



Indian Institute of Management Calcutta

Working Paper Series

**WPS No. 773
November 2015**

Sustainable Development and the Concept of a Good Life

Anup Sinha

Professor

Indian Institute of Management Calcutta
Diamond Harbor Road, Joka, Kolkata 700104
INDIA

<http://facultylive.iimcal.ac.in/workingpapers>

Sustainable Development and the Concept of a Good Life

Anup Sinha

“Man is fully responsible for his nature and his actions” – Jean Paul Sartre

Introduction

Discussions on the quality of life are rich and diverse with contributions coming from economists as well as philosophers. There are many different ways of approaching the issue. There are alternative measures too, if one is interested in moving beyond the philosophical arguments into more objective metrics. Common perceptions about what constitutes a good life, however, ultimately revolve around the amount of material consumption one can afford or access. The more the actual consumption, the better it is considered to be. Decisions to consume are viewed independent of time. The notion of time in consumption decisions are considered explicitly only when the lifetime consumption of an individual is being considered.

One might raise a question that whether the notion of the good life would be significantly different if the process of development would be one that could be sustained across generations, rather than one individual's lifetime. The notion of time is germane in the concept of sustainable development. The commonly used definition of sustainability as development that meets the needs of the present generation without sacrificing the needs of future generations, involves time in a way that is much longer than an individual's lifetime, and more importantly so, moves beyond the individual to a whole generation of human beings (see Dasgupta (2001) Neumayer (2013) Martini (2012)). Sustainable development, as opposed to the usual notions of economic development and aggregate material growth of production in a society, is supposed to take cognizance of the significant constraints imposed by the availability of natural resources and their planetary boundaries. Hence to ensure sustainable development, unrestricted material growth of physical goods would have to be contained and checked.

It is in this sense that the common conception of the good life in today's world of industrial capitalism and its associated consumerism might be difficult to reconcile to a notion of the good life that would be implied in a world where development was sustainable. It may be difficult even to imagine an alternative good life where material consumption is consistent with sustainable use of exhaustible resources. Even if one could imagine it, how would it evolve and change from the current emphasis on unrestricted material consumption? What would be the characterization of its goodness? Would there be alternative ways of arranging one's life so that it is considered good? When one takes a long-range view of time, would not the concept of a sustainable good life itself be subject to change and alteration? These are questions that involve not only the individual, but the community and the institutions of governance as well, that set the social environment within which choices are made available and actually exercised. This paper discusses some of these issues and attempts to identify some significant aspects of a good life consistent with sustainable development.

Dimensions of a Good Life

Arguably the most common conception of a good life is rooted in material consumption of goods and services (see Sinha (2004)). This is, to a certain extent, quite understandable since the task of staying alive is dependent on whether one has the wherewithal to consume even the biologically minimum food, clothing and shelter. One also requires oxygen and water. However, the former set of items is considered to be more important than the latter. Food, clothing and shelter requires an individual to have an entitlement to access them either through economic means like income and wealth, or through political or social entitlements. Air and water are supposed to be so abundant and freely available that the question of access is not considered to be of any significance.

If material consumption is the fundamental fulcrum on which the quality of a good life depends, and access to it depends for most people (and in most situations) on the ability to buy these goods, the next important aspect of the good life is considered to be the amount of income or the amount of wealth an individual has, since these are instrumental in getting the needed goods and services. It may be noted that most individuals can and do consume more than the bare minimum required to survive and be alive. It in this sense the instruments of income and wealth are considered valuable. More of these are better to the extent it allows one to consume more. Individuals aspire to have more income and wealth precisely because they desire to consume more (and a larger variety) of goods and services. Income, wealth and consumption constitute an interrelated triplet of measures that most people, most of the time, consider to be the fundamental (if not the entire) basis of a good life. This image of the good life is a very powerful one.

The act of consumption, however, opens up other aspects of material living that need consideration if one has to probe the meaning of a good life (see Sen(1984a) Sen (1984b)Sen (1986)). Three such aspects are immediately apparent. The first is why do people consume more than the bare minimum necessary to stay alive? There must be some positive reasons if individuals do this voluntarily without being pressurised (though there could be some extreme reasons for doing it such as keeping up with the Joneses which is often referred to as the demonstration effect). Hence there must be something that consumption leads to – a subjective feeling of pleasure or happiness, or satisfaction. The second follows from the biblical aphorism that man (and woman too) cannot live by bread alone. If that is indeed so, then can consumption be non-material? Can one consume feelings such as being loved, cared for, being recognized by other people, or taking a stand on a controversial issue which one believes to be a morally correct one? The third thing of importance that emerges from the act of consumption is the fact that no one individual can consume all things in all quantities at one time, or even during one's lifetime. How then, and on what basis, are the choices made on what to consume?

