Can Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach Be Integrated Within a Complete Positive Psychological Theory of Happiness?

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Abstract

The question of what constitutes a good life has been debated throughout the history of political and moral philosophy, and more recently in the social sciences. In particular, the issue of how a good life can be adequately defined and the manner in which human well-being can be meaningfully assessed has proven to be both a complicated and controversial task. The political philosopher Derek Parfit (1984) has categorized the various conceptions of well-being into three types: desire fulfillment theories, which conceptualize well-being as the satisfaction of revealed preferences; objective list theories, which attempt to catalog the goods required for a well-lived life; and hedonistic theories, which equates well-being as pleasurable mental states.

While the first of these theory types—desire fulfillment theories—dominates mainstream economics, objective lists and hedonistic theories have been presented as alternatives to the preference-based theories dominating economics. One of the most prominent “objective list” theories in the field of human development and political philosophy is the Capability Approach, which has largely been shaped by the work of the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen (1980, 1985, 1992, 1999, 2005) and the legal and moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1999, 2000, 2006). The Subjective Well-Being approach, developed by psychologists including Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman (1999), Ed Diener (1999, 2000) and Martin Seligman (2000, 2004) offers a more developed and substantive hedonistic account, which acknowledges that well-being is a multifaceted concept involving more than simple hedonism. The new and rapidly emerging field of positive psychology has championed this approach, and researchers within this tradition have now realized that a more comprehensive theory of human
happiness that combines the three types of approaches outlined by Parfit (1984) is needed in order for a more exhaustive evaluation of human well-being. The study of well-being has been hampered by the multiplicity of theories (Diener et al., 2003), and focusing on a single approach (the preference-based approach, for example) has usually led to deficiencies that other theories attempt to rectify. Positive psychology hopes to resolve these contradictions through an incorporation of need-, want- and like-based theories into an integrative theory of well-being. Such a theory would have the potential to provide a fresh conceptual perspective on how to evaluate public policies that seek to enhance well-being and promote environmental and justice-focused sustainability.

In this paper, we will evaluate the suitability of Nussbaum’s more substantive account of capabilities as forming part of an integrated account of well-being that positive psychologists argue is required for the proper psychological study of well-being. In particular, we will evaluate her account in light of conceptual and empirical work that has shown that some contiguity exists between people’s subjective preferences and objective accounts of well-being, that SWB is widely valued and pursued as an end by many people, and evidence that positive outcomes, even economic ones, are often caused by well-being rather than the other way around. We will also determine whether certain fundamental assumptions made by the two accounts preclude an integrative account.

(493 words)
The question of what constitutes a good life has been debated throughout the history of political and moral philosophy and more recently in the social sciences (Diener, 2007). In particular, the issue of how a good life can be adequately defined, and the manner in which human well-being can be meaningfully assessed has proven to be both a complicated and controversial task. In this essay, we hope to bring positive psychology to the table to augment this discussion.

The political philosopher Derek Parfit (1984) has categorized the various conceptions of well-being into three types: desire fulfillment theories, which conceptualize well-being as the satisfaction of revealed preferences; objective list theories, which attempt to catalog the goods required for a well-lived life; and hedonistic theories, which equates well-being as pleasurable mental states.

While the first of these theory types—desire fulfillment theories—continue to dominate mainstream economics, we focus on accounts of well-being derived from the objective lists and hedonistic theories perspectives, which have been advocated as alternatives to the preference-based theories dominating economics. The Capabilities Approach, which has been largely shaped by the work of the legal and moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1999, 2000, 2006) and the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen (1980, 1985, 1992, 1999, 2005), has emerged as the most prominent objective lists theory in the field of human development and political philosophy. The Positive Psychology and Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach

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Psychology approach, developed by psychologists including Martin Seligman (2000, 2004), Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman (1999) and Ed Diener (1999, 2000)—who have championed the study of subjective well-being as part of the wider positive psychology project—offers a more developed and substantive hedonistic account, which acknowledges that subjective well-being is a multifaceted concept involving more than simple hedonism. In this interdisciplinary essay, we hope to evaluate Nussbaum’s account of capabilities—which owes more to moral and political philosophy than Sen’s approach, which is concerned more with questions directly related to human development—in light of recent research in positive psychology, as well as Seligman’s (2002) theory of happiness. After outlining both approaches, we will delineate the commonalities that the two approaches have, as well as some of the advantages that the capabilities approach (and Nussbaum’s version in particular) could bring to subjective well-being researchers. We will touch on some of the general limitations we see in the capabilities approach, and finally offers some comments on how a synergy between the two approaches could be achieved.

The Capabilities Approach

Sen developed his capability approach as a viable alternative to standard economic models, which (as briefly noted above) focus mostly on preference satisfaction. In his most recent extended refinement of this framework, Development as Freedom (1999), he argues that while income analysis presents the best starting point for assessing development, it is misguided to limit one’s attention to income alone. He claims that any
meaningful analysis of the relationship between income and well-being requires a consideration of other relevant informational spaces. This argument for the necessity for considering factors in addition to income has its roots in Adam Smith’s analysis of “necessities” (1776, quoted in Sen, 1999, pgs. 73-74), and political philosopher John Rawls’ argument on the importance of primary goods (1971/1999, quoted in Sen, 1999, pg. 72) and “self-respect” (1971, quoted in Sen, 1992, pg.8). However, Sen goes beyond these accounts by claiming that what is important are the “substantive freedoms” that individuals enjoy. Income is only important insofar as helps us achieve these freedoms. Sen quotes Aristotle’s maxim that wealth is “merely useful and for the sake of something else” (Sen, 1999, p.14), and it should be noted that in general he acknowledges strong conceptual similarities between his approach and the Aristotelian conception of eudemonia or optimal human functioning (Sen, 1993, p.46; and 1999, p.73), although his account does not rely on Aristotle as heavily as Nussbaum’s.

