Addressing Inequality: A Theoretical Inquiry into Divergent Approaches

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Abstract: Inequality and Justice are two important political values that have grabbed the attention of the political scientists. They have tried to demonstrate that the question of inequality and justice can be addressed through applying certain methods. For example, commodities approach, resource based approach, basic needs approach etc all make an attempt to demonstrate that inequality can be resolved. However, the paper argues that there are problems in these approaches and Sen’s argument on these approaches appear to be justified. The paper makes an modest attempt to look into these issues.

Key Words: Inequality, Justice, Utilitarianism, Egalitarianism, Basic needs

The central dilemma of political theory has been to resolve debates about normative ideals of equality and inequality. Political theory has engaged itself with questions of what we should be aiming at when we wish to make people more equal. Should norms of equality be conceived in terms of welfare, which entails reference to subjective evaluations or should goals of equality be directed at objective resources? Are concepts of the distribution of resources adequate for comparing objective well-being or do we need to conceptualize and compare what persons are capable of doing with these resources?

The purpose of this paper is to probe into the contributions of different traditions of thought in political theory with special reference to the debate over inequality. The paper makes an attempt to analyze three approaches which discuss extensively on the issue of inequality. The approaches have been chosen keeping in mind the response of Amartya Sen. We have many other approaches or traditions in political theory which discuss on inequality. But Sen has not responded to these traditions. The approaches that we discuss here are a) commodities approach, b) utilitarian approach, c) basic needs approach. The following is an attempt to outline the major arguments of each of these approaches and how Sen has responded to these approaches.

THE COMMODITIES APPROACH

One way to define fundamental ethical categories is to identify certain goods or commodities as intrinsically good or ethically basic in some other way. Income, (per capita) GNP, and economic growth (in goods and services) were early favorites of postwar development economists and development practitioners. Let us call this version the crude commodity approach. This perspective has both strengths and weaknesses. It correctly understands that development does not occur without material prosperity. People cannot have well being or a good life without having access to certain goods. Moreover, commodities can be both evidence for and causes of valuable human functionings. The commodity approach’s good idea goes bad when means are
transformed into ends. The result is what Sen calls, ‘commodity fetishism’. (Sen, 1995) Instead of focusing on what goods can do for people or rather what people can do with these goods and services, the commodity approach often collapses into a valuation of goods themselves as intrinsically good.

John Rawls has offered a more sophisticated account of addressing inequality. He evolves a procedure of justice which he calls as justice as fairness. (Rawls, 1999) As such, justice as fairness is a theory designed to apply to what Rawls calls the basic structure-the political, social and economic institutions of a society. It provides a normative ideal by which we are to judge the political constitution of society and the principal economic and social arrangements. The just society, according to justice as fairness, is one governed by the two principles of justice. (Farrelley, 2004) These principles are:

- Each person has the same indefensible claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties which is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all (equal basic liberties principle).
- Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions. First, they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity (fair equality of opportunity principle); and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society (difference principle). The principles are presented in lexical order. This means that they are listed in order of priority. The equal basic liberties principle must be satisfied before the second principle is evoked and the fair equality of opportunity principle must be satisfied before the difference principle can be evoked.

Rawls’ theory of justice invokes two main concepts of ethics—the right and the good—in order to illustrate how his contractarian theory differs from utilitarianism. The structure of an ethical theory is largely determined by how it defines and connects these two basic notions. Rawls distinguishes between right and the good in two ways. The first way is to define the good independently from the right and then the right as that which maximizes the good. For example, one defines the good as material prosperity. If we accept this definition of the good, then we can determine which laws and policies are the right ones by simply choosing the institutional arrangement which will bring about the greatest level of material prosperity. Institutions and acts are right if of the available alternatives, they produce the most good. Rawls calls this type of theory a teleological theory. It is contrasted with a deontological theory. Deontological theory can be defined as a theory that either does not specify the good independently from the right, or does not interpret the right as maximizing the good.

