

## **On the Concept of Human Well-Being**

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The concept of sustainable well-being, as Professor Suzumura points out in his insightful note on the purpose and scope of the conference, involves two distinct components – the notion of well-being and the notion of sustainability. In this lecture, my focus will be on the notion of individual well-being (which constitutes the basis of our judgments regarding the well-being of societies or groups). The issue of sustainability will remain important and urgent under practically every notion of human well-being that one can think of. For the purpose of formulating social policies, however, it may be important to clarify what exactly one is seeking to sustain.

One can make a distinction between three distinct categories of notions of well-being that have influenced economic thinking. The first category is derived from the utilitarian tradition, interpreted in a broad fashion. Here the well-being of an individual is identified with either her pleasure or her happiness or the fulfillment of her desires. The second category includes basically resource-based conceptions of well-being. The resources may be simply commodities or they may be social primary goods in the sense of Rawls or they may be a combination of social primary goods and the natural endowments of an individual, such as intelligence and physical vigour. The third category consists of notions of well-being based on what people value in their lives, as distinct from what gives them pleasure or what they desire. The functioning and capability approach initiated by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum comes within this category. The distinction between these categories may get obliterated under certain circumstances. Thus, if the things that people desire are also what they value in life, and conversely, then, obviously, the desire-based conception and the conception based on what people value would coincide.

Given the limitation of time, I shall concentrate on the concepts of well-being based on preference satisfaction or the fulfillment of desires, which has been widely used in economics for a long time, and the conception of well-being in terms of functionings and capability, which has been increasingly used in the last two decades or so as the basis of policy oriented economic research. I argue that, for several reasons (including some that were clearly seen by John Stuart Mill), the conception of well-being based on desire fulfillment is rather problematic, and that the appeal to non-paternalism that is sometimes made to defend this conception is not quite convincing. The conception of well-being based on functionings and capability seems much more attractive in many ways. The functionings and capability approach, however, gives rise to its own conceptual and analytical problems. I discuss some of these problems. In particular, I discuss four types of problems: (i) the problem of aggregation over different functionings and the difficulties that arise when we want to take into account social and cultural differences in such aggregation; (ii) the problem of measuring some individual functionings, which are themselves multidimensional in nature; (iii) problems that arise from the fact that people's values are often endogenous in nature; and (iv) some intuitive problems associated with the formulation of the notion of opportunity in terms of 'capability'.

I shall conclude my lecture with some remarks about how the choice of a specific notion of well-being may be relevant for the issue of sustainability.