For Sen, focusing solely on the distribution of goods (as Rawls argues) is insufficient as individuals differ in their ability to convert those goods into meaningful and valuable functionings. Additionally, following Rawls’ (1971/1999) argument that utility-based approaches do not differentiate between different types of pleasure and pain and focus only on aggregate utility at the expense of individual well-being, Sen dismisses choice-based approaches to well-being. With regards to these accounts, he also notes the dangers posed by adaptation, when an individual changes her preferences to fit with her set of opportunities afforded to her. What is necessary is a framework that focuses on the extent to which individuals can function successfully with the goods that they have at hand. In setting up this framework, Sen distinguishes between functionings, capabilities,
functioning vectors and capability sets (Sen, 1999, pg. 75). Functionings refer to the various activities that an individual may value doing or being, while that individual’s capability refers to “the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve” (p.75). Capability is therefore a form of freedom, as it affords the opportunity to achieve multiple functioning combinations. A functioning vector can be said to describe the combinations of these “doings and beings” that she enjoys at a particular point in life, while the capability set describes the set of possible or attainable functioning vectors that an individual can achieve. The focus of the capability approach can be either on the realized functionings (what the individual has achieved) or on the capability set of alternative she has (p.75).

One of the main advantages of Sen’s approach is that it is “inescapably pluralistic” (p.76). For one, Sen does not identify his approach with a single list of functionings, and as a result his approach is amenable to development and adaptation in a number of different ways and contexts (Clark, 2006). Moreover, Sen acknowledges that his approach does not provide an exhaustive theory of justice or development and that other principles must be taken into consideration. Sen sees this non-exhaustive flexibility as a strength: “To insist that there should only be one homogeneous magnitude that we value is to reduce drastically the range of our evaluative reasoning” (1999, p. 77).

As Clark (2006), among many others, has noted, Sen’s approach has been praised for its theoretical inclusiveness, as it argues that we need to broaden the informational base of evaluation, recognize that different people and cultures have different functioning vectors, see individuals, and not economic growth, as the end of policy, and value human
freedom and democratic participation, as “freedoms of different kinds can strengthen one another” (Sen, 1999, p.11).

While Sen’s emphasis on human freedom and capability has been widely regarded as groundbreaking, it has also been criticized as being vague on the extent to which capability, well-being and freedom are spelled out (Gasper, 2004). Nussbaum (2003) has been critical of Sen’s approach on this account, and her capabilities approach (to be distinguished from Sen’s capability approach) seeks to rectify this shortcoming by offering a substantive set of human capabilities which, while non-exhaustive, are non-negotiable in their equal worth, as they are together constitutive of what it means to live a truly human existence.

While Nussbaum’s work shares significant similarities with Sen’s approach, her account draws much more heavily from Aristotle and Marx’s conception of flourishing. As Nussbaum writes: “The basic intuitive idea of my version of the capabilities approach is that we begin with a conception of the dignity of the human being, and of a life that is worthy of that dignity” (Nussbaum, 2006, p.74). She develops her approach as a philosophical project that aims “to provide the philosophical underpinnings for an account of core human entitlements that should be respected and implemented by the governments of all nations” (p.70). She thus sees her approach as suitable for application in the realm of practical politics and policy making. She also sees her approach as contributing to an overall theory of justice, as it stipulates which primary goods must be justly distributed and requires that all citizens reach a threshold level of each capability, beneath which they would not be able to achieve “truly human functioning” (p.71).
Nussbaum’s arguments for the suitability of the capabilities approach over preference-based and utility-based theories mirror those of Sen (p.71-75). She presents her version as a minimum account of social justice, focusing on the threshold level of capabilities mentioned above:

The capabilities approach is not intended to provide a complete account of social justice. It says nothing, for example, about how justice would treat inequalities above the threshold. (In that sense it does not answer all the questions answered by Rawls’s theory.) It is an account of minimum core social entitlements, and it is compatible with different views about how to handle issues of justice and distribution that would arise once citizens are above the threshold level (p.75)

Her current list (2006) of the ten Central Human Capabilities (with the rights necessary for each of them, following Freeman, 2007) is as follows:

1) Living a normal life span;
2) Bodily health, including rights to adequate nourishment and shelter;
3) Bodily integrity (including freedom of movement and security against assault, as well as freedom of choice in reproduction and in matters of sexual satisfaction);
4) Being able to use the senses, the imagination, and thought (including freedom of expression and religious exercise, and adequate education), and being able to have pleasurable experiences;
5) Experiencing normal human emotions, including longing, grief, anger, etc., and having emotional attachments to others (i.e., love, friendships, and the normal range of affective emotions);
6) Development of one’s capacities for practical reason, including the capacity of critical reflection upon one’s good or plan of life (protected by liberty of conscience and religious freedom, among other rights);