The appeal of the deontological position can be brought out by considering the example noted above. A teleological theory instructs us to maximize the good. If we define the good as material prosperity, for example, the institutions of our society will be designed to maximize overall material prosperity. But, such a goal may be pursued by measures, which we think as unjust. Maximizing overall material prosperity might justify restricting the number of children people can have or...
denying the terminally ill expensive health care provisions. By asserting a priority of the right over the good, Rawls seeks to avoid the injustices that may be made in the name of maximizing utility. Rawls argues that each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. (Pogge, 2007)

The main target of Rawls critique is the classical utilitarian doctrine espoused by Jeremy Bentham and Henry Sidgwick. This version maintains that society is just when its major institutions are arranged in such a way so as to achieve the greatest satisfaction of greatest numbers. (Pogge, 2007) Rawls believes that we must begin with some criteria to determine which principles should govern the main institutions of our society. Rawls claims that there is a limited class of facts against which conjectured principles can be checked. This class of fact comprises the considered judgments concerning what constitutes a just society. Our moral sensibilities tell us that acts of murder, slavery and discrimination, for example, are acts that our institutions should seek to prevent and in cases where they do occur, the perpetrators should be appropriately punished. Any theory of justice that conflicts with these judgments will be rejected. For example, a theory that permits denying ethnic minorities the right to vote will fail to secure our approval. One of our most firmly entrenched beliefs concerning justice is that, all citizens should be entitled to the right to vote, regardless of their race, religion or gender. A theory that cannot accommodate such widely shared belief fails to provide a viable account of the demands of justice.

The appeal to a shared understanding of what justice demands is an important aspect of Rawls theory. When constructing a theory, we must start somewhere and Rawls wants to start with general and widely accepted premises, which reflect the considered judgments of citizens of a democratic society. These judgments serve as the moral data from which we are to construct and test a theory of justice. A theory that blatantly violates one of these convictions will fail to be a viable theory. While Rawls endorses appealing to some shared beliefs in the initial stages of his theory, he is quick to point out that he does not appeal to values that violate what he calls the fact of reasonable pluralism. This is the fact of profound and irreconcilable differences in citizens’ comprehensive religious and philosophical conceptions of the world and in their views of the moral and aesthetic values to be sought in human life. Citizens affirm aesthetic values to be sought in human life. Citizens affirm diverse and often competing conceptions of what is of value in life. An appeal to contentious claims concerning, for example, what the Bible says regarding the sexual relations between a man and a women, goes well beyond the shared judgments of citizens in a free democratic society. Rawls does not provide an exhaustive list of what these initial shared assumptions are. Nor does he claim that our initial convictions are exempt from scrutiny. On the contrary, once we begin to consider the complexities of issues raised by different conceptions of justice, we will find that we revise or perhaps even abandon some of the initial convictions we began with. What we seek is parity between the principles of justice and our considered judgments. This is what Rawls calls reflective equilibrium. Reflective
equilibrium is a state of balance or coherence among a set of beliefs arrived at by a process of deliberative mutual adjustment among general principles and particular judgments. Rawls argues that human beings have a “sense of justice” which is both a source of moral judgment and moral motivation. In Rawls’s theory, we begin with “considered judgments” that arise from the sense of justice. These may be judgments about general moral principles (of any level of generality) or specific moral cases. If our judgments conflict in some way, we proceed by adjusting our various beliefs until they are in “equilibrium,” which is to say that they are stable, not in conflict, and provide consistent practical guidance. Rawls argues that a set of moral beliefs in ideal reflective equilibrium describes or characterizes the underlying principles of the human sense of justice.

While Rawls does not provide an exhaustive list of what these initial assumptions are, he does invoke certain fundamental ideas which are embedded in the public political culture of a democratic society.  

These include the following:

(a) The idea of society as a fair system of social cooperation over time from one generation to the next.

(b) The idea of citizens as free and equal persons. As such, they are taken to possess two moral powers. First, the capacity for a sense of justice, i.e. the capacity to understand, to apply and to act from (and not merely in accordance with) the principles of political justice that specify the fair terms of social cooperation. Second, persons have a capacity for a conception of the good i.e. the capacity to have, revise and rationally to pursue a conception of the good. (Farrelley, 2004)

Rawls invokes the original position to justify these above arguments. The original position is a hypothetical choice situation. It corresponds to the state of nature in traditional contract theories. Parties are placed in the original position and given two tasks. First, the individuals have to choose the principles that are to govern the basic structure of society. Second, to choose the principles which can be applied to individuals. They are also given a limited list of principles from which to choose. This list includes Rawls’ two principles of justice and their priority rules, utilitarianism and perfectionism. Rawls describes the original position as the appropriate initial status quo in which all people are treated as equals. In order to be so, certain conditions must hold. In everyday life, a number of unfair factors influence agreements that we want to rule out in the original position. For example, unfair bargaining advantages, threats of force and coercion, and deception and fraud. In order to ensure that the voice of principles of justice is impartial and fair Rawls invokes the following two constraints.

