely similar, of proposed fundamental, irreducible, aspects of well-being (2002: 59-85).

Since the mainstream of economics has derived from *a priori* and abstracted theorization about one type of life situation (the cool, calculating and assiduous choice maker in markets) it often has not faced or accepted the vector nature of WB. No advance in indicators and indexes will find the one correct index that converts WB or poverty to a scalar. Scalar indexes have their uses, but not as all-purpose measures.

Mainstream economics has generally recognized the third type of plurality affecting well-being: plurality of persons. Its longstanding response was perverse: to try to avoid interpersonal comparisons, rather than to be conscious about and analyse the value

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<sup>12</sup> The plurality of types of psychic ‘currency’ must not be confused with the plurality of ways of ‘earning’, even if there were only a single ‘currency’.



choices involved in the comparisons which are inevitable in public life. Ironically, we might say that interpersonal comparisons are feasible and legitimate *except* in the market-metric. Interpersonal comparisons of non-utility variables, such as holdings of Rawlsian primary goods, are perfectly feasible; and comparisons are now standard and well-validated for satisfaction measures too, as we have seen. But money-tarianism too readily makes comparisons across persons. We cannot equate a Euro more for the rich person with a Euro less for a pauper and declare the redistribution societally neutral. Money-tarianism ignores the worth of cataract operations and hospices for the poorest, since they cannot afford them.

*'Poverties not poverty'*

Poverty means the lack of something(s) of special importance. As remarked by the Chilean economist and needs-theorist, Manfred Max-Neef (1989), we must speak then of poverties not poverty, for different important things may be lacking. As in needs theory, what is lacking can be specified as the requisites for survival, or health, or dignity, or flourishing, and so on—or as those things themselves.<sup>13</sup> In other words, poverty (like development) is a vector not a scalar concept, though we sometimes for purposes of making decisions find aggregation useful.

Poverty concerns not only lack of income and wealth. 'I am illiterate. I am like a blind person' remarked an illiterate mother in Pakistan (cited by Narayan *et al.* 2000: 53). Narayan *et al.* at first stipulate that 'While poverty is material in nature, it has psychological effects' (2000: 37); but others call these psychic poverties: having no voice, no dignity, being humiliated, feeling powerless, being unable to participate in one's community. These poverties also vary independently of material poverty. And the ability to participate and to have voice is not mere subjective perception. Any claim that poverty is *only* material in nature is swept away by the end of that chapter in *Voices of the Poor*. While the definitions by poor people vary, Narayan *et al.* find that 'What is striking, however, is the extent to which dependency, lack of power and lack of voice emerge as core elements of poor people's definitions of poverty' (2000: 64). These aspects are not only 'material in nature'. At least part of the World Bank thus acknowledged that 'Poverty Is Multidimensional' (Narayan *et al.* 2000: 32).

Baulch (1996) suggested that we use a series of poverty concepts, progressively more inclusive, rather than attempt to devise a single 'correct' concept: (1) private consumption; (2) #1 plus income from common property resources; (3) #2 plus income from social provision/consumption; (4) # 3 plus assets; (5) #4 plus dignity; (6) #5 plus autonomy. To organize these and similar ideas, we next look further at the notion of levels, and at the purposes and context of an analysis of well-being.

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<sup>13</sup> Baulch (1996:38) tries to distinguish poverty, deprivation, and ill-being. For him, poverty means lack of the requisites for well-being—a person may have the requisites, and so not be poor, but mis-use them and so have low well-being. He takes deprivation to mean feelings of dissatisfaction.

### 3 Bridging the means–ends divide: a comparative and integrative framework

Poverty can be conceptualized at different levels. Kabeer (1996) contrasts: (i) the ‘means perspective’, which focuses on the resources and requisites which people possess or obtain and can use to fulfil their (basic) needs or preferences; these means are often (inadequately) summarized by a measure of their income; and (ii) the ‘ends perspective’, which focuses on the actual degree of fulfilment of their needs or preferences. Economists typically adopt the means perspective, though they can also consider consumption, which moves us part way to an ‘ends’ perspective. Measures of income or personal consumption often neglect non-commoditized goods and services.

The traditional economics foci and presumptions can be summarized as a chain: (exogenous) preferences and resource endowments → income → choice/expenditure → preference fulfilment → satisfaction (utility). Much work, especially in psychology, has demonstrated the limits of these presumptions, and for example of the model of expected-utility maximization. Consumer expenditure, to take a concrete example, is a weak proxy for the quantity and quality of consumption—are purchased goods actually used, how long do they last, how useful are they? Sen has built a framework for welfare economics which enlighteningly adds levels to the conventional set, notably the levels of functionings and capability. Each level can be the focus for defining and/or measuring poverty: so we can define ‘income poverty’, ‘capability poverty’, and so on. Sen’s categories and the work of Doyal and Gough underlie the next two figures.

Figure 2 presents an elaborated set of levels, grouped into three ranges (inputs, intermediate events, and outcomes), and some of the corresponding types of study of well-being and/or poverty. The figure includes rows for each of the interpretations of well-being which we saw in section 2. Some readers might place value fulfilment in either the desire fulfilment or functionings row (the latter allocation would match an ‘objective list’ approach), but it may be worth highlighting separately.

