

# Consumption as Happiness

## *a critique of utilitarianism*

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The world is dominated today by the economic belief that an unrestrained market shall usher in an era of unprecedented 'global happiness' that has eluded the humankind all through its history. It is made to appear that the 'American Dream' President Roosevelt promised the 'developing nations' just after the second world war, is finally very near. The North is no more a geographical entity; it is a category of affluence and consumption, with enclaves in the South too. As nations compete frantically to up their growth rates hoping to expand and deepen their North enclaves, it would seem to be pertinent to critically examine the very dream people are being made to aspire for. Is the neoliberal dream full of happiness? Is it sustainable? It promises leisure, minimal physical labour, ability to buy and procure objects of desire and much more. It allows a per capita use of about 5,000 liters of water for a US citizen (against about 200 liters for a citizen of India) and a per capita energy consumption that is threatening the very basis of life on Earth, the climate. A lifestyle based on gluttonous intake of food along with leisure requires a health industry to provide for paid physical exercise in order to reduce obesity and remain free from disease – the dream of a slim body is the very essence of the consumers well-being. If every country in the world were to achieve the American Dream, it seems unlikely today that life itself could be sustained on the Earth.

If that suggests that there is a limit to how much the Earth could support lifestyles based on unrestrained consumption and leisure, it is also important to examine the very notion of happiness and well-being associated with such lifestyles. As Amartya Sen points out (*The Standard of Living*, Cambridge: 1987; *TSOL* here afterwards), 'There are many fundamentally different ways of seeing the quality of living, and quite a few of them have some immediate plausibility. You could be *well-off*, without being *well*. You could be *well*, without being able to lead the life you *wanted*. You could have got the life you *wanted*, without being *happy*. You could be *happy*, without having much *freedom*. You could have a good deal of *freedom*, without *achieving* much.' We can go on.

The notion of well-being is intrinsically related to the concepts of standard of living and quality of life, and in what follows, they may appear to be used interchangeably. Consumption of commodities is often seen to provide the most visible indicator of the utilitarian notion of standard of living, and inter-alia of the state of 'happiness' of a

society. Before, however, we enter the main concern of this article, whether consumption is necessarily an indicator of happiness, it would be useful to briefly review some issues associated with consumerism in Asia, based on the edited work of Chua Beng-Huat, (*Consumption in Asia*, Routledge, 2000; and references therein). It is of particular interest to note that certain trends in post-modernity celebrate consumerism not only for the 'happiness' it provides, but see elements of 'spirituality' in it.

### **Consumption as Identity**

"It is as consumers that the new rich of Asia have attracted an interest of almost cargo-cult proportions in the West. They constitute the new markets for Western products: processed foods, computer software, educational services and films and TV soaps. They are the new tourists, bringing in foreign exchange in hard times", (Robison and Goodman: *The New Rich in Asia: Mobile phones, McDonald's and Middle-Class Revolution*: Routledge 1996).

As Chua Beng-Huat notes, 'the tangible improvement in the material conditions of the people has been the cornerstone of governments, and Asian governments are no exception to this rule. It constitutes the 'performance' criterion for political legitimacy. Until the late 1980s, the Governments of East and Southeast Asia were at best semi-democratic, if not authoritarian. In all instances, one 'covenant' between the governments and their respective peoples was that of improved standards of living in exchange for restraints on political freedom; the more authoritarian the regime the more essential is high-economic growth to rationalize it, if overt repression were to be avoided. It was therefore in the interests of these governments to encourage expansion of consumption, as evidence of their successes in generating and maintaining economic growth'.

Class divisions, an emergent phenomenon because of late industrialization have become increasingly apparent, as evidenced by differing capacities to consume. Also, in each nation, and much more in South Asia, there is a significant population segment that has lived through or continues to live in material deprivation, and therefore it values thrift. Their moral/ideological position on savings has made them resistant to the rapid expansion of consumerism. In addition, this segment old population sees the arrival of consumerist culture as the consequence of the penetration and contamination of traditional cultural practices by 'Western', particularly American. Thus the moral debate on consumption has often been characterized as a 'generational conflict', supposedly between the deprived generation who embody thrift as a traditional value and the affluent and fast spending 'Westernised' generation.