1. The principle must fulfill what he calls the formal constraints of the right.

2. They must be chosen behind a veil of ignorance. From behind the veil of ignorance, the parties are denied certain information which will ensure that they evaluate principles solely on the basis of general considerations. The parties do not know the following information.
   - Their place in society
   - Their race or gender
• Their fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities
• Their conception of the good
• The particular circumstances of their society
• The generation they belong to

The only facts the parties do know are general facts about society (for example, principles of economic theory and laws of human psychology) and that their society is subject to the circumstances of justice. (Farelley, 2004)

If the parties do not know their conception of the good then on what basis they will decide the principles? Rawls claims that the parties have some rational plan of life; they just do not know what the details of this plan are. In order to ensure that individuals have the opportunity to pursue their conception of the good in the real world, once the veil is lifted, the parties in the original position seek to secure the largest share they can. Rawls calls these as social primary goods. These goods are rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth and self-respect.

However, Rawls had to face lot of criticisms because of his excessive focus on primary goods. Critics pointed out the inflexibility of his primary goods. So, he tried to respond his critics with a modified version through his book Political Liberalism. In political liberalism, Rawls introduces some new vocabulary. He now talks about ‘reasonable persons’, ‘public reason’, the rational and the reasonable and the ‘burdens of judgment’. The extent to which these terms represent a substantial change to Rawls theory as opposed to simply clarifying aspects of his original theory is debatable. One idea that has become more central to Rawls’ revised theory is the idea of an overlapping consensus. Rawls claims that a political conception of justice is the object of an overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. He describes a political conception as a module, an essential constituent part that fits into and can be supported by various reasonable comprehensive doctrines that endure in the society regulated by it.

Dworkin on Equality of Resources

Ronald Dworkin is an egalitarian thinker whose main concern is with distributional equality and he considers two general theories—equality of welfare and equality of resources. Equality of welfare stands for a distributional scheme which treats people as equals when it distributes or transfers resources among them until no further transfer would leave them more equal in welfare. Equality of resources stands for a distributional scheme which treats people as equals when it distributes or transfers resources among them until no further transfer would leave them more equal in welfare. Equality of resources stands for a distributional scheme which treats people as equals when it distributes or transfers so that no further transfer would leave their shares of the total resources more equal. (Dworkin, 2002)

The idea of equality of welfare is appealing because it accepts the principles of ethical individualism. Dworkin emphasizes the principle of equal importance which is one of the important principles of ethical individualism. (Cohen, 1989) Consider, for example, how people with handicaps would be treated in this society. Their welfare is just as important as the welfare of those who do not have handicaps. Thus, whose welfare is impeded by such burdens will receive extra resources so that they can enjoy the same level of welfare as others. Equality of welfare thus supports the principle of equal importance because it requires that the needy receive more resources. (Cohen, 1989) But, equality of welfare fails to...
accommodate the second principle which Dworkin takes to be fundamental, the principle of special responsibility. If equality of welfare is the goal, then it cannot provide sufficient room for the idea that we have special and final responsibility for the success of our lives. My welfare might be impeded not because of factors beyond my control. Perhaps I have cultivated expensive tastes and thus need extra resources in order for me to achieve the same level of welfare that others have. According to equality of welfare my demand for extra resources, like those of the person with a handicap, is legitimate. Equality of welfare fails as a distributive ideal because it does not afford enough room for considerations of personal responsibility. Like Rawls’s difference principle, equality of welfare fails to distinguish between the deserving and undeserving poor. Dworkin puts for his account of equality of resources as an alternative distributive ideal that incorporates both the principle of equal importance and the principle of special responsibility. (Cohen, 1989)