Individual Well-being

This broadens the discussion of the concept of a good life beyond purely material consumption, which is often referred to in the social sciences as the concept of well-being. Individual well-being has been looked at in two distinct but interrelated ways. The first revolves round the subjective aspects of a person's being. The individual is supposed to be the best judge of her own conditions. Mainstream

economics and its use of the philosophical tradition of utilitarianism is an example of this approach. The individual's happiness or satisfaction of wants and desires are the key to well-being, based on the individual's subjective preferences for all alternative consumption possibilities (see Little (1957) Robbins (1935) Sen (1979) . The second, while not denying the importance of subjective aspects of well-being, focuses attention more on a person's ability to do things in life that are of value. These are based on a person's capabilities. These capabilities are chosen from a set of possible 'functionings' that can be attained by the individual. Functionings is a combination of being something or doing something. Life can then be seen as a set of functionings chosen by the individual. Examples of functionings can vary from elementary things, such as being healthy, being employed, and having a place to live, to more complex states, such as being happy, having self-respect, and attaining self-actualization. Capability, as a measure of well-being, is understood as the freedom to achieve valuable functionings (see Sen (1983) Sen(1984c) Sen (1985)).

The feasible set of functionings from which an individual makes choices is however, determined by rights and entitlements that are often beyond the control of an individual (see Sen (1984c)). A person may wish to be in good health. One requirement of achieving this capability is to have access to health care facilities in the event of being struck by an illness or injury. However, this may not be possible, if health facilities are unavailable in the person's residential neighbourhood. These outcomes (the presence of accessible health care facilities) are usually determined by the prevailing state of affairs of society where the person is living. Hence, this approach shifts attention from the pure mental states and psychology to more objective conditions that determine the quality of life of the individual as an outcome of preferences and feasible choices determined by the person's relative position in the social state of affairs. It is in this sense that the understanding of individual well-being as a more nuanced conception of the good life takes the discussion beyond the individual into larger issues of access to resources, social situations and public policies (see Sen (1979) Sen (1999) Nussbaum and Sen (1983)).

The Subjective Aspects of Well-being

The subjective aspect distinguishes between the constituents of well-being and their objective determinants. The constituents are obviously quite diverse, beginning from an individual's assessment of her life as a whole, from the quality of family and personal life, professional life, to different aspects of living that a person values such as having a sense of purpose, commitment to causes, fulfilment of goals and how the person is looked upon by her community of peers. There are other personal issues too that revolve around an individual's own perceptions or feelings. These feelings could be valued by the person, such as the feeling of pleasure, a sense of security and peace, a perception of self-actualization. The valuation could be possible for unpleasant feelings too, such as pain or sorrow, humiliation or a sense of deprivation. All these, taken together, constitute the subjective well-being of the individual. They include psychological evaluations or perceptions about positive and negative aspects of mental states.

These valuations are difficult to estimate unless they are reported by the individual. Even if they are, they cannot be really compared across individuals. They do reflect the differences in the determinants of the subjective valuations of an individual where features of the social, political and natural environment

all get woven together. The person's position in society is also an important determinant. Somebody on the verge of starvation may put an extraordinarily high valuation on having two square meals a day. Or, a person unable to achieve a specific consumption goal, say getting to a bunch of grapes, might undervalue them by believing the grapes to be sour (see Elster (1983)). However, the important thing to note is that these constituents of well-being are determined by circumstances and opportunities that have instrumental value. The constituents, on the other hand, can be considered to be of intrinsic worth.

For analytical tractability all intrinsic worth is often subsumed into one metric. In mainstream economic theory for instance, the only measure of intrinsic worth is taken to be utility, a subjective concept. Everything else that can be of value to the individual is considered to be of instrumental value only. This approach has been extensively critiqued as being too narrow a concept (see Nozick (1974) Rawls (1971) Sen (1977) Sen (1987)).

