

An Epistemological Perspective on the Quality of Life Concept*

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Abstract. *Any researcher interested in defining the concept of quality of life faces a difficult epistemological task in terms of harmonizing a concept that seems by its very nature subjective and dispersed. Therefore, at present one can not speak of a universally accepted definition of quality of life but a series of different approaches to the concept based on hypothesis, assumptions and methods of analysis and research. From this viewpoint, the main aim of the present paper is to analyze two most known approaches on the concept of quality of life, so as to highlight the epistemological difficulties and challenges inherent to these approaches. Nevertheless, this paper does not seek definitive answers to the epistemological dilemmas, but set into the limelight these difficulties for further encouraging debate on these questions which might advance the state of research.*

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1. Introduction

The quality of life is a relatively new concept emerged from the pressing need for a better understanding the complexity of human action from the perspective of its ends: prosperity, welfare, and wellbeing, as concepts transcending mere economic meaning and define a much more complex state of the individual. Although in its inception the concept may be located in economic studies, in a relative brief period of time, it stirred the interest of many scholars from various fields such as sociology, ethics, law, to name just a few, thus acquiring a strong interdisciplinary character. The concept has been validated not only as pure scientific notion, but also as defining element in public policy. One of the most recent proofs in this respect is the foundation in 2008 of the “Sarkozy commission” led by two of the most influential contemporary economists (Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz), with main aim to re-define the measuring methods, from a more qualitative approach of living standards and welfare of people. On the other hand, defining such a complex concept as quality of life is not an easy task, as argued by Nussbaum and Sen (Nussbaum, Sen, 1993, p. 4): “The search for a universally applicable account of the quality of human life has, on its side, the promise of a greater power to stand up for the lives of those whom tradition has oppressed or marginalized. But it faces the epistemological difficulty of grounding such an account in an adequate way, saying where the norms come from and how they can be known to be the best. It faces, too, the ethical danger of paternalism, for it is obvious that all too often such accounts have been insensitive to much that is of worth and value in the lives of people in other parts of the world and have served as an excuse for not looking very deeply into these lives”.

Under these circumstances, the development of various definitions and approaches is a natural result. In the light of so many definitions and approaches, the main epistemological difficulty resides in combining such an array of perspectives on a concept which by its very nature seems subjective and dispersed. The researcher, disciple of traditional epistemology true to scientific objectivity, is faced with the dilemmatic perspective of sacrificing objectivity for accuracy.

From this viewpoint, the main aim of the present paper is to analyze two most known approaches on the concept of quality of life, so as to highlight the epistemological difficulties and challenges inherent to these approaches. Nevertheless, this paper does not seek definitive answers to the epistemological dilemmas, but set into the limelight these difficulties for further encouraging debate on these questions which might advance the state of research.

2. The utilitarian approach

As Sen observed, “Utilitarianism was for a very long time the «official» theory of welfare economics in a thoroughly unique way” (Sen, 2008, p. 5). In this context, the utilitarian approach might be considered as the dominant approach in the philosophy of science for almost two centuries, as the result of, on the one hand, utilitarian philosophy initiated by Bentham and perfected by Mill, and, on the other hand, of registered progress in economic science through inclusion and use in analysis on large scale of the concept of economic utility and mostly marginal utility under its original diverse denominations. This new kind of analysis emerged from the epistemological necessity to offer a viable alternative to the holistic approach with often times inductivist tinges based on the generalization of behavior and economic variables specific to theories initiated by economists traditionally encased in the classical current, fact which, in the end, generated a crisis of the specifically economic instruments and methods. Thus, marginal analysis not only allowed for the pure economic science to surpass the gripe generated by the ascension of holistic currents which foresaw the collapse of free economy, but also created the necessary parameters to develop a new branch in economic science – welfare economics.

In the utilitarian approach, quality of life essentially depends on the level of welfare of the individual, where welfare is defined as the pleasure or desire satisfaction one obtains from using goods or, in broader terms, resources. This simple definition succeeds to elegantly solve two apparently incompatible methodological problems for any social science: the universality of a scientific theory, on the one hand, and individualism which is specific to human behavior, on the other hand.

