Choices have to be faced in the delineation of the relevant functioning. The format always permits additional 'achievements' to be defined and valued. Many functioning are of no great interest to the person (e.g. using a particular washing powder – much like other washing powders). There is no escape from the problem of evaluation in selecting a class of functioning in the description and appraisal of capabilities. The focus has to be related to the underlying concerns and values, in terms of which some definable functioning may be important and others quite trivial and negligible. The need for selection and discrimination is neither an embarrassment, nor a unique difficulty, for the conceptualization of functioning and capability.

1 Value-objects and Evaluative Space

Furthermore, the very identification of the set of valued objects with personal weights itself precipitates a 'dominance ranking' (as is at least as high as yields at least as much of each of the valued objects). This dominance ranking, which can be shown to have standard regularity properties such as transitivity, can indeed take us some distance – often quite a long distance – in the evaluative exercise.

The identification of the objects of value specifies what may be called an evaluative space. In standard utilitarian analysis, for example, the evaluative space consists of the individual utilities (defined in the usual terms of pleasures, happiness, or desire fulfilment). Indeed, a complete evaluative approach entails a class of 'informational constraints' in the form of ruling out directly evaluative use of various types of information, to wit, those that do not belong to the evaluative space.

The capability approach is concerned primarily with the identification of value-objects, and sees the evaluative space in terms of functioning and capabilities to function. This, of course, itself a deeply evaluative exercise, but

Bernard Williams (1987) raises this issue in his comments on my Tanner Lectures on the standard of living (pp. 98-101), on which see also Sen (1987a: 103-4). On the miscalculation of different functioning and capabilities, see Sen (1985a: chs. 5-7). Just as the contrary to the commodity space in real-income analysis does not imply that every commodity must be equally valuable (or indeed valuable at all), similarly focusing on the space of functioning does not entail that each functioning must be taken to be equally valuable (or indeed valuable at all) to this and other formulations and uses of dominance ranking, see Sen (1980a: ch. 1). The idea of relative role of the informational base is on the formulation and use of informational.

Answering question (1), on the identification of the objects of value, does not, on its own, yield a particular answer to question (2), regarding their relative values. The latter calls for a further evaluative exercise. Various substantive ways of evaluating functionings and capabilities can still all belong to the capability approach.

The selection of the evaluative space has a good deal of cutting power on its own, both because of what it includes as potentially valuable and because of what it excludes. For example, because of the nature of the evaluative space, the capability approach differs from utilitarian evaluation (more generally 'well-being' evaluation) in making room for a variety of human acts and states as important in themselves (not just because they may produce utility, nor just to the extent that they yield utility). It also makes room for valuing various freedoms – in the form of capabilities. On the other side, the approach does not attach direct as opposed to derivative – importance to the means of living or means of freedom or 'freedom,' which includes drinking goods or structural forms of a particular kind, and does not partake in the evaluative space, though they can indirectly influence the evaluation through their effects on variables included in that space.

4 Capability and Freedom

The freedom to lead different types of life is reflected in the person's capability set. The capability of a person depends on a variety of factors, including personal characteristics and social arrangements. A full accounting of individual freedom must, of course, go beyond the capabilities of personal living and pay attention to the person's other objectives (e.g. social goals not directly related to one's own life), but human capabilities constitute an important part of individual freedom.

Freedom, of course, is not an unproblematic concept. For example, if we do not have the courage to choose to live in a particular way, even though we could live that way if we so chose, can it be said that we do have the freedom to live that way, i.e. the corresponding capability? Is it not my purpose here to brush under the carpet difficult questions of this—and other—types. In so far as there are genuine ambiguities in the concept of freedom, that should be reflected in corresponding ambiguities in the characterization of capability. This relates to a methodological point, which I have tried to defend elsewhere, that if an underlying idea has an essential ambiguity, a precise formulation of that idea...
The assessment of each of these four types of benefit involves an evaluative exercise, but they are not the same evaluative exercise. They can also have very disparate bearings on matters to which the evaluation and comparison of individual advantages are relevant. For example, in determining whether a person is deprived in a way that calls for assistance from others or from the state, a person's well-being may be, arguably, more relevant than his agency success (e.g. the state may have better grounds for offering support to a person for overcoming hunger or illness than for helping him to build a monument to his hero, even if he himself attaches more importance to the monument than to the removal of his hunger or illness). Furthermore, for adult citizens, well-being freedom may be more relevant to state policy, in this context, than well-being achievement (e.g. the state may have reason to offer a person adequate opportunities to overcome hunger, but not to insist that he must take up that offer and cease to be hungry). Interpersonal comparisons can be of many distinct types, with possibly dissimilar evaluative interests. Despite the interdependences between the different value-purposes, they can generate quite distinct exercises with partly divergent concentration and relevance.