7) Capabilities for affiliation (including both having the capacities to care for and commiserate with others, and having social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation (with rights to nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, and national origin));

8) Living with other species;

9) Play, including the ability to enjoy recreational activities;

10) Control over one’s environment (including rights to political participation, freedom of association, and having property rights on an equal basis with others and equal opportunities)

(Nussbaum, 2006, p76-78; adapted from Freeman, 2007)

Nussbaum has utilized a series of methods to justify her list of capabilities. Her early work on capabilities (1990, 1992) derived a list of capabilities from the writings of Aristotle, and represented a development of his ideas concerning optimal human functioning. While the account is short on the rigorous theoretical order that other objective list theorists have employed (e.g. Doyal and Gough, 1991; Alkire, 2002), it offers “a thick vague theory of the good” that is both empirical and normative (Nussbaum, 1992, p.214-5) and “aims to be as universal as possible” (p.215). Here, the capabilities are presented as an “internal-essentialist account” that reveals “what the most central features of our common humanity are” (p.215). The account is thus a challenge to moral relativistic metaphysical accounts championed by postmodernist and post-colonial
Nussbaum is strongly dismissive of relativist accounts, seeing them as ultimately confused and reactionary (see Nussbaum, 1998, for an extended discussion).

Nussbaum’s later accounts, captured in *Women and Human Development* (2000) and *Frontiers of Justice* (2006) are substantially less uncompromising. As noted earlier, she emphasizes that the list is founded on an intuitive idea of the dignity of the human being, although this remains founded on the Aristotelian virtues of practical reasoning and affiliation (Nussbaum, 2006, p.78, n.52). She claims that the list remains open-ended and subject to revision, is vague enough to be open to a multiplicity of interpretations, stands as a “partial moral conception” without being grounded in any metaphysical tradition, and—in line with Sen—focuses on protecting people’s capabilities as opposed to functionings. The final three points protect pluralism and offer the possibility for an overlapping consensus among parties with different metaphysical standpoints. The list also includes liberties that protect plurality, and Nussbaum sees her account as primarily offering a basis for persuasion, and not for intervention (p.78-80).

Thus, it would seem that Nussbaum has become more agnostic about the question of whether human beings share a common humanity. Note, however, that she still holds “that human personality has a structure that is at least to some extend independent of culture” (Nussbaum, 2000, p.155). Moreover, it is clear that her account emphasizes commonalities as opposed to differences: this focus enables her to attempt an extension of her account to nonhuman animals, since “we have much in common with these creatures, although we differ in so many ways” (Nussbaum, 2006, p.325-6). It seems plausible that her list—which, despite her claims that it is the result of cross-cultural
dialogue, remains remarkably similar to her early, more essentialist accounts—seeks to tap into this common humanity.

Sen has hailed Nussbaum’s approach as an example of the flexibility that the capability approach affords, as it allows for significant differences in application, however, he is critical of her most substantive account, which he sees as overtly reliant on Aristotelian conceptions of human functioning, and paying insufficient attention to the virtues of democratic public reasoning:

Nussbaum has discussed the importance of identifying an overarching “list of capabilities,” with given priorities, in a more Aristotelian way. My own reluctance to join the search for such a canonical list arises partly from my own difficulty in seeing how the exact lists and weights would be chosen without appropriate specification of the context of their use (which could vary), but also from a disinclination to accept any substantive diminution of the domain of public reasoning. The framework of capabilities, as I see it, helps to clarify and illuminate the subject matter of public reasoning, which can involve epistemic issues (including claims of objective importance) as well as ethical and political ones. It does not—and cannot—displace the need for public reasoning.

(Sen, 2004, p. 333, n.31).

Nussbaum does not champion democracy as a necessary requirement for freedom in the manner that Sen does (Sen, 1999, p.11), yet it seems at first glance that her more recent account of the capabilities approach have attempted to deal with Sen’s criticism by enlarging the space available for pluralism within her account (as noted above). However, note that although her pluralism seems to allow for different expressions of her specified
capabilities, rather than a discussion of which capabilities should be adopted. I will evaluate the extent to which this concession is sufficient later in this essay.

**Positive Psychology and the Study of Subjective Well-Being**

Concurrent with the study of well-being in human development and political philosophy has been a resurgence of interest in well-being in other areas of the social sciences, and especially the fields of economics and psychology. In particular, the emergence of the new field of positive psychology presents an insight into the future direction of the science and practice of psychology. While psychology in practice has generally concerned itself with healing—fixing what is wrong or malfunctioning with individuals—, a number of psychologists have claimed that equal emphasis should be placed on the factors contributing to healthy human functioning (see Allport, 1961, for an early argument). This new focus has as its goal the creation of “a psychology of positive human functioning…that achieves a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving individuals, families and communities (Seligman, 2002).