Dworkin’s argument for equality of resources is a rich and sophisticated one and we can only briefly consider some of its main components. Dworkin makes an attempt to merge the two fundamental principles of ethical individualism through the hypothetical tale of shipwrecked survivors who are washed up on a desert island that has abundant resources. Let us assume for the moment that everyone have the same natural talents. The immigrants agree to divide the resources of the island equally among them. Each person is given 100 clam shells to bid on the various resources. These people will obviously have different preferences and this will be reflected in what they spend their clam shells on. If the majority of immigrants have a preference for sun tanning on the beach then those parts of the beach will be very costly. If the majority have a preference for living as farmers, then those parts of the island conducive to agriculture will be very costly. The distribution that would result from such an auction would be ambition sensitive. That is, the bundle of goods people end up with would reflect only the choices they made. No one could complain that someone else received preferential treatment as all started with 100 clam shells and were free to bid on those resources they wanted. Of course, some resources will be more expensive than others, but this is not a ground for a complaint as this stems from our personal preferences and those of the other immigrants. We could change our preferences so that we could appropriate more of the less expensive resources. Such an auction will treat all as equals if it satisfies what Dworkin calls the envy test. The envy test maintains that no division of resources is an equal division if, once the distribution is complete, any immigrant would prefer someone else’s bundle of resources to his own bundle.

The first part of Dworkin’s hypothetical story captures the concern for the special responsibility principle. The initial bundle of goods the immigrants have are the result of their own ambitions, tastes, etc. Things take an interesting turn once the auction is completed and the immigrants begin to produce things. Given the fact that some immigrants will be more skillful, others will fall sick, etc, it will not be long before the conditions of the envy test will fail to be met. These events thus threaten to undermine the first fundamental principle of ethical individualism-the principle of equal
importance. This principle maintains that it is important that human lives be successful rather than wasted. Dworkin argues that we must not allow the distribution of resources to be endowment-sensitive that is to be affected by differences in ability of the sort that produce income differences in a laissez-faire economy among people with the same ambitions.

Dworkin introduces the hypothetical insurance scheme to alleviate the concerns about abandoning the ideal of an endowment-insensitive distribution. He modifies the auction story by declaring that, prior to the auction, the immigrants are denied information about their natural endowments. They are given the opportunity to purchase insurance against handicaps and unequal skills. Under these conditions of uncertainty, people would be willing to part with some of their 100 clam shells to guard against having disabilities or lacking skills. Such schemes will be funded by those who are fortunate not to have to make an insurance claim but will have to pay an insurance premium.

The hypothetical auction Dworkin invokes, is likely to cause some confusion in terms of understanding how it relates to the real world, where we don’t begin with equal resources nor do we have insurance schemes in place for things like skill. Dworkin attempts to make the link between the theory and the real world by tackling a number of applied topics in second part of Sovereign Virtue, including health care, welfare programmes, electoral reform and affirmative action.(Dworkin, 2002) In the real world, for example, there is a need for taxation and redistribution. Income tax is a device; society can use to neutralize the effects of handicaps and differential talents. But a tax system can only roughly approximate the results of the insurance scheme and will not achieve a truly ambition sensitive/endowment insensitive distribution. Nor is there one simple solution which will do justice to the demands of the two fundamental principles of ethical individualism. Dworkin endorses, for example, a decent minimum of medical care for all citizens and the option to buy private health insurance. But his endorsement of universal health coverage is not founded on the rescue principle, which instructs us to spend all we can on health care until the next dollar would buy no gain in health and life expectancy at all. Equal concern for all does not necessarily entail that we spend exorbitant amounts of public funds trying to save the lives of those who have little chance of surviving for long. Society must be deemed necessary and appropriate for coverage under the publicly funded health care system and also allow individuals to choose for themselves how much more they wish to spend to insure themselves against other possible misfortunes. Such an arrangement is a just compromise between the demands of equal importance and special responsibility.(Arneson, 1989)

Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have offered four criticisms against commodities approach.

First, Sen and Nussbaum appeal to our considered judgments that commodities are not intrinsically good. They are good because of the relationship they have with individuals. In other words, both of them are actually criticizing the commodity fetishism aspect of this approach. Commodities have values because individuals attach meaning to them.

