Capability, Happiness and Adaptation in Sen and J. S. Mill

MOZAFFAR QIZILBASH
University of East Anglia

While there is much common ground between the writings of Amartya Sen and John Stuart Mill – particularly in their advocacy of freedom and gender equality – one is a critic, while the other is an advocate, of utilitarianism. In spite of this contrast, there are strong echoes of Sen's capability approach in Mill's writings. Inasmuch as Mill sees the capability to be happy as important he holds a form of capability approach. He also thinks of happiness as constituted by the exercise of certain capabilities (including the higher faculties). Furthermore, Mill addresses the possibility that people can adapt to limited opportunity, which is central to Sen's critique of some 'utility'-based views. By contrasting contentment and happiness Mill suggests one way in which a utilitarian might address cases of adaptation. His discussions of capabilities and of adaptation are consistent with his utilitarianism.

I. INTRODUCTION

John Stuart Mill and Amartya Sen are important figures in both economics and philosophy. Their works also have several common themes. Both are champions of freedom and gender equality. Both have great faith in reason and are passionate defenders of pluralism (understood in terms of a diversity of views in society) and of public discussion. The connections do not end here, and it is not my purpose to provide an exhaustive list of these. However, on one point they diverge. While Mill advocated a variety of utilitarianism, and founded the Utilitarian Society, Sen has developed his own position in normative economics and moral philosophy based on a critique of utilitarianism. His 'capability approach' has emerged, in part, from that critique. To be sure, Sen's critique has been multi-faceted and nuanced, and he has on occasion reminded us of some of the virtues of utilitarianism (such as its focus on ends rather than means, and on people's well-being).[1] He has also argued in favour of a specific view of utility which sees it as a 'vector' with many (possibly non-comparable or 'incommensurable') components. Sen suggests that Mill's view of happiness, which involves a plurality of qualitatively distinct pleasures, involves precisely this view.[2]

[1] Amartya K. Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford, 1999), p. 60.
[2] Amartya K. Sen, 'Plural Utility', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 81 (1980–1), pp. 193–7.

© 2006 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0953820805001809
Utilitas Vol. 18, No. 1, March 2006
Printed in the United Kingdom

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820805001809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In this article, I argue that there are passages in Mill which are very Sen-like, and involve a specific form of capability view, as well as a distinct view of happiness which involves the exercise of capabilities. In the first part of the article, I cite some of the relevant passages and relate them to Sen's approach.[3] In the remainder of the article, I focus on one line of criticism which Sen levels at 'utility'-based views – particularly when 'utility' is understood in terms of happiness or desire satisfaction. This involves the idea of disadvantaged people who 'adapt' to their desperate circumstances in various ways. Mill's writings on utilitarianism engage with, and respond to, examples of this sort to some degree. His writings on gender go even further in addressing adaptation, and there are strong links here with Sen's views on adaptation and gender. However, reading Mill's passages on adaptation also allows us to appreciate the way in which capability, opportunity and happiness are linked in some of his writings.

II. CAPABILITY AND HAPPINESS IN SEN AND J. S. MILL

Amartya Sen has argued that the quality of life, egalitarian claims and development can be judged, *inter alia*, in terms of the *opportunities* that a person faces or in terms of that person's *ability* to lead a valuable life. This is the central insight of his capability approach. Sen has formulated his notion of 'capability' in a variety of ways. One puts the emphasis on the idea of opportunity. A person's capability is the range of lives from which she can choose one. To that degree, it reflects her opportunities. On Sen's view, good lives are in turn constituted by valuable 'beings' and 'doings' or valuable 'functionings', and can be defined in terms of a collection or *n-tuple* of such functionings.[4] Another way in which Sen sometimes characterizes the notion of 'capability' comes closer to the ordinary sense of the word: it sees capability in terms of a person's *powers*.[5] A person's capability reflects her 'positive freedom' inasmuch as it captures what she *can* be or do.[6] While Sen runs the two notions – of opportunities and powers – together, in ordinary use they are distinct and can come

[3] In this part of the article I expand on the first section of my 'Amartya Sen's Capability View: Insightful Sketch or Distorted Picture?', *The Capability Approach: Concepts, Measures and Applications*, ed. F. Comim, M. Qizilbash and S. Alkire (Cambridge, forthcoming).

