

**‘DEVELOPMENT AS FREEDOM’:  
TAKING ECONOMICS BEYOND COMMODITIES  
- THE CAUTIOUS BOLDNESS OF AMARTYA SEN**

DES GASPER

*Institute of Social Studies, PO Box 29776, NL-2502 LT, The Hague, Netherlands*

Prefinal version of a paper that appeared in *Journal of International Development*, 12(7),  
989-1001, in 2000.

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**Abstract:** Amartya Sen’s 1998 Nobel Prize and his recent synthesis of his views in *Development as Freedom* provide an opportunity to assess his intellectual contribution and style. The paper identifies entitlements analysis and capabilities analysis as the areas which make him stand out for wider audiences from the economists of his generation; and considers the integrative development philosophy which he has constructed around those two areas, centering on the direct and instrumental values of freedom and democracy. Three aspects of Sen’s intellectual style are discussed: first, his multi-disciplinarity and fruitful balance between vivid cases, formal theorizing, and policy relevance; second, a preference for gentle persuasion, seen in adoption of evocative but ambiguous, politically safe labels and an avoidance of seeking debate on all fronts (e.g. concerning hyper affluence); third, a continuing project to debate with and influence economists, and hence, while upgrading parts of their inadequate picture of persons, retention of other parts. His capability approach lends itself however to enrichment by deeper analyses of human agency.

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Many of us in development studies and development practice, including remarkably many non-economists, have been impressed and influenced by the work of Amartya Sen. The following observations, triggered by Sen’s receipt of the 1998 Nobel Prize for economics, reflect on the nature and role of various of his contributions. These include his inputs towards enriched, more ethically aware, economics; towards moral

philosophy that is both more rigorous and more policy-relevant, as well as less narrowly Euro-American in assumptions and concerns; and thus, whether seen as a distinct field for discussion or not, towards development ethics that can help guide development policy and practice. I will outline--briefly, non-exhaustively, and with a broad brush--some of his contributions of major interest to development studies, with special reference to normative analysis, and will suggest significant features of Sen's intellectual project and style. The synthesis of his views on socio-economic development in his new book *Development as Freedom* receives special attention.

### **ENTITLEMENTS ANALYSIS AND CAPABILITY ANALYSIS**

Amartya Sen (b. 1933) was already an internationally reputed economist 25 years ago, known for his work on, amongst other areas, the cost-benefit analysis of public investments, growth theory, and the relationship between choices for a collective and the preferences of its members. He has continued prominent in chosen fields in technical economics. What makes him most stand out for wider audiences however, amongst and from the economists of his generation, is his work in the past quarter century in two major, linked, areas:

- (1) the analysis and explanation of famine, and of hunger and poverty more generally, notably through his 'entitlements approach'; together with formulation and use of a resulting framework for policy responses; and
- (2) going beyond critique of welfare economics (the concepts and theories in economics about when we can say that people and societies are better placed) to offer a reconstruction: including his 'capability approach' and the associated reconceptualizations of well-being, poverty, equity, and development.<sup>1</sup>

This work provides broader perspectives on, respectively, (1) claims and allocations, now perceived as within a society and polity, not only an economy, and (2) personhood and well-being.

In both areas Sen presented the main features of this thinking in the late 1970s and early 80s. He could have received the Nobel Prize at any time in the past decade,

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<sup>1</sup> Some might add as equally important the elucidation and critique of ethical utilitarianism (as consisting of consequentialism, a utility-base, and sum-ranking), and his synthesis of consequentialist and rights-based normative reasoning.

but the economics prize panel of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences was reportedly dominated by neo-liberal market economists and methodological conservatives. In the interim Sen added much and, probably more important, has effectively inspired, often even directly fostered, a considerable body of work by others. His ideas around poverty, opportunity, equity, and quality of life have become increasingly influential in economics and development studies (with ‘development’ here as a concept of global scope, not only for poorer countries). His deep, structured, thinking about questions of major theoretical and policy relevance, plus an exemplary style of communication, in writing and in person--clear, courteous, persistent, assiduous, dialogical--have gradually mobilized a substantial network of researchers and practitioners who now partly work and think along lines formed by Sen.

