Value and Freedom

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Despite the dramatic sounding title, the goal of this talk is relatively modest. When we want to make society better we do need some notion of what makes society good and in what way is one society better than others. To measure the goodness of a society we need also to measure how well off an *individual* is and how to compute the goodness of a society from the well being of its individuals.   There are various proposals for this.   Utilitarianism is one. Rawlsianism is another one. Now recently, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have suggested bringing in the notion of *Capability*. How well off you are should not be measured *just* by what you have but should be measured by what you *can* have. Thus if two people have the same income but one of them is handicapped then the handicapped person is worse off by having less capability.   One issue not yet considered but important is how society can *increase* our capability. Giving us money need not be the only way.

A second Issue to be considered is the notion of *freedom*. How much freedom do I have? Freedom may be limited by society *disallowing* certain things. But it may also be limited by what I can do independently of social restrictions.   A naïve approach is to count my freedom by the *number* of things I can do, but this can be deceptive. Suppose there is only one Indian restaurant in my neighborhood but I am allowed to have a six digit password. Usha has five Indian restaurants in her neighborhood, but is only allowed a three digit password. I seem to have *many more* options than Usha. Does that mean that I have *more* freedom? Sen has suggested that the *value of options* matters and not just their number.

The mathematics needed to address these issues is currently rather meagre. We hope to supplement what exists already.