As the universality of theory entails the identification of a common measure unit, applicable to any case, this definition oriented utilitarian approach towards the interpretation of welfare which would allow a direct relation between the quantity of goods an individual possesses and his or her welfare status. This relationship has been generated by the following rationale of simplifying character which appears to be an eloquent example of the nomological-deductive method described in the Popper-Hempel-Oppenheim model: welfare depends on the satisfaction of the individual, whereas the satisfaction of the individual derives from the consumption of goods. Consequently, welfare is in a relation of direct proportionality with the capacity of the individual to acquire goods. Clearly, this reasoning does not imply that two individuals with a similar quantity of identical goods have the same level of welfare, because in the case of the two, the utility of consumption of the same

type of goods may differ, but, on the other hand, this reasoning shows the path towards better welfare - acquiring and then, consumption of goods.

The ever present temptation offered by the identification of a common feature of a quantifiable financial instrument by means of income and consumption to assess welfare was much too strong not to be followed and to waste time with the appraisal of certain methodological malfunctions that could ultimately and essentially alter the result of the research. Hence, in this way we may explain why important advocators of welfare such as V. Pareto, F.Y. Edgeworth or A. Marshall focused mainly on the way individuals may obtain resources and the way the respective are distributed at the level of society. Under the present circumstances, it becomes obvious that Pareto efficiency or the function of utility does not represent something else than analysis instruments of welfare derived from the above detailed rationale, used as such.

Regrettably, the utilitarian approach of welfare economics and quality of life as they were conceived by traditional economists of welfare eventually fell into the trap of holism as hard as it sought to avoid it. Focusing on the aggregate welfare lost sight of the special character of the utilitarian – the individualist methodology in which the way welfare is distributed among the members of society ought to be decisive. Besides, one of the main criticisms brought to the utilitarian approach is precisely this aggregate feature, the lack of importance regarding the ways in which wealth is distributed among the members of society thus leaving utilitarianism somewhere in between the sum of total of human happiness and average individual happiness.

In fact, the expected fallacy of utilitarianism was instilled, involuntarily, by J.S. Mill from its very inception through what scholars, starting with *Principia ethica* by G.E. Moore use to call the naturalistic fallacy. Mill's confusion between individual desire and desirability, hard as it is to understand for an economist with a sharp methodological sense, showed the restrictions in analyzing aggregate welfare thus directing this approach to the general assumption that the quality of life is reflected exclusively in the subjective state of the person. Following this reasoning, utilitarianism was faced with the apparently insurmountable problem: it cannot warrant the drawing of adequate protective boundaries around the essential interests of individuals, and it does not allow them the space to pursue the personal concerns which give meaning to their lives. This dilemmatic situation further transcends the area of quality of life by Sen who argues: "The utilitarian calculus based on, say, happiness can be deeply unfair to those who are persistently deprived, such as the traditional underdogs in stratified societies, oppressed minorities in intolerant communities, precarious sharecroppers living in a world of uncertainty, sweated workers in exploitative industrial arrangements, subdued housewives in deeply

sexist cultures. The hopelessly deprived people may lack the courage to desire any radical change and often *tend to adjust their desires and expectations to what little they see as feasible*. They train themselves to take pleasure in small mercies. The practical merit of such adjustments for people in chronically adverse positions is easy to understand: this is one way of making deprived lives bearable. But the adjustments also have the incidental effect of distorting the scale of utilities” (Sen, 2008, p. 6).

Presently, for a significant array of researchers, utilitarianism is brought to the forefront under the overshadowing of cold and pragmatic approach, trapped into an intransigent and narrow-minded approach, in which, from one point forward, someone’s happiness may be reached through someone else’s unhappiness and in which quality of life is reduced to a simple problem of distribution of resources and monetary calculus of income and expenses.