### **Entitlements analysis**

Of the two major areas mentioned above, Sen’s ‘entitlements approach’ to the analysis of famine, and hunger and poverty more generally, has become relatively widely known. His book on *Poverty and Famines* (1981) presented a socially disaggregated analysis of absolute poverty. Just as the poverty of some does not imply an overall shortage of satisfiers, so in the extreme case the starvation of some does not imply an overall shortage of food, but rather those people’s shortage of convertible claims, *entitlements*, acquisition power. Many factors, including people’s political and civil rights, become seen clearly as influences on this acquisition power. Entitlements analysis was consolidated in a three-volume study on famine and hunger for the U.N. University, *The Political Economy of Hunger* (1990), edited with Jean Drèze. Sen also extended his disaggregation into the household.

Sen has used the entitlements approach as a framework for thinking broadly about policy alternatives to prevent and reduce deprivation. The framework, including a strong stress on varied forms of ‘*public action*’ besides direct state action, is seen in his books with Drèze on *Hunger and Public Action* (1989) and on the backwardness of social development in India (Drèze & Sen, 1995). Their public action perspective has become widely influential, well beyond academe. This is notwithstanding, and even in part because of, ambiguities in Sen’s term ‘entitlement’, which have led to divergence by many others from his usages despite believing that they are following them. I have elsewhere analysed (Gasper, 1993) the approach’s appealing but

sometimes enigmatic terms, and its achievement still in providing a helpful framework in problem analysis and policy analysis for famines and poverty. This pattern--use of attractive, ambiguous, yet in context still helpful terms--is seen also in capability analysis and will be returned to later in regard to Sen's overall approach.

### **Capability analysis**

The second major area, Sen's critique and extensions of welfare economics, has so far probably been more directly discussed and used in development ethics, though entitlements analysis may grow there as attention moves from clarifying needs to institutionalizing rights. Sen clarified what have been the ethical assumptions typically made in economics and promoted richer thinking about ethical choices by showing many relevant types of information besides those considered in previous welfare economics. Beginning from this insight in his early book *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (1970):

- He has extensively drawn in ideas from philosophy, and re-established the close links necessary between ethics and economics (summarized in a luminous set of lectures: Sen, 1987). Simultaneously, he has notably strengthened philosophers' analyses of well-being and equity; and thus, most unusually in modern days, was both Professor of Philosophy and Professor of Economics at Harvard.
- He has reconceptualized equity and equality, making us always ask 'equality of what?' and understand each version of equity as involving equality of something.
- Highlighting two particular categories of additional information, his 'capability approach' leads us to look at the range of life-options that people have (their '*capability set*'), and the actual things they do and achieve (their '*functionings*'), not only at their incomes or their imputed ('she chose it, so it must make her happy') or declared state of satisfaction, each of which can be misleading.
- His reconceptualization of poverty and development in these terms helps us see the range of relevant dimensions, see poverty as in some respects relative and in other respects absolute, and in particular consider development as involving the extension of the set of attainable and worthwhile life-options that people have -- the notion adopted in the 1990s by UNDP and its annual Human Development Reports, thanks to the late Mahbub Ul-Haq.

## **‘DEVELOPMENT AS FREEDOM’**

Sen’s new book goes further. His earlier broadening and enrichment of welfare economics (Sen, 1970, 1982, 1984), and widening of vision in policy economics (Sen, 1981; Drèze & Sen, 1989), have been synthesized with a range of ideas from his explorations in social philosophy, to present a lucid, integrated perspective on development. Ideas from the earlier work—such as that entitlements are socially defined; that democracies have (almost) no famines; that there are many forms of public action besides State intervention and provision—are knitted together within an overall approach to political economy and public affairs. One chapter, for example, compares and relates Sen’s freedom language to international human rights language.