[4] Amartya K. Sen, 'Capability and Well-Being', *The Quality of Life*, ed. M. C. Nussbaum and A. K. Sen (Oxford, 1993), p. 31.

[5] See, for example, Amartya K. Sen (in conversation with Bina Agarwal, Jane Humphries and Ingrid Robeyns), 'Continuing the Conversation', *Feminist Economics* 9 (2003), p. 323.

[6] Sen has T. H. Green's notion of positive freedom in mind rather than Isaiah Berlin's. See Amartya K. Sen, *Rationality and Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2002), pp. 585–6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820805001809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

apart.[7] In ordinary language, there is nothing peculiar in claiming that someone has great powers (such as natural abilities and talents) without the opportunity to exercise them. This serves to remind us that, on many occasions, Sen's use of 'capability' is quite specialized and technical. However, he also sometimes uses 'capabilities' in a less technical way to refer to specific abilities such as the ability to appear in public without shame or to be minimally adequately nourished, or to avoid starvation. He sees some such capabilities as 'basic', inasmuch as they involve the ability to realize or achieve certain crucially important functionings up to minimally adequate levels. Aside from providing a view of the quality of life, the capability approach also provides a view of development, which is understood in terms of 'capability expansion'. Sen has characterized this expansion in terms of Karl Marx's notion of 'replacing the domination of circumstances and chance by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances'.[8] Furthermore, on Sen's view, egalitarian claims – including claims relating to gender justice – may be judged in terms of equality of capability, *inter alia*. Finally, Sen sees poverty in terms of a failure to have basic capabilities.

As we shall see in the next section, Sen bases some of his arguments against 'utility' as a reliable basis for the evaluation of the quality of life on a critique of happiness or desire satisfaction views of the quality of life. However, in some statements of his capability approach he takes 'being happy' to be a valuable functioning.[9] To this degree, happiness is incorporated into, and given space in, that approach. Equally, pleasures can be seen as valuable functionings. For example, the pleasures of reading *Middlemarch* might include such 'beings' and 'doings' as being moved by the unfolding fate of the main characters and appreciating George Eliot's insights and humour. There is, nonetheless, a contrast between the relatively limited role that happiness has in Sen's approach and the central position of happiness in Mill's 'Utilitarianism', where he defines 'happiness' in terms of 'pleasure and the absence of pain' and 'unhappiness' in terms of 'pain and the privation of pleasure'.[10] Yet

[7] For a passage where Sen runs the notions of positive freedom, opportunity and power together see Sen, *Rationality and Freedom*, pp. 586–7. Various distinct senses of capability in Sen's writings are noted in Des Gasper, 'Sen's Capability Approach and Nussbaum's Capabilities Ethic', *Journal of International Development* 9 (1997), p. 284.

[8] Amartya K. Sen, 'Development as Capability Expansion', *Human Development and the International Development Strategy for the 1990s*, ed. K. Griffin and J. B. Knight (London, 1990), p. 44.

[9] Amartya K. Sen, 'Poor Relatively Speaking', *Oxford Economic Papers* 35 (1983), p. 161f. and 'Capability and Well-Being', p. 48.

[10] John S. Mill, 'Utilitarianism', in *Utilitarianism, On Liberty. Essay on Bentham. Together with Selected Writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Austin*, ed. M. Warnock (Glasgow, 1962), p. 257.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820805001809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

we find echoes of Sen's capability approach scattered throughout Mill's writings, and not merely in his famous defence of liberty.

First, consider Sen's account of development as an expansion of capabilities. In his *The Subjection of Women* Mill distinguishes the 'modern world' from the 'old'.[11] While Mill's use of the terms 'modern world' and 'old world' belong to a different age, they translate quite directly into contemporary uses of 'developed world' and 'underdeveloped world'. For Mill, what distinguishes 'modern' from 'old' institutions and social ideas is that 'human beings are no longer born to their place in society, and chained down by an inexorable bond to the place they are born to, but are free to employ their faculties'.[12] To the degree that the 'old' world is one where people are constrained, and have limited capabilities (in Sen's sense), there is an expansion in freedom in the move from the 'old world' to the 'modern world'. Mill's position here is a form of capability view. The same can be said of Mill's discussion of gender justice in *The Subjection of Women*. He describes the disadvantages of women in terms of 'disabilities . . . to which women are subject' and the 'higher social functions' which are closed to them.[13] He also looks forward to a world in which '[w]omen in general would be brought up equally capable of understanding business, public affairs, and the higher matters of speculation, with men'.[14] Some form of equality of capability seems to be Mill's ideal, or goal, or perhaps 'hope' here, though the underlying sense of 'capable' used in this passage involves the notion of 'powers' understood as abilities or faculties rather than opportunities. While, as we shall see, this sense of 'capability' runs through many of Mill's passages cited in this article, it is important that in some of the passages just cited he is also concerned with the expansion of opportunity and freedom.