2. The capabilities approach

Utilitarianism has received numerous criticisms over time, but perhaps the most powerful critics, those who have managed to irrevocably shake the foundations were those made by John Rawls and Amartya Sen, who, in the end, succeeded to change the utilitarian approach in quality of life with the capabilities and functionings approach showing that, as Sen points: “the value of the living standard lies in the living, and not in the possessing of commodities, which has derivative and varying relevance” (Sen, 1987, p. 25). The individual must not track welfare in the classical sense which can be financially measured, but a superior condition opposed to the current one, which is given neither by the quantity of owned goods, nor by the level of welfare and hence cannot be limited to the evaluation through resources, as Sen confirms: “The central feature of well-being is the ability to achieve valuable functionings. The need for identification and valuation of the important functionings cannot be avoided by looking at something else, such as happiness, desire fulfillment, opulence, or command over primary goods” (Sen, 1985, p. 200). Subsequently, capabilities and functionings approach, according to Sen, renders resources into a much more complex notion, that of capabilities, which transcend economic significance and acquire an interdisciplinary character. In the present overarching, the concept of quality of life undergoes a change of significance via a definition entailing a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being (Nussbaum, Sen, 1993, p. 30). Sen continues, arguing that “The approach is based on a view of living as a combination of various «doings and beings», with quality of life to be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings” (Nussbaum, Sen, 1993, p. 30). The connection between functionings and

capabilities is more clearly established by way of defining capabilities as: “the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve”. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors [or n-tuples] of functionings, reflecting the person’s freedom to lead one type of life or another... to choose from possible livings’ (Sen, 1992, p. 40) or, to put it differently, “Functionings represent parts of the state of a person – in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life. The capability of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection” (Nussbaum, Sen, 1993, p. 31).

At first glance the progress of such an approach is quite obvious: analysis concentrates on the individual personality, expanding at the same time the area of significance of living standards and quality of life much beyond possession or resource accumulation. In fact, the real progress made by this approach is given by the revaluation of the concept of quality of life by calling the following reasoning: quality of life derives from emotional states and these states are not limited to material means (Alkire, 2009, p. 3)

Nevertheless, once with the progress and the extension of the term, there follows the methodological paradox of how can one commensurate and compare interpersonally, the elements which give value to the quality of life, since “they can not be mechanically reduced to a single common denominator, such as happiness or utility” (Alkire, 2009, p. 3). Moreover, for the accuracy of argumentation, we should highlight the fact that the capabilities approach confronts itself with two evaluation shortcomings: one at the level of the element aggregation which composes the living standard and another regarding the tangible assessment of these elements. This difficulty is also observed by Sen (Nussbaum, Sen, 1993, p. 32), who argues: “In an evaluative exercise, we can distinguish between two different questions: (1) What are the objects of value? (2) How valuable are the respective objects?”

One of the most frequent solution is suggested by Alkire, who points: “Rather, the capability approach is applied differently depending on the purpose of the measure, the place and situation (or, if comparability is required, the places to be compared), the level(s) of analysis, the data available, the institutions it will guide, and the kind of analyses that the measure will catalyze or inform. The methods by which it is applied are, similarly, plural. The concrete purpose of the application provides necessary definition” (Alkire, 2009, p. 7). This solution solves the problem of quantification transferring it into the area of public policy and methodological instrumentalism which suggest that any solution is good as long as it is applicable. This way: “The identification of a space does not foreclose the possibility of using different indicators – including subjective and resource indicators – to better understand

quality of life. Capabilities can also be analyzed using quantitative, qualitative, participatory, and subjective data, and using administrative, census, survey, and institutional data” (Alkire, 2009, p. 7). This manner of approach has been otherwise suggested by Sen, who argued: “While the identification of value-objects and the specification of an evaluative space involve norms, the nature of the norms must depend on precisely what the purpose of the evaluation is” (Nussbaum, Sen, 1993, p. 35).

Also, the previously proposed solution maintains that the quality of life concentrated on the individual as fundamental unit of analysis, but one remark is promptly added in order to rescue from the assumption that this solution is in any way subordinated to methodological individualism: “The capability approach adopts what Robeyns (2008) calls ethical individualism, but does not adopt other kinds of individualism (to which many, rightly in our view, would object) which she calls ontological and methodological individualism” (Alkire, 2009, p. 8). Not only is this form of individualism different from ontological individualism, which assumes that society is made up of a collection of individuals who dispose of certain properties, and from the methodological one, which argues that any social phenomena may be explained through human action, but it is the only form of individualism that proves to be applicable to capabilities approach. It is clear thus, that there is an elevated form of individualism, as approach opposed to holism, which “does not allow the achievements of a group to be celebrated without taking note of deprivations and unfreedoms that certain members of the group may quietly suffer” (Alkire, 2009, p. 8).

