

Tony Burns

**‘Amartya Sen and the Capabilities Versus Happiness
Debate: An Aristotelian Perspective’**

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Tony Burns.
School of Politics & International Relations,
University of Nottingham,
Nottingham, UK
tony.burns@nottingham.ac.uk



Amartya Sen and the Capabilities Versus Happiness Debate: An Aristotelian Perspective

Abstract

This chapter discusses Amartya Sen's capabilities approach to human development from the standpoint of the concept of happiness. It locates Sen's work against the background of the recent capabilities versus happiness debate. Sen's version of the capabilities approach is commonly regarded as a critique of the happiness approach to development ethics. It is sometimes assumed that he attaches no importance at all to the value of happiness. I argue that this view misrepresents what Sen has to say about the value of happiness in his writings. A distinctive feature of Sen's views on this subject is that he agrees with the view that happiness is nothing more than subjective mental state and rejects the idea of objective happiness. This distinguishes his version of the capabilities approach from the ethical eudaimonism of both Aristotle and John Stuart Mill. The chapter concludes by suggesting that Sen could and should have taken this idea more seriously than he does

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1. Introduction

A great deal has been written by and about the Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen in the last two or three decades. In that time much has also been written about the capabilities approach in development studies, including Sen's version of it. Indeed, there is now an academic journal devoted to it, the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, which commenced publishing in the year 2000, changing its name to the current title in 2009.

Similarly, a great deal has also been written in the same period about the concept of happiness and its relevance for students of economics. Not all of the contributors to this literature are enthusiasts for the value of happiness, or for a happiness approach to human well-being and development, although many of them are. Here it should be noted that there are, broadly speaking, two different versions of it, based on the notions of objective happiness and subjective happiness respectively. The difference between these is that for proponents of the former one can be mistaken about one's own happiness, whereas according to proponents of the latter one cannot be. On that view, individuals are the best judges of what their own happiness involves.

Again, this burgeoning literature on the economics and politics of happiness has led to the creation of a new academic journal, *The Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being*, which also commenced publication in the year 2000. As the wording of this title suggests, the editors of this journal lean in the direction of what I have called the subjective happiness approach. A good example of somebody who endorses this approach would be



Richard Layard, who provides an accessible account of it in his *Happiness: Lessons From a New Science* (2005). [1]

Given the above, it is not too surprising that some scholars have attempted to bring these two different bodies of literature together. In the last fifteen years or so, a number of conferences and workshops, and associated special issues of academic journals, have been devoted to this theme. These include symposia in the *Review of Social Economy* (2005); *Utilitas* (2006); *The Journal of Socio-Economics* (2010); and *The International Review of Economics* (2020). A significant event here was the publication of a volume edited by Luigino Bruni, Flavio Comim and Maurizio Pugno, entitled *Capabilities and Happiness* in 2008. [2] I shall refer to this general effort as the capabilities versus happiness debate, which commenced in 2005 and continues to the present.

This chapter has five parts. In part one I offer an account of the subjective happiness approach to development studies. In part two I turn to consider Amartya Sen's version of the capabilities approach, which was initially put forward by him as a critique of the subjective happiness approach. In part three I consider what Sen has to say about the value of subjective happiness and his understanding of part which the concept has to play in the capabilities approach as he understands it. In part four I scrutinise the efforts which have been made by some scholars to synthesise the capabilities approach and the subjective happiness approach into a third approach, which is claimed to have the strengths of each and the weaknesses of neither. Finally, in part five, I consider some possible criticisms of Sen's own understanding of the concept of happiness and its significance, when assessed from the standpoint of Aristotle's ethical eudaimonism and its notion of objective happiness.

2. The Happiness Approach to Human Development and Well-Being

The happiness approach comes in two significantly different forms, namely the subjective happiness and the objective happiness versions respectively. The contributors to the capabilities versus happiness debate usually (though not always) have in mind the notion of subjective rather than that of objective happiness. On that view, happiness is identical with subjective well-being. It is a matter of having pleasurable sensations or experiences, which might be characterised by the expression 'feeling good.' As such, it is something that is veridically self-reported. For those who think in this way about happiness, it is not possible for any individual agent to be mistaken about their own situation, so far as their happiness (or otherwise) is concerned. This way of thinking about happiness runs counter to a very old view, which can be traced back at least to the writings of Aristotle, if not before, according to which happiness (or eudaimonia) is at least in part an objective state of affairs. On that view, individual agents can indeed be mistaken as to what will make them really or truly happy. I shall say something about Sen, eudaimonism and the notion of objective happiness in part five.

I shall follow Amartya Sen and take Richard Layard and his *Happiness: Lessons From a New Science* as a representative for the happiness approach. This is subjected to criticism by Sen in *The Idea of Justice*. [3] Enthusiasts for the subjective happiness approach such as Layard make five core assumptions, some of which are indicated by the sub-title of *The Journal of Happiness Studies*, with its reference to the notion of subjective well-being. The first of these is a



commitment to monism, or the view that there is only one value which really matters. The second is that this unitary value is happiness. Hence, in their opinion, happiness is all that matters. Given this assumption, there is evidently a close intellectual affinity between the happiness approach to human development and well-being and utilitarianism, more specifically, the classical version of that doctrine, in the writings of Jeremy Bentham.

The third assumption that is made by Layard is that happiness is entirely a subjective affair. Contrary to the view that is associated with ethical eudaimonism, Layard holds that there is for them no such thing as objective happiness. There is no more to happiness than a subjectively experienced 'feeling.' In Layard's words, 'happiness is feeling good and misery is feeling bad.' [1] On this view, if somebody 'feels' happy then they are happy. For there is no more to happiness than having a feeling of a certain kind, or being in a certain psychological state. On this view, as Shakespeare's Hamlet says, 'there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so.' Consequently, one cannot be mistaken about one's own happiness.

It is true that Layard thinks that mental experiences or of this kind, or psychological states of mind, can be connected to the physiological activity of the human brain, and that this is something which increasingly we are able to objectively measure. [1] Once that is done, we can go on to explain a person's underlying level of happiness,' the 'quality of his life as he experiences it.' [1] Nevertheless, according to Layard and other advocates of this view, this should not be thought to imply that the concept of happiness is objective in any other sense of the term, especially not the sense according to which individual agents might possibly be mistaken when making a judgment about their own happiness. For those who subscribe to a subjective or subjectivist understanding of the notion of happiness, to talk in that way would involve a contradiction in terms.