By the late 1970s, with the vast expansion in globalised capitalism consumption as a phenomenon could no longer be subsumed under the mantle of production (Jonathan Friedman: *Consumption and Identity*, Switzerland, Harwood Academic 1994). Consumption expansion had by then generated fundamentally different ways in which advanced capitalist societies were organized. This 'reconfiguration' has been

conceptualized, in rather exaggerated manner, as a 'new' mode of domination: 'the substitution of seduction for repression, public relations for policing, advertising for authority, needs-creation for norm-imposition. What ties individuals to society today is their 'activities as consumers, their life organized around consumption', (Zygmunt Bauman: *Legislators and Interpreters, On Modernity, Post-modernity and Intellectuals*; Cambridge, Polity, 1987). Or in more modest terms, 'consumption is not a by-product of industrial production but a self-generating economy and a way of life no longer limited to the 'family unit' but now characterized by highly fluid and heterogeneous channels of consumption that in turn, are symptoms of important changes in the very conception of 'production' and 'market' (I. Chambers: *Border Dialogues: Journeys in Postmodernity*; Routledge, 1990).

A central concern of the analysis of particular items of consumption is the place of these objects in the identity construction of its consumers, which is linked to the sense of 'happiness' or satisfaction these identities give to the consumer. At a complex level the concern is with broader cultural strategies 'of constitution of meaningful existence' such as in Baudrillard's (*For a Critique of the Political Economy of Signs*; St. Louis: Telos, 1981) conceptualization of consumption of the 'sign-value' of objects as an element in the identity formation in post modernity.

The idea of identity formation contrasts sharply with earlier notions of consumption. These earlier images were of consumers as easily manipulated, hoodwinked into buying products, useful or otherwise, by false promises emblazoned in advertisements, consumers were conceived as 'malleable wax to the thumbprint of either commerce or the law'. Such, for example, had been the Marxist tradition, which saw mass consumption as the instrument of capital which transformed working individuals into consumers in order to further its own interest – capital accumulation. The classic statement for such a view has to be, 'The man with leisure has to accept what the culture manufacturers offer him', (Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno: *The Dialectics of Enlightenment*; Boston, Herder and Herder, 1972). In contrast the postmodern view asserts that consumption is to be treated as a process by which artifacts are not simply bought and 'consumed', but given meaning through their active incorporation in people's lives.

Significantly, the reconceptualisation of the consumer from passive automaton to active creator of new cultural meanings has not eliminated debate on 'morality' of consumption. Acquisition of the unending proliferation of objects of consumption, repackaged with borrowed and devalued Art, is conceptualized as the unreflective, excessive materialist orientation of modern life – a preference for immediate entertainment, pleasure, the gut feeling, a regard for the sensual and representational – at the cost of tradition, spirituality and other supposed moral high grounds.

However, against the view that mass circulation is a process of artistic degeneration, defenders of the popular conceptualise the embedding of artistic elements in everyday life

as a process of 'democratisation'. The consumer is in turn reconceptualised as an active participant in the creation of social and cultural meanings; the consumption of lifestyles becomes a process of 'aesthticisation' of everyday life. An explicit formulation of this defense of consumerism is the configuration of the 'heroic consumer': consumer culture uses images, signs and symbolic goods that summon up dreams, desires and fantasies which suggest romantic authenticity and emotional fulfillment in narcissistically pleasing oneself wherein people open themselves up to a wider range of sensations and emotional experiences. Thus, spirituality and consumerist materialism are drawn together. However, instead of being diametrically opposed orientations where consumerism is the death of spirituality, consumerism is rendered the facilitator of spirituality. And in this manner, consumerism is exalted to a philosophy of happiness.

The maximization of such happiness constitutes the very basis for the neoliberal economic paradigm, namely classical utilitarianism. So instead of pursuing further the description and analysis of consumption, which is only the outcome of the underlying philosophy, it is worthwhile to examine the philosophy itself.

### **Classical Utilitarianism**

The particular political thought that dominates neo-liberal economics is obviously that of utilitarianism. Given the influence of this tradition in normative economics, through the work of people like Bentham, Mill, Marshall and Pigou, it is not surprising that it is very often taken for granted that any evaluative concept in economics must be ultimately based on some notion or other of utility. Happiness is not taken to be an exception to this rule.