Very evident is this more emphatic, explicit and central use of the language of ‘freedom’, as in the book’s title. People want freedom; and their intelligence as well as their wilfulness imply that such freedom is essential in formulating informed and widely accepted statements of purposes and priorities, and should be a principal instrument for pursuing the purposes. Sen elucidates three major roles of freedom and democracy.

First, freedom and democracy have *direct importance*, being valuable in themselves. Sen asserts that all available evidence shows that very poor people too place significant value on freedom.<sup>2</sup> He now emphasises an argument long standard in politics and philosophy but less familiar in economics: that part of the desirability of markets is insofar as they form arenas for exercise of free choice, irrespective of their results, which may add to or detract from this distinct source of attraction.

Secondly, freedom has *instrumental importance*, as often conducing to the attainment of other desired ends. The chapter on population argues, for example, that free discussion in South India has led to sharper (and sustained) declines in female fertility than have been achieved by compulsion in China (pp.222-3); and that women’s education and employment are a far better ‘contraceptive’ than is economic growth.<sup>3</sup> The chapter on women’s agency argues that women’s independence, as measured by outside employment, literacy and education, is far more significant in

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<sup>2</sup> Sen (1999), pp. 224-5. He relies heavily here on one case: the shift of some percentage points in Indian voters’ choices in 1977, away from Indira Gandhi’s Congress Party, at the end of her period of emergency rule with its cases of forcible sterilization and shanty town clearance.

<sup>3</sup> For possibly reverse findings on fertility decline in China, see Feng (1999).

reducing infant and child mortality and anti-girl bias than are general economic and social development (including growth of production, urbanization, and access to health facilities). Free discussion and circulation of information, followed by democratic decision-making, are presented as potent also in overcoming Pareto's paradox: that a measure that benefits one powerful person a thousand (or five hundred) francs, at the expense of a one franc loss to each of a thousand poorer persons, is very likely to be established and maintained, because the gainer has high motivation to mobilize forces to do so.

Thirdly, freedom has a *constructive role*, in building views about desired ends and drawing validated moral conclusions. Free exchange of views influences and modifies opinions and social values. For example, specifications of needs should arise from democratic debate, as statements of community priorities; and in general, value-laden community choices between competing goods and attendant and unequally distributed evils should be through open discussion rather than concealed by pseudo-objective technique (pp.110, 153-4). Capability analysis, by taking us beyond the incomplete coverage, inequitable weightings and too ready comparisons made in markets, brings us to more open political choices about values rather than choices hidden behind financial calculations. However, given the range of capabilities and the massive difficulties in structuring political choice processes in ways simultaneously feasible, participatory and equitable, one would expect workable operationalizations of capability analysis to be very simplified, such as those operated by UNDP. Its central role then is to demystify the financial analyses.<sup>4</sup>

The centrality proffered to democracy is a bold generalization from Sen's earlier theses that there has never been a famine in a democracy and that the Chinese Great Leap Forward brought the greatest famine in history (Sen, 1981; Drèze & Sen, 1989). Democracy provides both for free circulation and testing of vital information, and for incentives to decision-makers to anticipate or respond to the informed

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<sup>4</sup> The orthodox response may be to say that whatever one's objectives one can fulfil them more by *gaining* more money, so policy must remain focused on financial calculations. This implicitly recognises that how one *uses* money, say to promote valued capabilities and functionings, will require analysis beyond orthodox economics. Insofar as money dominance is found in various ways to undermine social relations, personal balance and quality of life then the critique goes much further, into territories very compatible with capabilities (*sic*) analysis but not ones highlighted by Sen, as we will see.

pressures from their electorate.<sup>5</sup> Sen extends this judgement now to public policy in general. He adds imposing labels to facilitate and structure future use. Freedom of information becomes ‘transparency guarantee’, and social security and basic entitlement guarantees become (perhaps tautologously) ‘protective security’.