Layard's fourth assumption is that there is, therefore, no significant difference between 'happiness' and 'well-being.' These two terms are synonyms. They are simply two different ways of talking about or referring to the same thing. His fifth assumption is that, just like happiness, so also well-being is entirely a subjective affair. This implies that those like Layard who make this assumption should not really talk about 'subjective well-being' at all, and would not do so if their thinking was entirely consistent. This is so because for them, given their understanding of the concept of well-being, the term is a pleonasm. It really only makes sense to speak in that way if one also accepts that there is such a thing as objective well-being as well as subjective well-being. However, this is something which Layard denies.

3. Sen's Version of the Capabilities Approach

Sen is a critic of what I have called the happiness approach to human development and well-being, especially Layard's subjectivist version of it. He rejects most of its assumptions, though not all of them. With one important exception, his version of the capabilities approach is based on a very different set of beliefs. First of all Sen rejects Layard's monism, or the view that there is only one thing which really matters, or only one core value in ethics and politics, either for private individuals or for policy makers. Sen rejects Layard's utilitarianism, 'on the grounds that well-being,' whether understood by Layard or in some other way, 'is not the only thing that is valuable.' [4] There is disagreement over the issue of what Sen's proposed alternative to monism is, specifically whether he is a pluralist who maintains that there are many values, which are of equal importance to one another or,



alternatively, a dualist who maintains that there are in fact two core values rather than just one. For present purposes, I shall present Sen as a dualist. His version of the capabilities approach attaches importance to just two core values, not one or more. These two core values are well-being and freedom. Unlike Layard, far from being *the* one and only value in ethics, happiness is not even one of the core values in Sen's version of the capability approach. I shall consider what Sen has to say about the value of happiness in part four.

There is evidential support for a dualist reading of Sen's views. For example, in *On Ethics and Economics*, he states that 'there is an essential and irreducible "duality" in the conception of a person in ethical calculation.' [4] This is so, he continues, because 'we can see the person, in terms of agency [freedom – TB], recognizing and respecting his or her ability to form goals, commitments, values, etc., and we can also see the person in terms of well-being.' [4] Sen makes the same point in his Dewey lectures of 1984. There he observes that 'in these lectures I have tried to explore some of the implications of seeing persons from two different perspectives, viz., well-being and agency, neither of which can subsume the other.' [5] He goes on to say that these 'two basic aspects of persons, viz., well-being and agency' might be associated with the 'dual base' of his capability approach to questions of ethics and politics. [5] His conclusion in *On Ethics and Economics* is that there is 'no possibility of relying on utility-based calculation' in order to catch 'the dual basis of well-being and agency in substantive ethics.' This 'duality between achievement and freedom,' he argues, is simply 'not capturable within the "monist" framework of utility-based calculus.' [4] Sen argues that, because of its dualism, his version of the capabilities approach provides 'a different—and in many ways a richer—perspective on the evaluation of individual well-being and freedom' than is offered by utilitarianism. Consequently, it provides a more 'plausible informational basis for a large part of social evaluation.' [6]

This conceptual dualism between the value of freedom and that of well-being runs throughout Sen's work. It is expressed in different ways at different times. Sometimes Sen distinguishes between thinking about individual human beings as either 'agents' or as 'patients.' Elsewhere, when talking about the actions of individual agents, he differentiates between 'processes' or the process side of things, on the one hand, and 'achievements' or 'outcomes' on the other. The same dualism is also implicit in his distinction, which is central to his version of the capabilities approach, between 'capabilities' and 'functionings.' When Sen talks about capabilities he has in mind realistic opportunities for the successful achievement of certain outcomes which are preferred and freely chosen by individual agents. The concept of 'functionings,' on the other hand, has to do with whether or not the intended outcomes, or the associated 'beings and doings,' are in fact successfully achieved.

Sen holds that there is no guarantee that an increase in freedom, understood by reference to the notion of capabilities, will lead to an increase in well-being. This is so for a variety of reasons. For example, this may not be what the agent chooses. Alternatively, the agent may choose to promote her own well-being and yet, for some reason, decide not to act on that choice. Also, Sen suggests at times that the well-being of the agent might actually be reduced for some reason. This might be either intentional or unintentional. In the first case, as with Mohandas Gandhi, this would happen if through an act of commitment the agent freely chose to act in a way which they know will lead to a diminution of their own well-being. Alternatively, they might choose to pursue their own well-being and act accordingly, but unsuccessfully. An unintended outcome of their action might be that their well-being actually falls, despite their efforts to increase it.



The second assumption which Sen makes follows on immediately from the first. It is that, *pace* Layard and classical utilitarianism, happiness is not the only value which matters. In his contribution to the *Capabilities & Happiness* volume, Sen argues that ‘it is one thing to see utility or happiness as important, but it is quite another to insist that nothing else matters.’ [6] Here he emphasises the importance of two other values, namely that of freedom and justice. He says that note should ‘be taken of considerations of freedom in assessing social arrangements.’ [6] He also draws attention to the value of justice, understood by reference, not only to ‘the rights’ which people enjoy, but also to their ‘actual opportunities in society,’ [6] or what Max Weber would refer to as their ‘life chances.’ [7] When it comes to social evaluation, Sen argues, ‘there are grounds for being concerned about the interpersonal distribution of these freedoms, rights, and opportunities.’ [6] In other words, unlike classical utilitarianism, which is entirely quantitative or summative and has no interest at all in the issue of distribution or redistribution, Sen thinks that we should be concerned about the issue of social equality or justice. This involves redistribution of economic resources. At the same time, however, Sen assumes that the promotion of social justice, understood in this way, is significant because it is a necessary precondition for the existence of freedom as he understands the concept.