Lifestyles and the Quality of Life

One other aspect of well-being indicative of the quality of life of an individual is the concept of lifestyles. A lifestyle is viewed as the combination of preferences and the access to resources including income and wealth (see Bliss (1983)). The two together determine what kind of life the individual leads. Lifestyle is understood as the synthesis of what is consumed and what set of preferences the individual has. It is argued that preferences can be chosen, or they might evolve, (endogenous preferences) just like goods and services can (see Hammond (1976)). Usually, mainstream economic theory assumes that preferences of individuals are constant. The set of prices or incomes or even the availability of goods (new goods come into being) can change. Allowing preferences to change makes lifestyles easier to define but makes comparison more difficult. For example can one compare the well-beings or even some simpler measure like the standard of living of two people with different lifestyles without bringing in the preferences of the evaluator? How do we compare the standard of living of a nomadic tribesman with that of a Wall Street fund manager? One might argue that the nomadic tribesman if given the choice would like to emulate the lifestyle of the fund manager. People do migrate between lifestyles – a villager may migrate to the city and adapt to a completely different lifestyle. However, can we be so sure if we try to compare the fund manager's standard of living with that of a hippie's? Bliss (1983) argues that lifestyles are closely related to the productivity of the economy. The strict work discipline of advanced market economies allows for enlarged choices in consumption, but simultaneously constricts the time spent on supplying labour, or reduces variety in the nature of work done to earn a living. In short, different lifestyles cannot be ranked.

Lifestyle is quite distinct from the image of a rational individual with constant preferences used widely in mainstream economics. Ideas, values and beliefs of individuals along with their preferences are formed and shaped by the interactions experienced in social living within a community. Interactions also occur within families and kinfolk, and in places of work. Lifestyles do change, evident from the fact that not many in today's world live as hunters-gatherers. Sometimes lifestyles can change abruptly, but more often they do so gradually. Lifestyles can be altered by force, for instance if there is a sudden environmental change, or if there is a sharp change in prices or incomes that makes consumption in the current lifestyle unattainable. The gradual change in lifestyle occurs when people leave a lifestyle and

choose a different one (new one that may have emerged or an older existing one). It is possible that a lifestyle becomes unviable as many people exit and less than a critical amount remain. Lifestyle is a dynamic concept that accounts for people living in a community or in some collective unit, and accounts for changes in the environment that may erode or even abruptly change a particular lifestyle.

The subjective approach views the individual's well-being as very person-specific, which makes comparisons across different people and over time difficult to make. However, it does emphasize the importance of considering aspects of living beyond material consumption of goods and services or some purely quantitative measure of income or wealth that provides the means to attain a chosen level of consumption.

Well-being and Objective Conditions

The capability approach, mentioned above, is a very comprehensive way of emphasizing the objective conditions that shape one's overall well-being (see Sen (1985b) Sen (1999)). Capabilities like having good health and being educated can be instrumental in contributing to the subjective well-being of the individual. However, the expansion of the feasible opportunity set of functionings through which new capabilities can be attained, for instance the freedom to do things and achieve goals is considered of intrinsic worth. The freedom to choose from an expanding set of feasible functionings is considered an end in itself. Hence over time (for instance the life of an individual) different freedoms to do and be things assumes a great deal of importance. The capabilities attained help the individual achieve material needs and requirements. They also help the individual attain other aspirations and goals related to self-realization, acceptance in a community of peers, having meaningful relationships and so on.

Two things are worth noting at this stage. The first is that capabilities can be viewed as a set of determinants of well-being rather than its constituents. So having a capability of good health, or having education and the associated capability to read and write can be viewed as contributing to the more subjective aspects of well-being. The second aspect worth noting is that some of the capabilities can be observed and measured (at least to some partial extent) and can certainly be compared across individuals and over time. Take for example the level of a person's education with the explicit understanding that education is a capability that expands one's functionings. Suppose the person has studied up to ten years in school. One might safely conclude that another person in a very similar schooling system who has spent only five years in school has a lower level of educational attainment and hence, has a relatively lower capability in terms of education.

Of course there could be some debate as to who would be the best judge of this (see Dasgupta (2010)). The individual may look at contextual marginal changes in capabilities. If in a village the person with ten years of schooling is the most educated person, the individual in question would take that to be an exceptionally high degree of attainment. An uninvolved observer (economist or policy maker) might judge this attainment to be very low if in the rest of society most people are college graduates. This leads one to conclude that if there is a lack of knowledge or information about what constitutes an adequate education there might be imperfect vision. In such cases a question might be raised as to the adequacy of the role of the individual to measure or estimate one's own well-being.