*Development as Freedom* also attempts to answer a variety of objections likely to be made against his approach. Principles of a liberal social democracy are not parochially Western, he argues. Effective purposeful public action is not ruled out by incorrigible ignorance about unintended consequences, since we are able to learn;<sup>6</sup> nor by incorrigible selfishness, for ‘Space does not have to be artificially created in the human mind for the idea of justice or fairness... That space already exists’ (p.262); nor does public expenditure on human development bring an inevitable slide into destructive inflation, stagnation, and the ‘serfdom’ of a State that must define and enforce fairness down to the distribution of the last dollar. Sen deals effectively with these bogey-men arguments, noting the high cost-effectiveness of many public programmes (such as anti-famine measures) and arguing that support to the weak is a *precondition* for individual responsibility.<sup>7</sup> He concludes that those concerned with fiscal restraint should concern themselves first with military expenditures.

In general, Sen adds to his old systems various extensions and links. The second half of the book thus includes a series of topics which go beyond just a capabilities description of human development. It does so along lines broadly familiar to readers of the Human Development Reports but with more extensive and powerful argumentation.

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<sup>5</sup> Banik (1998) raises, with special reference to the state of Orissa, the question of how far independent India has ended famines and how far simply not reported them, at least amongst marginal groups.

<sup>6</sup> Sen understates the problem of unforeseen effects, but valuably stresses the numerous major examples of large-scale beneficial purposive change.

<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, Friedrich (von) Hayek receives high praise (p.257). His ‘chastising description of the communist economies as “the road to serfdom” was indeed a fitting, if severe, rhetoric’ (p.114). Hayek in fact went far further in his 1944 book of that name: the one existing communist economy was deemed already in serfdom, and social democratic State activism in a mixed economy was allegedly the road that would lead there.

## SEN'S APPROACH - I: ON LINKING DISCIPLINES, AND BALANCING LIFE, THEORIZATION, AND POLICY ANALYSIS

Why have Sen's ideas attracted such sustained attention *and* inspired significant work by others along similar lines? The degree of his prominence and the range of his influence give us something out of the ordinary to explain.

In addition to analytical rigour and technical strength, Sen possesses strong communication skills, which he applies also in many lectures and journals oriented to audiences other than economists and philosophers. He has a flair for employing evocative terms like 'entitlements' and 'capability' which can appeal to a range of people. *Development as Freedom* is a major book for the wider audience, profound yet readable, with analytical niceties left to its lengthy end-notes.

I suggest further that Sen has shown exceptional judgement concerning his intellectual location and hence possible influence. His work crosses disciplines, reaching out from economics, notably to (compatible streams in) philosophy; and links formal theorization to lived experience and policy analysis. This type of location is not itself so exceptional, but Sen's lively awareness and skill in employing it are.

Sen has maintained an unusually effective balance between three stages of normatively oriented studies. (The following remarks draw from Gasper 1996; Gasper 1999 refines the picture of stages.) The first stage is marked by openness, observation, and ethical reactions to experience: the horrors and joys, dilemmas and ambiguities of development and non-development. The second stage attempts to sift and strengthen first-stage reactions, by building concepts and theory (both methodological and substantive, normative and non-normative). On the third stage these deepened concepts and theory are confronted with the demands of practice: real situations more complex than their categories, and the need for finding alliances and common ground between different perspectives and worldviews.

Sen is primarily a second stager, a theorist. But his theorizing has maintained respectable and fruitful balances in relation to experiential basis and practical role. Unlike rather many economists and philosophers, his choice of examples does not reflect a narrow life nor mainly a priority to convenience in a pre-set style of theorizing. His first-stage motivating cases are wide-ranging, sometimes intense, and not concealed: including the Great Bengal Famine of 1943-5, in which millions died



while food was available, which he lived through as a child; also his own mouth cancer as a student, which dramatically illustrated the importance of access to information and facilities. His second-stage theorizing has then analysed, for greater clarity and tractability, abstracted formulations and hypothetical cases, including:

- (1) the displaced wage-labourer or artisan who can lack effective entitlement and starve in the face of food – hence aggregate measures of availability are insufficient, though important;
- (2) the person who has greater needs, for example because disabled – hence measures of personal income are insufficient;
- (3) the person with high or low expectations, for example widows in South Asia with expectations that have been kept low to match their restricted opportunities - thus feelings of personal utility are another insufficient measure of well-being;
- (4) the person who goes without food voluntarily - showing that crudely defined functionings too are an insufficient measure.<sup>8</sup>

Intense consideration of such cases has helped Sen to engage readers *and* to build theory, including through forming new categories or formalising everyday ones missing from economics and previously unformalised in philosophy, such as entitlements and capabilities.

Sen often finds or already has empirical counterparts for his notional cases: he moves to ‘thin’ theorizing about selected aspects after first thinking on real cases; or begins thin, with a hypothetical case, but then seeks to confirm its relevance through examining real counterparts and checking that he has not left out key features. The approach typically remains a components/factors analysis, rather than holistic. That can be acceptable because his style of theorizing typically leads to procedural advice not policy edicts: ‘pay attention also to factors A and B’, not ‘conclude and do as follows’. And it is characteristically embellished or, rather, reconnected to richer, real life, by anecdote and quotation. His third-stage work of policy analysis and general advice--such as in *Hunger and Public Action* and for the Human Development Reports and human development indices--is thus conducted without forgetting the corrigibility and incompleteness of his theorization.

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<sup>8</sup> In the same vein, Qizilbash (e.g. 1997) has examined the person with capabilities that have been adapted upwards under the pressure of disadvantage or downwards in the lap of privilege, to show that capabilities too are an insufficient measure in discussions of equity.

Overall, his ability to link cases, concepts, explanatory and normative theory and policy analysis gives his work the character of a research programme and has mobilized the attention and cooperation of a variety of others. The programme is to build a more humane, deeper, real alternative to the dominant liberal-utilitarian welfare economics; not as a single grand model, but as a flexible approach that can more satisfactorily handle rich and varied human situations.

## **SEN'S APPROACH - II: COSTS AND BENEFITS OF GENTLE PERSUASION**

Sen defines development as 'a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy'; 'a process of removing unfreedoms and of extending the substantive freedoms of different types that people have reason to value' (1999, pp. 3, 86). If development is process rather than outcome, should not his book's title be 'Development as Liberation' rather than 'Development as Freedom'? 'Liberation' however conveys something different from 'Freedom', especially in America. Perhaps Sen would prefer the clumsier 'Freedom-Expansion' over 'Liberation' as a description of process, but not adopt it for a title. The choice of the imprecise but attractive and politically safe term 'Freedom' illustrates a sustained style: cautious boldness, seeking a wide, mainstream audience with terms, tones and topics that will appeal and engage them.

Topics omitted in 'Development as Freedom' reflect this caution. In taking welfare economics beyond *analytical* fetishization of the commodity--'the focus has to be...on the freedoms generated by commodities, rather than on the commodities seen on their own' (1999, p.74)--Sen shows the human capital approach to be seriously incomplete. It ignores values other than the growth of production and it reduces the concept of production to commodity production, things handled by markets. But Sen does not engage with the *behavioural* realities of commodity fetishism, commodity superfluity and addiction, and other *unfreedoms* and side-effects generated by wealth and commodities. While he rejects the path of Arthur Lewis and mainstream economics--concentration on growth of commodity production on the assumption that this increases freedom--he does so only because the growth of freedom 'depends also on many other factors'. When he grants that 'Certainly, other things given, an increase in output and income would expand the range of human choice--particularly over commodities purchased' (1999, p.290), he sidelines how the

acquisition of commodities can sometimes be at the cost of much human freedom. Other references in his work suggest that Sen is aware of deeper issues here, but that due to his focus on countries like India and on audiences which include those in or close to power, he chooses not to highlight them.