Second, due to variations among individuals, the same commodity either
may help some and harm others or may promote well being of some a lot and others a little. Although food intake normally will enhance human functionings, it will kill person choking on a fish bone. To function well, Milo the wrestler needs, on one hand, more food than the infant and the disabled and on the other hand, less food than a wrestler of similar size but stricken with parasites. Pregnant or lactating women have different nutritional requirements than they need before the conception or after the birth of their children. (Sen, 1995) Not only does the usefulness of given commodity vary among persons but also the same human functioning can be promoted, even in the same society, by various goods or differing packages of goods. Sen calls this a correspondence between commodities bundles and given capabilities. (Sen, 1995)

Being adequately nourished can result from radically different diets. Being in good health can be promoted by different properties of good food and preventive or curative medical care. A concept of human well being that focuses on goods rather than persons inevitably neglects the variable conversion of goods into valuable human functionings and capabilities. (Sen, 1988)

Third criticism as explained by Sen is societal rather than individual. A focus on commodities easily leads to a kind of cultural relativity or conventionality. For example, the clothing that promotes basic functioning differs in Kashmir and the mining areas of Jharkhand. The important point is that the capabilities approach can retain the notion of a culturally invariant core to both well being and deprivation while at the same time, constructing any specific means of provisioning as relative to historical and cultural contexts.

Nussbaum, drawing on Aristotle, states a fourth criticism of the commodities approach. (Nussbaum, 1992) In many instances, goods can be bad when we get too much of them. More or bigger is not always better. Too much of good thing can be bad. Goods and the hunger for them often makes people excessively competitive, domineering, arrogant and have a mercenary attitude towards other kinds of good things. This attitude can go so far as to result in what Nussbaum calls a commodification of parts of the self in which women’s bodies, for example are treated as commodities in market transactions and in legal proceedings concerning rape. In this connection, one might also mention body building and beauty contests as well as the increasing use of steroids and cosmetic surgery.

THE WELFARE (UTILITARIAN) APPROACH

The commodities approach, whether crude or Rawlsian, overemphasizes goods and neglects people. The welfare approach, of which utilitarianism is a prime example, overemphasizes people’s mental states and neglects other aspects of their well being. It does advance beyond the commodity approach by interpreting human well being and good development as a feature of persons themselves. It goes astray, however, by paying exclusive attention to only one aspect of human well being, namely utility. Utilitarianism in its simplest form claims that the morally right act or policy is that which produces the greatest happiness for the members of society. There are two major attractions of utilitarianism. (Kymilka, 2002) First, the goal which utilitarians seek to promote
does not depend on the existence of God or any metaphysical entity.

Second, consequentialism is another attraction of utilitarianism. (Kymilka, 2002) In simple words, consequentialism prohibits arbitrary moral restrictions. To clarify further, our acts have to be judged by the consequences. For example, somebody would say drinking alcohol is bad if she fails to produce any bad consequences that arise from it. Consequentialism says that something is morally good only if it makes someone’s life better off. Utilitarianism provides a test to ensure that such rules serve some useful function. (Kymilka, 2002)

Utilitarians have traditionally defined utility in terms of happiness. But there exists lot of internal debate among the utilitarian as to how to define happiness. One school believes that the experience of pleasure is the central human good. Bentham belongs to this school of thought. This is called hedonistic account of well being. Similarly, there are philosophers who argue that many different kinds of experiences are valuable and that we should promote the entire range of valuable mental states. Nozik is very critical of these two accounts of well being. He points his fingers towards the experience machine. He argues that because of drug effect we may get pleasure or mentally fit. But this is not good for health.

There is another variety of utilitarianism which believes in the preference satisfaction account of utility. In this view, increasing people’s utility means satisfying their preferences, whatever they are. But the question is whether preferences define our good. But the question is to what extent preferences define our good? Because, we do not know in most cases, which preferences will do good to us. The last account of utility tries to accommodate the problem of mistaken and adaptive preferences by defining welfare as the satisfaction of rational or informed preferences. Utilitarianism on this view, aims at satisfying those preferences which are based on full information and correct judgments, while filtering out those which are mistaken and irrational. We seek to provide those things which people have good reason to prefer, that really make their life better off. But this view is extremely vague.

Some critics have concluded that for this reason, utilitarianism must be rejected. If we accept the fourth view of welfare as the satisfaction of informed preferences, and if welfare cannot be clearly identified or aggregated on that view, then there is no way to know which act maximizes welfare, and we need some other account of the morally right act.