National income measures concern only range I, the money-metric focus. They measure monetized activity. If treated as measures of net benefits they at most measure opportunities, not achieved well-being in terms of actual consumption or functioning or satisfaction. Even as measures of valued opportunities, they include much which should be excluded, exclude much which should be included, and weight inequitably whatever is included.<sup>14</sup>

The narrative structure in Figure 2, from resources through to felt satisfaction and value fulfilment, is still not ideal for a descriptive and explanatory micro-economics. Each of the categories contains ambiguities (see e.g. Gasper 2002); this is common though in social science. Reality also has loops and alternative narrative sequences, not a one-way causal chain; e.g. SWB could feedback into functionings, and capabilities feed back into resources. The focus on a chain-narrative brings a danger too of neglecting process-

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<sup>14</sup> In the first of these categories, many things which typically reflect lack or loss of well-being are treated as benefits, such as most commuter travel and ‘defensive expenditures’ which merely counteract costs caused by economic growth, like environmental pollution or increased stress and conflict. These expenditures grow far faster than overall GDP in rich countries (Ekins and Max-Neef 1992: 254). Net economic performance can be conventionally recorded as improving while net societal performance declines (see e.g. Daly and Cobb 1994).

values (Hirst 1990). Further, the structure of Figure 2 should not make us assume that the level (or levels) which has normative priority must be the final one. The set of levels still serves to usefully organize and compare diverse literatures; and it highlights the intermediate range of categories (set II in Figure 2) between economists' two traditional foci, the monetizable inputs to life and, secondarily, the presumed psychic outputs expressed in the mental money of utility. Economists have studied the inputs empirically and imputed the psychic outputs from those inputs.

Figure 2 Alternative levels of focus in studies of well-being

<b>Putative narrative sequence</b> (from bottom to top)	<b>Who has studied the category?</b>
<i>III. Fulfilment / satisfaction information</i>	
HUMAN FULFILMENT as value fulfilment	Studied by humanistic psychologists and philosophers
Utility—as SATISFACTION (this is not necessarily a unitary category; different aspects can be distinguished)	Traditionally not measured by economics (instead presumed unitary and imputed via long chains of assumptions). Studied empirically in psychology, especially in SWB research, and by others.
'Utility'—as DESIRE FULFILMENT	Imputed from choice, in much economics; i.e. (choice → desire fulfilment) is presumed. Studied directly by some others.
<i>II. Non-fulfilment non-money-metric information</i>	
FUNCTIONINGS (other than satisfaction)	Little studied by economics (health economics may be one exception). Studied by functional specialisms, sociology, social statistics, psychology: in work on social indicators and objective QOL. <sup>a</sup>
O-CAPABILITY (the range of lives which people could attain)	Hard to measure; often functionings are taken as the proxy. But see e.g. medical measures of (dis)ability.
S-CAPABILITIES (people's skill and capacities); and other characteristics of people (Culyer)	Measured by functional specialisms, see e.g. various psychological and health indicators.
CHARACTERISTICS OF GOODS, which are acquired through consumption	Not much researched by economics, except in some basic needs work. Investigated by functional specialisms, such as in nutrition, health, education, transport, fashion, and in psychology.
CONSUMPTION proper —viz., actual <i>use</i> of purchases / acquisitions	Not much researched by economics, except in some basic needs work. Left to psychology, anthropology, medicine, cultural studies, etc.
<i>I. Information on inputs; money-metric focus</i>	
PURCHASES and other acquisitions	More researched by marketing, psychology, anthropology, sociology; less intensively by economics.
'Utility' as CHOICE, which is assumed to reflect preference, and (as the base case) is weighted according to purchasing power.	These assumptions have been normal in economics; including 'revealed preference' as an <i>axiom</i> . <sup>b</sup>
INCOME AND RESOURCES/POWER TO ACQUIRE GOODS/COMMODITIES	Researched by economics; not the power to acquire many other basic goods: political freedom, dignity, rewarding personal relations, satisfying meanings,...

<sup>a</sup> Note e.g. WHO's categories of social, emotional and physical well-being

<sup>b</sup> We saw that typically preferences have been imputed from real choices. Nowadays, stated preferences and notional choices are presumed in parts of economics to be reliable guides to real choices

Partha Dasgupta calls the difference in focus here between economists and other relevant sciences ‘a cultural divide’ (2001: 33). He initially represents the groups involved too narrowly, identifying only philosophers, who he says examine *constituents* of well-being, and economists and statisticians, who focus on its *determinants*. Absent at first from this colloquy on well-being are the rest of the social sciences and humanities. They provide richer perspectives on both the constituents and the determinants, and find that the connection between well-being and the means studied in economics is weak and not infrequently perverse. As we will see, Dasgupta later reaches out somewhat across this second disciplinary divide, a greater one than that between economists and many Anglo-American philosophers. Oswald (1997) adds that a gap has existed too between psychologists working on SWB and sociologists *et al.* working on non self-report measures of QOL.

Figure 3 uses the sequence of levels presented in Figure 2, for exposition and comparison of the conceptions of well-being in a selection of recent work, with emphasis on lower-income countries. One point that arises concerns the insufficiency of the traditional economics conception; a second concerns the variety of alternative conceptions, which reflect partly different purposes and contexts.

A major finding is the repeated confirmation that the realm of means which economics has focused on is often only weakly connected to the world of ends, of satisfaction, valued functioning, and fulfilment. For both SWB and OWB the main determinants seem often not to be the monetary ones on which economists have concentrated. Robert Lane calls the incoherence of the economics narrative of welfare ‘the economic fallacy’ (Lane 1991). This implies a need for alternative or additional base-narratives, with different variables to be highlighted in the bottom rows of Figure 3.