Well-being, Agency, and Living Standards

The well-being achievement of a person can be seen as an evaluation of the 'wellness' of the person's state of being (rather than, say, the goodness of her contribution to the country, or her success in achieving her overall goals). The exercise, then, is that of assessing the constituent elements of the person's being seen from the perspective of her own personal welfare. The different functioning of the person will make up these constituent elements.

This does not, of course, imply that a person's well-being cannot be 'other-regarding'. Rather, the effect of 'other-regarding' concerns on one's well-being has to operate through some feature of the person's own being. Doing good may make a person contented or fulfilled, and these are functioning achievements of importance. In this approach, functioning are seen as central to the nature of well-being, even though the sources of well-being could easily be external to the person.

The functioning relevant for well-being vary from such elementary ones as escape morbidity and mortality, being adequately nourished, having mobility, etc., to complex ones such as being happy, achieving self-respect, taking part in the life of the community, appearing in public without shame (the last a functioning that was illuminatingly discussed by Adam Smith18). The claim is that the functioning make up a person's being, and the evaluation of a person's well-being has to take the form of an assessment of these constituent elements.

If the value-purpose is changed from checking the 'wellness' of the person's being to assessing the person's success in the pursuit of all the objectives that he has reason to promote, then the exercise becomes one of evaluation of 'agency achievement', rather than well-being achievement. For this exercise, the space of functioning may be rather restrictive, since the person's goals may well include other types of objective (going beyond the person's own state of being). Also, the difference between agency achievement and well-being achievement is not only a matter of space (the former taking us beyond the person's own life and functioning), but also one of differential weighting of the shared elements (i.e. for the functioning that are pertinent both to one's well-being and to one's other objectives, possibly different weights may be attached in agency evaluation and a wider well-being appraisal).

The assessment of agency success is a broader exercise than the evaluation of well-being. It is also possible to consider 'narrower' exercises than the appraisal of well-being. A particularly important one is that of evaluating a person's standard of living. This, too, may take the form of focusing on the person's functioning, but in this case we may have to concentrate only on those influences on well-being that come from the nature of his own life, rather than from 'other-regarding' objectives or impersonal concerns. For example, the happiness generated by a purely other-regarding achievement (e.g. the freeing of political prisoners in distant countries) may enhance the person's well-being without, in any obvious sense, raising his living standard.

In the ethical context, the explicit recognition that one's well-being may often be affected by the nature of other people's lives is not, of course, new. Even Emperor Asoka, in the third century BC, noted the distinction clearly in one of his famous 'rock edicts' in the process of defining what should count as an injury to a person: 'And, if misfortune befalls the friends, acquaintances, companions and relations of persons who are full of affection [towards the former], even though they are themselves well provided for, [this misfortune] is also an injury to their own selves.' The inability to be happy, which will be widely recognized as a failure of an important functioning (even though not only important one, except in the hedonist version of utilitarianism), may arise either from sources within one's own life (e.g. being ill, or undernourished, or otherwise deprived), or from sources outside it (e.g. the pain that comes from sympathizing with others' misery). While both types of factor affect one's well-being, the case


19 Book Edicts XIII at Patañjali, statement VII. For a translation and discussion, see Sircar.
There are many formal problems involved in the evaluation of freedom and the relationship between freedom and achievement. It is, in fact, possible to characterize functionings in a refined way to take note of the countercausal opportunities, so that the characteristic of relating well-being achievement to functioning x-tuples could be retained without losing the substantive connection of well-being achievement to the freedom of choice enjoyed by the person. Corresponding to the functioning x, a refined functioning (x,x) takes the form of having functioning x through choosing a from the set A.