Evaluating and measuring capabilities are not easy tasks. These entail attaching relative weights to alternative functionings and capability sets. On this there could be serious debate and differences of opinion. Proponents of this approach (see Sen (1999)) have argued for looking at the possibility of attaching different sets of weights to different functionings and then allowing public debate to allow for improvements brought about by critical scrutiny.

Secondly, there are issues of having individual-specific information about needs and requirements to attain specific capabilities. Looking at a uniform measure could be seriously misleading. For instance consider a very wealthy person who is caught and indicted in a case of white collar crime like fraud or corruption and has to serve a long spell of imprisonment. His well-being may be considered to be high in terms of wealth but his capability may be seriously constrained by staying in jail. On the other hand, if he avoids the indictment by spending all his wealth as bribes in hushing up the investigation, he becomes poor but avoids serving time in jail. Is he better off being poorer but avoiding going to jail? Obviously there could be differences in the valuation of the capability that wealth provides and the freedom to go about as he chooses outside the confines of a prison wall.

Evaluation can focus on the realized functionings which essentially revolves round what a person is actually able to do. Alternatively, the focus can be on the real opportunities measured by the person's capability set. The two approaches provide different kinds of information. The first approach reveals what a person does, while the second approach tells us about the things the person is free to do. The concept of capabilities and freedoms not only brings us into the arena of observable and a distinctly wider range of the aspects of well-being, it also links the individual (with all her subjective desires and fears) to a social world (see Scanlon (1983)) where the outcome of public policies, more often than not, determine the feasible set of functionings that can be attained.

Concern for Others as an influence on Well-being

Before trying to link a person's ability to enjoy a good quality of life with public policy outcomes, it may be worthwhile to discuss another aspect of an individual's quality of life. Since people live their lives in social contexts of family, friends, co-workers, and fellow human beings, it is only expected that any person would have varying degree of concern for others revealed through a wide range of emotions. These emotions could be positive or negative, and they would have an impact on the well-being of the individual (see Nagel (1970) Sen (1977) Sen (1985c) Arrow (1977) Breyer and Gigliotti (1980)). Sen (1977) talks about two such aspects of living that influence the well-being of an individual – sympathy and commitment. A feeling of sympathy (or hatred as negative sympathy) could affect the well-being of the person in an instrumental sense. For instance, a friend's loss might affect a person's well-being negatively. Commitment, on the other hand, is about anticipated (or possible) levels of well-being. It is quite possible that in acting according to commitment might actual reduce an individual's well-being. This reduction is chosen consciously over an available alternative that would not have reduced the well-being of the person in question. For instance one could choose not to intervene in a situation where an unknown woman is being harassed from the fear of facing possible physical violence. If the person does intervene, it is from a commitment to individual freedom or a commitment to human dignity,

anticipating the possibility of bodily injury arising from the attempt to intervene. Actions arising from a sense of commitment are distinct from actions arising out of narrowly defined self-interest.

The important thing to note is that the concept of commitment as a basis for action makes a distinction between personal choice and personal welfare. In this sense one perhaps needs to move beyond the concept of preferences as being more than something related to consumption only. Preferences are something that determines choice in a much wider sense. Harsanyi (1955) makes a distinction between a person's ethical preferences and other subjective preferences, the former based on impersonal social considerations while the latter are based on interests. In this context, one need not restrict the consideration for others (through sympathy or commitment) only to persons who are alive and belong to the current generation of human beings inhabiting the earth. One might easily consider the sympathy or commitment that a person might have for future generations. Yet unborn people could include not only one's own progenies but all human beings who will inhabit the earth in all future time. The impersonal social-space can be surprisingly large, including other generations of humans as well as other living beings, and Nature in a widest sense (see Newman (2011), Nolt (2015)).

Some scholars (see Sen (1977)) have suggested that one could consider in the context of moral judgements a ranking of preference orderings (meta-rankings) to say that one ranking more ethical than another ranking. The purpose here is not to get into the nuances of the arguments that scholars have provided. It suffices for the purpose at hand that when we introduce concepts like commitment and possibility of actions beyond self-interest we introduce moral judgements and ethical values as an integral part of the quality of one's life. Moral agency and moral obligations or duties towards humanity (including future generations) cannot be ignored when considering well-being and the quality of a person's life.