While well-being is a plural category, some conceptualizations are perhaps better seen as part of a wider category of ‘advantage’. Sen has stressed that people often pursue goals which do not further their own well-being, in the traditional economics sense of their own comfort and convenience, but instead goals concerning other people or general ideals. (This is different from saying that they do things against their own benefit due to errors.) Some other authors say that the traditional economics sense is too narrow and that well-being covers such wider goals too. In any case, freedom to achieve well-being is different from achieved well-being. Freedom is one conception of personal advantage, but assessing freedom could be different from assessing well-being. Whether or not people prefer to be free to make their own mistakes, we perhaps should not define well-being as freedom.

Not all concepts of well-being also concern advantage, for the latter is a normative concept, whereas assessments of well-being can be for a variety of purposes. Some are simply descriptive, like the measures of SWB. Some are evaluative judgements of people’s state-of-being, according to particular normative conceptions of WB. Some are better seen as prescriptive, concerning how people should be treated: e.g. provided with opportunities even if it is expected that some people will make severe mistakes and blight their own well-being in the more usual sense. I have suggested that such concepts could in fact be seen instead as concepts of what is advantage, not well-being. Money-metric measures then concern opportunities (but only a narrow range of these: opportunities to purchase), not well-being in the more usual sense. So does Sen’s criterion of range of valued choice.

Figure 3 Comparative overview of the focus and assumptions of selected writers on human development and well-being

<i>Authors on well-being</i>	<i>Coudouel et al.</i>	<i>Baulch</i>	<i>Kabeer</i>	<i>Dasgupta</i>	<i>Sen</i>	<i>Nussbaum</i>	<i>Doyal and Gough</i>	<i>Diener</i>	<i>Deci and Ryan</i>
<i>General nature of the author's perspective on well-being</i>	<i>World Bank's Poverty Measurement manual (originally mis-titled Well-Being Measurement)</i>	<i>Six aspects of absence of poverty, including: (5) dignity and (6) autonomy</i>	<i>Contrasts the means focus in economics with the ends focus in other social science on well-being</i>	<i>In practice a combination of individual desire-fulfilment, health, education, political and civil liberties</i>	<i>Attention to all levels, but stresses functionings and especially capability and capability poverty</i>	<i>A substantive conception of key elements of a decent human life</i>	<i>A rigorous theory of need, which derives the needs implied by alternative specifications of required well-being / functioning</i>	<i>Prominent researcher on 'subjective well-being' (SWB), a multi-dimensional field in psychology</i>	<i>A more theorized approach to SWB: priority of fulfilment of humans' posited true/best nature</i>
<i>Levels of focus:</i>									
SATISFACTIONS	(Perfunctory reference)	(5) dignity	'The ends perspective': considers powers, functionings, satisfactions	Individuals' desire-fulfilment (measured by WTP)	1. Own-well-being achievement (happiness and/or [self-oriented] preference fulfilment and/or other objective outcomes). 2. Agency achievement			SWB: 1. Positive affect (happiness), 2. Negative affect (unhappiness) 3. Life satisfaction	A. Happiness: Hedonic Well-Being; B. Fulfilment: Eudaimonic Well-Being;
FUNCTIONINGS (term ambiguously covers both activities and outcomes, even—for Sen—satisfactions)	(No reference)			Health		Implied priority functionings	Criterion of required functionings, e.g. avoidance of serious harm	Systematic investigation of functionings that conduce to satisfaction.  Most key determinants are	Valued functionings, incl. vitality, physical and mental health, ...

CAPABILITIES / POWERS: as ability to attain specific functionings	(No reference)	(6) autonomy		Civil and political liberties (assumed usable)	'Capability', in terms of: (1) own-well-being or (2) own goals.	Specified priority functional capabilities, esp. practical reason and affiliation,	Implied required capabilities: health, autonomy of agency	outside economic life (but can be affected by it):  Warm personal relations; clear goals, and progress towards them; ...	Key cases of valued functioning:  (1) autonomy (2) competence (3) relatedness	
CAPABILITIES / SKILLS: persons' characteristics				Education		Highlighted				
Generalized satisfier CHARACTERISTICS OF GOODS			Intermediate, shared focus: consumption fits in both means- and ends-perspectives	Not studied directly			Implied required universal satisfier characteristics: food and water; housing; health care, work, etc.			
CONSUMPTION	Poverty is seen as lack of income and consumption; with reference also to their inter-personal and inter-temporal distribution (vulnerability)	1. Private consumption 2. Use of common property resources 3. Societally provided consumption		Not studied directly			Implied required satisfier goods / commodities, in a specific society	<i>Consumption → satisfactions link:</i>  —significant in low income countries  —insignificant in high income countries		
PURCHASES / ACQUISITIONS				'The means perspective': considers assets, income, purchases [but not work; Kabeer herself studies the worlds of	Private consumption, measured by expenditure					
INCOME					Downgraded	Income-poverty, or its reverse, opulence			[Implied minimum required income]	