Thus, in an almost imperceptible manner, the capabilities approach enters in the shallow waters of ethics and value judgments, by means of a mechanism directly transient from the phenomenon that David Hume observed a while ago: “In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprized to find that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, `tis necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.” (Hume, 2000, p. 334).

But which is ultimately the danger in judgment values? Supporters of capabilities approach would answer that none, demarcating themselves categorically from the traditional epistemological vision. While, traditional epistemology and especially positivist would answer that the greatest danger with value judgments lies in the disappearance of the criterion of demarcation between science and common knowledge; supporters of capabilities approach argue that we have come to that point where scientific progress is no longer possible if one does not accept value judgments as viable working hypothesis. The adepts of capabilities approach argue for their position by two means: on one hand, they attack the difficult, artificial and abstract character to be applied of logic positivism by using, among other, Duhem-Quine hypothesis of the impossibility of individually testing one possibility (Nussbaum, Sen, 1993, p. 143) and, on the other hand, by supporting choice of hypothesis, essentially of the operators used in the analysis of quality of life, cannot be pursued if not appealing to value judgments. This argument suggests that no social science can be disinterested, as value judgments reside in the larger interest depleted over one economic theme in disfavor of another. In other words, always “assumptions are impregnated in value”, because they are the result of a researcher's choice that is subjective by definition. The argument is sustained by the capabilities approach in the following rationale: If the interest to select a particular problem or approach may be the result of value judgments, the objective nature of science can be maintained by a research method based on logical arguments and/or factual evidence.

Ultimately, one last argument in favor of capabilities approach would be that if the researcher overtly assumes judgment values, then his scientific endeavor is as honest as possible and more so, internalizing and discussing these judgment values is the one fact which makes economics more interesting. This is in fact what Sen also points. “There is no escape from the problem of evaluation in selecting a class of functionings in the description and appraisal of capabilities, and this selection problem is, in fact, one part of the general task of the choice of weights in making normative evaluation... The need for selection and discrimination is neither an embarrassment, nor a unique difficulty, for conceptualizing functionings and capabilities” (Sen, 2008, p. 11).

Clearly, the objectivity-value judgments controversy continues in many other areas related with quality of life concept and will continue for a long time. What is noteworthy is that the capabilities approach seems to resist the siege of the traditional epistemological trends, and, moreover, to impose a new vision on methodological approach in quality of life issues.

4. Conclusions

Consistent with the purpose aimed at in the introduction, the present paper concentrated on the analysis from the perspective of epistemological foundations, of two common approaches in the study of quality of life. The analysis of the two approaches, the utilitarian one and the one on functions and capabilities, proves to be interesting from at least three points of view, that can be summarized as follows: (1) they are probably the most known methods to analyze the quality of life; (2) seem to have common source in the area of economic science and (3) the methods promoted by these are the result of opposed epistemological views. On the one hand the utilitarian approach, although generated by the need to overcome an epistemological barrier imposed by the holistic method, in the end gave up to analyze subjective context in favor of an objectivism imposed by the traditional epistemological perspective. On the other hand, the approach based on functions and capabilities seems to have chosen precisely the rationale of context, despite all the risks related to an objective character which can be challenged from the point of view of theories more or less in fashion regarding scientific knowledge. Therefore, both approaches specific to quality of life seem to be the result of crucial choices or sacrifices from the perspective of methodology, fact which may render them vulnerable to criticism directed towards this angle. But, while the utilitarian approach shows that it has exhausted its resources and that it has at least temporarily abandoned the methodological battle, the approach based on functions and capabilities demonstrates that it can successfully face any epistemological controversy, thus proving a viable path in deciphering phenomena and meanings specific to quality of life.

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