

WHAT'S THE WELL-BEING FOR UTILITARIANISM, JOHN RAWLS AND AMARTYA SEN

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ABSTRACT

Well-being is the one of the core concepts of economics. Despite of its importance, there has been little concensus on the nature of the well-being. In this paper, we will examine the concept of well-being from three perspectives; one of these is utilitarianist view in which well-being means utility of the individual. Second one is John Rawls' notion of "primary social goods". Finally, we will mention Amartya Sen's "capability" perspective which challanges the utilitarianism and Rawl's theory both. In Sen's Capability Approach, evaluation of well-being should be made in the space of "capability" sets.

In this paper, we will also argue that standard view of well-being- as preference satisfaction or utility- is insufficient to explain the real world phenomena and it is necessary to take a more pluralist view. In this sense, the most appropriate and promising candidate seems to be capability perspective.

Key Words: well-being, primary goods, capability

ÖZET

Refah, iktisadın çekirdek kavramlarından birisidir. Taşıdığı öneme rağmen bu kavramın doğası hakkında çok az bir uzlaşma söz konusudur. Bu çalışmada, refah kavramına üç farklı perspektiften ele alacağız. Bunlardan birisi, refahın, bireysel fayda olarak açıklandığı faydacı görüştür. İkincisi ise Rawls'un birincil mallar nosyonudur. Son olarak, gerek faydacılığa gerekse Rawls'un teorisine meydan okuyan Amartya Sen'in "yetkinlik" yaklaşımıdır. Sen'in Yetkinlik Yaklaşımında, refah değerlendirmeleri bireylerin "yetkinlik" kümeleri bağlamında yapılmalıdır.

Bu çalışmada ayrıca, tercih tatmini veya fayda şeklindeki standart refah anlayışının da gerçek dünya olgularını açıklamakta yetersiz olduğunu ve daha çoğulcu bir yaklaşımın gerektiği ileri sürülecektir. Bu anlamda en uygun ve en ümit verici aday yetkinlik perspektifidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: refah, birincil mallar, yetkinlik

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1. Introduction

Questions about what are good or bad are tried to answer in the moral theory. Exactly what is good for a particular agent will depend on that person's character, ability and circumstances and what is good for that person may be very different from what is good for someone else. But most of these differences is related to instrumental goods - things that are good because they are means to something else. If we focus on intrinsic goods - things that are good in themselves- without regard to their consequences, then there may be much less interindividual variation. It is important to remind that there must be intrinsic goods in order to the existence of instrumental goods.¹ One central question of moral philosophy has been to determine what are intrinsically good for human beings. For example, Aristotle held that happiness was the sole intrinsic good.

All sensible moral views assign an important place to the conceptions of individual good, utility, welfare or well-being. This is valid for utilitarianism which maintains that what is the right maximizes some function of the welfare of individual members of society. But even non-utilitarian views that emphasize notions of rights, fairness and justice need a conception of human well-being. For example, justice or fairness is understood in terms of treating the interests of different persons properly, and acting rightly will often involve avoiding harm to other individuals. And notions of harm and interest are entirely connected to notions of well-being².

Although the theory of well-being is a complex area of philosophy, theories of well-being can be classified as either "formal" or "substantive".³ A substantive theory of well-being says what things are intrinsically good for people. "Hedonism" is an example of a substantive theory of well-being. It says that well-being is happiness or pleasure. Formal theories of well-being specify how one finds out what are intrinsically good for people, but they do not say what those things are. To take the welfare as satisfaction of preferences is to offer a formal theory of well-being. This theory does not say what things are good for individuals, but it says how to find out- by seeing what they prefer. Formal theories may be compatible with substantive theories. For example, if happiness is the ultimate object of preference, then it could be true both that well-being is the satisfaction of preferences and that well-being is happiness.

However, meaning of well-being is also central issue for normative economics since it deals with evaluating the welfare. The orthodox position in normative economics has been "welfarism" in general -and utilitarianism in particular. Yet, Kenneth Arrow's "impossibility theorem"(1963) has revealed a series of mathematical and philosophical problems in the welfarist framework and these have prompted economists to look for alternative approaches. The most influential non-welfarist alternatives are John Rawls' and Sen's approaches.