Sen’s view that happiness is not the only important value is clear from the emphasis which he places on the value of freedom. However, it is also clear from the fact that the value which he contrasts with that of freedom is in fact well-being and not happiness. According to Sen, there is a significant difference between ‘happiness’ and ‘well-being.’ [5] [8] [9] In *On Ethics and Economics* (1987), Sen refers to ‘the insufficient depth of the criterion of happiness or desire-fulfilment in judging a person’s well-being.’ [4] He also maintains that ‘happiness’ and the ‘fulfilment of desire’ with which Layard associates it, ‘cannot, on their own or even together – adequately reflect the value of well-being.’ [4] In his view, then, utilitarianism, by which he has in mind the classical utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and latterly of Richard Layard, ‘provides a defective view of well-being.’ [4] The problem with utilitarianism, he says, is that ‘the claim of utility to be the only source of value’ rests on wrongly ‘identifying utility with well-being.’ [4] Sen maintains that this view is open to criticism. In his opinion, utility or happiness ‘does not adequately represent well-being.’ [4] The conceptual distinction between happiness and well-being is central to Sen’s ethical and political thought, and to his critique of the subjective happiness approach that is defended by Layard.

A third assumption that is made by Sen is one which he shares with Layard and with classical utilitarianism. This is the assumption that happiness is entirely a subjective affair. In other words, Sen rejects outright the notion of objective happiness, which is one of the core assumptions of ethical eudaimonism from the time of Aristotle to that of John Stuart Mill. So far as he is concerned, happiness in the strict sense of the term is necessarily or inherently subjective. For Sen also, therefore, the expression ‘subjective happiness’ is a pleonasm. Given his understanding of what the concept of happiness involves, for Sen to characterise happiness as ‘subjective’ is unnecessary. I consider Sen’s capabilities approach from the standpoint of ethical eudaimonism and its notion of objective happiness in part four

A fourth assumption of Sen’s version of the capabilities approach is that well-being is at least in part an objective affair. Sen insists, therefore, that although one cannot be mistaken about one’s own happiness, nevertheless one can be mistaken about one’s own well-being. According to one commonly held reading of his views, Sen holds that far from being a pleonasm, as Layard argues, on the contrary the notion of ‘subjective well-being’ is in fact an oxymoron. If he is read in this way, Sen rejects



Layard's view that happiness subjectively understood is a sufficient condition for well-being. At the same time, however, he does not think that it is a necessary condition either. I shall discuss an alternative reading of his views on this subject in part four.

What Sen says about the phenomenon of adaptation is relevant here. This has to do with the case of how extremely deprived individuals adapt to their situation. In his contribution to the *Capabilities & Happiness* volume, as elsewhere, Sen draws attention to the significance of the phenomenon of adaptation for an assessment of the adequacy of utilitarianism as an approach to the understanding of well-being. He repeats his oft cited claim that 'the utilitarian calculus based on, say, happiness can be deeply unfair to those who are persistently deprived, such as the traditional underdogs in stratified societies.' [6] These 'hopelessly deprived people,' he says, 'often tend to adjust their desires and expectations to what little they see as feasible,' thereby 'making deprived lives bearable.' [6] Sen argues there that if we focus entirely on 'the metric of pleasure or desire fulfilment,' then 'the disadvantages of the hopeless underdog may seem much smaller than would emerge from a more objective analysis of the extent of their deprivation and unfreedom.' [6] It is important to note, however, that Sen refrains from arguing that these deprived individuals are not really happy at all, and that they just (mistakenly) think that they are. On the contrary, he accepts that they *are* happy. This is one of Sen's reasons for not attaching too much importance to the value of happiness.

Sen insists that what matters most is not happiness but, rather, well-being. This raises two interesting and related questions. The first is whether Sen considers well-being to be *entirely* an objective affair. The second is whether or not Sen attaches any value at all to subjective happiness. With respect to these two questions, Sen has been interpreted in different ways. According to one reading, he holds that well-being is indeed entirely an objective matter. Consequently, he attaches no importance at all to the value of happiness. According to another, he maintains merely that there is an objective component to well-being. Hence he does attach at least some importance to the value of happiness, subjectively understood. I shall say something about these two alternative readings of Sen's views regarding the value of subjective happiness in part four.

4. Sen on the Value of Happiness

In this part I consider what Sen has said about the value of happiness over the years. I should emphasise at the outset that I do not think that Sen's views have altered significantly. In particular, he did not change them in response to criticisms he received from the various contributors to the *Capabilities & Happiness* volume. Rather, his response to those criticisms was simply to draw attention to the fact that he had already pre-empted them in his earlier writings. In short, he suggests that his critics should have read what he has to say about the importance of the value of happiness more carefully.

There are two issues here. The first is Sen's understanding of what happiness is and involves. The second is his assessment of the value which should be attached to happiness as he understands the term. So far as the first of these issues is concerned, it is important to note that Sen consistently assumes that happiness is indeed a subjective matter and not an objective one. He endorses rather than rejects the hedonistic understanding of the notion of happiness that is to be found in the writings of Layard and other contributors to the happiness literature.



Tadashi Hirai, Flavio Comin & Yukio Ikemoto have rightly suggested that Sen's understanding of the concept of happiness is 'hedonic.' That is to say, he endorses the view that happiness is a 'mental state' which is associated with such things 'pleasure and desire.' [10] Sen never argues that there is more to happiness than subjective experiences of that kind. In Sen's theoretical framework, it is not happiness but rather well-being that is considered to be more than a hedonic feeling. It is a distinctive feature of Sen's version of the capabilities approach that he endorses Layard's view that happiness itself is indeed a purely psychological condition, or a state of mind. In agreement with Layard and utilitarianism, Sen has rejected outright the idea, associated with ethical eudaimonism, that there might be such a thing as objective happiness. I shall examine this view in part five.

However, the fact that Sen thinks about the concept of happiness in this subjectivist way is not to say that he approves of hedonism, or that he attaches importance to the pursuit of happiness in this sense. On the contrary, there are times when Sen gives his readers the impression that he strongly disapproves of those, like Layard, who maintain that human existence has solely to do with the pursuit of happiness in that hedonistic sense of the term. On the issue of Sen's assessment of the value of subjective happiness, there are two contrasting readings of his views. I shall consider them in turn.