The hope for positive psychology’s role in the 21st century can be compared favorably with John Dewey’s hope for the field of psychology when he delivered the 1899 Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association. Dewey believed that psychology as a discipline should be able, in its unique position as a social science committed to the comprehension of human behavior, to contribute to the value of human life. Psychological practice for Dewey should be judged “by the contribution which they make to the value of the human life,” (Dewey, 2000) and assist in the development of
flourishing communities. Such sentiments are clearly echoed 100 years later by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000):

(In this millennium), the social and behavioral sciences can play an enormously important role. They can articulate a vision of the good life that is empirically sound while being understandable and attractive. They can show what actions lead to well being, to positive individuals, and to thriving communities. Psychology should be able to document what kinds of families result in children who flourish, what work settings support the greatest satisfaction among workers, what policies result in the strongest civic engagement, and how people’s lives can be most worth living.

(Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.3)

As Seligman, one of the field’s most prominent researchers, has written, “we will learn how to build the qualities that help individuals and communities not just endure and survive but also flourish” (Seligman, 2002, p.8) through the fostering of subjective well-being and positive human traits. Consequently, subjective well-being (SWB) researchers have argued that well-being should become a primary focus of policymakers (Diener and Seligman, 2004).

SWB has been generally equated with hedonic pleasure, but researchers in the field have emphasized its multi-faceted nature. Ed Diener, who has studied SWB for over a quarter century, writes that “SWB includes diverse concepts ranging from momentary moods to global judgments of life satisfaction, and from depression to euphoria” (Diener, Scollon and Lucas, 2003, p.188). What SWB captures is the individual’s own subjective assessment of his own life, and this assessment includes general satisfaction with one’s
life, satisfaction with specific domains of one’s life, and levels of positive and negative affect. In adopting this approach, Diener and colleagues (2004) claim that the field echoes the pre-Socratic philosopher Democritus’ definition of happiness as the manner in which individuals responded to their life circumstances, as opposed to what goods they had. Seligman (2004) has defined well-being as including positive emotion, engagement, satisfaction, and meaning.

Positive psychology has become an important area of research over the last decade—although interest in SWB dates back at least 35 years—and a number of reasons can be posited for this increase of interest. High SWB has been found to be associated with a number of benefits (Frederickson, 2001; Lyubomirsky et al., 2002). Happier individuals tend to have better health and possibly even longer life spans (Danner et al., 2001). Happiness precedes and causes a large number of positive outcomes, as opposed to being merely the product of these positive outcomes (Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005). High levels of SWB lead to better health, better work performance, better social relationships, and more ethical behavior (Diener, 2007). In addition, Diener (2000) found that people from a wide number of countries valued happiness and well being above monetary income. In general, it would seem that people value SWB highly, and see it as a worthwhile end. SWB has also been advanced—not unlike the capabilities approach—as an alternative to standard economic and social indicators (such as GNP and levels of education, crime and health) as a measurement of quality of life, and advocates have claimed that in combination with objective measures, SWB indicators can provide information that standard indicators cannot offer (Diener and Suh, 1997; Diener and Seligman, 2004; Diener, 2006).
Part of the motivation for offering SWB as an alternative to standard economic measures is the fact that “there are distressingly large, measurable slippages between economic indicators and well-being” (Diener and Seligman, 2004, p.1). Determining public policy based on economic indicators alone has meant that growing economic prosperity has not been accompanied by an increase of happiness. This lack of a relationship has been termed the “Easterlin paradox” after the economist Richard Easterlin (1974), who first noted this discrepancy. Many SWB researchers have argued that this paradox needs to be resolved, with more emphasis being placed on the well-being of citizens. Diener and Seligman (2004) have noted that important non-economic predictors of well-being include social capital, democratic government and human rights, and that policies designed to preserve and foster strong social relationships are desirable, as research has shown that positive social relationships are important for well-being. One important claim that SWB researchers make is that “desirable outcomes, even economic ones, are often caused by well-being rather than the other way around” (Diener and Seligman. 2004, p.1). That is, well-being can facilitate individuals to better achieve their ends. This means that not only is SWB seen by many as an important—and perhaps the ultimate—end, but SWB can help individuals better achieve other important ends.

Many positive psychology researchers have consequently called for the development of national indicators of well-being that can in time achieve the conceptual and methodological sophistication of national economic indicators. Diener (2006) has recommended that the various facets of SWB (including positive affect, negative affect, life satisfaction, domain satisfaction, and quality of life) be measured separately; that measures sensitive to changes in well-being resulting from changes in circumstances be
utilized and that short-term and long-term changes in SWB be assessed separately; that instruments measuring SWB be psychometrically valid (that is, that they consistently measure what they are supposed to be measuring); that current measures, although comparatively imperfect, can still provide information to policymakers that standard economic indicators cannot offer; and that taking well- and ill-being into account when making policy decisions represents an important part of the democratic process. Diener (and other SWB researchers) are careful to point out that while SWB measures can provide important information that can inform policy decisions, they are not meant to override other source of information, such as objective measures of well-being (such as those offered by the capabilities approach) and standard economic indicators. Like Sen, they recognize the value of multiple informational spaces in assessing well-being. They also share a number of other similarities, as we will later in this essay.

Seligman’s Theory of Happiness

Seligman (2002) has proposed a substantive psychological theory in which the unwieldy notion of “happiness” is decomposed into three more scientifically manageable components: positive emotion (the pleasant life), engagement (the engaged life), and meaning (the meaningful life).