[EFFORT / WORK] Located here in an economic means-ends chain as an input rather than also as a central functioning in living	Ignored. Treated in the economics tradition as a cost not a benefit	Conceivably implied under dignity and autonomy?	work in depth]	No attention to well-being in work. Shows how malnutrition affects work effectiveness.	[Little attention?]	Fuller attention than Sen [via her categories of practical reason and affiliation]	Work is specified under the general requirements for health and autonomy of agency	Work is highlighted by SWB researchers—it is found to be a major determinant of satisfactions; and so are several other aspects, in contrast frequently to the aspects focused on (wealth, income, acquisitions, consumption) by economics	
ASSETS		4. Assets; which reduce vulnerability		Attention to natural resources					
[IMPLIED REQUIRED SOCIETAL CONDITIONS]				Attention to preconditions of civil and political liberties and to ‘social capital’			Conditions concerning: production; reproduction; cultural transmission; political authority		
<i>Authors on well-being</i>	<i>Coudouel et al.</i>	Baulch	Kabeer	Dasgupta	Sen	Nussbaum	Doyal and Gough	Diener	Deci and Ryan

Section 4 will use this framework to understand the conceptualizations of well-being by a number of leading recent contributors on human development, including some of those presented in Figure 3: Partha Dasgupta, Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, and Len Doyal and Ian Gough.

## 4 Some current human development theorists

### 4.1 Dasgupta on technically superior substitutes for GNP

Partha Dasgupta proposes two measures as major advances over both GNP and the HDI. His measure for current well-being includes attention to liberties as well as to income, health and education. To measure the sustainable level of well-being he proposes a comprehensive measure of wealth. He calculates (2001: chapter 9) that in many low-income countries the rise in present well-being has been achieved by such degradation of natural assets that societal wealth, his measure of societal well-being over time, has fallen.

Dasgupta argues as a contractarian that the state's responsibility is not the management of happiness and the guarantee of achievement but instead the provision of opportunity, of preconditions for all to pursue their own purposes (1993: 53-5). Like other contract theories, this ignores the major cases of children and the mentally infirm. Given that WB is one of nearly everyone's purposes, we also still need to understand and measure it and what promotes or facilitates it, and his *An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution* adopted this agenda. It originally views WB as 'flourishing' (1993: 34; and also uses the concept of 'a well-lived life', 1993: 44), but deems the idea elusive, not well-captured by any of 'happiness', 'pleasure', 'satisfaction', or 'utility'. He proceeds though to a definition: 'A person's well-being is an aggregate of its constituents: utility (because it is the most reliable approximate of her rational desires), and an index of the worth to her of the freedoms she enjoys' (1993: 70). He omits any independent value to functionings. In practice to Dasgupta well-being is largely a subjective category (being subject-specified or concerning feelings). He does not however try to then measure it directly (2001: 34ff) as psychologists do, but instead in the economists' fashion via long chains of assumptions.

His recent study of *Human Well-Being and the Natural Environment* (2001) now includes no preliminary Aristotelian flourish; the categories stay closer to his practice. For example he explicitly makes no distinction between WB and QOL (2001: xviii), unlike Sen. He adopts a flexible subjective concept of 'welfare', as the valuation by a person of her own situation. This potentially includes pleasure obtained from abuse of others. Thus 'welfare' should be traded-off sometimes against respect for others' rights. Perhaps unfortunately, he uses 'welfare' and 'utility' interchangeably, but (p.15) 'well-being' remains a wider notion which includes other concerns ('non-welfare characteristics'), notably for human rights (but also health, 'associational life, various kinds of freedoms to be and to do', p.22). Thus he recognizes that a drug-user's valuation of his own situation could diverge from his well-being (p.36), given 'non-welfare' concerns such as health, and also because the drug-user's valuation is flawed. Dasgupta has held to the peculiar notion of 'welfare' which is traditional in economics,



although etymologically welfare could arguably be a wider notion than well-being: ‘fare’ means to travel, travel through life, rather than only to be at a moment.

He adopts in both books the assumptions of sum-ranking across persons and of comparability of all objectives. The assumptions may reflect a view that choices can only be made after aggregation of costs and benefits (e.g. 2001: 23), rather than sometimes by other procedures (e.g. lexicographic, or by voting). His version of current WB is thus a national measure that adds political and civil liberties to HDI-type concerns, as the HDR 1991 tried; but unlike the HDRs he measures private consumption not GNP per capita and he synthesizes the concerns differently.

Dasgupta notes briefly but dismissively sociologists’ work on measures of objective well-being (p.36), but treats more favourably and uses at least some of psychologists’ work on measures of subjective well-being, consistent with his definition of individual ‘welfare’ in terms of self-valuation of situation. He uses first the finding that whereas at very low levels of material living subjective well-being is undoubtedly increased by material gains, in rich countries it is not. Commendably, he holds back from any further income-based claims on levels of well-being in rich countries (p.38). Second, in both rich and poor countries, other things contribute to happiness. From the literature he emphasizes health, employment and civic participation. He feels this supports his inclusion of indices of consumption, health (viz., life expectancy), and civic and political liberties in his well-being measures, and concludes that in poor countries they are adequate proxies for happiness (p.38). The conclusion ignores many other determinants of happiness, such as employment (which he treats only as a badge of social status), and the distribution of consumption, and assumes that liberties are converted into participation. Yet he himself later notes, for example, that longevity is an insufficient measure of health status: ‘it isn’t difficult to remain alive even when malnourished and weak’ (p.79); and complains of the neglect of measures of nutrition in assessing the quality of growth (n.42).