Mill's discussion of poverty in 'Utilitarianism' also echoes Sen. Mill suggests that rational discussion may help to solve social problems. He hopes that: 'poverty in any sense implying suffering, may be completely extinguished by the wisdom of society'.[15] His account is inevitably couched in terms of happiness and yet he echoes Sen's capability approach. Mill argues that everyone with certain

> moral and intellectual requisites is capable of an existence which is enviable; and unless such a person through bad laws, or subjection to the will of others, is denied the liberty to find the sources of happiness within his reach, he will not fail to find this enviable existence, if he escape the positive evils of life, the great

[11] John S. Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, ed. S. Okin (Cambridge, 1988), p. 17.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., p. 20.
[14] Ibid., p. 90.
[15] Mill, 'Utilitarianism', p. 266.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820805001809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sources of physical and mental suffering, and the unkindness, worthlessness, or premature loss of objects of affection. The main stress of the problem lies, therefore, in the contest with these calamities . . .[16]

The thought here is that people have the capability to lead valuable or 'enviable' lives, if certain prerequisites are met. In 'contesting' the 'calamities' which can undermine a person's capability to live an 'enviable life', Mill is concerned with ensuring that people have the *capability to be happy*. This position may not be seen as a 'capability view' inasmuch as it can be argued that, in Mill's account, capability is not seen as intrinsically valuable, but only valuable to the degree that it is connected to happiness.[17] Nonetheless, Sen's hope is that the capability approach can be adopted by people with different views of the good life and valuation,[18] and Mill's view might be classified as a capability approach on a broad definition of what might count as such an approach. On this 'Millian' capability view 'being happy' and the 'beings' and 'doings' which constitute a happy life would be treated as the only intrinsically valuable functionings. Ensuring that people have the ability to achieve these functionings is crucial on this view.

There are also numerous passages in 'On Liberty' where Mill uses the language of capability. For example, Mill argues that liberty is not just required for the development of great thinkers but that it is 'indispensable to enable average human beings to attain the mental stature which they are capable of'.[19] Similarly, in articulating his arguments in favour of diversity as a prerequisite for the development of individuality, Mill suggests that, given the variety of human beings, 'unless there is a corresponding diversity in their forms of life, they neither obtain their fair share of happiness, nor grow up to the mental, moral and aesthetic stature of which their nature is capable'.[20] He argues against the conformity which he thinks is dominant in his time. This conformity has, he thinks, led to a sorry state of affairs where people's 'capacities are withered and starved: they [have] become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures'.[21] The underlying thought running through these passages is that people require the freedom to purse a diverse range of opportunities – involving distinct forms of life – to develop (or maintain) their capabilities and to achieve

[16] Ibid., pp. 265–6.
[17] I am grateful to Roger Crisp for this point.
[18] Amartya K. Sen, 'Capability and Well-Being', p. 48.
[19] John S. Mill, 'On Liberty', *Utilitarianism, On Liberty. Essay on Bentham. Together with Selected Writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Austin*, ed. M. Warnock (Glasgow, 1962), p. 160.
[20] Ibid., pp. 197–8.
[21] Ibid., p. 190.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820805001809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

happiness. Here the notions of opportunity and capability clearly come apart.