Utilitarianism as a political philosophy is the view that government should act to maximise the general happiness or 'utility' in society. There is, however, a great deal of ambiguity in this formula that needs to be cleared up before we have a political philosophy with definite implications. First, we have to explain the notion of 'happiness' and 'utility.' Next, we have to explain what it means to 'maximise' happiness or utility. Both Bentham and Mill argue that governments should maximise 'utility' or 'happiness.' Indeed, utilitarianism is often summed up by the slogan 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number.'

Bentham may be called a 'hedonistic' utilitarian. This is because Bentham says that by 'happiness' he means the same thing as pleasure and the avoidance of pain. It is important to note that in saying that happiness is pleasure, Bentham does not mean to say that a person's happiness consists entirely of pleasurable bodily sensations. Rather, Bentham thinks of 'pleasure' generally as the experience of enjoyment. This is obvious from Chapter 5 of his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, where Bentham cites various 'kinds' of pleasures. Bentham's list includes the pleasures of certain bodily sensations, but it also includes many other types of pleasure, such as exhibiting a skill, possessing health, wealth, power, friends, or respect, and the pleasures

of anticipation, relief, and imagination. In sum, Bentham thinks of pleasure (and so happiness) as any type of enjoyable experience.

Bentham is a 'simple' hedonist since he thinks that the only distinctions that can be made between pleasures are *quantitative* in nature. This means, first, that for Bentham the *object* of a given pleasure (that is, the thing or activity experienced as pleasurable) is not relevant to assessing the value of that pleasure. Moreover, Bentham is a 'simple' hedonist in that he does not recognise any reason for distinguishing in value between different *kinds* of pleasures. All that matters for Bentham are certain quantifiable aspects of pleasures (and pains). In particular, Bentham lists four properties of pleasures as relevant to assessing their value, namely their (1) *intensity*, (2) *duration*, (3) *certainty* or *uncertainty*, and (4) *propinquity* or *remoteness*. (Bentham also lists as relevant what he calls the 'fecundity' and 'purity' of a given pleasure, though he notes that these properties are not relevant to assessing the intrinsic value of pleasures, but only the act that produces those pleasures.)

The procedure Bentham outlines for determining whether an action is good or bad depends on these various qualities being somehow quantifiable. Note that Bentham nowhere provides a criterion for anything more than an *ordinal* (as opposed to *cardinal*) quantifiability of notions such as the 'intensity' of various pleasures. His procedure doesn't make much sense, however, unless some cardinal measure of happiness is available. Bentham says that for each individual affected by an action, we begin by listing the pleasures and pains that the individual will experience as the result of that action (both immediately and in the future), along with their respective quantifiable features (for example, their intensity and duration). His directions for finding this information, and how to balance these various features to decide a person's overall happiness, are rather vague. This is all that Bentham says in this regard, 'Sum up all the values of all the *pleasures* on one side, and those of all the pains on the other. The balance, if it be on the side of pleasure, will give the *good* tendency of the act upon the whole, with respect to the *individual* person; if on the side of pain, the *bad* tendency of it upon the whole.'

Let us set aside how we might do this for the moment, and assume that it is possible to quantify an individual's overall happiness. Bentham suggests that once we have done this for each individual, we can determine the general tendency of an action to produce pleasure or pain in society as a whole (and, therefore, the moral value of that action) by simply 'summing' the values we determined earlier for each individual's overall happiness, which would result if that the action is done. Bentham's basic idea (which is common to all utilitarians) is that to decide whether an action maximises the general happiness in a 'community,' we should regard the community (which is a 'fictitious body,' according to Bentham) simply as the aggregation of the individual persons in it. This requires that we assume not only that we can quantify the overall value of the various pleasures and pains experienced by each individual, but that the measures so defined are meaningfully comparable, so that determining the overall good conferred on

the ‘community’ by a certain action can be accomplished by simply summing the goods conferred on the individuals that compose it.

These two assumptions, namely that we can quantify each individual’s overall happiness and meaningfully compare the measures so defined, were given a rigorous foundation only in this century.