Dasgupta’s index of current well-being significantly diverges in many important cases from GNP per capita, notably in the most unequal cases (2001: 62). So too does the HDI, but he attacks this; first for being *ad hoc*, and second for not showing the decline in longterm prospects due to ‘mining’ of natural capital, as shown by his own index of well-being over time. The HDI does not of course claim to be a measure of wealth or of well-being over time, and we need measures of present well-being precisely in order to then see the trade-offs over time. The role of the HDI should instead be seen as tactical and political—to reach an audience of politicians, administrators and the wider public, in order to demonstrate the inadequacy of GDP—and it has succeeded in that. To fulfil the role it had to be easily understandable and universally calculable, hence its simple and ‘ad hoc’ nature. Its constructors were aware of its limitations.<sup>15</sup> The wider UNDP Human Development approach explicitly highlights other relevant dimensions of present well-being, including distribution, employment, civic and political liberties, and their use, including security, and more. Concluding that there is no adequate single

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<sup>15</sup> UNDP’s retention of GDP per capita was arguably a mistake (though not unique to them—see Dasgupta 1993); private consumption per capita is logically more appropriate. But tactically, for recognition and acceptance, and logistically, for worldwide computability, GDP per capita was a more suitable component.

synthesis, the *Human Development Reports* amongst others mainly use a disaggregated approach.

Having delegitimized GDP as a well-being measure, various paths lie open. One is to construct better composite indicators, the path trodden by Dasgupta. What their additional value-added is, for whom and what, needs to be considered. Would they be used to allocate, say, international aid? One doubts it. Another path is to accept that no composite indicator is very good, and to consider how to intelligently handle plurality and incommensurabilities, with an eye to the variety of contexts and purposes. There is not as much depth in Dasgupta's discussion of the notion of WB as in his disturbing examination of our exploitation of and impacts on the natural environment, and in his case for appropriate measures of wealth as measures of sustainable WB. Those merits of his discussion no doubt survive his limited conceptualization of WB. Let us proceed to others who investigate the concept of WB further.

#### **4.2 Sen: a conceptual backdrop to analyse personal advantage and quality of life**

Various great economists, like Mill, Marshall and Pigou, had ethical visions which had little longterm impact in economics since they remained as non-integrated, non-formalized supplements to their economic theories (Ackerman 1997). In contrast Sen has got major ethical messages relatively far into his discipline. He has built an alternative that is influential in theory, applied research, and policy.

Analytically, he has critiqued the conflation in modern welfare economics of numerous categories (self-interest = preference = choice = satisfaction = WB) which has been exacerbated by giving several of them the name utility. He has pluralized our conceptual armoury to discuss 'human advantage', as we noted earlier and will elaborate. He recognizes for example how satisfaction can come both from one's own situation and from others' situations. At the same time, he stresses that interpretations of ambiguous ideas 'must try to capture that ambiguity rather than hide or eliminate it' (1993: 34).

Normatively, he has argued convincingly that many types of information are relevant to the assessment of WB and QOL, and has warned against focus on hedonic well-being alone. As we saw in section 2, he argues for a focus on some specific functionings and, especially, capabilities, more than on satisfaction; and he in effect adopts an analogue to the 'informed desire' or, better, 'reasoned desire' conception in this different space for evaluation: namely a priority to those capabilities (and functionings) which we 'have reason to value'. While he shares the eudaimonic conception's concern for valued functionings, he stresses in a policy context the capability to attain these functionings above the actual attainment; and he eschews a general statement of what are priority functionings, leaving the prioritization to legitimate decision procedures in each situation.

My purpose here is to elucidate rather than assess Sen's conceptualization of well-being. (For more on assessment, see e.g. Giri 2000, Gasper 2002, Gasper and van Staveren 2003.) Let us look at his usage of the term 'well-being', and at whether capability is better seen as an interpretation of a person's 'advantage'.

*Is Sen's capability approach really a theory of WB?*

Sen's capability approach does not centre on the content of being—specific functionings—nor on functionings as primary evaluative criterion. It gives priority in evaluation to capability (e.g., 'quality of life to be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings', 1993: 31), though it retains a secondary evaluative role for functionings (e.g., 1993: 32 'sees the evaluative space in terms of functionings and capabilities to function'). Capability seems best read then as a freedom-centred concern relevant in policy prescription, an appropriate concept of advantage rather than of achieved well-being or quality of life. Indeed Sen writes of 'The capability approach to a person's advantage ...' (though also, a few lines earlier, of 'a particular approach to well-being and advantage', 1993: 30).<sup>16</sup>

*Is Sen's usage of the term 'well-being' still too utilitarian?*

Sen formalizes various choices in assessing a person's advantage. Two are: reference to opportunities or to achievements; and assessment in terms of a person's own costs and benefits, or in terms of the person's values which could ignore aspects of their own welfare and include concerns about other matters. 'Assessment in terms of a person's own costs and benefits' itself includes two cases: first, where we refer to satisfactions, which can be affected by other person's situations (via sympathy or Schadenfreude); and second, where we refer only to those aspects of a person's well-being determined by 'the nature of his own life, rather than from "other-regarding" objectives or impersonal concerns' (Sen 1993: 37).<sup>17</sup> Sen describes the second as the person's 'Standard of Living' (a label that only makes sense coming out of the economics tradition). He thus generates five categories for describing and assessing a person's situation, shown in Figure 4. And he then adds a sixth, quality of life.