The Pleasant Life

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1 This section is adopted from Seligman, Rashid and Parks (2006).
The pleasant life is what hedonic theories of happiness endorse. It consists in having a lot of positive emotion about the present, past, and future and learning the skills to amplify the intensity and duration of these emotions. The positive emotions about the past include satisfaction, contentment, fulfillment, pride, and serenity, and we developed gratitude and forgiveness exercises that enhance how positive memories can be (e.g., Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; McCullough, 2000; Seligman et al., 2005). Positive emotions about the future include hope and optimism, faith, trust, and confidence, and these emotions, especially hope and optimism, are documented to buffer against depression (Seligman, 1991, Seligman, 2002). Positive emotions about the present include satisfaction derived from immediate pleasures.

More positive emotion is often associated with lower depression and anxiety. Is this merely a correlation, or could it be causal? Barbara Fredrickson and colleagues have provided evidence that positive emotions counteract the detrimental effects of negative emotion on physiology, attention, and creativity (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Fredrickson & Levenson, 1996; see Fredrickson, 2000, for a review). They also contribute to resilience in crises (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). The cognitive literature on depression documents a downward spiral in which depressed mood and narrowing thinking perpetuate each other. In contrast, Fredrickson and Joiner (2002) reported that positive emotions and a broad thought-action repertoire amplify each other, leading to an upward spiral of well-being. These data support the hypothesis that low positive emotion may be causal in depression and that building positive emotions will buffer against depression.
The Engaged Life

The second “happy” life in Seligman's theory is the engaged life, a life that pursues engagement, involvement and absorption in work, intimate relations, and leisure (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). *Flow* is Csikszentmihalyi's term for the psychological state that accompanies highly engaging activities. Time passes quickly. Attention is completely focused on the activity. The sense of self is lost (Moneta & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Seligman (2002) proposed that one way to enhance engagement and flow is to identify people's highest talents and strengths and then help them to find opportunities to use these strengths more. We call the highest strengths *signature strengths* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

One of the initial endeavors of positive psychology was the massive project of coming up with an exhaustive list of universally valued strengths and virtues, and their efforts culminated in a classification system made up of 24 character strengths, organized under six core virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The six core virtues identified were *wisdom* (e.g., love of learning, creativity), *courage* (e.g., bravery), *humanity* (e.g., kindness); *justice* (e.g., fairness), *temperance* (e.g., forgiveness) and *transcendence* (e.g., religiousness/spirituality). Of these, the character strengths of hope, zest, gratitude, love, and curiosity have been shown to be most strongly and robustly linked to life satisfaction, while more cerebral virtues such as love of learning on the other hand—the ones Aristotle considered to be supreme and most conducive to happiness—seem to be only weakly associated with happiness (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Diener, 2007). Overall, however, this view is as old as Aristotle and consonant with more modern psychological
notions such as Rogers's (1951) ideal of the fully functioning person, Maslow's (1971) concept of self-actualization, and Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory.

The Meaningful Life

The third “happy” life in Seligman's theory involves the pursuit of meaning. This consists in using one's signature strengths and talents to belong to and serve something that one believes is bigger than the self. There are a large number of such “positive institutions:” religion, politics, family, community, and nation, for example. Regardless of the particular institution one serves in order to establish a meaningful life, doing so produces a sense of satisfaction and the belief that one has lived well (Myers, 1992; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Such activities produce a subjective sense of meaning and are strongly correlated with happiness (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). A consistent theme throughout meaning-making research is that the people who achieve the greatest benefits are those who use meaning to transform the perceptions of their circumstances from unfortunate to fortunate (McAdam, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; Pennebaker, 1993).

Similarities Between Capabilities and SWB

Despite the fact that the capabilities approach and the SWB approach represent the dominant accounts of human well-being in the social sciences, there has been remarkably little mutual acknowledgement of the other’s work. In reviewing the two literatures, Comim (2005) notes that while the two approaches share a common general objective—a richer understanding of what it means to live well—“this seemingly obvious
overlap in their object of research does not seem to be accompanied by any considerable acknowledgement of the vast work that has been produced in the two fields” (Comim, 2005, p.162).

A number of prominent similarities between the two accounts can be noted, many of which are obvious in light of the previous discussion:

1) As noted above, both accounts have a similar core objective—an investigation of well-being and how people evaluate their lives. Diener (2000), Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2006, 2000) make similar claims, and the two approaches can be seen as constituting distinctive informational spaces within the study of well-being.

2) Both approaches rely (directly or indirectly) on individuals’ own evaluation of their own well-being. While this is fundamentally constitutive of the SWB approach, Sen (1999, 2004) emphasizes the importance of public deliberation in discussing the relevant capabilities, while Nussbaum’s later work (2000, 2006) emphasizes the value of pluralism within her framework.

3) Both distinguish between means and ends, and give priority to a direct assessment of ends. While this is a hallmark of the capabilities approach, Diener and Seligman (2004) also make the Aristotelian claim that “money…is a means to an end, and that end is well-being” and subsequently ask the question “After all, if economic and other policies are important because they will in the end increase well-being, why not assess well-being directly?” (p.2)

4) Both attack and offer themselves as alternatives to the resource-based and preference-based accounts of well-being. While the capabilities approach sees the

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2 This list follows Comim (2005), although many of the descriptive examples are the present authors’.
goods-based approach as deficient because of differences in converting those goods into valuable functionings, the SWB approach rejects the approach because of dynamic temporal adjustments of expectations to goods: “Rising expectations and desires to some degree cancel the psychological benefits of greater income” (Diener and Seligman, 2004, p.7).