Mill has much in common with Bentham. However, he disagrees with Bentham in an important respect. Mill holds that we can not only distinguish between pleasures based on various quantifiable properties they have (such as intensity and duration); we can also distinguish between them based on their intrinsic *quality*. In other words, Mill holds that some kinds of pleasure are intrinsically superior to others, irrespective of considerations of quantity. Mill suggests a criterion for deciding which types of pleasure are intrinsically superior: we simply ask those who have experienced both kinds of pleasure which they prefer, irrespective of considerations of quantity (such as intensity and duration). If Mill’s criterion gives us definite results (that is, if we get the same answer from nearly everyone), it would allow us to lexically order the various types of pleasures according to their intrinsic (superior or inferior) quality. We could then order pleasures *within* those kinds using quantitative considerations of the sort that Bentham suggests.

Mill claims that the pleasures of the intellect are clearly superior in quality to the pleasures of bodily sensation, since nearly everyone who has experienced both types of pleasure regards the former as superior in quality to the latter. This means that Mill rejects any understanding of ‘utility’ as a measure of subjective *satisfaction*. One person can be better off than another even if he is less satisfied with his life. Mill states this point with characteristic eloquence as follows, ‘It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates satisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.’

Because of his willingness to distinguish in value between different types of pleasure, and his view that the pleasures of the intellect are the most valuable, Mill is often called a ‘eudaemonistic’ utilitarian. Alternatively, we could call Mill a ‘stratified’ hedonistic utilitarian, since he retains Bentham’s emphasis on pleasure or happiness, but ‘stratifies’ the notion of pleasure or happiness based on differences in quality between the various types of pleasure.

### **Is Enjoyable Experience The Only Thing Of Value?**

Though Mill differs with Bentham regarding the relative value of different kinds of pleasure, he agrees with Bentham that the tendency to increase the general utility (happiness, pleasure) in society is the only thing that can give something value, and thus that the principle of utility is the only principle that can function as a criterion of good and bad. As Mill puts it, ‘... pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable

as ends; and ... all desirable things ... are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.’ Bentham agrees, and adds that not only is human happiness the only plausible measure of value, it is the only thing that can *motivate* people to act. Bentham writes, ‘...admitting (what is not true) that the word *right* can have a meaning without reference to utility, let (the opponent of utilitarianism) say whether there is any such thing as a motive that a man can have to pursue the dictates of it.’

Furthermore, Bentham claims that any attempt to refute the principle of utility will ultimately be self-defeating: ‘When a man attempts to combat the principle of utility, it is with reasons drawn, without his being aware of it, from that very principle itself’. Note that for both Bentham and Mill, something only benefits someone (enhances their well-being or happiness) if it either is an enjoyable experience or causes them to have enjoyable experiences. This is not the only way to understand the term ‘well-being,’ however. Does Bentham and Mill’s hedonism provide a plausible account of the notion of well-being or happiness?

In his book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Nozick describes a thought experiment that according to him shows that no one values enjoyable experience for its own sake, contrary to what Bentham and Mill think. Nozick asks us to imagine that scientists develop a machine, which he calls an ‘experience machine,’ that could give you any experience you so desire. (To be a bit more concrete, the scientists might hook your brain up to electrodes and a sophisticated computer that simulates the neural input you would get from actually having such experiences.) You can choose to live your whole life hooked up to this machine, experiencing any life of your choice, with as many experiences you deem enjoyable (and as few of those you deem painful) as is possible during your lifespan. Would you choose to live your life hooked up to the experience machine? Nozick thinks not. His claim is that having enjoyable experiences is not sufficient for you to have a good life.

For example, you want to be the kind of person who has friends, family, is loved and respected by others, and has many accomplishments to your credit. What you don’t want, Nozick claims, is merely to have the enjoyable experiences *associated with* having friends, family, love, respect, and accomplishments. Since enjoyable experience is all that the machine gives you, you would not choose to be hooked up to the machine, since that would effectively amount to living an empty life in a dreamworld. If Nozick’s conclusion is right, the hedonistic utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill cannot be correct, since it says that a person’s well-being consists *solely* of enjoyable experience.

For reasons such as these, many contemporary utilitarians reject Bentham and Mill’s *hedonistic* utilitarianism, favouring instead an understanding of a person’s well-being as consisting of the satisfaction of that person’s (rational) preferences. Accordingly this version of utilitarianism could be called the *preference-satisfaction utilitarianism*.