Moral agents are those who are free and can reflect, and have the rational capacity to be responsible for choices they make. Moral agents have moral standing in the sense that their continued existence or well-being has intrinsic value. Hence, their interests and well-being must be considered when deciding on any action. Moral duties are owed by moral agents to all those with moral standing. Usually human beings are considered to have moral standing because they have moral agency, personhood (self-consciousness) and can communicate (have language). Sometimes the ability to feel pain is taken as an extended criterion for identifying those with moral standing. Hence all living creatures are supposed to have sentience (the ability to feel pain). Moving beyond bio-centric morality, moral standing can even be extended to being part of nature – including the entire natural world.

Time and Sustainable Development – the Changing Quality of Life

So far the discussion has centred round an individual with multiple dimensions of well-being – subjective as well as objective aspects of the good life, including consideration for others, living and unborn. In the process of understanding the context in which decisions are made and choices exercised, it is evident that the individual cannot be looked at in isolation, detached from a community or society of other people along with public policies whose outcomes determine the available options from which choices are made. Public policies might change over time as they do in real societies. It has been noted earlier

that preferences of individuals as well as the circumstances in which they exercise choices or try to attain goals can also change. Therefore, it becomes important to note that the concept of the good life itself, as well as the well-being of the individual might both change over time. The core question raised in this context would be that can we think of the possibility that well-being of individuals as well as that of different individuals populating different generations over time can all achieve a non-declining level of well-being. In other words, can well-being be sustained over time?

What is to be sustained such that inter-generational well-being is non-decreasing? One widely accepted approach is to ensure that society's stock of wealth is non-diminishing (see Dasgupta (2001)) so that at least an equivalent stream of income can be generated from it. Capital is supposed to be substitutable so that if one kind of machine or material could be substituted for another. Similarly, knowledge could be replaced too, say from using oil to drive a car to nuclear energy powered electric batteries. Ecologists and scientists would be quick to point out that not all capital is fungible as economists quite often presuppose (see Neumeyer 2013). One can hardly think of substituting fresh water, or clean air, or the fertility of the top soil, or the cyanobacteria that form the base of oceanic food webs. Hence, one may think of a set of substitutable economic and social capital (institutions, rules of functioning) and a distinct non-substitutable set of natural capital. Sustainable development would imply a non-decreasing stock of both the sets of capital.

Mere bequests of a stock of non-decreasing capital, including natural capital is clearly not enough. All these forms of capital could be maintained while having a terribly unequal distribution of power and wealth where political or corporate elites might keep wealth to themselves holding down a dominated and powerless populace. In such a case of absence of freedom the provision of basic needs for everybody of the current generation would be unattained. Hence the best way to view sustainability from an anthropocentric perspective is to ensure a non-diminishing measure of human well-being that includes not only income and wealth, but also basic capabilities such as health, education, political voice, natural capital, and the freedom to choose one's lifestyle from an expanding set of functionings. Intra-generational equality is as important as inter-generational equality for development to be made sustainable.

Sustainable development is distinguished from the usual considerations of economic development in terms of ensuring that development is not just a one-off change in the state of affairs of a society. Rather, it has to be seen as a *process* that can be replicated over time and space for future generations of people who will inhabit the earth (see Sinha (2012) Sinha (2013) Martini (2012)). Indeed, sustainable development is essentially a critique of thinking about development as mere economic growth accompanied by improvements in the average income and standard of living attained by a given population. It is more about a fair distribution of resources and access to productive resources, across generations, keeping within the bounds of the planetary natural resource constraints.

Acceptable as it may seem at first glance, the social solution may be difficult to arrive at, and even more difficult to implement. First of all, it entails a basic understanding of the role of Nature in the process of economic activities, and especially the kinds of constraints this role might throw up. The second problem is agreeing about what exactly is to be bequeathed to future generations. Would it be some

subjective notion of utility or satisfaction measured with the help of a social welfare function, or some more tractable concept of well-being? The third issue is about how much importance we attach to the well-being of future generations of yet unborn people (see Koopmans (1960)). Does one treat them to be as important as we consider ourselves, or does one discount their well-being only because they are born at a later date? Next, depending on how one resolves the first three questions, one has to agree upon a time-path of resource allocation and the resultant social well-being from those resources accruing to successive generations.