4.1. Sen Attaches No Value to Subjective Happiness

I have said that for Sen there are just two core values, neither of which is happiness. These two values are freedom and well-being. It might therefore be thought that Sen attaches no importance at all to the value of happiness, subjectively understood. That is how some of his critics understand his views. Some of the contributors to the capabilities versus happiness debate have criticised Sen along just these lines. The broad thrust of most of the contributions to this debate is to argue that this is a weakness in Sen's thinking and that his version of the capabilities approach would be improved if he were to attach at least some importance to the value of happiness. These commentators are of the opinion that 'the capabilities approach' and 'the happiness approach' are both partial and one-sided. They suggest that each of these approaches provides valuable insights for those who are concerned with issues in development ethics, which are overlooked by the other. Moreover, each is open to possible criticism from the standpoint of the other. Consequently, they argue, there is scope to provide a theoretical synthesis of them both. For those who think in this way, the core assumptions of the happiness approach and Sen's version of the capabilities approach are compatible with one another and may fruitfully be combined. I shall survey these contributions, before offering a critique of them.

For example Flavio Comin, in an article entitled 'Capabilities and Happiness: Potential Synergies,' which he contributed to a special issue of the *Review of Social Economy* in 2005, argued that there are 'two prominent approaches to assessing Human Well-Being,' namely 'the Capability Approach and the Subjective Well-Being Approach,' and states that on his paper 'an argument is made for exploring the potential synergies between them.' [11] Comin maintains that 'both approaches appear to show limitations that can potentially be overcome by drawing from each other.' [11] Similarly, Luigino Bruni, Flavio Comin, and Maurizio Pugno, in their introduction to the *Capabilities & Happiness* volume in 2008, also maintain that their aim is that of 'bringing together' these 'two different approaches' to understanding 'human development' or 'well-being.' [12] Here also



it is argued that ‘there are potential synergies to be explored by looking jointly at them.’ [12] In the same volume, Johannes Hirata also argues that ‘the two perspectives focus on two different aspects, or dimensions, of a comprehensive conception’ of human development. Hence they should be regarded as ‘complementary, not rival.’ According to Hirata, ‘their conceptual relationship is best understood as a division of labour’ between them.’ [13]

Andre Hoorn, Ramzi Mabsout, & Ester-Mirjam Sent also argue along similar lines in their contribution to a symposium on ‘Happiness and Capability’ in *The Journal of Social Economics* in 2010. They maintain that this symposium ‘brings together two perspectives that seek a greater measure of well-being,’ namely, ‘the happiness approach and the capability approach.’ [14] They too claim that ‘the connection happiness–capability is extremely stimulating and potentially able of opening up a very promising field of research.’ [14] In the same special issue, Murat Kotan also asked ‘how might we bring these two approaches,’ that is to say the capabilities approach (which he also refers to as ‘the freedom approach’) and the happiness approach ‘into closer contact with one another?’ [15] And he too maintains that ‘the aim of this paper is to integrate the concerns of both approaches.’ In his view, if the notion of agency is taken ‘as a focal point of departure,’ then it is fairly ‘straightforward to see how the work done under the heading of these two approaches can inform and complement each other in a constructive way.’ [15] Kotan’s conclusion is that ‘a freedom plus happiness approach is better than either alone.’ [15]

Jose M. Edwards & Sophie Pelle also refer to ‘two different, and even opposed, programs: the economics of happiness; and the capability approach,’ [16] which they associate with the names of Tibor Scitovsky and Amartya Sen respectively. These two approaches, they argue, ‘represent two major attempts to renew normative economic analysis.’ [16] They differ from one another because they possess two ‘different concepts of well-being,’ namely, ‘the “joy” of satisfied consumers for Scitovsky; and the “capabilities” of deprived individuals for Sen.’ [16] More recently, Maurizio Pugno has also argued that ‘in the study of human welfare and progress, two prominent approaches stand out,’ which at first sight ‘appear to have opposite perspectives and even opposite weaknesses.’ [17] The first of these is ‘the capability approach’ which was ‘founded by A. Sen.’ According to Pugno, this approach ‘focuses on the objective factors that contribute to human welfare.’ The second approach is the ‘happiness approach,’ which ‘focuses on subjective well-being.’ Pugno states that his paper ‘attempts to go beyond the critical comparison’ that has been offered of the two approaches so far, by ‘integrating’ them, [17] in order to ‘avoid the just mentioned and other weaknesses.’ [17] Pugno states that, in so doing, it attempts to link the objective with the subjective evaluations of individual welfare.’ [17]

Finally, Martin Binder, also, has maintained that ‘two of the most prominent measures of well-being come from subjective well-being research and the capability approach’ respectively. [18] He too suggests that ‘both approaches have significant weaknesses when considered on their own.’ [18] And he too asks ‘to what extent’ can these two approaches ‘profit from each other? Is there a way to enrich one with the insights of the other?’ [18] Like the other contributors to the debate, Binder sets himself the task of considering ‘to what extent a fusion between both approaches can overcome the weaknesses’ of each of them considered separately. [18] In the conclusion to his paper Binder maintains that while both approaches seem *prima facie* disjunct’ (sic), and appear to be ‘dealing with substantively different ideas of welfare,’ nevertheless he has ‘made a case that a combination of both approaches allows to avoid some of the drawbacks associated with them in isolation.’ [18]



It is clear from the above survey of the capabilities versus happiness debate that the idea of combining the happiness approach and the capabilities approach is well-established in the literature. However, if these two approaches are to be combined in the way proposed, it is necessary for these commentators to assume that the capability approach, as Sen understands it, attaches no importance at all to the value of happiness or subjective well-being. In order for this theoretical synthesis to be possible, it is necessary to present the capabilities approach in a certain way. According to this understanding of its core assumptions, the capabilities approach is partial and one-sided. Adherents of this approach such as Amartya Sen must be regarded as attaching no significance at all to the value of happiness, or to subjective well-being. Against that view, however, it is arguable that Sen's version of the capability approach is not guilty of doing this. To attribute such a position to Sen, as the commentators cited above do, involves a misrepresentation of his views regarding the value of happiness.