The notion of capability emerges again in Mill's discussion of the Calvinist 'theory of life' in 'On Liberty'. Mill suggests that because human nature is seen as radically corrupt on this theory, 'to one holding to this theory of life crushing out any of the human faculties, capacities and susceptibilities is no evil'. Given the influence of this view of life, Mill finds it unsurprising that:

> many persons think that human beings thus cramped and dwarfed are as their Maker designed them to be; just as many have thought that trees are a much finer thing when clipped into pollards, or cut out into figures of animals, than as nature intended them. But if it be part of any religion that man was made by a good Being, it is more consistent with that faith to believe that this Being gave all human faculties that they might be cultivated and unfolded, not rooted out and consumed, and that he takes delight in every nearer approach made by his creatures to the ideal conception embodied in them, every increase in any of their capabilities of comprehension, of action, or of enjoyment.[22]

In these passages, while what humans are capable of is important, and drives Mill's arguments, the claims made are typically related to happiness or pleasure in some way. Taken together, these various passages from Mill's diverse writings suggest that he was concerned with capabilities in relation to gender justice, poverty and development. However, some of these passages hint at the possibility that happiness and the development and exercise of human capabilities are also closely related.

III. HAPPINESS, CONTENTMENT AND ADAPTATION

In his critiques of happiness and desire satisfaction views of welfare, Sen often uses well-known examples of 'adaptation'. Sen's worry is that a person might adapt to deprived circumstances and learn to be 'happy' with the limited pleasures, or to satisfy the few desires, she can achieve. If she does so, the metric of happiness or desire satisfaction may not be a reliable basis for judging her well-being. One of many passages where Sen develops this critique runs as follows:

> [a] person who has had a life of misfortune, with very limited opportunities, and rather little hope, may be more easily reconciled to deprivations than others reared in more fortunate and affluent circumstances. The metric of happiness may, therefore, distort the extent of deprivation, in a specific and biased way. The hopeless beggar, the precarious landless labourer, the dominated housewife, the hardened unemployed or the overexhausted coolie may all take pleasures in small mercies, and manage to suppress intense suffering for the

[22] Ibid., p. 191.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820805001809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

necessity of continued survival, but it would be ethically deeply mistaken to attach a correspondingly small value to the loss of their well-being because of this survival strategy.[23]

While Mill does not address the specific cases of the hopeless beggar, the hardened unemployed, the dominated housewife or the over-exhausted coolie in 'Utilitarianism', one can construct a response to Sen's point through a reading of Mill's text. In his famous discussion of the different qualities of pleasures, Mill suggests that:

> no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no uninstructed person would be an ignoramus . . . even though they may be persuaded that the fool, [or] the dunce . . . is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs. They would not resign what they possess . . . for the most complete satisfaction of all the desires which they have in common with him.[24]

Here Mill clearly thinks that the 'complete satisfaction' of desires is not *in itself* a goal for intelligent human beings. He would no doubt reject views which suggest that one might achieve happiness by levelling down one's desires to those which could be most easily and completely satisfied, while not discriminating between the objects of those desires.

Mill famously goes on to argue that those who are acquainted with both higher and lower pleasures – the so-called 'competent judges' – would 'show a marked preference for the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties'.[25] Furthermore, he adds that 'whoever supposes that this preference takes place at a sacrifice of happiness confounds two very different ideas, of happiness, and content'.[26] Mill's discussion here can be directly related to Sen's examples of adaptation if – as seems plausible – the 'pleasures in small mercies' in Sen's text relate merely to lower pleasures. On Mill's account, if the circumstances of the over-exhausted coolie, the hardened unemployed and the dominated housewife are such that they cannot, and for that reason learn not to, pursue or achieve the pleasures which engage their higher faculties, and content themselves with the more limited lower pleasures to which they have access, they are not, on Mill's view, *happy* even if they claim that they are. Happiness must be distinct from mere contentment with a life of lower pleasures inasmuch as happiness involves or requires the development and exercise of our higher faculties or capacities. I refer to this view – that happiness in some way involves the development and exercise of capacities – as Mill's 'capability view of happiness'. It is distinct from what I earlier called the 'Millian' capability approach (which stresses the importance

[23] Amartya K. Sen, *On Ethics and Economics* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 45–6.
[24] Mill, 'Utilitarianism', p. 259.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Mill, 'Utilitarianism', p. 260.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820805001809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the ability to be happy). While capability and happiness are linked in both, the link is far more direct in the capability view of happiness. To distinguish 'happiness' and 'contentment' in the way that he does in this text, Mill effectively relies on a substantive picture of the good life, which involves the exercise of specific faculties or capabilities.

Rather than explicitly filling out the account required to make the distinction between happiness and contentment with lower pleasures, he leaves the relative value of a life which involves pleasures which engage the higher faculties and one which only includes the lower pleasures to be adjudicated by competent judges. However, there are two ways in which we can further specify the capabilities which are relevant to the capability view of happiness. First, for this view to be consistent with the hedonistic view of happiness in Mill's 'Utilitarianism', the exercise of the relevant capabilities must yield pleasure. Furthermore, some of the relevant capabilities must be 'higher faculties'.