In solving the dynamic resource allocation problem there are bound to be many complications too. People living in a society normally prefer to consume things in the present time as opposed to waiting for the future. This is referred to as time preference or impatience, and is usually considered in economic theory to be a subjective choice exercised by the individual. How would the social rate of time preference be chosen? Is there a well-defined method of arriving at this number? The social planner chooses some number that could be low implying that society (assumed to live forever) would consider today's consumption as important as tomorrow's consumption (consumption being taken as a rough and ready measure of social well-being). On the other hand, a large amount of poverty and current levels of material deprivation might compel a planner to treat the consumption in the here and now to be more important than the future, especially the distant future. An implication of this would mean having more to consume now. The opportunity of productive investment on the other hand, implies that if one sacrifices and saves for the future, the action will be rewarded with a positive rate of return on investment, usually captured in the rate of interest as the reward for waiting. This in turn, would imply society would try to consume a little less now and save for a future attracted by the rewards earned from saving. Finally, the nature of the social well-being function with some reasonable properties such as diminishing marginal gains would imply a smooth distribution of income over time. This is referred to in economic theory as the 'aversion' to inequality. If marginal gains are diminishing, then a tiny amount of consumption (again taken as a rough indicator of social well-being) withdrawn from the future and re-allocated to the present would imply that the loss (of future consumption) would be less than the gain (in current consumption). The dynamic decision problem could exert pulls in three different directions. Society's choice would depend on the *combination* of values chosen for the allocation of resources over time with the values of time preference and the aversion to inequality playing a critical role in determining dynamic outcomes.

There are complicated ethical choices too, even when an individual allocates personal resources over time, say the lifetime of the individual, and the terminal bequests left for the next generation. When it comes to an entire society making a decision to ensure that development is sustainable in the sense of inter-generational well-being is chosen in such a fashion that it is non-decreasing (see Dasgupta (2001)) the complexity is compounded. How does society ethically choose a set of numbers for planning its allocation of resources as a representative of a large set of individuals each of whom has a particular ethical ranking of states of affairs (current and in the future)? Obviously the role of the public policy planner becomes complicated. For instance it would be of great convenience for the planner, if she knew that a overwhelmingly large number of persons (whom she is supposed to represent) had a strong ethical preference for guaranteeing a non-diminishing level of well-being for future generations, even if

it entails making current sacrifices for the purpose. The complexity of sustainable development does not stop there. Even if all these issues could be resolved or a consensus arrived at, the pathway to sustainability would entail some sacrifices to be made by the current generation of people living on the planet. What would be the quantum of this sacrifice and how would the cost of making the sacrifice be shared across individuals and nations.

Having a Good Life and Living Well

Let us assume, for arguments sake, that these complex problems mentioned in the preceding section are actually resolved. If the world is to move from a material consumption oriented lifestyle as the basis of a good life, and transit to a more sustainable pattern of production and consumption, then it is rather obvious that the relative importance of an ever-increasing level of consumption would perforce have to be reduced. The social choice of the way resources are allocated over time would, as discussed above, determine the material conditions under which individual choices have to be made, and they could be much more restricted than what the contemporary global market economies offer.

There are two interrelated issues worthy of mention. If the world were to indeed move from the current pattern of resource use and waste to a sustainable model of development, then the dominant preference of a good life measured to a large extent by the level of material consumption would have to be altered, and the set of feasible material choices would have to be reduced. On the other hand, given the limitations of social choice that a planner faces a change in the preferences and ethical positions of a significant number of individuals in society would actually help and hasten the transition to a more sustainable world.

This is where, one might easily see, the concern for others assumes a major role. The concern for others may have different motivations, such as sympathy or commitment. On seeing suffering a person might feel sympathy and act to prevent or mitigate the problem. It could also well be that the person has a commitment to reduce suffering in the world and that might motivate her to act. There could be a plurality of reasons for concern. It may also be mentioned that commitments evolve over time. Changing circumstances, life's experiences or anticipations about future states of affairs might contribute to this change. For instance, a person repeatedly seeing physical violence may be moved to act as the abhorrence to it grows, or a person on witnessing a growing scarcity of natural resources like ground water may become committed to promote and support more sustainable practices of consuming and conserving water.