4.2. Sen Does Value Subjective Happiness

In *On Ethics and Economics* (1987), Sen claimed that 'while happiness and the fulfilment of desire may well be valuable for the person's well-being,' they do not 'adequately reflect the value of well-being.' [4] It is, he argues, 'not the only achievement that matters to one's well-being.' [4] Nevertheless, he does acknowledge there that 'being happy' is indeed 'a momentous achievement.' In *Inequality Re-Examined* (1992), Sen connected this assessment of the value of happiness to his distinction between capabilities and functionings. In this text he argues that although happiness can 'scarcely be the only valuable functioning,' and 'cannot really be taken to be all there is to leading a life,' nevertheless 'being happy may count as an important functioning,' albeit one of many. [19]

In his contribution to the capabilities versus happiness debate, in the *Capabilities & Happiness* volume (2008), Sen again emphasises that he does consider happiness, understood as a subjective mental state, to be a significant value. He states explicitly there that happiness 'is extremely important,' since 'being happy is a momentous achievement in itself.' However, he also emphasises that 'happiness cannot be the only thing that we have reason to value, nor the only metric for measuring other things that we value.' Again therefore, despite the limitations of an exclusive focus upon it, Sen acknowledges that subjectively experienced happiness is indeed 'an important human functioning.' The 'capability to be happy,' he argues, is 'a major aspect of the freedom that we have good reason to treasure.' Hence, 'the perspective of happiness illuminates one critically important element of human living.' Nevertheless, Sen also claims in this chapter that 'the metric of happiness' is not 'a particularly good guide' for 'our valuations in general.' [6]

Similarly, in *The Idea of Justice*, which was published in 2009, the year after the *Capabilities and Happiness* volume, in a critique of the views of Richard Layard, Sen argues that the central issue is not the significance of happiness, but the alleged insignificance of everything else.' [20] For 'happiness is not the only thing we seek, or have reason to seek.' [20] Sen strongly objects to Layard's 'claim that nothing else ultimately matters' apart from happiness. [20] Against this view, Sen once more maintained that 'happiness, important as it is, can hardly be the only thing that we have reason to value, nor the only metric for measuring the things that we value.' [20] Once again, therefore, he acknowledged that subjectively conceived happiness is indeed something that is rightly valued, even if it is not the



only thing that is of value. Here, as earlier in *Inequality Re-Examined*, Sen again connects this idea to the distinction which he makes between capabilities and functionings. He argues there that ‘the capability to be happy’ is a component part, indeed a ‘major aspect,’ of ‘the freedom that we have good reason to value.’ [20] He emphasises the significance of the work done by economists in the literature on the economics of happiness and maintains that ‘there is little reason to doubt the importance of happiness in human life.’ [20]

For present purposes what is significant about the remarks cited above is Sen’s acknowledgement that subjective happiness is indeed an important value for human beings. On this reading of his views, Sen does attach at least some importance to happiness, understood in the way in which Layard understands it, as a psychological or mental state. In his opinion, being happy in that sense, is a component part of well-being, in the fullest sense of the term, which necessarily takes account the mental as well as the physical aspects of persons and their well-being. For individual persons evidently do possess minds as well as bodies, and due consideration needs to be given to their mental as well as to their physical health. Sen argues that, for this very reason, subjective happiness is a necessary condition for well-being, even if it cannot be said to be a sufficient one (because of the adaptation issue).

In short, Sen’s considered position is that well-being, as he understands it, necessarily possesses an objective component, whereas happiness does not. This view is compatible with the belief that well-being also possesses a subjective component, which should not be overlooked, or its significance dismissed. From this standpoint, Sen’s objection to Richard Layard’s subjective happiness approach is that it identifies happiness and well-being, and thereby collapses these two things into one another. According to Sen, Layard thinks that being happy is not only a necessary condition for the presence of well-being, it is also a sufficient condition. It is that view, and that view only, which Sen rejects.

If his ideas are understood in this way, Sen holds that the value of happiness, subjectively understood, should not be dismissed out of hand as morally irrelevant. He does not claim that self-reported happiness is of no value at all. Rather, he argues that although it is indeed of some value, ethically speaking, nevertheless it is not by any means the most important value, as Layard and utilitarian thinkers mistakenly claim. Sen’s conclusion in his contribution to the *Capabilities & Happiness* volume is that although ‘happiness is not all that matters,’ nevertheless ‘it does matter (and that is important).’ [6] Even so, it is I think significant that Sen does not include it in his list of core values. There are only two of these, namely freedom and well-being. Sen consistently assumes that both of these are far more important than happiness. We have seen that Sen subordinates the value of justice to that of freedom. In much the same way, without dismissing it altogether, he subordinates the value of happiness to that of well-being.

When engaging with the views of Richard Layard in *The Idea of Justice* Sen begins by asking ‘how adequate is the perspective of happiness in judging a person’s well-being?’ He observes that when answering this question it is possible to go wrong in two very different ways. For In the first place, we could make the mistake of ‘overestimating its importance in judging the well-being of people.’ In that case, we would be ‘blind to the limitations of making happiness the main – or only – basis of assessment’ of social welfare.’ [20] This is of course his main objection to Layard’s position. However, in the second place, Sen argues that ‘we could err’ for a different reason, by ‘not being fair to the importance of happiness.’ [20] It is ironic that, despite his explicit statement to the contrary, this second criticism has



been brought again Sen himself by a number of contributors to the capabilities versus happiness debate.

L. W. Sumner, in his *Welfare, Happiness and Ethics*, asks the question, 'is Sen's account' of well-being 'subjective or objective?' Sumner's reply is that, 'at first glance, the answer seems obvious,' given that Sen 'rejects utility accounts of well-being because they are subjective.' [21] It certainly appears, therefore, that Sen wishes to develop an approach to the understanding of well-being that is in some sense objective, perhaps even entirely so. However, Sumner argues, a more accurate account of Sen's views would be to say that 'he is aiming at a more moderate and defensible version of an objective theory,' that is to say, one which includes within itself an a significant subjective component. [21]

Sumner refers to 'hybrid' theories in this connection. [21] Advocates of a hybrid theory, as he understands the term, maintain that 'something can contribute to a subject's well-being' (directly or intrinsically) only if (1) the subject finds it satisfying or fulfilling, or endorses it as an ingredient in her life, and (2) it is independently valuable.' [21] He suggests that hybrid theories in this sense have emerged 'in response to' Amartya Sen's discussion of the adaption problem and his criticisms of extreme subjectivism. In Sumner's words, 'some philosophers' who have engaged critically with Sen's views 'have embraced a kind of hybrid theory, which combines subjective and objective components.' [21] Sumner does not appreciate that such a view might be attributed to Sen himself. He wrongly assumes that Sen subscribes to an entirely objectivist understanding of the notion of well-being.