Sometimes even our ordinary language presents functionings in a refined way. For example, fasting is not just starving, but starving through rejecting the option of eating. The distinction is obviously important in many social contexts: we may, for example, try to eliminate involuntary hunger, but not wish to forbid fasting. The importance of seeing functionings in a refined way relates to the relevance of choice in our lives. The role of the choice involved in a capability set has been discussed above in the context of well-being only. But similar arguments apply to the assessment of agency achievement and the standard of living.

8 Basic Capability and Poverty

For some evaluative exercises, it may be useful to identify a subset of crucially important capabilities dealing with what have come to be known as 'basic needs.' There tends to be a fair amount of agreement on the extreme urgency of a class of needs. Particular moral and political importance may well be attached to fulfilling well-recognized, urgent claims.

It is possible to argue that equality in the fulfilment of certain 'basic capabilities' provides an especially plausible approach to egalitarianism in the presence of elementary deprivation. The term 'basic capabilities', used in Sen (1980), was intended to separate out the ability to satisfy certain crucially important functionings up to certain minimally adequate levels. The identification of minimally acceptable levels of certain basic capabilities (below which people count as being scandalously 'deprived') can provide a possible approach to poverty, and I shall comment on the relation of this strategy to more traditional income-focused analyses of poverty. But it is also important to recognize that the use of the capability approach is not confined to basic capabilities only.

Turning to poverty analysis, identifying a minimal combination of basic capabilities can be a good way of setting up the problem of diagnosing and measuring poverty. It can lead to results quite different from those obtained by concentrating on inadequate income as the criterion of identifying the poor. The conversion of income into basic capabilities may vary greatly between individuals and also between different societies, so that the ability to reach minimally acceptable levels of basic capabilities can go with varying levels of minimally adequate incomes. The income-centred view of poverty, based on specifying an interpersonally invariant 'poverty line' income, may be very misleading in the identification and evaluation of poverty.

However, the point is sometimes made that poverty must, in some sense, be a matter of inadequacy of income, rather than a failure of capabilities, and this might suggest that the capability approach to poverty is 'essentially wrong-headed'. This objection overlooks both the motivational underpinning of poverty analysis and the close correspondence between capability failure and income inadequacy when the latter is defined taking note of parametric variations in income-capability relations.

Since income is not desired for its own sake, any income-based notion of poverty must refer—directly or indirectly—to those basic ends which are promoted by income as means. Indeed, in poverty studies related to less developed countries, the 'poverty line' income is often derived explicitly with reference to nutritional norms. Once it is recognized that the relation between income and capabilities varies between communities and between people in the same community, the minimally adequate income level for reaching the same minimally acceptable capability levels will be seen as variable—depending on personal and social characteristics. However, as long as minimal capabilities can be achieved
muddled by my use of such words as 'capabilitie' and 'achieving.'

But let us move now from the minimalist defence to the claim that an active exercise of freedom might well be valuable for a person's quality of life and achieved well-being. Obviously, this consideration would be of no direct relevance in the case of babies (or the mentally disabled), who are not in a position to exercise reasoned freedom of choice (though babies can sometimes be amazingly cogent, choosy, and insistent). For people who are in a position to choose in a reasoned way and value that freedom to choose, it is hard to think that their well-being achievement would never be affected if the freedom to choose were denied, even though the (unrefined) functioning vector (or midfare) were guaranteed by the actions of others. Even in Cohen's analysis of midfare, I should have thought that room would have to be found to see it in choice-inclusive terms in much the same way that the functionings can be redefined in 'refined' terms (as discussed in Section 7). And if this is done, that would be isomorphic to including substantive consideration of the capability set, going beyond focusing exclusively on the achieved-unrefined-functioning vector (as was also discussed in Section 7).