To be sure, utilitarianism as a political philosophy requires that we be able to compare utility gains and losses across lives, not just within a particular life. In order to decide who should be given scarce resources, we may need to judge whether A’s political fulfillment outweighs B’s disappointment. This is the problem of the interpersonal comparability of utility and some people think that, even if we can make rational judgments about how to maximize utility within a single life, we cannot do so across lives. We cannot get inside other people’s heads to know whether our fulfillments and disappointment are greater or less than theirs.

But while utilitarians seek to treat people as equals, it violates many of our intuitions about what it genuinely believes
to treat people with equal consideration. Utilitarianism misinterpreted the ideal of equal consideration for each person’s interests and as a result, it allows some people to be treated as less than equals, as means to other people’s ends. (Farelley, 2004)

For Rawls, it is a defining feature of our sense of justice that interests which require the violation of justice, have no value. So, the presence of illegitimate preferences cannot distort our claims upon one another. Justice limits the admissible conceptions of the good so that those conceptions the pursuit of which violates the principles of justice are ruled out absolutely. The claims to pursue inadmissible conceptions have no weight at all. Because, unfair preferences never enter into the social calculus, people’s claims are made secure from the unreasonable demands of others. For utilitarians, on the other hand, no restrictions grounded on right and justice is imposed on the ends through which satisfaction is to be achieved.

Utilitarianism fails to recognize special relationships or to exclude illegitimate preferences. In each case, utilitarianism is interpreting equal consideration in terms of the aggregation of pre-existing preferences, whatever they are for, even if they invade the rights or commitments of others. But our intuitions tell us that equality should enter into the very formation of our preferences. Part of what it means to show equal consideration for others is taking into account what rightfully belongs to them in deciding on one’s goals in life. Hence, prejudiced and selfish preferences are excluded from the start, for they already reflect a failure to show equal consideration. However, if my goals do respect other people’s rightful claims, then I am free to pursue special relationships, even if some other act maximizes utility. In my plans respect the teachings of equality there is nothing wrong with giving priority to my family or career. This means that my day to day activities will show equal concern. I will care more about helping my friends, or the causes I am committed to, than about helping the goals of other people. And that is entirely acceptable, so long as I respect the claims of others concerning the pursuit of their subjects.

If we think about the values that motivate utilitarianism, the values which give it its initial plausibility we will see that it must be modified. Utilitarianism is initially attractive because human beings matter and matter equally. But, the goal of equal consideration that utilitarians seek to implement is best implemented by an approach that includes a theory of fair shares. (Kymilka, 2002) Such a theory would excuse prejudiced or selfish preferences that ignores the rightful claims of others, but would allow for the kind of special commitments that are part of our very idea of leading a life. These modifications do not conflict with the general principle of consequentialism, but rather stem from it. They are refinements of the general idea that morality should be about the welfare of human beings. Utilitarianism has simply oversimplified the way in which we intuitively believe that the welfare of others is worthy of moral concern.

In objecting to welfarism, Sen is criticizing one component of the utilitarian moral theory that undergirds much of neoclassical and continues to function as a dominant outlook in philosophical ethics. Sen distinguishes three features of utilitarianism. (Alkire, 2002)
(a) Consequentialism: The rightness of actions and more generally of the choice of all control variables must be judged entirely by the goodness of the consequent state of affairs.

(b) Welfarism: The goodness of states of affairs must be judged entirely by the goodness of the set of individual utilities in the respective states of affairs.

(c) Sum-ranking: The goodness of any set of individual utilities must be judged entirely by their sum total.

Sen is sympathetic to a broadly conceived consequentialism especially if it is able to accommodate rights respecting actions in the states of affairs to be evaluated. What he finds morally problematic in utilitarianism is its welfarism and its method of sum ranking.

Sen recognizes that welfarism comes in different forms depending on whether individual utility is interpreted as happiness, desire fulfillment or choice between options. For our purpose, it will suffice to concentrate on Sen’s evaluation of the happiness and the desire fulfillment interpretations.