Des Gasper and Rebecca Gutwald have also stated that Sen's version of the capabilities approach is a 'hybrid' theory. [22] [23] They suggest that Sen and his ideas do not represent the capabilities approach in its pure form. This idea is problematic, given that Sen is usually thought to have initiated the capabilities approach. Indeed, his version of it might be said to be a paradigm example of it. It could not therefore be plausibly argued that Sen's version goes beyond the capabilities approach in its pure form, by combining its central insights with those of the happiness approach. For the belief that subjective happiness is an important functioning, is already a core component of the capabilities approach as he understands it. Sen's version of the capabilities approach, understood in just this way, should itself be regarded as the pure form of that approach.

Johannes Hirata, in his contribution to the *Capabilities & Happiness* volume, argues that if I focus attention on the objective aspect of well-being, as Sen does, 'this is not to say that I do not also care about feeling happy and about pleasure in a purely psychological sense.' What 'it does mean, he says,' is simply that 'this is not the overriding concern.' It is to claim that both subjective and objective considerations are 'constitutive of a good life.' For although it is true that 'a life full of pleasure but without any self-transcendent reasons for being happy can hardly be called a good life,' it is also true that 'a life full of reasons for being happy but without any subjective experience of happiness' is 'certainly not a good life either.' [13] These remarks express very well Amartya Sen's view of the relationship which exists between happiness and well-being. Hirata's reference to the notion of 'the good life,' or to the quality of life, has implications for the claim that Sen's is a dualist thinker. However, a consideration of that issue will have to be left for another occasion.

In conclusion, if the role which the concept of subjective happiness has to play in Sen's thought is properly understood, it becomes clear that Sen's version of the capabilities approach is not at all one-sided, as is suggested by some of the



contributors to the capabilities versus happiness debate. Indeed, it is the understanding of the capabilities approach that is offered by Sen's critics, rather than that of Sen himself, which is subject to this particular objection. Consequently, there is no need for a theoretical synthesis of the capabilities approach and the happiness approach along the lines they propose. Sen has already integrated the value of happiness into his own theoretical system and he has given this value what he considers to be its due. It is just not one of his two core values. Sen evidently thinks that there are things which matter more than subjective happiness. However, that is not the same as holding that happiness is of no ethical value at all.

5. Sen, Aristotle, Eudaimonism and Objective Happiness

Sen's name is usually mentioned together with that of Martha Nussbaum, who is generally considered to be a Neo-Aristotelian thinker. Sen himself refers to the connection which exists between the philosophy of Aristotle and his own version of the capabilities approach on several occasions. It is true that he does not make a great deal out of this. Rather, he leaves the development of this side of things to Martha Nussbaum. Nevertheless, he does at times maintain that the ultimate origins of his own approach can be found in the writings of Aristotle. [4] [6] [19] [24] [25] [26]

For example, in *On Ethics and Economics*, Sen states that 'the approach of functionings and capabilities developed in these works can be seen as having something in common with Aristotle's analysis of functions (see *Politics*, Book III).' [4] Similarly, in his contribution to the *Capabilities & Happiness* volume, he says that 'one route that some of us have tried to explore relates to Aristotle's pointer, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, to the achievement of valuable functionings and to the ability to generate and enjoy such functionings.' [6] He also refers there to the 'ability to achieve combinations of functionings, which is often called "capability." However, going further than Aristotle, Sen also claims that this 'is really an expression of freedom, and can be interpreted as the freedom to attain different kinds of alternative lives (between which a person can choose).' [6] Similarly, in *Development as Freedom*, he argues that 'there have indeed been broader voices, including that of Aristotle, whose ideas are of course among the sources on which the present analysis draws.' [24] As Robert Sugden has pointed out, Sen 'repeatedly refers to the Aristotelian concept of "human flourishing" as the philosophical starting point for his own approach.' [27]

This association of Sen and his ideas with the philosophy of Aristotle is significant because, as is well known, Aristotle's ethical and political thought attaches fundamental importance to the notion of 'eudaimonia,' a Greek term which has often been translated by the English word 'happiness.' Given this, one might expect Sen to follow Aristotle and also attach importance to the value of happiness, albeit objectively rather than subjectively understood. It is not too surprising, therefore, to find that a number of commentators have interpreted Sen's views on happiness along these lines. They have drawn attention to the similarities which exist between Sen's version of the capabilities approach and Aristotle's ethical eudaimonism. For example, Luigino Bruni has argued that, despite Sen's criticisms of the hedonic version of the happiness approach, the capabilities approach, as he understands it, 'is in fact close to the Aristotelian' notion of eudaimonia. [28]



Benedetta Giovanola also explicitly associates Sen with ethical eudaimonism, and therefore with the notion of objective happiness. [29] According to Giovanola, Sen's version of the capabilities approach presents a 'critique of happiness as subjective well-being' and is to be associated with 'the idea of "flourishing" which ultimately refers to the Aristotelian concept of eudaimonia.' [29] Giovanola points out that many economists 'understand happiness mainly as subjective well-being,' and 'often related to other notions like pleasure or desire fulfilment, or, more broadly, utility.' She claims that Sen criticises this understanding of what happiness involves, and argues that 'one of Sen's critiques of the notion of happiness addresses precisely this problem.' [29]

According to Giovanola, Sen maintains that in the happiness literature the notion of happiness 'is interpreted too subjectively.' [29] Giovanola notes that Sen is a critic of utilitarianism, at least in its classical Benthamite form, for a number of reasons. He rejects 'the interpretation of happiness in utilitarian terms, i.e., as welfare, satisfaction, and maximization of utility function.' However, she argues, his criticisms of utilitarianism 'seems aimed more' at its assumed 'equivalence between welfare, happiness and utility,' than 'at the notion of happiness itself.' [29]