## Utilitarian Account of Justice

Since a sense of being 'wronged' is intrinsically linked to the sense of 'happiness', or lack of it, Mill attempts to give a specifically utilitarian account of justice. Mill sees the task as having two parts: (1) to give a utilitarian account of the qualities that distinguish 'just' and 'unjust' acts from those that we approve or disapprove of generally, and (2) to show that the special disapproval that we feel toward cases of injustice is consistent with utilitarianism.

Mill points out, first, that we often feel that injustice has been done when someone is deprived of what is his (unforfeited) legal right. This is perhaps the clearest (and historically primary) sense of 'injustice,' but it cannot be the whole of the matter since we all admit that there can be unjust laws. In such cases, the injustice inherent in the law must consist of depriving someone of something that is his *moral* right. Closely connected with this idea is that an injustice has been done when a person does not get what he deserves, or gets what he does not deserve. (This may happen, for example, when a person fails to fulfil a promise, or when a person shows favouritism when it is inappropriate to do so.)

Mill claims that we only feel that inequalities are breaches of *justice* when they are 'inexpedient' (by which he means that they do not conform to the principle of utility). Things cannot be 'unjust' unless they are to some specific person's disadvantage. This is not sufficient, however, for there to be injustice. We also have to feel that we would approve of those parties causing the person's disadvantage being punished or compelled to make up for that person's disadvantage. (This does not mean that we actually want it to be a law that the parties causing the person's disadvantage are punished, or compelled to make up for that disadvantage. For example, we may feel that bringing every case where a person is wronged into court would be disadvantageous to society.)

Injustice is distinguished from mere wrong (a more general term) by the fact that there is a *specific* person whom we feel is disadvantaged by the parties, who has a 'right' that is violated by those parties. According to Mill, the person's having a 'right' consists solely of the fact that we would approve if those parties were somehow punished by society or forced to make amends for the harm they have caused. Thus, according to Mill, we call an act 'unjust' when it violates someone's 'rights,' and say that someone's 'rights' have been violated when he has been harmed and we would approve, because of our sympathy with the person so harmed, if society were to punish those parties for harming him (or force them to make amends). Here is how Mill puts the point:

'When we call anything a person's right, we mean that he has a valid claim on society to protect him in the possession of it, either by the force of law or by that of education and opinion... If we desire to prove that anything does not belong to him by right, we think this done as soon as it is admitted that society ought not to take measures for securing it to him, but should leave him to chance or to his own exertions... To have a right, then, is,



I conceive, to have something which society ought to defend me in possession of. If the objector goes on to ask why it ought, I can give him no other reason than general utility.'

Many critics have claimed that Mill's analysis gets things backwards. We don't call something a 'right' because we would like to see the person who 'violates' it punished; on the contrary, we think that such a person ought to be punished (or compelled to make amends) because he has violated someone's rights. (Moreover, it is not obvious that a person has to be harmed to suffer an injustice, or to be treated unfairly. For example, if the United States government gave out \$1,000 to everyone except you, giving you only \$100, you might plausibly argue that this is unfair even though you have benefited from the government's action. Benefiting less than someone else is not the same thing as being harmed.)

### **The Main Challenge to Utilitarianism: Toleration of Injustice?**

**The Problem of Scapegoating :** Suppose that a majority of a town is outraged and made fearful by a certain heinous crime, and wants to see the guilty party found and punished. Suppose further that a policeman knows that the guilty person has fled town for good, but that he can frame a particular innocent person without it ever being discovered. Weighing the happiness that would be caused among the members of the town upon believing that the guilty party had been caught against the unhappiness that would result in the innocent person being framed, he concludes that overall the town would be happier if he framed the man. Utilitarianism seems to give the wrong advice, i.e. that the policeman ought morally to frame the innocent man.

**The Problem of Special Relationships:** We often feel that we have special obligations to friends and relatives that we do not have to other people, in the sense that we should make our friends happy even when we could make someone we don't know even happier. Utilitarianism cannot account for obligations arising from such special relationships. Also, some special arrangements come about when we promise a particular person we will do something for them. Utilitarianism seemingly says that we should only keep our promises when we could not make society happier by doing otherwise. Certainly, however, this does not recognise that the obligation to keep our promises is normally overriding, except in extraordinary circumstances (not just whenever we could maximise the social good by doing so).