¹ Daniel Hausman and Michael McPherson. **Economic Analysis and Moral Philosophy**, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, s.71.

² Hausman and Mcpherson, **ibid.**, p.72.

³ Hausman and Mcpherson, **ibid.**, p.72.

In this paper, we will first examine the utilitarianist view of well-being –which is the dominant approach in mainstream economics–, then in the following sections, we will examine the views of Rawls and Sen which are critiques of Utilitarianism. And the forth section concludes.

2. Utilitarianist View Of Well-Being

Utilitarianism emerged as an alternative to the earlier “natural law” perspective. Utilitarians held that the moral course of action was that which promoted the great happiness of the greatest number of people. This stood in contrast to the older moral tradition that there were natural laws, derived from divine revelation, logic, or understanding of human nature, that defined the right way to act and live.⁴

The main concern of utilitarianism is to make the world a better place therefore our aim should be to enlarge the intrinsic value of human beings that is interpreted as utility.

Utilitarianism can be regarded as the intersection between two different kinds of theory. One is a theory of the correct way to assess or assign value to states of affairs, and it claims that the correct basis of assessment is welfare, satisfaction, or people getting what they prefer. This theory, one component of utilitarianism, has been called *welfarism*. The other component is a theory of correct action, which claims that actions are to be chosen on the basis of states of affairs which are their consequences: this has been called *consequentialism*. Utilitarianism, in its central forms, recommends a choice of actions on the basis of consequences, and an assessment of consequences in terms of welfare. Utilitarianism is thus a species of welfarist consequentialism- that particular form of it which requires simply adding up individual welfares or utilities to assess the consequences, a property that is sometimes called *sum-ranking*.⁵

As an intrinsic good, utility is a metaphysical and circular concept : “*utility* is the quality in commodities that makes individuals want to buy them, and the fact that individuals want to buy commodities shows that they have *utility*”.⁶

Even within the utilitarian tradition, there are several distinct meanings associated with “utility” and there is an extensive literature on the respective claims of the “happiness” (or pleasure) view of utility on the one hand, and the “desire fulfilment” view on the other.⁷

⁴ Frank Ackerman. “Overview Essay” in **Human Well-being and Economic Goals**, edited by Frank Ackerman, David Kiron, Neva R. Goodwin, Jonathan M. Haris and Kevin Gallagher, Island Pres, 1997, p.51

⁵ Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams. **Utilitarianism and Beyond**, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p.3.

⁶ Joan Robinson, “ Summary of The Neoclassics: Utility” in in **Human Well-being and Economic Goals**, edited by Frank Ackerman, David Kiron, Neva R. Goodwin, Jonathan M. Haris and Kevin Gallagher, Island Pres,1997, p.71.

⁷ Amartya Sen, **Commodities and Capabilities**, Oxford: Elsevier Science Publishers, 3rd edition,1999, p.12.

While the happiness is accepted as an intrinsic good in Classical utilitarianism, as the result of critiques toward the fact that happiness is a mental state, desire fulfilment is replaced it in the modern version of utilitarianism. Desire or preference theories take seriously the idea that well-being consists in states of the world, not just states of mind. However, preference or desire accounts fail to distinguish between those satisfied desires that do and that do not contribute to well-being.

There is third alternative that is altogether different approach to utility which has acquired some prominence in the modern economic literature. This concerns the view of utility as nothing other than the real-valued (i.e., numerical) representation of choice. If a person's "choice function" has certain characteristics of internal consistency then the person's choice function can be represented by one binary relation and all the choices can be seen as maximization according to that binary relation. That binary relation is frequently seen as "utility" in the modern economic literature, following an approach that goes back at least to the origin of the "revealed preference" school.⁸

Given economists' commitments to utility theory in explaining human choices, it is natural that they would look to levels of utility-that is preference satisfaction- as the fundamental measure of human well-being for evaluative purposes as well. If individuals are exclusively self-interested; then they will prefer x to y if and only if they believe that x is better for them than y is. If they were well-informed, then their beliefs will be true, and x is better for them than y if and only if they prefer x to y. So it is very tempting to take well-being to be satisfaction of preferences. In applied work, economists often rely on more objective measures of "real income" rather than utility measures, but this is viewed as a compromise with data limitations.⁹