The point of Giovanola's claiming that Sen rejects one way of thinking about happiness, but not the other, is to suggest that, like Aristotle and J. S. Mill, Sen is an ethical eudaimonist who endorses the notion of objective happiness. According to Giovanola, this 'can be proven by the fact that Sen does speak about happiness, but very differently than utilitarian thinkers.' Indeed, she maintains, 'he wants to restore happiness to its traditionally essential and broader meaning, linked to the Aristotelian notion of eudaimonia, which is commonly translated as happiness, but which instead is closer to "flourishing".' [29] [30]

A similar view is also taken by Carl-Henric Grenholm. According to him, 'in Aristotelian philosophy happiness is taken to be much more than pleasure. It is related to flourishing and integral human fulfilment, which means the realization of the potentials we have as humans.' [31] Grenholm maintains that the 'neo-Aristotelian position' that is set out by both Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum shares with Aristotle's eudaimonism the view that 'happiness may be understood in terms of human self-actualization.' It is for this reason, Grenholm argues, that they 'reject the utilitarian theory' that well-being or 'welfare' has to do only with pleasure or preference satisfaction.' [31] Grenholm claims that 'one argument in favour of the capabilities approach,' as he thinks Sen understands it, 'is that it entails a reasonable understanding of what happiness means.' [31] By this Grenholm has in mind the idea that, unlike Richard Layard, Sen subscribes to an objective or objectivist understanding of the concept of happiness.

Finally, Tadashi Hirai, Flavio Comin & Yukio Ikemoto have also argued that it is possible to find in Sen's writings an alternative, though 'complementary' view, according to which 'happiness is not simply a hedonic feeling,' but rather a 'manifestation of the things that' objectively speaking 'we have reason to value.' It is for this reason, they argue, that for Sen 'happiness,' objectively understood, 'can provide an informational space that can be part of an overall assessment of our quality of life.' [10]

This reading of Sen's views on happiness, with its attribution to him of the notion of objective happiness, as we find it in the writings of Aristotle and other eudaimonist thinkers, seems to me to be not well founded. In fact, as we have seen, Sen endorses Richard Layard's view that happiness is a matter of subjective well-being. This is his main reason for insisting that there is much more to the quality of life than happiness. This reading of Sen's views overlooks the significance which



Sen attaches to the distinction between happiness and well-being. For Sen it is not so much the notion of happiness that is to be associated with that of human self-actualization or flourishing, but rather that of well-being. For Sen happiness just is an hedonic feeling and nothing more. It is well-being that Sen thinks has an objective component, not happiness. This is not to say, however, that Sen regards well-being as an entirely objective affair. We saw earlier that Sen does acknowledge the importance of subjectively perceived happiness as an essential component of well-being.

Sen appreciates that the capabilities approach as he understands it has a close connection to the Aristotelian notion of the good life, or human flourishing. However, he is reluctant to characterise such a life as a happy life, or to associate it too closely with the value of happiness. He prefers, rather, to talk about the concept of well-being. There is a similarity between Aristotle's ethical eudaimonism and Sen's version of the capabilities approach. However, this has nothing to do with their respective understandings of the notion of happiness. Rather, it has again to do with their conceptualisation of the notion of well-being. As we have seen, Amartya Sen endorses the hedonic or subjectivist way of thinking about happiness that is dominant within the happiness literature today. He is very close to Aristotle on other issues, especially his understanding of the notion of well-being, and the related but not identical notion of the quality of life, but not so far as his understanding of the concept of happiness itself is concerned.

Grenholm may well be correct when he states that there are 'good philosophical' reasons 'to maintain' that happiness is 'not limited to pleasure and feeling good.' Rather, as in the case of 'an Aristotelian perspective on happiness,' which might be 'expressed in terms of functionings and capabilities,' happiness can and should 'be understood in terms of human fulfilment and human flourishing.' [31] Such a doctrine is often rightly associated with Aristotle. However, it would be wrong to attribute this Aristotelian notion of happiness to Amartya Sen. Sen explicitly dissociates himself from any such understanding of his own views. In his opinion it is not happiness, but rather well-being, or possibly the quality of life, which is to be understood in this way. Sen does not consider himself to be an ethical eudaimonist, or a follower of Aristotle in this particular sense, despite the affinities which exist between his ideas and those of Aristotle with respect to other issues. A fuller treatment of this subject would require a consideration of Sen's understanding of the notion of the quality of life, and how this relates to the idea of well-being. I set discussion of this issue aside for the present

Sen criticises the views of ethical eudaimonists, from Aristotle to John Stuart Mill, whose understanding of what real or true happiness involves is either entirely objectivist, or has a significant objective component. For example, in *The Standard of Living*, he argues that 'it is, of course, possible to pack more into the notion of happiness than common usage will allow, and to see some objective achievements as part of being "really happy".' [32] He also acknowledges there that 'the Greek concept of *eudaimonia* may suggest similarly broad interpretations of happiness.' [32] Nevertheless, he insists, 'in the present context there is not much point in going in that direction, since other notions of value and valuation,' for example well-being and freedom, 'can be entertained in their own right without their having to be inducted into serious consideration through riding on the back of pleasure or happiness.' [32]

Perhaps with John Stuart Mill in mind, Sen also maintains in *The Standard of Living* that if one is a monist thinker, for example a 'self-declared utilitarian who has signed away his freedom to use other concepts,' and who is in consequence 'stuck with having to make do with the notion of happiness,' and who must 'base



all evaluation on happiness alone,' then ethical eudaimonism, with its notion of objective happiness, might perhaps, in such circumstances, 'form a sensible exercise.' [32] However, Sen himself rejects any such theoretical monism and refuses to limit his own thinking in that way. Sen has a great deal of sympathy for Mill and his ideas generally, as well as for those of Aristotle, but he does not endorse their objectivist understanding of the notion of happiness.