Freedom has many aspects. Being free to live the way one would like would likely be emotionally helped by the choice of others, and it would be a mistake to think of achievements only in terms of active choice by oneself. A person's ability to achieve various valuable functionings may be greatly enhanced by public action and policy, and these expansions of capability are not unimportant for freedom for that reason. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that 'freedom from hunger' or 'being free from malaria' need not be taken to be just rhetoric (as they are sometimes described); there is a very real sense in which the freedom to live the way one would like is enhanced by public policy that transforms epidemiological and social environments. But the fact that freedom has this aspect does not negate the relevance of active choice by the person herself as an important component of living freely. It is because of the presence of this element (rather than the absence of others), that the act of choosing between the elements of a capability set has clear relevance to the quality of life and well-being of a person.

But suppose we were to accept (wrongly, I believe) that this element of freedom really has no direct impact on the well-being of a person. In that case, the capability perspective could still be used to relate well-being achievement to achieved (unrefined) functionings (or midfare) through elementary evaluation. The need to relate well-being freedom to the capability set would also remain. That was indeed the first claim (in Section 2, pp. 38–9) in favour of the use of the capability set for analysing well-being (in this case, well-being freedom).

As was discussed earlier in this paper, for many problems of individual behaviour and social policy, well-being freedom is a concept of relevance and importance. If achieved functionings (or midfare), defined in the 'unrefined' way, were all that mattered, we might be as worried about the rich person fasting as about the starving poor. If we are more concerned to eliminate the hunger of the latter, it is primarily because the former has the capability to be well nourished but chooses not to, whereas the latter lacks that capability and is forced into the state of starvation. Both may have the same midfare, but they differ in their capabilities. Capability does have importance in political and social analysis.

Motivationally, the focus on capability (in addition to achieved functionings) is, in fact, not altogether different from the concern that Cohen shows elsewhere for 'access to advantage.' Cohen notes that in his proposal 'advantage' is like Sen's 'functioning' in its wider construal, a heterogeneous collection of desirable states of the person reducible neither to his resources bundle nor to his welfare level. And while 'access' includes what the term normally covers, I extend its meaning under a proviso that anything which a person actually has counts as something to which he has access, no matter how he came to have it, and, hence, even if his coming to have it involved no exploitation of access in the ordinary sense (nor, therefore, any exercise of capability). If, for example, one enjoys freedom from malaria because others have destroyed the malaria-causing insects, then, in my special sense, such freedom from malaria is something to which one has access (Cohen, p. 28).

I do not see any great difficulty in extending the meaning of 'access' in this way. An 'access' I enjoy may not have been created by me. But exactly the same applies to freedom and capability as well. The fact that a person has the freedom to enjoy a malaria-free life (or, to put it slightly differently, that his choice of a malaria-free life is feasible) may be entirely due to the actions of others (e.g., medical researchers, epidemiologists, public health workers), but that does not compromise the fact that he can indeed have a malaria-free life and has the capability (thanks largely to others) to achieve such a life. 65

I don't even see that much 'extension' of ordinary usage is involved in such use of the terms freedom and capability (even though this is not the central issue in any case). 66 Indeed, even the expression 'freedom from malaria,' used also by Cohen, is a pointer to the fact that ordinary language takes a less narrow view of the use of the term freedom. Similarly, there is no underlying presumption that we have the capability to lead a malaria-free life only if we have

---

61 Perhaps the word 'capabilitie' is misleading, but I am not sure that this should be the case. The source of the word is Latin capabilis, 'capable,' but this is not from the Greek word capabili. More recently, many have translated 'capabilis' as 'capable of existing or acting,' and presumably 'acts' need not be the result of some vigorous exercise of capability. Nor do I have any great difficulty in saying that the babies in question do have the state of being nourished and warm. Perhaps something else in my use of the word muddled Cohen.

62 For a more extensive discussion, see Sen (1985a).

63 On this see also Hare and Sen (1988) and Sen (1992).

64 On this see also Hare and Sen (1988) and Sen (1992).

65 As was mentioned earlier (in footnote 2), in their well-known Greek English lexicon, even A. D. Bessell and Scott (1977) had translated the Greek word dunamein, central to Aristotle's concept of...
processes through which human activities are chosen (thereby pointing towards the importance of freedom as a part of living).