In understanding an ambiguous idea Sen tries to reveal the ambiguity. Are all the five categories faces of well-being; or only the 'well-being' column; or only the shaded cell whereas other cells represent other aspects of a person's 'advantage'; or even WBA only, since that is about being, not just potential, and about the individual's being, not other people's, but inclusive of what she feels about others? He seems to conclude that all are relevant aspects, with their relevance depending upon the context; but his choice of terms of course prioritizes the well-being column. His sixth term, 'quality of life', could fit the agency column or represent an evaluative summing-up of AA and WBA, or of the whole table.

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<sup>16</sup> Sen's Nobel lecture (2002: 82-5) speaks alternately of (inter-personal comparisons of) personal well-being, personal welfare, and individual advantage, though without equating them; p.94 differentiates between well-being and overall advantage. Alkire (2002) too moves to and fro between these names.

<sup>17</sup> In contrast Hammond rules out reference to preferences concerning other people, as being intrusive. He tries to construct a category of 'an individual's personal welfare' which excludes such preferences (1987: 108). It is different from Sen's "Own WB", since that includes sympathy effects, let alone from QOL in Sen's schema. He uses the term 'meddlesome preferences' but his move rules out Sen's 'sympathy' and 'commitment' and excludes all feelings and concern for others. In fact both markets and politics allow expression of preferences regarding others; and the 'external effects' of other people's situation on a person's well-being or QOL are standard, not rare.

Figure 4 Sen's categories for ranking a person's situation

	<i>In terms of an agent's personal/own well-being</i>	<i>In terms of the agent's objectives</i>
<i>Actual achievement</i>	(Own) Well-Being Achievement (WBA);  'Standard of Living' (SOL) = WBA minus 'sympathy'	Agency Achievement (AA)
<i>Potential for attainment</i>	(Own) Well-Being Freedom (WBF)	Agency Freedom (AF)

Sen reserved the label well-being for the categories in the first column. Within that column we can interpret well-being in terms of pleasure, or of reasoned desire, or of externally specified valued functionings (e.g. life-span, etc., as in QOL research); but in all cases for self-referential concerns only (including, except in SOL, the pleasures from the benefit of others whom one cares for, and from the sufferings of one's enemies). Sen himself does not present an externally specified list, but in practice uses an implicit partial list in his examples and his policy-oriented work. He continually refers to certain good functionings (such as longevity, health, and self-respect) in order to criticize assessments of well-being instead in the spaces of income, commodities, or felt utility. But he also gives space for well-being in terms of pleasure/satisfaction (hence the issue about whether or not to include pleasures caused by other's situations). Arguably his linguistic privileging of the first column is consistent with still seeing well-being (in his terms) as preference fulfilment, but that conception fits more readily his agency column, since many preferences are about other people and other types of concern, and the 'utility' imputed from choices would reflect this.

Some people advocate 'agency achievement' as the best single candidate for the title 'well-being': the fulfilment of one's goals, whatever their subject. This matches a less self-enclosed conception of personhood, and a less utilitarian conception of satisfaction. For Sen, WB is self-referential; agency is anything-referential. This is one standard usage, the idea of WB as 'prudential value': 'the notion of how well a person's life is going for that person' (Crisp 2001: section 1). It encounters criticism from various authors (e.g. Gore 1997, Giri 2000, Nussbaum 2000). First, it rests on assumptions about sharp bounds of the self. Second, Sen uses the category of 'commitment' to cover the pursuit of objectives which bring the agent no utility, in contrast to the pleasures of 'sympathy'. 'Commitment' thus falls outside 'well-being', perhaps reflecting a utilitarian assumption that there is only one currency of feeling ('utility'). Third, the debatable contrast between being and agency might lead to a further separation in Sen's vocabulary, between being and living (WB versus QOL).

Sen's main focus has however been on the last row in Figure 4: on the lives that people could attain, with reference to those functionings that people 'have reason to value'. He concentrates on well-reasoned desires (for him 'reason' implies reasoning, not mere whim or habit) and on the capabilities space, not directly the functionings space (except for proxy purposes, or with secondary status), let alone the commodities space. He emphasises the contrast between rows in Figure 4, and chose to describe his approach as 'the capability approach'.

To some people the contrast between columns seems more important. It starts to add a theory of personhood. Over time, Sen has come to stress the language of ‘freedom’ above that of capability, perhaps partly because it links to this contrast between columns too. People can and do freely commit themselves to things other than their own narrowly-defined well-being. What he calls the process-aspect of freedom (e.g. 1999: 291) refers to people’s sharing in choices, on the basis of their various values and objectives. The opportunity-aspect of freedom concerns the extent of people’s capability set.

It may be wise to adopt different labels, and to break from the welfare economics and utilitarian tradition in vocabulary as well as in concepts. Figure 5 thus points to the need for an alternative vocabulary in which the term well-being no longer has singular reference but functions at most as the ambiguous umbrella for a complex field.