5) Both approaches value democratic participation. Sen (1999) sees this as a valuable end in itself, while SWB researchers place more emphasis on its instrumental effect on well-being.

6) Both emphasize the importance of autonomy and self-determination. Nussbaum (2006) notes that the capabilities approach “stresses the animal and material underpinnings of human freedom, and it also recognizes a wider range of types of beings who can be free” (p.88). For Sen (1999), having positive freedoms is constitutive of development (p.xi). SWB researchers (and positive psychology in general) have stressed the importance of autonomy and control. As Ryan and Deci (2006) note: “Autonomy is a salient issue across development, life concerns, and cultures, and is of central import for personality functioning and wellness” (p.1580).

7) Both approaches consider the role of emotions in assessing well-being. Positive and negative affect are constitutive of SWB measurement (Diener, 2003; 2006), while Nussbaum (2000, 2001) has argued that emotions play an important role in shaping individuals’ choices.

8) Both advocate methodological pluralism. Diener (2006) has argued for measure measuring multiple aspects of SWB, while a hallmark of the capabilities approach
is its focus on multiple informational spaces, which would require multivariate techniques.

9) Both approaches recognize the dangers of adaptive preferences, which could potentially bias individuals’ evaluation of their own well-being. Nussbaum (1997) characterizes adaptation as “a phenomenon in which an individual shapes her preferences to accord with (frequently narrow) set of opportunities she actually has” (p.218). Capability advocates have used this argument as evidence against the SWB approach, and Diener (2000; 2003) has acknowledged that self-report measures of SWB can be tainted by this problem and have advocated the development of other, more “objective” measures to measure mood states (Diener, 2003). However, it should be noted that individuals do not completely adapt to certain life events, such as disabilities (Lucas, 2007), although more research is needed to settle this question.

It is possible to identify a closer parallel between Nussbaum’s commitment to an Aristotelian conception of flourishing and Seligman’s focus on two paths to happiness that does not necessarily involve the experiencing of positive emotions. Seligman (2002) places equal emphasis on the Engaged and Meaningful life as paths to lasting happiness and well-being, and stresses that the terms “happiness” and “well-being”, while frequently referring to feelings such as positive emotions, may in certain instances refer to activities where no such emotions are felt. Seligman thus offers a broader scope for what constitutes positive functioning than simple hedonic theories would allow.

*Differences between the Capabilities Approach and Positive Psychology*
One obvious issue in attempting to reconcile the two approaches, despite the similarities noted above, is the fact that while SWB approaches focus on mental states, the capabilities approach measures more objective indicators of well-being. In fact, many positive psychologists have acknowledged that subjective reports of well-being are susceptible to adaptive preferences, and that “we probably need to take into account more objective bases for judging the attainment of the good life [such as Nussbaum and Sen’s work]” (Peterson, 2006, p.312). In this sense, it would seem that Nussbaum’s more substantive account has more to offer, as she explicitly sets out the defining features of a good life (this is not Sen’s primary concern). Moreover, many of the claims that Nussbaum makes concerning the value of capabilities have found support in the SWB literature. For example, her focus on affiliation as a fundamental capability finds support in the positive psychology literature (Diener and Seligman, 2004; Deci and Ryan, 2001).

However, while one can see the capabilities approach as fulfilling a role as a theoretical anchor of SWB accounts, as mentioned above, both Sen and Nussbaum claim that individuals’ subjective preferences may not necessarily contradict objective conceptions of well-being. Sen (1993) argues that this would be the case as long as positional parameters that affect individuals’ cognitions are accounted for, so that particular types of “special mental tendencies” (p.137) can be excluded. Similarly, Nussbaum (2000) advocates what she calls an “intelligently normative proceduralism” adapted from Jean Hampton’s “Feminist Contractarian” account, in which preferences

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3 However, it should be noted that individuals do not completely adapt their preferences in response to certain life events, such as disabilities (Lucas, 2007), although more research is needed to settle this question.
are evaluated with a view towards discarding those that are mistaken or illegitimate (p.159). She later notes in *Frontiers of Justice* that “convergence between the best informed desire approach and the capabilities approach should give us confidence that we are on the right track” (Nussbaum, 2006, p.81).

The possibility that objective and subjective approaches to well-being can be integrated is also discussed by John Rawls in his *Theory of Justice* (Rawls, 1971/1999). Rawls writes that happiness has two aspects: the successful execution of a rational life plan, and that individual’s state of mind. Therefore, happiness can be defined either objectively or subjectively. Objectively, happiness involves “a certain achievement in action and a rational assurance about the outcome,” while subjectively it involves the belief that the plan is being successfully executed (p.481). For Rawls, a complete life plan includes multiple ends, as well as due considerations of right and justice (p.482), and “happiness is an inclusive end, meaning that the plan itself, the realization of which makes one happy, includes and orders a plurality of aims, whatever they are” (p.484-5). While Rawls’ account of the good life is (like Nussbaum’s) strongly normative, his claim that happiness entails a plurality of aims appeals to both SWB accounts (Comim, 2005, p.169) and capabilities-based accounts.