11 Incompleteness and Substance

The Aristotelian critique points towards a more general issue, namely, that of the 'incompleteness' of the capability approach - both in generating substantive judgements and in providing a comprehensive theory of valuation. Quite different specific theories of value may be consistent with the capability approach, and share the common feature of selecting value-objects from functionings and capabilities. Further, the capability approach can be used with different methods of determining relative weights and different mechanisms for actual evaluation. The approach, if seen as a theory of algorithmic evaluation, would be clearly incomplete.17

It may well be asked: why pause at outlining a general approach, with various bits to be filled in, rather than 'completing the task'? The motivation underlying the pause relates to the recognition that an agreement on the usability of the capability approach - an agreement on the nature of the 'space' of value-objects, need not presuppose an agreement on how the valuational exercise may be completed. It is possible to disagree both on the exact grounds underlying the determination of relative weights, and on the actual relative weights chosen,18 even when there is reasoned agreement on the general nature of the value-objects (in this case, personal functionings and capabilities). If reasoned agreement is seen as an important foundational quality central to political and social ethics,19 then the case for the pause is not so hard to understand. The fact that the capability approach is consistent and combinable with several different substantive theories need not be a source of embarrassment.

Interestingly enough, despite this incompleteness, the capability approach does have considerable 'cutting power'. In fact, the more challenging part of the claim in favour of the capability approach lies in what it denies. It differs from the standard utility-based approaches in not insisting that we must value only happiness (and see, instead, the state of being happy as one among several objects of value), or only desire fulfillment (and takes, instead, desire as useful but imperfect evidence - frequently distorted - of what the person herself values).20 It differs also from other - non-utilitarian - approaches in not placing among value-objects primary goods as such (accepting these Rawlsian focus variables only derivatively and instrumentally and only to the extent that these goods promote capabilities), or resources as such (valuing this Dworkinian perspective only in terms of the impact of resources on functionings and capabilities), and so forth.21

17 This relates to one part of the critique presented by Beitz (1980).
18 On this see Sen (1985b, chs 5-7).

A general acceptance of the intrinsic relevance and centrality of the various functionings and capabilities that make up our lives does have substantial cutting power, but it need not be based on a prior agreement on the relative values of the different functionings or capabilities, or on a specific procedure for deciding on those relative values.

Indeed, it can be argued that it may be a mistake to move on relentlessly until one gets to exactly one mechanism for determining relative weights, or to turn to a different aspect of the 'incompleteness' - until one arrives at exactly one interpretation of the metaphysics of value. There are substantive differences between different ethical theories at different levels, from the meta-ethical (involving such issues as objectivity) to the motivational, and it is not obvious that for substantive political and social philosophy it is sensible to insist that all these general issues be resolved before an agreement is reached on the choice of an evaluative space. Just as the utilization of actual weights in practical exercises may be based on the acceptance of a certain range of variability of weights (as I have tried to discuss in the context of the use of the capability approach22), even the general rationale for using such an approach may be consistent with some ranges of answers to foundational questions.

12 A Concluding Remark

In this paper I have tried to discuss the main features of the capability approach to evaluation: its claims, its uses, its rationale, its problems. I have also addressed some criticisms that have been made of the approach. I shall not try to summarize the main contents of the paper, but before concluding, I would like to emphasize the plurality of purposes for which the capability approach can have relevance.

There are different evaluative problems, related to disparate value-purposes. Among the distinctions that are important is that between well-being and agency, and that between achievement and freedom. The four categories of intrapersonal assessment and interpersonal comparison that follow from these two distinctions (namely, well-being achievement, well-being freedom, agency achievement, and agency freedom) are related to each other, but are not identical. The capability approach can be used for each of these different types of evaluation, though not with equal reach. It is particularly relevant for the assessment of well-being - in the form of both achievement and freedom - and for the related problem of judging living standards.

As far as social judgements are concerned, the individual evaluations feed directly into social assessment. Even though the original motivation for using the capability approach was provided by an examination of the question 'equality of what?' (Sen, 1980), the use of the approach, if successful for equality, need not