How can these moral positions as commitments be viewed and understood? Moral positions can contribute as a determinant of a good life for the person who believes who is doing the right thing. It is also of consequential significance if the person believes that the moral act benefits others directly or indirectly by improving a given state of affairs. It serves one's self as well as others. However, it is unlikely that all individuals would achieve a full integration of moral values as individual and as a citizen (or just a member of the human race). One might try, and take it up as a continuing project of living well rather than just having a good life (see Dworkin (1978)). As Dworkin (2011) puts it:

“ Philosophers have pressed the question ‘Why be moral?’ because it seems odd to think that morality, which is often burdensome, has the force it does in our lives just because it is *there*, like an arduous and unpleasant mountain we must constantly climb but that we might hope wasn’t there or would somehow crumble. We want to think that morality connects with human purposes and ambitions in some less negative way, that it is not all constraint, with no positive value. “

One way of establishing the link between having a good life and living well would be to make personal choices consistent with one’s own perceptions and interpretations of what obligations we have towards others – living as well as unborn. It is in this sense that our concept of morality can guide us in living well. This is a somewhat intermediate position between Hobbes’s (see Skinner (1996)) ethical position that self-interest and survival is of the greatest moment, or the other extreme such as Hume’s position (see Broackes (1995)) that one’s own interests are exactly equal to everybody else’s. The argument being made here is that the quest for morality in terms of duties towards others need not be divorced from the best individual goals a person might choose.

Hence, living well can be thought of as a chosen quality of life, or rather the process of migration to a different lifestyle. Living well is, however, more than that. It is essentially about *striving* for a good life, within a chosen lifestyle which includes creating the conditions where all can have a good life not only in the present but in the foreseeable future as well (see Brenkett (1983) Fromm (1979) Tucker (1980)). Living well goes beyond the satisfaction of instinctual drives and desires. It lies in seeking a life that is good: a life that one might take pride in having lived. This goal can be explained only if we recognize that we have a responsibility to live well, and living well is all about *creating* a life that is not only pleasurable, but good in a critical way.

Concluding Remarks

When one considers sustainable development, a time dimension inevitably enters into a person’s choices and actions. These choices and actions perforce must include responsibility to others, living and unborn, and can even be considered to extend to the entire natural world we live in. One is responsible for one’s actions today, and many of them have important consequences for the future. It is in this sense one might be held responsible for future consequences of one’s current actions. However, are responsibilities for one’s own actions boundless? It could be quite terrifying and appalling to think so. There must be some limit.

In order to be ethically responsible for one’s actions that might cause negative consequences (injury, damage or harm), then one must be able to cause the injury, recognize how it was caused, and could have acted in less harmful ways (presence of superior alternatives). If a person cannot meet any of these conditions then the person’s ethical responsibility obviously gets reduced. It may be argued however, that as a person gains knowledge and attains power to do things, the conditions become easier to meet and hence responsibility grows. Where then is the limit of one’s responsibilities?

The limit of a person’s responsibility must lie between one’s capability to cause harm and one’s capability to protect and preserve. A person living in a primitive society would only be able to cause harm to a limited geographical space (may be only within walking distance) and the capability to protect

would be confined to family and close associates such as immediate neighbours. In the modern world of globalized economies, the human society's capabilities to cause harm, as well as its capabilities to protect are pervasive and powerful, not confined to territorial spaces and kinship ties. If the capacity for harm becomes far greater than the capacity to protect, then one observes careless acts that cause injury and harm. It is patently evident that modern society's capacity to cause harm is far more than its capacity to protect and preserve. The limits to responsible choices and actions must then be bounded by the capacity to protect and preserve, thereby minimizing callous and selfish acts of causing harm to others across space and over time.

However, it is also obvious that an individual's (or society's) capacity to protect is neither comprehensive nor complete. Even with these imperfections one might bind one's actions to the capacity to protect from harm – to live one's life more carefully and consciously. In the process one may choose a lifestyle (with preference orderings and consumption patterns) that is seemingly simple, but where having a good life is congruent with the continuing project of living well.

References

- Arrow, K. (1977), 'Extended Sympathy and the Possibility of Social Choice' *American Economic Review* 67
- Bliss, C. (1983), 'Life-Style and the Standard of Living' in Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (eds.) *The Quality of Life* pp 417-436 Clarendon Press Oxford
- Brenkett, G. (1983), *Marx's Ethics of Freedom* Routledge and Kegan Paul London
- Breyer, F. and G. Gigliotti (1980), 'Empathy and the respect for the right of others' *Zeitschrift für Nationalökonomie* 40
- Broackes, J. (1995), 'Hume, David' in T. Honderich (ed) *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* Oxford University Press New York
- Dasgupta, P. (2001), *Human Well-being and the Natural Environment* Oxford University Press New Delhi
- Dasgupta, P. (2010), 'Facts and Values in Modern Economics' in *Institutions, Innovations, and Human Values Selected Papers of Partha Dasgupta Vol 1* Oxford University Press Oxford
- Dworkin, R. (1978), *Taking Rights Seriously* 2nd edition Duckworth London
- Dworkin, R. (2011), 'What is a Good Life?' in *The New York Review of Books* February 10, 2011 New York
- Elster, J. (1983), *Sour Grapes* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Fromm, E. (1979), *Marx's Concept of Man* Frederick Ungar Publishing Company New York
- Hammond, P. (1976), 'Endogenous Tastes and Stable Long-run Choice' *Journal of Economic Theory* 13pp 329-340