Mill inevitably worries about those who, while they 'are capable of the higher pleasures, occasionally, under the influence of temptation, postpone them to the lower'.[27] Rather than allowing the possibility that they value the lower pleasures more highly than the higher pleasures, Mill suggests that they only pursue the lower pleasures because of infirmity of character and lack of opportunity to cultivate and exercise higher faculties. He again uses the notion of capability in this context. He worries that:

> [c]apacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society in which it has thrown them, are not favourable to keeping the higher capacity in exercise. Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have not the time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to the inferior pleasures, not because they prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones they are any longer capable of enjoying.[28]

The loss of aspiration cited here echoes the 'limited hope' in Sen's discussion. Moreover, just as for Sen 'very limited opportunities' lead people to adapt to, and content themselves with, what is on offer, it is the lack of 'time and opportunity' which, for Mill, leads people, in certain conditions, to fall back on, and 'addict' themselves to, the inferior pleasures. Finally, just as the lives of the dominated housewife, the hardened unemployed and the over-exhausted coolie may fall short in terms of certain valuable functionings or capabilities, so also, for Mill,

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., p. 261.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820805001809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

one reason why people may limit their aspirations is that they are no longer capable of enjoying higher pleasures. Capabilities (understood in terms of abilities or faculties), opportunity and happiness are closely linked in Mill's discussion here. If this discussion is not seen as making the same point as Sen's adaptation examples, it is certainly a close relative of those examples. Furthermore, to the degree that Mill's discussion of higher and lower pleasures addresses the adaptation problem, his utilitarianism addresses a central plank of Sen's critique of happiness and desire satisfaction views of 'utility'.[29]

IV. ADAPTATION AND GENDER JUSTICE

Mill also shows a keen appreciation of adaptation in the context of gender inequality. Sen's worries about adaptation apply forcefully in this context. If women living in a highly inequitable society which leaves them able to pursue only a very limited range of opportunities learn to tolerate the inequities embedded in their society, and to enjoy what they have access to, their contentment with their lot is likely to distort the 'utility' calculus on Sen's account.[30] That gives us one reason, on his view, to consider capability *inter alia* in thinking about gender justice. As a consequence, the capability approach has been very influential in discussions of gender justice, and the issue of adaptation plays an important role in advocacy of the capability approach in this context, most notably in Martha Nussbaum's variant on Sen's approach.[31]

Mill's writings on gender justice anticipate many of the points that Sen and Nussbaum advance. He suggests that 'all men, except perhaps the most brutish, desire to have, in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one'.[32] To ensure the willing slavery of women, men have 'put everything in practice to enslave their minds'.[33] To this end men have put in place an education which involves an ideal of character which is the opposite of that of men: one allowing control by, and submission to, the will of others. This is part of the

[29] Of course, Mill's discussion of the higher and lower pleasures can also be related to modern 'informed desire' views. See, for example, Roger Crisp, *Mill on Utilitarianism* (London and New York, 1997), p. 29. I discuss the question of whether such views can address Sen's examples of adaptation in my 'Well-Being, Adaptation and Human Limitations', Presented at the conference on 'Preference Formation and Well-Being' in Cambridge, in June 2004.

[30] For a version of this argument see Amartya K. Sen, 'Gender Inequality and Theories of Justice', *Women, Culture and Development. A Study of Human Capabilities*, ed. M. C. Nussbaum and J. Glover (Oxford, 1995), pp. 259–65.

[31] See especially Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 111–66.

[32] Mill, *Subjection of Women*, p. 15.