Figure 5 Towards a replacement vocabulary

	<i>PERSON'S 'OBJECTIVE' STATE (excludes 'sympathy')</i>	<i>PERSONAL GRATIFICATION (includes 'sympathy')</i>	<i>GOAL FULFILMENT (includes commitment)</i>
<i>ACHIEVEMENT</i>	<i>Objective well-being</i>	<i>Gratification achievement / subjective well-being</i>	<i>Goal achievement</i>
<i>POTENTIAL / FREEDOM</i>	<i>OWB potential</i>	<i>SWB potential</i>	<i>Potential for goal achievement</i>

### 4.3 The roles of lists: Nussbaum, Doyal and Gough, Alkire

*Nussbaum: a richer exploration of human well-being, for backing human rights*

Martha Nussbaum provides an objective-list conception of well-being, plus in a policy context a liberal focus on the capabilities to achieve those functionings highlighted in the list. In the Aristotelian tradition, pride of place is given to practical reason and to affiliation with others. Nussbaum’s list in various versions has attracted great attention. Rather than repeat the details of the list or the discussion around it (see e.g. Nussbaum 2000, Alkire 2002, Gasper 2003), let us situate her work.<sup>18</sup>

Although her list contrives to keep in general a Mosaic length of ten (with sub-parts), it is not *ad hoc*. It is derived first through Aristotelian procedures. Her criteria for the ‘well’ in well-being arise as criteria for what is human, and, more extensively, for what are capabilities essential to live at a minimum decent level: ‘with dignity’. These hypotheses then cross-checked with a variety of sources and interlocutors, including from diverse cultures and literatures on well-being. The list yet lacks the degree of theorized order found in for example Doyal and Gough’s model with its rigorous distinctions between levels, which influenced Figure 3. Why does it still deservedly draw attention?

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<sup>18</sup> It is important to refer to her work published from 1999 onwards, which significantly revises and refines her theory, and no longer to the widely read predecessor papers.

First, it consciously builds a basis for core rights, as parts of a legal constitution, to give a set of entrenched priorities without which we would leave too much open to domination by the powerful. It is best seen as conveying a method of thinking for developing such a priority set. A key audience consists of legislators, lawyers and judges, and those who seek to influence them. Second, it buttresses Sen's move to increase the range of types of information used in evaluation, for it provides a substantive language to express people's multi-faceted concerns (Nussbaum 2000: 138-9). Third, using such language helps to open up observers' perceptions of the content of others' lives and their own, and contributes to building sympathy and commitment (Gasper 2003).

### *Doyal and Gough's synthesis for discussing policy priorities*

Existentialist work on well-being attacks perspectives like the Aristotelian which derive an extensive picture of well-being from a relatively full picture of human nature. It uses a different and less extensive picture, asserting that self-determination is 'the defining characteristic of what it is to be human' (Hodge 1990: 43). The meaning of well-being is for people themselves to determine. Thus existentialists dispute objective list approaches, as in QOL research. For them what matters is self-determination, and all other aspects are not given as good or bad by human nature but depend on mental attitude. However we should not equate choice with self-determination; addiction must be distinguished from autonomy. And the criteria of autonomy and self-determination have limited application also to the very young, the very old and the mentally infirm.

The work of Doyal and Gough is important, first for seeking to draw out an objective list of implications of a commitment to autonomy, and second for integrating many of the elements found in Sen, Nussbaum, QOL research (notably on physical and mental health), the existentialists and others. By a layered conception of well-being's aspects and determinants, similar to that in section 3 above, and by systematically studying the links between levels, Doyal and Gough bridge the 'cultural divide' described by Dasgupta and Kabear, and integrate the discussion of means and ends, establishing agendas for measurement and institutionalization at the various levels (Gasper 1996). Gough's work in the Bath project on Wellbeing in Developing Countries continues in this direction (Clark and Gough 2003), by connecting to the Resource Profiles approach to livelihoods (Kebede and McGregor 2003) and to SWB research (Camfield and Skevington 2003).

Doyal and Gough ask what are the prerequisites for avoiding serious harm and for functioning as an effective member of one's society. These are their criteria for basic needs. By focusing on the requirements of functioning as a society member, they are close to a social exclusion perspective. They argue that autonomy of agency, plus physical and mental health, are the minimum prerequisites. More striking than the specific inclusions in this list of posited basic needs—Nussbaum, existentialists and desire-fulfilment theories also prioritize goal formation and pursuit, though as directly central to human being—is the exclusion of other things from this level of priority, as a result of constructing their needs list by using explicit criteria, not *ad hoc*. The same principles of systematic derivation are applied down the hierarchy of levels which we saw in section 3, rather than declaring needs/priorities by intuition. Given the layered structure of the model, moving from general ideals down through levels of increasingly specific means, it generates not a single list but lists at each level.

This is an ethical theory not a psychological theory, although it uses psychological evidence. It is a theory about needs as posited high priorities for policy; not a theory about motives, nor about every normative concern. Still, psychological evidence on what people care about is certainly relevant, and Camfield and Skevington (2003) report that the focus on autonomy matches the findings of decades of psychological research.

Bowlby's Attachment Theory holds that relatedness is a key condition for building autonomy: a person will operate more effectively when he feels he has a 'secure base' of other persons on whom he can rely for support if and when needed (Downes 1990). This finding emerged also in eudaimonic WB research. Thus Ryan and Deci (2001) highlight, besides autonomy and competence, relatedness as a key determinant of felt well-being; and Nussbaum highlights affiliation as the second key capability. Doyal and Gough's theory could readily absorb an additional posited basic need such as affiliation/relatedness /conviviality, and draw out its implications. The theory offers space for partly different specifications of derived need according to what are the specified desirable functionings.