- Harsanyi, J. (1955), 'Cardinal Welfare, Individualistic Ethics, and Interpersonal Comparisons of Utility' *Journal of Political Economy* 63
- Koopmans, T. (1960), 'Stationary Ordinal Utility and Impatience' *Econometrica* vol 28, no. 2, pp287-309
- Little, I. (1957), *A Critique of Welfare Economics* Second Edition Oxford Clarendon Press
- Martini, V. (2012), *Economic Theory and Sustainable Development: What can we preserve for future generations?* Routledge London
- Nagel, T. (1970), *The Possibility of Altruism* Clarendon Press Oxford
- Neumayer, E. (2013), *Weak versus Strong Sustainability: Exploring the Limits of Two Opposing Paradigms* Fourth Edition Edward Elgar Cheltenham UK
- Newman, J. (ed) (2011), *Green Ethics and Philosophy An A-Z Guide* Sage Los Angeles
- Nolt, J. (2015), *Environmental Ethics for the Long Term: An Introduction* Routledge London
- Nozick, R. (1974), *Anarchy, State and Utopia* Oxford, Blackwell
- Nussbaum, M. and A.Sen (ed) (1983), *The Quality of Life* Clarendon Press Oxford
- Rawls, J. (1971), *A Theory of Justice* Cambridge Massachusetts Harvard University Press
- Robbins, L. (1935), *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* 2nd edition Macmillan London
- Sartre, J. (1946), *Existentialism as a Humanism* cla.calpoly.edu/~lcall/307/sartre.pdf
- Scanlon, T. (1983), 'Value, Desire, and Quality of Life' in M.Nussbaum and A.Sen (ed) *The Quality of Life* Clarendon Press Oxford pp 185-200
- Sen, A. (1977), 'Rational Fools: a critique of the behavioural foundations of economic theory' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6
- Sen, A. (1979a), 'Personal Utilities and Public Judgement: Or What's Wrong with Welfare Economics' *Economic Journal* 89
- Sen, A. (1979b), 'Utilitarianism and Welfarism' *Journal of Philosophy* 76
- Sen, A. (1983), 'Capability and Well-being' in M. Nussbaum and A. Sen (ed) *The Quality of Life* Clarendon Press Oxford pp 30 – 53
- Sen, A. (1984a), 'Goods and People' in *Resources, Values and Development* pp 509-529 Basil Blackwell Oxford
- Sen, A. (1984b), 'The Living Standard' *Oxford Economic Papers* 6

- Sen, A. (1984c), 'Rights and Capabilities' in *Resources, Values and Development* pp 307-324 Basil Blackwell Oxford
- Sen, A. (1985a), *Commodities and Capabilities* North Holland Amsterdam
- Sen, A. (1985b), 'Well-being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984' *Journal of Philosophy* 82
- Sen, A. (1985c), 'Goals, Commitment and Identity' *Journal of Law Economics and Organization* 1
- Sen, A. (1986), 'The Standard of Living' in S. McMurrin (ed) *Tanner Lectures on Human Values Volume VII* Cambridge University Press
- Sen, A. (1987), *On Ethics and Economics* Basil Blackwell Oxford
- Sen, A. (1999), *Development as Freedom* Oxford University Press New Delhi
- Sinha, A. (2004), 'Consuming to Live: Living to Consume – Globalization and Human Consequences' in S. Singh-Sengupta (ed) *Beyond Philanthropy Business Social Partnerships – The International Perspective* Aalekh Publishers, Jaipur
- Sinha, A. (2012), 'Sustainable Development and Governance: Complex Processes and Unpredictable Outcomes' in *Society and Management Review* Vol 1 Number 1 January
- Sinha, A. (2013), 'Sustainability: Ethics and the Future' in *Journal of Human Values* Vol 19 Number 2 October pp 113-126
- Skinner, Q. (1996), *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Tucker, D. (1980), *Marxism and Individualism* Basil Blackwell Oxford