

PHILOSOPHY OF ECONOMICS & POLITICS

LECTURE 14: WOMEN & CAPABILITIES

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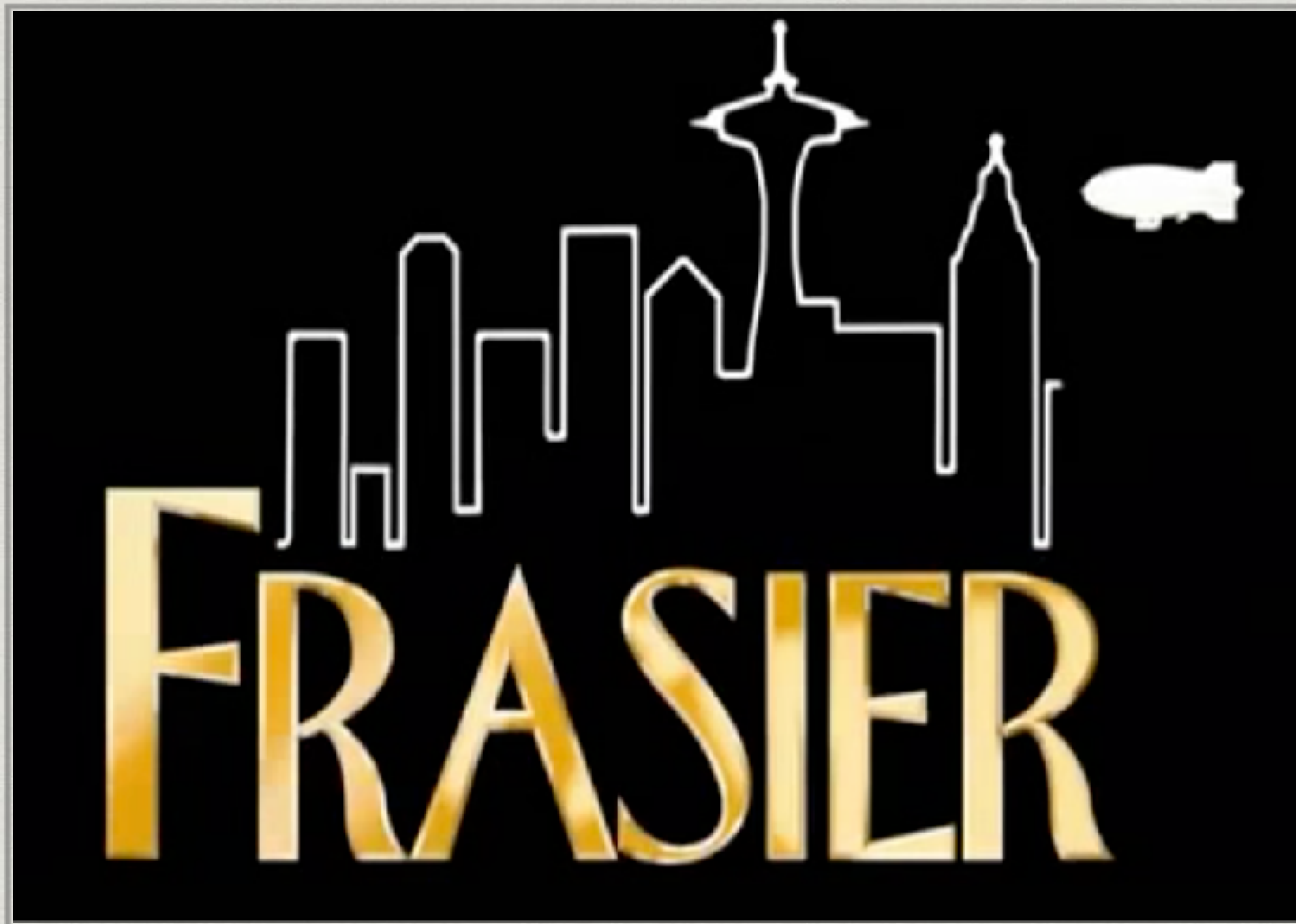
Today's agenda

- * Today we'll get the first (real) helping of our 'ethical aspects of economics' and discuss **theories of well-being**
- * Recall from last week that Ayn Rand maintained that **happiness** is the ultimate purpose of life
- * Theories of well-being tell us **what it means for a life to go well for a person**
- * That a happy life is a good life is one such theory, but there are alternatives
- * We'll discuss these alternatives and pay particular attention to Nussbaum and Sen's '**capabilities approach**'

Martha Nussbaum

- * Unlike Rand, Nussbaum doesn't take her starting point in metaphysical considerations about the fundamental alternatives humans face
- * Instead, she is interested in facts about gender inequalities in well-being, especially in the context of human development
- * (Aside: chances are that she is paying selective attention to the evidence...)
- * But a question that arises of course is: which aspects of these unequal distributions of resources, outcomes, and abilities are most significant? Are there systematic answers to this question?