#### *Alkire's synthesis for project management*

Focused at a different operational level—not the national (and even global) constitution-making of Nussbaum or the policy-design level of Doyal and Gough, but rather at a local or project planning level—Alkire argues that a list of core aspects of well-being serves as a tool to give structure to, rather than replace, processes of discussion in particular situations (2002: 38). A list is an aid, to avoid forgetting matters which are often found important. For fuller ideas on how to structure such processes, Alkire uses the work of an Australian philosopher, John Finnis. Finnis seeks to identify basic reasons for action: reasons for which no other reason has to be given in order to be intelligible. He and collaborators have generated their own such list, in various versions. Interestingly, providing happiness is absent, perhaps considered as too undifferentiated; our reasons are not reducible to one. To judge such intelligible motives and their fulfilment to be good or bad is declared to involve a further step. However, also absent from the list are, for example, competitive spirit, aggression, and malice; so the list may be already more moralized than it claims.<sup>19</sup>

The list of motives is used as the set of dimensions to be covered in local discussions about evaluating past or prospective changes, as the hypothesized dimensions of human well-being. Alkire shows how, without necessarily measuring well-being directly, a deeply considered and enriched conception of well-being (with again an emphasis on capability) can guide local planning and resource allocation. What she finds she needs in order to operationalize Sen are the methods of Nussbaum and Finnis (Alkire 2002: 224-6): a 'thick' (multi-dimensional), 'vague' (stated generally and requiring local interpretation) conception of the good, applied through a process of practical reasoning. This leads us to a successor of the basic human needs approach (2002: 168 and 173) and to multi-criteria analyses, including some in aggregating mode and some non-aggregating, with each of these now given a more complex philosophical basis.

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<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Jeremy Bentham's *Table of the Springs of Action* included such factors (Collard 2003).

## 5 Conclusion: what should we try to measure?

Too much work on *well-being* has been based on insufficient evidence and theory about *be-ing*. Many economists and philosophers apparently expected to establish appropriate concepts of well-being from reflection that abstracts from evidence and not only from particulars. They mistook the role of theory, which is to make sense of evidence; concepts should reflect plentiful experience rather than screen it out. In economics the treatment of well-being has been too much an offshoot of market calculation, with attempts to modify market figures of willingness-to-pay in order to make them acceptable well-being estimates. The study of use-values has needed to break from the tyranny of categories derived from the study of exchange-values. In contrast, work in psychology, sociology, and socio-economics (e.g. Etzioni 1988) has generated concepts more adequately grounded in experience. Hence this paper on concepts started with some of the evidence and has tried throughout to relate conceptualization to evidence.

I draw the following ideas from the evidence. There are many major aspects of ‘objective’ well-being (such as health, family life, employment, recreation, quality of death), and these are also major determinants of subjective well-being. These aspects are far from invariably strongly positively correlated with access to commodities via income, so that income cannot act as proxy for the others. Indeed, the aspects can sometimes be negatively correlated with income and each other, so that to use income, or any other variable, as proxy for all the others can be seriously misleading. One possible explanation for the Easterlin paradox, besides concerns with status and relative position, and the emergence of new aspirations, is this: even if higher income would, other things being equal, raise SWB, the generation of the income might have substantial negative side effects on major determinants of SWB like family life; the ‘other things’ don’t remain equal, under many arrangements. We need disaggregated pictures which highlight various aspects of life. In looking at information on persons we must study good outlier cases too, as the ‘positive psychology’ movement does, and not rest content with the measures of central tendency and crude macro correlations.

Of course we sometimes have good reason to aggregate; not because this reveals a shared essence such as utility, but because we need to make choices, and this is one way. The HDI too had a good reason to aggregate, for its rationale was to provide a contrast to the ruling aggregate, GNP; to suggest how it misleads us on welfare, not to claim that it was itself a great indicator of overall welfare. Aggregation is unlikely to ever give a great overall indicator here; any appropriate weights might be far from fixed, for example.

The other theme that emerged was that numerous different concepts and measures are required to match the various contexts and purposes. For example, in distributing international aid between countries, one would probably not adjust (or supplement) national income figures for the quality of family life; whereas for assessing QOL and explaining social dynamics one might do so. Dasgupta (2001: 31-2) points out that different organizational contexts generate differences in purpose: responsibilities need to be divided, and the different institutions need to pursue different objectives, and hence to measure different things.

Amongst the authors we discussed, Dasgupta appeared focused on providing a more robust alternative to GNP as an aggregate measure of WB, not just to delegitimize it as the HDI had done. Such an aggregate measure which makes normative claims remains



in demand for some purposes. Sen's purposes have been different: to delegitimize GNP as a WB measure, as prelude to opening us to the use of diverse types of information which feed into various types of decisionmaking. Alkire's work on project planning and evaluation exemplifies this. Max-Neef too is oriented to project action and the workshop format, not to technocratic measurement. Nussbaum is less oriented to measurement of WB, more to the design of constitutions. Operationalization includes institutionalization, not only measurement.

Not everything important needs to be measured; thus informed-desire theory carries many policy implications even if we could not come up with an informed-desire measure of WB. And many of the important things to be measured are determinants of WB, inputs rather than outputs. For example, we can attempt to measure what Sen calls sympathy and commitment, as vital societal glue, types of 'social capital'; but attempts to monetize say empowerment would seem misguided (Alkire 2002: 209).

We must address well-being not only by measurement but also, and sometimes instead, by for example rich qualitative description. The methods of conventional economics are insufficient to capture and communicate all of importance that is involved. We need in addition cases of particular real people in their complexity, in their social and historical contexts. Testimony, 'voices of the poor', life histories, and the languages of feelings are indispensable complements to economists' abstraction (Gasper 2000). Promoting well-being does not always require more work on measuring it.

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