One reason why economists are attracted to a formal theory of well-being is that formal theories appear to involve fewer philosophical commitments. In particular, economists are reluctant to make substantive claims about what is good or bad for people. By leaving the substantive question of what is good for an individual up to the individual, it seems that economists are showing their philosophical modesty.¹⁰ The preference satisfaction view of well-being also appeals to the anti-paternalist values of many economists. But as we shall argue in this paper, it is not clear that formal theories of the good, such as the preference-satisfaction theory, are less philosophically controversial than substantive theories.

There are such obvious objections to a preference satisfaction view of well-being. Real individuals are not exclusively self-interested. They are sometimes altruistic and all too often malevolent. Real individuals are also ignorant of many things. So people may prefer something that is bad for them because they mistakenly believe it is beneficial or because they want to help a friend or harm an enemy. It is not true that x is better for A than y if and only if A prefers x to y.

⁸ Sen, *ibid.*, p.13.

⁹ Hausman and McPherson, *ibid.*, p.73.

¹⁰ Hausman and McPherson, *ibid.*, p.73.

3. John Rawls' Notion Of Primary Goods

Substantive theories of well-being purport to say which things are intrinsically good. Traditional hedonistic mental-state views, to which, as we suggested, economists still pay secret allegiance, are substantive theories, as are "perfectionist views" and what Parfit calls "objective list" views.¹¹ Substantive views are "objective" in the sense that what is good for people is not determined by whether people believe it is good for them.

One objective view that may be relevant to economists is John Rawls' notion of "primary goods". Rawls is the first one who provided a systematic critique of utilitarianism. He asserts that the nature of utilitarianism is against our intuitions. In his influential book "A theory of Justice" (1971), Rawls sees well-being as the satisfaction of rational preference or desire, but he does not regard this conception as appropriate for the purposes of a theory of justice. How well off people are depends on their own efforts, on their lucks and on the materials or opportunities for a good life that society provides. What social policy should attend to is not welfare but that aspect of welfare to which society contributes.¹²

Rawls' theory is based on the concept of "primary goods". Primary goods are those which every rational person can be presumed to want, because they "normally have a use whatever a person's rational plan of life". That is primary goods are the means by which an individual can achieve their ends—whatever those ends may be. Rawls subdivides primary goods into two categories—*social* and *natural*. Natural primary goods are a person's natural endowments of characteristics that provide general means for achieving unspecific ends; examples include health, intelligence and physical strength. Social primary goods are those primary goods that are "at the disposal of society". The main social primary goods are "liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect".¹³

Because of the impossibility of redistribution of natural primary goods, the prominent candidates for evaluation are social primary goods and Rawls proposes that the relevant aspect of well-being is measured by an index of "primary social goods".¹⁴ Primary social goods are not proxies for utility levels. In Rawls' view, on the contrary, utility levels are not issue in discussions of justice. Primary social goods offer an alternative basis for a more settled social agreement on what is important to well-being and also a social responsibility.¹⁵ Rawls' approach avoids the expensive tastes and anti-social preferences problems and, as he argues, provides an impartial perspective for comparing what society contributes to the well-being of different individuals than a preference standard does.

Rawls regards justice (or fairness) as the primary virtue of the social institutions. He defines a hypothetical situation—called **original position**—in which all the participants must reach a consensus about basic institutional arrangements under the **veil of ignorance**.

¹¹ James Griffin, **Well-being: Its meaning, measurement and Moral Importance**, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, ch.4.

¹² Hausman and McPherson, **ibid.**, p. 81

¹³ John Rawls, **A Theory of Justice**, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1971.

¹⁴ Rawls, **ibid.**, p.92.

¹⁵ Rawls, "Social Unity and Primary Goods" in **Utilitarianism and Beyond**, ed. Sen and Williams, 1992, p. 167.