An Example



Questions

- * How do you think Tom's life is going for him?
- * Is he happy?
- * Is Frasier justified in offering Tom help?
- * Is Tom living a flourishing life?
- * What are the most important aspects of a good life?

Theories of well-being

- * This Frasier episode shows that there are a number of different – and conflicting – ideas of what a good life is:
 - * Tom is, to all appearances, happy
 - * He also ‘spends it in the pursuit of his passions’
 - * However, he does not ‘weave the tapestry of his life with many diverse threads’ (i.e., his life does not seem very full)
- * These ideas correspond to the three major theories of well-being (cf. Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons*):
 - * **Hedonism:** well-being = happiness
 - * **Desire theories:** well-being = desire/preference satisfaction
 - * **Objective-list theories:** well-being = having and being a number of diverse things (e.g., health, enjoyment, literacy/education, professional fulfilment *etc.*)

Preference-satisfaction theories

- * **Traditional welfare economics assumes that well-being = preference satisfaction**
- * There are two main versions: **actual preference theories** and **‘laundered’ (or tutored or...) preferences**
- * Actual preference theories: well-being = satisfaction of actual preferences
 - * Great advantage: **well-being would be observable if people chose what they actually preferred and they preferred what is good for them**
- * Reasons to believe that neither is the case
 - * **People don’t always choose what they prefer**
 - * **It’s also clear that people don’t always (actually) prefer what is good for them** (due to e.g. being misinformed or weakness of will)

Preference-satisfaction theories

- * Laundered preference theories: **well-being = satisfaction of the preferences agents would have if they were fully informed, rational, had no weakness of will...**
- * Problems:
 - * **Changing preferences**
 - * **People care for things other than themselves**
 - * **Rawls' grass-counter**
- * This is why at least some economists have looked for alternatives such as hedonism and objective-list theories

Hedonism

- * Most vocal defender today: Lord Richard Layard, LSE
- * His motivation: if you're so rich, why ain't you happy?
- * Goes back to the 'classical utilitarians': Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Henry Sidgwick
- * Well-being is identical to pleasure or, more precisely, the balance of pleasure over pain
- * Plausible view: how can something be good for me unless it gives me pleasure or avoids pain?
- * Well-being is a sensation, a mental event

Hedonism: Problems

- * ‘The philosophy of swine’: isn’t a shorter life of more ‘valuable’ pleasures preferable to a very long one of living like an oyster?
- * Mill therefore added a third dimension: quality
 - * Is that still hedonism?
- * More seriously: the experience machine or Sen’s ‘happy slave’

Objective list theories

- * ... hold that **some things are good for the agent *objectively***; i.e. they are good for the agent independent of the agent's mental states and whether she wants it or not
- * **Every good should be on that list**, i.e., everything people value: e.g., health, knowledge, friendship, having a political voice
- * Nussbaum's theory is an example of an objective-list theory of well-being
- * However, there is a twist: her list of items is a list not of goods (or ultimate ends) but rather of what she calls **capabilities**
- * So what is the '**capabilities approach**'?

The capabilities approach

- * ... is both a theory of justice as well as a theory of well-being!
- * ... notes that **people differ** with respect to their situations, tastes, physical abilities etc.:
 - * If you live in Iceland you need more resources to keep warm and safe than if you live in the South of Spain
 - * A paraplegic requires more resources to be mobile than the able-bodied
 - * The ascetic might consume as few calories as a pauper, but in his case it was a deliberate choice
- * Nussbaum (and Sen) distinguish **functionings** — what we value (health, literacy, mobility, ‘play’) — from **capabilities** — alternative combinations of functionings that can be achieved given the individual’s situation

Objective list theories

- * Who decides what goes on that list?
 - * A **philosopher's intuition**? (That's Nussbaum's preferred option.)
 - * **Democratic deliberation**? (That's Sen's preferred option.)
- * Common objection: objective list theories are **elitist** or **patronising** – why should something be better for someone if they neither enjoy nor want it?
- * But one can either develop a view that includes non-interference by others as a major item on the list or argue that well-being doesn't directly entail any moral conclusions – one can have the view that healthy eating is better for one and yet forbid policies that make people eat more healthily