Sen identifies two fundamental shortcomings in welfarism. First, well being is not the only thing that is valuable. Welfarism conceives of humans as no more than sites of certain mental states. This angle of vision unfortunately abstracts from what Sen calls the agency aspect of the person. Humans are not only experiencers or preference satisfiers; they are also judges, evaluators and doers. They decide on and revise their conceptions of the good as well as satisfy desires based on those conditions. And these basic aims often go well beyond the agent’s pursuit of utility. Here Sen is trying to do justice to Kantian emphasis on agency and autonomy. For, Sen agency and well being are two fundamental and irreducible dimensions of being human.

Second, Sen has presented powerful arguments against the way utilitarians try to understand well being. Utilitarians argue that well being is measured in terms of individual happiness. But, happiness or desire fulfillment is not sufficient for well being and is woefully inaccurate as a measure of human well being. (Sen, 1995) We need a perspective that is concerned with what people are able to do and be, where being happy or getting what they desire is only one valuable capability among others.

THE BASIC NEEDS APPROACH (BNA)

The basic needs approach to international development, as worked out in the 1970’s and 1980s by development economists and policy makers such as Paul Strrten, Frances Stewart and Mahbub Ul Haq, draws attention in an immediate and powerful way, to the importance of the type of life, that people are able to lead. It is both an important breakthrough and perspective for a deeper and more secure foundation of human development. Sen offers his capability approach just an improvement over the BNA.

BNA criticizes those approaches that define development in relation to the economic growth-even the equitable economic growth of commodities or utilities. Economic and societal development is a matter of human well being, which in turn is a function of meeting certain basic or human needs. We cannot really say that a society is developed unless it promotes a good life for all its citizens and affords them the
freedom to choose it. Streeten himself put it eloquently: “A basic needs approach to development attempts to provide the opportunities for the full physical, mental and social development of the human personality and then derives the ways of achieving this objective”.

Streeten, 1997

Sen also defends the BNA against the objection that economic growth and meeting needs are mutually exclusive, that a basic needs perspective inevitably reduces a country’s economic growth and material prosperity. Although strongly sympathetic, Sen makes five criticisms of the BNA. They are as follows:

1. The foundations criticism
2. The individual variability criticism
3. The social interdependence
4. The minimalist criticism
5. The passivity criticism

Sen’s first criticism of the BNA is that it lacks an adequate foundation. The BNA has failed to resolve the unsettled question of what among conflicting interpretations, should be meant by the appeal to needs. Is need satisfaction important because of the mental state of satisfaction? This would fall back into welfarism. Is meeting needs reducible to providing people with certain amounts of commodities? If so, then the BNA becomes a new version of commodity fetishism. The BNA has often collapsed into a commodities approach and hence is subject to the criticisms of commodity fetishism. The human need for food has tended to be replaced by a focus on the food needed. Although, the BNA recognized in principle that different amounts of the same commodity were needed by different individuals, it tended operationally to define basic needs in terms of food, water, shelter, and hospital beds. Sen especially underscores what we called earlier his interpersonal variability argument. My main difficulty has been with the way basic needs are typically defined in terms of needs for commodities, and that I think is problematic, because of the enormity of interpersonal variations in converting commodities into capabilities. Moreover, according to Sen, the BNA largely neglected the correspondence between commodities and capabilities: even in the same individual, the same functioning often can be achieved by more than one bundle of goods and services. The BNA, then has not been able to exercise the ghost of commodity fetishism. This failure, Sen

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In fact, according to Sen, the BNA has often collapsed into a commodities approach and hence is subject to the criticisms of commodity fetishism. The human need for food has tended to be replaced by a focus on the food needed. Although, the BNA recognized in principle that different amounts of the same commodity were needed by different individuals, it tended operationally to define basic needs in terms of food, water, shelter, and hospital beds. Sen especially underscores what we called earlier his interpersonal variability argument. My main difficulty has been with the way basic needs are typically defined in terms of needs for commodities, and that I think is problematic, because of the enormity of interpersonal variations in converting commodities into capabilities. Moreover, according to Sen, the BNA largely neglected the correspondence between commodities and capabilities: even in the same individual, the same functioning often can be achieved by more than one bundle of goods and services. The BNA, then has not been able to exercise the ghost of commodity fetishism. This failure, Sen

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appears to imply, is traceable to the theoretical failure of the BNA to carve out a distinctive space for the concept of needs.