In his theory, this purely hypothetical original position has replaced the historical or semi-historical social contracts of the preceding contractarian philosophers. The institutions of a society would be fair if they were organized according to the principles that are reached by the rational agents in original position.¹⁶

To sum up, Rawls tries to develop a systematic contractarian approach. Rawls regards his theory as the generalization of the classical contractarian view and reexpression of it at a more abstract level.¹⁷

4. Amartya Sen's Notion Of Capability

Amartya Sen's primary contributions to the literature on well-being, both critical and constructive, were produced during the 1970s and 1980s in a series of lectures, books and published articles.

At a philosophical level, utilitarian theory is theory of same kind as Sen's theory of capabilities, in the sense that they are based on claims about the nature of well-being or the nature of a good life.¹⁸

Sugden distinguishes two kinds of response to welfarism. One is to evaluate rules, using procedural values. This is Rawls' approach. Rawls commends his own view as a workable political or public conception of justice for a democratic society. Once we think of justice in these terms, it is no longer relevant to ask the kind of questions that Sen tries to answer- questions like "What is a good life?" and "What is well-being?". In arguing against Rawls' theory, Sen suggests that there are some significant cases in which everyone can agree about the nature of well-being, whatever their more general moral commitments. If we accept Rawls' approach, we do not ask how well-being might be equalized between people. We ask what would constitute fair terms for cooperation between them.¹⁹

The other one is Sen's response and it aims to develop a substantive account of the good of the individual. Amartya Sen has criticized both utilitarianism (or more generally welfarism) and Rawls's notion of primary goods.

Sen identifies two major problems with welfarism's focus on levels of individual utility. First, welfarism deals only with well-being, ignoring human agency, but Sen believes that both are fundamental dimensions of being human.

*"Humans are not only experiencers or preference satisfiers; they are also judges, evaluators, and doers."*²⁰

¹⁶ Rawls, *ibid.*, p.17.

¹⁷ Rawls, *ibid.*, p.11.

¹⁸ Robert Sugden, Welfare, Resources and Capabilities: A Review of Inequality Reexamined by Amartya Sen, *Journal of Economic Literature*, XXXI, 1993, p. 1955.

¹⁹ Sugden, *ibid.*, p. 1955.

²⁰ David Crocker, "Summary of Functioning and Capability: The Foundations of Sen's and Nussbaum's Development Ethic" in *Human Well-being and Economic Goals*, edited by Frank Ackerman, David Kiron, Neva R. Goodwin, Jonathan M. Haris and Kevin Gallagher, Island Press, 1997, p. 600.

Secondly; utility, happiness or desire fulfillment are not, in any case, adequate measures of well-being; a person who has very little may still experience happiness, and vice versa, but this is an incomplete basis for judging that individual's well-being or more importantly, the state of social justice. Utility therefore "at best captures part of the good life but at worst justifies severe deprivation and inequality.

According to Sen, both views of utility -happiness and desire fulfilment- have the twin characteristics of (1) being fully grounded on the mental attitude of the person, and (2) avoiding any direct reference to the person's own valuational exercise. The former he calls as "physical-condition neglect and the latter "valuation neglect".²¹

*"A person who is ill-fed, undernourished, unsheltered and ill can still be high up in the scale of happiness or desire-fulfilment if he or she has learned to have "realistic" desires and to take pleasure in small mercies."*²²

Sen calls these preferences as "adapted preferences". So, utility can easily be affected by mental conditioning and adaptative preferences.²³

*"The deprivations are suppressed and muffled in the scale of utilities by the necessity of endurance in uneventful survival"*²⁴.

The third view of utility, real-valued representation of choice, as an approach begs more questions than it can answer. Whether the binary relation of choice can possibly be seen as reflecting the person's well-being must depend on the motivations that underlie choice. There is an enormous difference between choosing tea or coffee according to one's taste and choosing to join or not to join a strike. To assume that the binary relation underlying choice must be the person's ordering of own well-being is an heroic simplification.²⁵ At the same time, choice-approach to well-being cannot easily accommodate interpersonal comparisons of well-being. For these reasons this approach is really a non-starter.