### **The Problem of Illegitimate Preferences**

I might prefer that another person, who I don't even know, not be in a certain profession simply because I don't happen to like members of that profession. Utilitarianism says that such a person should give my preferences some weight when deciding what profession to go into, contrary to what we intuitively feel is the case.

A person might prefer that he have an unfairly large share of society's resources. Utilitarianism says that we should take this person's selfish preferences into account when deciding how to divide up resources in society. This goes against our intuition that we are not morally obligated to consider selfish preferences of that sort.

### **Criticism of Utilitarianism**

Amartya Sen (*TSOL*), in order to construct an alternative framework for standard of living and quality of life provides a variety of critiques of the utilitarian tradition. In particular he questions the notions of *pleasure*, *desire* and *choice* as enunciated in the utilitarian framework, which are intrinsically related to its modality – consumerism.

The view of the standard of living as *pleasure*, Sen argues, would indicate that pleasures of different types are the objects of value and that the standard of living consists of pleasures. Having a high income is not, then, an object of value in itself, nor is good health, nor the existence of a friendly bank manager who is ready to lend one money. These things may influence one's standard of living, but that influence must work through some objects of value – in this case, some type of pleasure. It is easy to be persuaded that being happy is an achievement that is valuable, and that in evaluating the standard of living, happiness is an object of value, or a collection of objects of value if happiness is a bundle of things.

The interesting question about this approach is not the legitimacy of taking happiness to be valuable, which is convincing enough, but its exclusive legitimacy. Consider a very deprived person who is poor, exploited, overworked and ill, but who has been made satisfied with his lot by social conditioning (through, say, religion, or political propaganda or cultural pressure). Can we possibly believe that he is doing well just because he is happy and satisfied? Can the living standard of a person be high if the life that he or she leads is full of deprivation? The standard of life cannot be so detached from the nature of the life the person leads. 'As an object of value, happiness or pleasure cannot possibly make a serious claim to exclusive relevance,' so Sen contends.

As an object of value, Sen feels that *desire* fulfillment is very limited, if it is such an object at all. In assessing the well-being and the quality of life of a person, happiness may have direct relevance. But the value of desire has to be assessed and a person's desire for something he or she does not value correspondingly, and would not do so even on further reflection, may not be a good ground for counting it in the evaluation of that person's well-being or living standard. The fulfillment of a person's desires may or may not be indicative of a high level of well-being or of living standard. The battered slave, the broken unemployed, the hopeless destitute, the tamed housewife, may have the courage to desire little, but the fulfillment of those disciplined desires is not a sign of great success and cannot be treated in the same way as the fulfillment of the confident and demanding desires of the better placed.

And finally about *choice* behaviour. Though interesting on its own, its interpretation as indicative of well-being is strained because of the binary relation underlying it. If you choose  $x$  when  $y$  is available, then  $x$  has higher utility for you than  $y$ . It confounds choosing with benefiting. Sen believes that the popularity of this view in economics is due to a mixture of an obsessive concern with observability and a peculiar belief that choice, in particular, market choice, is the only human aspect that can be observed. What you choose must depend on your motivation. While the pursuit of one's own well-being is a good enough motivation, it is not of course the only possible one. If you do something for national pride, the glory of your football or cricket team or the benefit of your great aunt, its impact on your well-being may be quite secondary and derivative, with the main force behind your choice relating to something else. Under these circumstances, to treat choice as a reflector of your well-being is surely to overlook the motivational complexity of choice behaviour.

To some extent the same problem arises with the desire interpretation also, since you may desire to do something not because it is particularly good for you, but for some other reason. It is, of course, quite plausible to believe that a failure to achieve what one would choose, or to get what one desires, is likely to affect the value of one's well-being adversely. Disappointment, frustration, and suffering from a sense of failure may well reduce a person's well-being, no matter what he/she aims to achieve. But it is hard to persuade that the impact on the person's well-being is well-reflected by the intensity of desire or the matrix of choice, since the basic motivation is not avoidance of disappointment or frustration, but something else like national glory or some social or political ideal.