It should be noted, however, that while individuals’ preferences can be informed in this manner, both the capabilities approach and the SWB account make *prescriptive* arguments against mainstream economics’ focus on the socio-economic environment. The capabilities approach stresses that governments should guarantee a threshold level of a specified set of capabilities, which SWB researchers argue that individuals are frequently unaware of which choices would successfully maximize their well-being...
(Easterlin, 2003), and that policies that contribute to more informed preferences should be devised and implemented. These policies, while informed by psychological research, could also be grounded in a substantive theory, such as the capabilities approach.

Limitations of the Capabilities Approach

As noted above, the capabilities approach can serve a theoretical role by underpinning SWB accounts. In addition, I have noted that individuals’ subjective preferences can mirror objective accounts in certain conditions, and that both accounts make prescriptive claims on policy makers. However, a number of limitations with the capabilities approach—and particularly Nussbaum’s version—can be noted, which cast doubt on its potential role within an integrated theory of well-being.

For one, the possibility that our informed desires and more objective accounts of well-being may (or may not) correlate does not seem to be intrinsically important for the capabilities approach *per se*. Here Sen and Nussbaum’s accounts differ significantly. Sen does not advocate a particular list of capabilities, preferring to let people come up with their own lists of capabilities (note that people in this scenario may ironically fall prey to adaptive preferences). Nussbaum does, however, and while she does claim that convergence between the best informed desire approach and the capabilities approach would be a positive sign in terms of that community’s development, the failure of such convergence would invalidate the informed-desire approach, not her capabilities list. While in *Frontiers of Justice* she defines her approach as a philosophical one built around the intuition of the dignity of the human being, in *Women and Human Development* and
other articles, she also utilizes a form of what could be termed “philosophical anthropology” to substantiate her claims about what a list of capabilities should look like. She writes thus of the advantages of such an approach:

Finding such areas of informed agreement is epistemically valuable in two ways: first, it points us to areas of human experience that we might have neglected or underestimated. Second, it tells us that our intuitions about what would make a political consensus possible are on the right track. The methodology that has been used to modify the list shows this…

(Nussbaum, 2000, p.151)

In *Upheavals of Thought*, she further notes the importance of democratic discourse on the important question of what an appropriate political conception of the good life should be:

A pluralistic liberal society should refrain from advancing a fully comprehensive view of the good that would give a complete answer to this question. Instead, the answering will have to be done by the many different comprehensive views of the good that citizens will hold, both religious and secular…Such a society may…expect a convergence on certain basic goods, which, at some specifiable level, should be available to all citizens.

(Nussbaum, 2001, p.415-6)

While this procedure descends in part from Rawls’ notion of the overlapping consensus (Rawls, 2001, pgs.32-42; Nussbaum, 2000, p.76), two problems become clear. For one, it seems unclear what would happen were Nussbaum’s intuitions not to line up with others’; would Nussbaum give up her intuitions about which capabilities are
essential for a good life? The second problem may answer the question posed by the first problem: despite her claims that her “list represents the result of years of cross-cultural discussion, and comparisons between earlier and later versions will show that the input of other voices has shaped its content in many ways” and that the list already represents something of a overlapping consensus (Nussbaum, 2000, p.76), the fact that her list has (in this writer’s view) changed very slightly over the years must lead one to wonder whether her list of capabilities is really the result of discussion and consensus, or primarily the result of her own reasoning about what capabilities are necessarily for a good life. Such a list may be a perfectly reasonable starting point for discussion on what a good life should consist of, but it would be disingenuous to claim that an overlapping consensus already exists over the ten capabilities.

An area of research that has questioned the adequacy of the lists of capabilities that Nussbaum endorses has been the fieldwork conducted in South Africa and other countries with a view to identify examples of valuable capabilities (as Sen would advocate) and shed light on the constituent elements of well-being which could potentially further develop and refine the capabilities list (Clark, 2002; 2005). These studies have shown that while many people do endorse most (although not all) of the capabilities advocated by Nussbaum (thus representing evidence of the twinning of subjective and objective well-being that Nussbaum and Rawls elucidated upon), they also value things that Nussbaum and Sen neglect in their accounts. It is interesting to note that Clark (2000; 2002) found little evidence of adaptive preferences during his fieldwork among poor communities in South Africa (which may be accounted for by the heightened political consciousness that many South African have in the post-apartheid era).
However, one of Clark’s most interesting findings (substantiated by Diener, 2000) was that SWB was valued as an important end, and that most people engage in functionings in order to benefit from the SWB they achieved from them, which they believed had intrinsic significance for a good life. Moreover, Clark noted that “utility may also have considerable instrumental importance for human flourishing and well-being. Taking pleasure from some activity…helps to facilitate the realization of other achievements” (Clark, 2005, p.1358-9). This ties in neatly with Diener and Seligman’s (2004) claim that “desirable outcomes, even economic ones, are often caused by well-being, rather than the other way around” (p.1).

In order to account for this discrepancy, the capabilities approach would have to accept positive mental states as a valuable functioning worth pursuing for its own sake. This is conceivable under Sen’s account of capability; however, Nussbaum buries the ability “to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid non-beneficial pain” into her fourth capability of “being able to use the senses, the imagination, and thought” (Nussbaum, 2006, p.76). Nussbaum here privileges valuable activity over pleasant emotional states, as she would see a focus on pleasurable brain states as tantamount to an acceptance of hedonism.