To summarize, Sen rejects the welfarist theories because they extensively rely on the utility information and they do not include non-utility informations into our moral judgments.²⁶

For Sen, the personal mental state is crucial for determining well-being, but he criticizes the utilitarian approach for its exclusive dependence on personal satisfaction as information base and its exclusion of other sources, such as physical and social conditions, in evaluating well-being.

²¹ Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities*, p. 14.

²² Sen, *ibid.*, p. 14.

²³ Sen, *ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁴ Sen, *ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁵ Sen, *ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁶ Sen, "Personal Utilities and Public Judgements: Or What is Wrong With Welfare Economics?", *Economic Journal*, 89, 1979, p. 537-558.

On the other hand, resource-based approaches like Rawls', since only primary social goods are involved in the evaluation of well-being, just measures income and resources. However, income and resources are only the tools or the means to a person's well-being. For Sen, the measure should be based on what a person able to do with that resource.

"While the utilitarian tradition suffers from the twin defects of "physical condition neglect" and "valuation neglect", it does not suffer from taking an alienated, commodity-fetishist view, which an approach that sees well-being as "opulence or resource" must do. Well-being is indeed sometimes seen as reflected by the commodity-command of a person (how "rich" he or she is), and this one of the motivations for "real income comparison" in terms of market command over goods and services. As an approach this is a confusion of "well-being" with "being well off" and a confounding of the state of a person with the extent of his or her possessions."²⁷

Moreover, because of the human diversity, having same bundle of commodity does not mean equal functioning or utility. Sen draws our attention to the fact that people differ in their abilities to convert these resources into capabilities, due to personal, social and environmental factors. For example, a pregnant woman needs more nutrition than a non-pregnant one; a handicapped person will need more resources than a healthy person. If our aim is to concentrate on the real opportunities that people have (as Rawls suggested) then the evaluation must take note of the personal features which determine the conversion rate of primary goods into real opportunities (or capabilities) rather than just the command of primary goods.

According to Sen, the moves towards resource based interpersonal comparisons in contemporary political philosophy (such as that of Rawls) can certainly be seen as taking us in the direction of paying attention to freedom, but the moves are substantially inadequate. In general, comparisons of primary goods and resources cannot serve as the basis for comparing freedoms.²⁸ These are just means of freedom.

For Sen, the well-being of a person can be seen in terms of the quality of the person's being. He starts from the idea that "living may be seen as consisting of a set of interrelated functionings, consisting of beings and doings".²⁹ Being adequately nourished, avoiding premature mortality and being happy are all examples of functionings. Functionings are to be distinguished from commodities; commodities are objects which a person might use, while a functioning is an aspect of living itself.

A person's state of being is understood as a vector of functionings. In choosing what kind of life to live, a person chooses among such vectors. The set of feasible vectors for any person is that person's capability set. A capability set represents a person's opportunities to achieve well-being. We may also say that it represents a person's freedom, with freedom being understood in the positive rather than the negative sense.

²⁷ Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities*, 1999, p.16.

²⁸ Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 38.

²⁹ Sen, *ibid.*, p. 39.

Sen proposes that when we evaluate a person's good we should focus on her functionings and capabilities, or on both. The functioning and capability is between commodity and utility:

Commodities → capability to function → functioning → utility (happiness)

Sen³⁰ For a formal description of this approach, we introduce some notation, following

$x \in X$ $x \in X$ is a vector of commodities and X is the set of all possible commodity vectors.

$c = c(x)$ is a vector of characteristics of commodities,

c is a function that maps commodities into the characteristics space.

$b = f(c(x) | z_i, z_e, z_s)$ is a vector of activities and states of being

$f \in F$ is a conversion function that maps characteristics of commodities into the space of functionings, F is the set of all possible conversion functions and

z_i, z_s, z_e are conversion factors at the individual (i), social (s) and environmental (e) level, which determine rate of conversion from characteristics to functionings.

Q is the capability set comprising all potential functionings an individual can achieve.