[33] Ibid., p. 16.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820805001809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reason why, on Mill's view, '[a]ll causes, social, and natural, combine to make it unlikely that women should be collectively rebellious to the power of men'.[34] Sen explicitly takes a similar line in a response to an interview question about the influence of feminist scholars on his work. He tells his interviewers that Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* helped him understand how 'women readily accept the fog of pro-inequality apologia as a true description of reality' and suggests that Marx's notion of 'false consciousness' applies much more readily to 'spurious perceptions regarding gender inequality than to class inequality'.[35] In discussing gender inequality elsewhere, he also suggests, echoing Mill's text, that – as regards arrangements which are inequitable – '[t]his is not the only field in which the survival of extraordinary inequality is based on making "allies" of those who have most to lose from such arrangements'.[36]

Sen and Mill are very close here, and I have already argued that in his writings on gender, Mill can be seen as advocating a form of capability equality. Are these passages from Mill's writings inconsistent with his utilitarian writings? While in 'Utilitarianism' Mill does, as we have seen, attempt to fend off worries which can be interpreted as involving adaptation, there is no attempt in *The Subjection of Women* to defend utilitarianism in the light of such worries. Ought we to reject the view that these parts of Mill's writings have much to do with his utilitarianism and are better understood as advancing a non-utilitarian capability view?[37]

I suggest that we ought to reject the view that these parts of Mill's writings can be detached from his 'Utilitarianism'. There is a clear line of continuity between some of the passages from 'Utilitarianism' and 'On Liberty' cited above and passages in *The Subjection of Women* which suggests that Mill's underlying view remains stable. In particular, in all three texts Mill uses a plant metaphor in discussing the growth and decay of human capacities. In one passage from 'Utilitarianism', as we saw, Mill writes that '[c]apacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a tender plant' which is 'easily killed' or 'dies away' under certain conditions.[38] In a passage from 'On Liberty' cited earlier Mill

[34] Ibid., p. 15.

[35] Amartya K. Sen (in conversation with Bina Agarwal, Jane Humphries and Ingrid Robeyns), 'Continuing the Conversation', p. 322.

[36] Sen, 'Gender Inequality and Theories of Justice', p. 260.

[37] It can be, and has been, argued that much of Mill's work – including his writings on liberty – is best seen as an implicit rejection of utilitarianism. See, for example, Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 176–82 and pp. 193–4 and Christopher Coope, 'Was Mill a Utilitarian?', *Utilitas* 10 (1998), pp. 33–67. In this context, Sen himself suggests that 'the protection of liberty supplemented John Stuart Mill's utilitarian perspective very substantially' in his *Development as Freedom*, p. 289.

[38] Mill, 'Utilitarianism', p. 261.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820805001809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

compares the 'crushing' of human faculties to the clipping of trees into various shapes. Indeed, he often uses this metaphor to express what I earlier termed the 'capability view of happiness' and it is striking that he returns to it in discussing the influence of education on women's capabilities.[39] He writes that:

> in the case of women a hot-house and stove cultivation has always been carried on some of the capabilities of their nature, for the benefit of their masters. Then because certain products of the general vital force sprout luxuriantly and reach a great development in this heated atmosphere and under this active nurture and watering, while other shoots from the same root, which are left outside in the wintry air, with ice purposively heaped all around them, have a stunted growth, and some are burnt off with fire and disappear . . .[40]

Mill goes on to suggest that, in the generalizations that men of his time make about women, they fail to recognize the influence of their own work in shaping women's capacities (i.e. their powers or faculties). He admits that there is a great deal of ignorance about human character, and that it is not clear what women's capabilities would be if they were given the same range of opportunities as men. So he writes of women's ('natural') capabilities (presumably uninfluenced by social conditioning or allowed to develop in conditions which are more favourable to less distorted development) that 'these nobody knows, not even themselves, because most of them have never been called out'.[41]

Later on in *The Subjection of Women* Mill suggests that women's capabilities may turn out to be rather different from those which men have attributed to them. In discussing the view that the 'nervous susceptibility of women is a disqualification for practice, in anything but domestic life'[42] Mill returns to the plant metaphor. He writes of some 'higher class' women of his time that they are brought up as:

> a kind of hot-house plants, shielded from the wholesome vicissitudes of air and temperature, and untrained in any of the occupations and exercises which give stimulus and development to the circulatory and muscular system, while their nervous system, especially in its emotional department, is kept in unnaturally active play.[43]

[39] Martha C. Nussbaum suggests that the plant metaphor is central to the works of many ancient Greek poets and philosophers who were concerned with the influence of luck on human flourishing. See, in particular, M. C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 1–4. It is unsurprising, then, that in the passage from 'Utilitarianism' cited above where Mill is discussing 'the contest' with the 'calamities' which can undermine the capacity for achieving happiness, his aim is, in part, to counteract the influence of bad luck.