The social interdependence argument as explained by Sen is rather tentative and underdeveloped. A BNA will stress human needs for certain commodities. Even with respect to the need for food, it will be difficult to specify a bundle or amount of food stuff absolutely or in a culturally and individually invariant way. The problem is only compounded when we move to such important capabilities as being able to appear in public without shame or take part in community life. These sorts of achievements and capabilities make essential reference to the actions or judgments of other people. The commodity requirements for certain capabilities are not just a matter of matching a certain commodity with an isolated individual but must take into account social interdependence. A particular person’s capability to appear in public without shame will make essential and substantial reference to the culturally relative judgments or evaluations of other social members concerning what counts as acceptable apparel.

Sen’s third objection to the BNA, the minimalist criticism makes a distinction between basic and non basic needs and then interprets basic needs in terms of commodities such as food, water, shelter required to meet those needs. The focus would be on meeting minimum needs and not more. Sen finds two defects in this focus on a quantitative threshold, both of which, he claims, and his capability approach avoids. First, the focus on quantitatively minimal levels unfortunately restricts the BNA to evaluating deprived individuals and poor countries. More comprehensive and less biased would be an approach that permits the degree of advantage or well being of any individual and the degree of development of all countries and regions. Moreover, regardless of how many individuals fall below some social floor, it is also desirable to focus on the unacceptable inequalities within and between nations. One way to do so is to signify something different by basic capability than the BNA intends by basic need. The latter is quantitative threshold that one must be above if one is to survive or live decently. The former is a qualitative evaluation of what sorts of functioning are most valuable. What continues to be useful in the notion of threshold, and what Sen himself will employ with respect to his notion of basic rights, is that good government will ensure that all social members, by crossing this threshold, are able to choose to lead a life of valuable functioning. A capability approach, however, is also useful whenever we want to discuss various degrees of deprivation and development within and among countries.

The second and related defect in the BNA’s concept of a minimal threshold is that the haves, whether individuals or nations, easily can get the mistaken notion that their moral responsibilities are over when certain quantitatively minimal levels of need satisfaction are attained-regardless of whether or not there are such things as opportunities for valuable functioning or inequalities incompatible with self respect. The capability approach claims Sen, does not lend itself to this excessive contraction of moral responsibility and is open to formulating justice as equality of capabilities. It appears to me that Sen does
succeed in showing the superiority of his approach to earlier versions of the BNA. What is not so clear whether the same advances could made in a perspective such as Nussbaum’s in which, to use Sen’s language, the space of needs was not altogether interpreted or replaced by the space of capabilities.

The third criticism put forward by Amartya Sen is known as passivity criticism. Agents must do certain things to meet the needs of beneficiaries who unfortunately are at least temporarily passive. Sen’s point is that a capability ethic enables us to say that good public action does not always do things to passive receiptants but increases people’s choices and enhances people’s capabilities, including their capability of choice. Adults, right now and children, in the future, are assumed to be moral agents, and genuine social development aims to provide the conditions which they themselves acquire expanded and valuable capabilities, including that of substantial choice.

Sen admits that his proposal is different only in emphasis, presumably because a BNA can include on the list of basic needs such things as a need for self-reliance, self-help, and autonomous choice. To meet or fulfill other basic needs can then be interpreted as empowering the receiptants-with various sorts of aid- to meet their need of autonomous, self reliant action and thereby develop connotations of the BNA, which can be replaced with expressions that suggest receiptant activity, without denying the liberating role that external help can play.

To sum up, I have argued that the existing approaches to inequalities have serious dilemmas and contradictions. The commodities approach lacks the diversity element which is required to meet the norms of diverse societies. The inflexibility of this approach makes it vulnerable to neoliberal societies. The welfare approach wrongly conceives the notion of well being. The idea that human well being can be measured has lot of negative implications for the human society. Sen has advanced two reasons for rejecting the welfare approach. First, welfare approach ignores the ‘agency' aspect of human being. Second, the idea of well being is not pronounced in a comprehensive manner. It is a serious mistake to equate well being with individual happiness. Similarly, the basic needs approach lacks the foundations and sometimes it falls into the trap of commodity fetishism. There is a need to expand the scope of ‘basic needs’.
References