The evaluation of an individual's wellbeing involves the analysis of her or his capability set, Q_i , which is defined over the different potential functionings \mathbf{b} of individual i ;

$$Q_i(X_i) = \{b_i | b_i = f_i(c(x_i) | z_i, z_e, z_s) \text{ all } f_i \in F_i \text{ and all } x_i \in X_i\}$$

The functionings achievement of an individual depends on the employed commodities, x_i , and the conversion factors, z . These conversion factors can be distinguished in personal factors z_i (such as sex, physical disabilities, intelligence), social factors z_s (such as population density, but also legal regulations) and environmental factors z_e (e.g. climate, level of environmental pollution). They can also be interpreted as non-monetary constraints of the individual. Q_i is the set of all possible b_i , given the resource constraint X_i . The space of functionings \mathbf{b} is the space of states of being and activities, while the space of capabilities \mathbf{Q} is the space of *potential* functionings.³¹

³⁰ Sen, **Commodities and Capabilities**, 1999, p.7-10.

³¹ Wiebke Kuklys, **Amartya Sen's Capability Approach: Theoretical Insights and Applications**, Berlin, Springer-Vaerlag, 2005, p.11.

Two examples are discussed by Sen. A bicycle (commodity x) provides transport (characteristic c); and depending on an individual's physical ability and the state of the roads (conversion factors z), she can cycle or not (capability Q). Food provides nutritious capacity, which is converted into "being well-nourished", depending on physical circumstances such as the metabolic rate and presence of parasites. The individual's capability includes then the freedom to either be well-nourished, to fast for religious reasons or to go on hunger strike for another's sake.

Sen argues that "capability or freedom is intrinsically good therefore these must be taken as informational base of evaluation".³²

To sum up, according to Sen, the informational bases of normative evaluation must be neither means to freedom such as primary goods nor mental states such as happiness or desire fulfilment. The most adequate alternatives are functionings or capabilities.

Sen is interested in developing a theory of the good life that can be used to assess a person's ability to achieve valuable functionings. This is not an abstract theory unmoored from daily concerns. It is specifically designed for application to such social problems as inequality and poverty. Sen believes that one significant advantage of his theory over rival conceptions of human welfare is its directness. It provides a framework for assessing what people actually succeed in doing or being, rather than using consumption levels and income as proxies for well-being. Others have found his approach useful; for instance, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) uses the capability approach in its assessment of national welfare and also in various development strategies.³³

5. Conclusion

The concept of well-being is central to issues in moral philosophy and economics. Despite its importance there has been little consensus on the nature of well-being. Theories of well-being range from the narrow, which value only isolated properties of the mind, to the broad, which value states of the world, including nonmental properties.

The theory of well-being is a messy area of philosophy. It is difficult even to categorize the various theories. But the economists cannot avoid these philosophical problems if they want to be able to judge when welfare increases or decreases.

The modern economic conception of well-being equates it with utility, which is in turn a function of the level of consumption, and hence of income. This way of thinking reflects both economists' understandings and the cultural orientation of our entire society, but there is nothing inevitable about it.³⁴

³² Sen, "Capability and Well-being", in **Quality of Life**, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, 1993, p. 38-39.

³³ Kuklys, *ibid.*, p.12.

³⁴ Jerome Segal, Jerome M. "Summary of Alternative Conceptions of The Economic Realm" in **Human Well-being and Economic Goals**, edited by Frank Ackerman, David Kiron, Neva R. Goodwin, Jonathan M. Haris and Kevin Gallagher, Island Press, 1997, p.15.

Both empirical and theoretical objections to the rational egoist model of human behavior call for a more realistic account of individual motivation and a rejection of preference satisfaction as the appropriate concept for understanding either well-being or the broader concept of quality of life. Psychologists as well as philosophers recommend that economists expand their criteria for rational choice beyond the consistency standard, to include measures of subjective well-being and the quality of available choices. Individual commitments to projects and goals may be relevant to a person's well-being, even if a person does not benefit from his or her success. Finally economic discussions of well-being seem to ignore issues related to self-realization and character development.

The conclusion is unavoidable: economists need to develop a comprehensive answer to the question-s namely, Socratic question- of what makes a person life go well. The concept of preference satisfaction will not suffice. However, it is promising that there had been non-welfaristic approaches to well-being, especially Sen's, and we believe that there will be the other attempts to create more realistic models of human beings.

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