[40] Mill, *Subjection of Women*, pp. 22–3.

[41] Ibid., pp. 24–5.

[42] Ibid., p. 65.

[43] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820805001809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

By contrast, women who:

> in their early years have shared in the healthful physical education and bodily freedom of their brothers, and who obtain a sufficiency of pure air and exercise in afterlife, very rarely have any excess of nerves which can disqualify them from active pursuits.[44]

Mill concludes that while the education of the women of his time might make them more suitable for some tasks rather than others, there is no reason to think that they would not be able to take on a broad range of functions if they were brought up and educated differently. With this alternative education, they may be 'equally capable' of taking on various functions which were, in his time, exclusively set aside for men. Now, this is a very specific claim, which differs from Sen's focus in his discussion of capability. Sen is not primarily concerned with how women's natural powers or capacities might be distorted by social conditioning or upbringing. Indeed, this issue has not been much discussed in the literature on the capability approach.[45] Nonetheless, Mill's arguments in *The Subjection of Women* form a powerful case for equality of opportunity for women and men and this is precisely in line with Sen's capability approach. Mill's views about the relationship between education and capability are central to that case. To the extent that lack of opportunity distorts and stunts their capacities and blocks off routes to happiness, furthermore, Mill's utilitarianism would promote wider opportunities for women out of a concern for happiness. By now it is also clear that what I earlier termed the 'Millian' capability approach (which insists on the importance of the capability to be happy) and the capability view of happiness (which sees happiness in terms of the development and exercise of capabilities or faculties) are connected. The connection is not explicit in any of the passages I have cited, but it does not take much of a leap to make it. If there is a connection then

[44] Ibid.

[45] In her 'Nature, Function and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (Supplementary Volume 1988), pp. 175–6, Martha Nussbaum suggests that Sen's version of the approach might itself be vulnerable to criticism because of certain forms of adaptation if he does not provide a list of valuable capabilities. Her worry is that people might adapt to unfavourable conditions by adjusting the list of capabilities which they value. This would link to some of Mill's concerns. For example, if because of their dependence on men, women see the ability to attract, or be servile to, men as particularly valuable, they may develop great powers of seduction and servility. In this example, their adaptation might lead to 'the ability to attract men' or 'the ability to be servile' being key capabilities on the list, and their powers of seduction and servility may become so well developed that someone taking Mill's view of the adaptation of capabilities may suggest that they have become distorted or warped by the unjust situation in which these women find themselves. For a related discussion of the adaptation of women's capabilities see my 'A Weakness of the Capability Approach with Respect to Gender Justice', *Journal of International Development* 9 (1997), pp. 251–6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820805001809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mill's view is that the capability to be happy is important, and giving people certain prerequisites – as well as the liberty to pursue a wide range of forms of life – will ensure that they have the capabilities or faculties, exercise of which constitutes happiness.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Mill's extensive use of the language of capability does initially suggest that he holds a version of the capability approach which might conflict with his utilitarianism. However, his uses of words such as 'capable', 'capacity', 'capabilities' and 'disability' can only be properly understood through a careful reading of his texts. The relevant passages in those texts are, however, broadly consistent with his version of utilitarianism. Mill's writings also suggest that his variant of utilitarianism can address the possibility of adaptation in the face of limited opportunity. Furthermore, Mill's use of the language of capability and his arguments in favour of equality of opportunity are consistent with the thrust of Sen's capability approach. Indeed, Mill's utilitarianism is, in general, very close to Sen's capability approach even if the latter is formulated on the basis of a nuanced critique of utilitarianism. The relationship between capabilities, opportunities and happiness in Mill's writings suggests that he held a substantive view of human flourishing which involves the development and exercise of certain capabilities. In the absence of such a view, it is hard to make sense of the distinction between contentment and happiness in his discussion of higher and lower pleasures.[46]

m.qizilbash@uea.ac.uk

[46] The primary impetus for this article came from an earlier paper I presented at a conference on Amartya Sen's capability approach at Saint Edmund's College, Cambridge in June 2001. Amartya Sen's comments on, and response to, that paper led me to think that the subject required more consideration. I have particularly benefited from those comments, as well as from discussion with, and comments from, Sabina Alkire, Roger Crisp and Bob Sugden. I would particularly like to thank Roger Crisp for his written comments on this article.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820805001809 Published online by Cambridge University Press