It is clear from the above that Sen thinks that it is misleading, to translate Aristotle's Greek term 'eudaimonia' into English as 'happiness.' He is of the opinion that what Aristotle has in mind when he talks about eudaimonia is not the same thing as is implied by the use of the word 'happiness' today. These are two very different concepts. Nor is Sen alone in this. For example, Luigino Bruni, in his contribution to the *Capabilities & Happiness* volume, also suggests that 'the Aristotelian meaning of eudaimonia is semantically impoverished when translated into the English word happiness,' because the Greek expression means 'the highest end that a human person can realize,' [28] whereas the word 'happiness' does not mean this at all. Bruni argues that 'neo-Aristotelian philosophers in the Anglo-Saxon world' are right to prefer 'to translate eudaimonia with "human flourishing" rather than happiness,' because 'in common language today' the word 'happiness' is commonly thought to refer to 'momentary euphoria,' or to the presence of 'pleasurable sensation.' [28]

Bruni agrees with Amartya Sen that a subjectivist understanding of the notion of happiness is necessarily built in to the use of the word 'happiness,' which cannot therefore, in his opinion, any longer carry another meaning. [28] Nevertheless, a number of commentators have taken issue with this view. In their opinion, the notion of objective happiness, which they attribute to Aristotle, makes perfectly good sense, even today. Bruni acknowledges that at least 'some scholars' continue to 'maintain that "happiness," if qualified, renders the original meaning of *eudaimonia* more appropriately' than any other alternative expression. [28] The view, held by Bruni and others [33], that Aristotle's 'eudaimonia' should not be translated into English as 'happiness' has been challenged, notably by Richard Kraut, in his 'Two Concepts of Happiness,' [34] by Julia Annas, in *The Morality of Happiness*, [35] and by Merrill Ring, in 'Aristotle and the Concept of Happiness.' [36]

Kraut acknowledges that although 'it is sometimes correct to call a person happy merely because he feels that way about his life,' Aristotle 'never uses *eudaimonia* in this way,' and in this respect 'his term differs markedly from our (sic) own.' [34] However, Kraut's point here is not so much that it is wrong to translate the Greek word 'eudaimonia' into English as 'happiness.' Rather it is that, given that for Aristotle eudaimonia and happiness are the same thing, it follows that the Greek term can legitimately be translated in that way, provided that care is taken to avoid any misunderstanding of its meaning.

When discussing the disagreement between objectivists and subjectivists regarding the nature of happiness, Kraut asks whether this disagreement is 'merely verbal?' Does the objectivist simply differ from the subjectivist because she assigns 'a different meaning to the word "happiness?"' Should we say that she would make her point 'more clearly and effectively' by using 'a different word instead of "happiness?";' for example the word 'flourishing,' so that it might be said that 'one can be happy,' subjectively speaking, and yet 'not flourish,' and vice versa. Given his subjectivist understanding of what happiness involves, it seems clear that Amartya Sen would have some sympathy with that view. However, Kraut maintains that 'the objectivist has good reason to reject this proposal.' [34] For words do matter. In his opinion, 'happiness is what people want for themselves.'



Moreover, people ‘are unlikely to change’ their lives drastically ‘for their own sake unless they believe that they are not presently leading happy lives.’ Consequently, ‘if we take the word “happiness” away from the objectivist,’ then ‘we take away a strategic tool, which she rightly insists on using’ when engaging in debate with subjectivists. [34] Kraut insists, then, that ‘the objectivist is not simply adopting an arbitrary and misleading way of talking.’ [34] On the contrary, she ‘thinks that the way we talk about happiness’ today, which is the way in which Amartya Sen also talks about it, ‘deceives people into leading what is, from their own point of view, the wrong kind of life.’ [34] In his opinion, therefore, there is a substantive issue involved here and not merely a verbal one. Kraut argues that ‘we would be missing’ her point ‘if we were to look upon’ her ‘way of judging people happy to be nothing but a misuse of the word.’ [34]

Julia Annas has also defended this position, in her *The Morality of Happiness*. There Annas endorses Kraut’s views regarding happiness in general, as well as his reading of Aristotle’s opinions on the subject. As she puts it, Kraut ‘claims, convincingly, that we (sic) also have an “objective” notion of happiness.’ That is to say, ‘when we hope that somebody will be happy, we are not hoping that they will feel happy even if they are grossly mistaken, but rather hoping that they will have good reason to feel happy.’ [35] Annas insists that it is entirely appropriate to translate the Greek word ‘eudaimonia’ into English as ‘happiness.’ This is so because for Aristotle ‘eudaimonia is happiness [my emphasis].’ [35] In her opinion, ‘ancient theories, like that of Aristotle, ‘are theories about happiness’ itself. They are not about something else other than happiness. This is the case even though they contain ‘a reflective account’ of what happiness, properly understood, involves, one which requires an understanding that true happiness ‘requires having the virtues,’ and also ‘giving proper weight to the interests of others.’ [35]

Annas acknowledges that the word ‘happiness,’ as it is often used today, including by Amartya Sen, ‘covers some areas that are not covered by eudaimonia.’ [35] However, in her opinion, this is not a sufficient reason to translate the Greek word in some other way, for example by the term ‘flourishing.’ Rather, all that is necessary, is that ‘we remember that,’ for Aristotle and indeed for ourselves, happiness properly understood has to do, no so much with a momentary sensation of pleasure, but rather with ‘a whole life,’ or with an individual agent ‘in respect of her whole life,’ and that ‘it implies that she has a positive attitude to her whole life.’ [35] Unlike Amartya Sen, Richard Kraut and Julia Annas both endorse the eudaimonistic notion of objective happiness. In their view, even if happiness properly so-called is not entirely an objective matter, nevertheless it does at least possess an objective component. This is something which Sen denies.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has examined Amartya Sen’s version of the capabilities approach from the standpoint of the concept of happiness. Sen’s views on this subject have sometimes been misunderstood. Contrary to the view of some commentators. Sen does not follow Aristotle by embracing ethical eudaimonism, with its objectivist understanding of what true happiness involves. On the contrary, Sen agrees with those who maintain that happiness is nothing more than a subjective, psychological state. I have argued that despite its evident strengths in other areas, and because of its endorsement of the notion of subjective happiness, Sen’s capabilities approach is open to criticism from an Aristotelian point of view. Sen does not take seriously enough the possibility that there may be such a thing as



objective happiness. His unwillingness to accept that the concept of happiness might be understood in this eudaimonistic way is a weakness in his thinking.

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