Note, however, that SWB researchers accept the notion (and have empirically validated the claim) that people do not care about pleasure unless in corresponds to engaging and meaningful action. Diener et al. (2003) invoke philosopher Robert Nozick’s (1974) experience machine thought experiment to illuminate the empirical finding that people want their hedonic experiences to be justified and validated through real-life activity. As we noted earlier, Seligman (2002) has built on this fact by elaborating a
theory of well-being which posits that well-being includes not on positive emotions and moods (the Pleasant Life), but also engagement (the Good Life) and meaning (the Meaningful Life). On this account, people with lives incorporating both engagement and meaning would experience greater life satisfaction than those who only experience pleasure. Sumner (1999) makes a similar point with his own “authentic happiness theory.” In this theory, one’s self-assessment of happiness must be (1) informed, in the sense that it should be able to “survive the acquisition of missing information” (p. 161) and (2) autonomous, in the sense that it has to be genuine and not the result of “autonomy-subverting mechanisms of social conditioning, such as indoctrination, programming, brainwashing” (p. 171) (Diener, 2007).

That said, pleasant mood states are still valuable both intrinsically and instrumentally. Altering the list of capabilities to accommodate valuable mental states is not a concession to hedonism, but a concession to psychological facts about human nature. If human beings do value positive mental states, and if those states have both instrumental (facilitative) and intrinsic value, Nussbaum’s capabilities approach should be flexible enough to accommodate these states. It seems that such an alteration is unlikely, however, given Nussbaum’s dislike for privileging any account of hedonism.

Conclusion: Can Capabilities and SWB Learn From Each Other?

The above discussion represents the first step towards a possible integration of two approaches. As noted above, both the capabilities approach and the SWB approach share much in common despite their avowed differences, and moreover, conceptual and
empirical work has shown that some contiguity exists between people’s subjective preferences and objective accounts of well-being, and that SWB is widely valued and pursued as an end by many people.

However, we should note that well-being research in psychology is an integrative (and therefore largely reductionistic) project, which is in contrast to the ethos of the capabilities approach, which stresses the opening of multiple spaces for evaluating well-being. While the capabilities approach places a great deal of importance on qualitative aspects of well-being, the SWB approach emphasizes the importance of rigorous measurement and the quantifiability of SWB (Diener, 2006).

It is clear, however, that the distinction between the capabilities approach, SWB accounts offered by positive psychology, and preference-based accounts is not as clear-cut as Sen and others would have us believe. For one, it does seem that people’s preferences about the goods they value may mirror many of the capabilities that Sen and Nussbaum argue are valuable. To be fair, the fact that preferences can closely overlap with an objective view of the good life is something that Sen, Nussbaum and Rawls have accepted as a normative possibility. The fact that people’s preferences do in fact mirror normative accounts such as the capabilities approach (Clark, 2003) offers the possibility that objective and subjective accounts can be integrated. Moreover, the fact that SWB has been shown across cultures to be deeply valued as an end in itself, and has moreover been shown to have important instrumental value points to the necessity for the capabilities approach to recognize SWB as an important functioning, at the very least. Well-being is valuable not only because it feels good, but because “feeling good” can have beneficial consequences (Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005).
One advantage of Sen’s account in this respect is that it is flexible enough to account for these modifications. However, they pose more of a problem for Nussbaum’s capabilities list. For one, Nussbaum does not think that Sen’s approach is specific enough about the extent to which equality of capability should be a social goal (Nussbaum, 2003, p.36). Moreover, while she has written that the political conception of the good should be informed by what that society’s citizens hold to be valuable, the fact that her own account seems to be rooted more in a personal intuitive account following from Aristotle and Marx rather than a discussion resulting in an overlapping consensus—as she has claimed—means that incorporating her approach within a psychological theory of happiness may commit that theory to a specific metaphysical account of the human good (despite Nussbaum’s claim that the approach is merely a “partial moral conception” (Nussbaum, 2006, p.76)), which would be ill-advised (Seligman, 2002; Kendler, 2000). It seems that more evidence that her list is indeed the result of real discourse and an “overlapping consensus” is needed. However, the fact that she has placed emphasis on the equal status of all ten capabilities means it seems unlikely that she would be willing to modify the list through “simple” discussion, as noted earlier.

This is not to say that Nussbaum’s work should not be taken seriously by well-being researchers, however. She makes a powerful ethical case based on a liberal perfectionist account of humanity (Freeman, 2007) and despite its strong prescriptive bent, it is precisely this type of theory that can augment both Sen’s approach and positive psychology by providing a philosophical account of well-being. Fully articulating the conditions for a good life would ultimately require the type of substantive account that
Nussbaum posits, although integrating the two may be a normative task that ultimately lies beyond the scope of positive psychology.

Nussbaum’s work has always been both stimulating and provocative, and she is one of a handful of philosophers committed to developing substantive accounts of well-being and human rights. Her work stands as a serious challenge to moral relativism in advocating a universal framework for assessing the quality of life across the world. In a sense, her quest to outline a universal list of substantive capabilities mirrors the work in positive psychology to outline a ubiquitous list of strengths and virtues (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Her contribution remains a significant one, and we hope that these comments will serve to further this discourse.


Fredrickson, B. L. (2000, March 7). Cultivating positive emotions to optimize health and