We must, therefore, conclude that none of the interpretations of utility – pleasure, desire fulfillment, choice – takes us very far in pinning down well-being or the living standard, and the failure applies both to seeing them as objects of value and to taking them to be valuational methods.

### **Functionings and Capabilities**

The failure of utility to get very far and the role of 'individualism' in this failure would suggest looking for more objective considerations. In that context, it would appear to be tempting to see well-being as reflected through commodity possession and opulence. Indeed this is the way 'real income' is typically viewed, and the link between real income and living standard must be fairly close. Even a utilitarian like Pigou argued that in determining 'a national minimum standard of real income' below which people should not have to fall, 'it must be conceived, not as a subjective minimum of satisfaction, but as an objective minimum of conditions.'

He then proceeded to characterise this minimum in terms of commodity possessions: 'The minimum includes some defined quantity and quality of house accommodation, of

medical care, of education, of food, of leisure, of the apparatus of sanitary convenience and safety where work is carried on and so on.'

Sen argues that this is the right way to go. It is easy to argue that it is more plausible to identify someone as having a low standard of living on the ground that he or she is deprived of decent housing, or adequate food, or basic medical care, than on the ground that he or she is simply unhappy or frustrated. 'As a direction to go, concentration on the possession of vital commodities seems fair enough,' is how Sen sees it. However, whereas opulence in the form of commodity possession is undoubtedly important in enhancing the standard of living, is the standard of living best seen as opulence itself?

As pointed out earlier, there is a difference between being 'well-off' and being 'well,' and it is reasonable to argue that while well-being is related to being well-off, they are not the same and may possibly diverge a good deal. A historical controversy may illustrate such divergence. It relates to the impact of early industrialisation on the standard of living of the British working class. It appears that in the period 1780-1820, the death rate fell quite steadily, while measures of the opulence of the British working class showed little rise, whereas during 1820-40, as opulence did seem to increase a little, the fall of the death rate was halted and reversed.

Sen clarifies the question of opulence through the following example (*TSOL*). Consider two persons *A* and *B*. Both are quite poor, but *B* is poorer. *A* has a higher income and succeeds in particular in buying more food and consuming more of it. But *A* also has a higher metabolic rate and some parasitic disease, so that despite his higher food consumption, he is, in fact, more undernourished and debilitated than *B* is. So who has the higher sense of well-being and living standard of the two? *A* may be richer or more opulent, but it cannot be said that he has the higher standard of living of the two, since he is quite clearly more undernourished and more debilitated. The standard of living is not a standard of opulence, though it is *inter alia* influenced by opulence. It must be directly a matter of the life one leads rather than of the resources and means one has to lead a life. Therefore, the movement in the objectivist direction away from utility may be right, but opulence is not the right place to settle down.

The variation of nourishment vis-à-vis food intake is influenced by a variety of physiological, medical, climatic and social factors. To reach the same level of nutrition as another, one needs a larger command over food if one has a higher metabolic rate (or a larger body frame), or if one is pregnant or breast-feeding, or if one has a disease that makes absorption more difficult, or if one lives in a colder climate, or if one has to toil a lot. The move towards food possession is clearly right, but the concern is not so much with food as such but with the type of life one succeeds in living with the help of food and other commodities, for example whether one can be well-nourished, or whether one has the ability to entertain and so on.

The same applies to other types of commodity and other functionings – living conditions – that are helped by these commodities. Marx's attack on 'commodity fetishism,' though made in another context, is deeply relevant to the concept of standard of living as well. The market values commodities – consumerism - and our success in the material world is often judged by our opulence; but despite that, commodities are no more than means to other ends. Ultimately, the focus has to be on what life we lead and what we can or cannot do, or can or cannot be. Sen calls the various living conditions we can or cannot achieve, our 'functionings,' and our ability to achieve them, our 'capabilities.' The main point, according to Sen, is that the standard of living is really a matter of functionings and capabilities, and not a matter directly of opulence, commodities or utilities.

Consumerism - as a measure of acquiring commodities - can not therefore constitute the sum total of our 'happiness', nor can it, in particular, constitute the political philosophy for the governments to pursue their task of increasing societal well-being. The post modern notions of the 'heroic consumer' would therefore seem to require more nuanced critiques, particularly from an Asian point of view, where poverty and affluence coexists in a maddeningly confused manner.