His treatment of politics may be optimistic. The Pareto paradox--seen perhaps in grossest form in the agricultural protectionism in rich countries--can apparently be overcome, he indicates, by identification of it as a problem and resulting mobilization against the specious arguments of powerful recipients of special favours (p.123). So he dismisses the case for authoritarian concentration of power to override vested interests. However Sen need not claim that democracy has ready answers for all problems which authoritarianism sometimes solves.<sup>9</sup> He already has sufficient arguments against authoritarianism, including avoidance of the risk of catastrophic errors such as China's Great Leap Forward. We can add that, although in many countries systems of special favours have been partially dismantled only through the *diktats* of two authoritarian organizations based in Washington, D.C., their structural adjustment and reform programmes for Africa and Russia amply illustrate the danger of disastrous errors by isolated, unaccountable, ideologically insulated authorities.

When we consider terms, both Sen's major coinings, 'entitlements' and 'capability' have wide appeal. They carry some sense of worth and of real people's lives. Both however diverge from the previous usages which nourish them, in directions chosen to persuade economists to join the discussion. 'Entitlement' means an actual title to goods, or a normative claim to title. As used by Sen it becomes the set of all those goods vectors to which one could acquire title.<sup>10</sup> 'Capability' means 'a feature or faculty capable of development' or an ability or power. Sen builds rather on its other meanings, 'potential for an indicated use' and 'the quality or state of being capable' (Webster's Dictionary). For him, one's *capability* (set) is the set of all those functionings vectors which one could attain. Yet he retains the term '*capabilities*' too, when referring to the attainability of particular functionings; for it seems to have more appeal and better grounding in ordinary language and an understanding of people as

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<sup>9</sup> A more persuasive argument is that the relative effectiveness of authoritarian governments in East Asian NICs partly reflected the pressures, actual and potential, they felt from opposition forces (Sen, 1999, p.156). The comparative ineffectiveness of governments in India in social development programs he relates to 'docility of opposition' (loc. cit.), which he does not link to class interests.

learners who evolve. The distinct and more refined and psychologically probing version of capabilities theory created by Sen's one-time collaborator, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, correspondingly distinguishes between, first, people's potentials for acquiring capacities, second, their actual capacities and skills, and third, Sen's sense, their access to possible ways of living. In capabilities theory as in entitlements theory, Sen's chosen combination of concept and label has however performed the feat--even if at some cost in clarity--of stimulating economists to think more realistically about people.

In an earlier paper (Gasper, 1997) I have assessed Nussbaum's and Sen's contrasting versions of capabilities theory, in relation to each other and to the agendas and questions each has selected. The differences in part reflect choices of audience, with Sen oriented relatively more to economists and analytic philosophers (where he indeed achieves impact in both groups), Nussbaum more to humanities. At the same time, to spread and strengthen the capability approach and create a broader development ethic that is persuasive to wider ranges of people would require more adequate pictures of 'culture' and 'the individual' than Sen and even Nussbaum have used, and a combination of insights from communitarian and other critics together with those in the capabilities approach (Gasper, 1997: 281, 299). The papers by Giri and Carmen in the present Policy Arena are steps in that direction.

### **SEN'S APPROACH - III: OF PEOPLE AND ECONOMISTS**

Sen proceeds as an economist, an exceptional trans-disciplinary one, but one who has not turned his back on his discipline for its failings. He tries instead to reform it. This continuing orientation to disciplinary economics audiences in the core of his work carries a price in the type of questions and methods he engages with. I have argued elsewhere that it restricts Sen's version of capabilities analysis and limits its appeal amongst many non-economists; but also that no one set of frames can serve for all purposes and audiences. Sen's frames serve well for some (Gasper, 1997).

Sen does move a great way beyond a conventional economics conception of people as asocial atoms of selfishness. First, he identifies and stresses *agency* aspects

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<sup>10</sup> Sen himself returns to the first usage when speaking of 'the economic entitlements that economic agents are practically able to secure' (1999, p.39).

of personhood, not only *well-being* aspects. (Contrary to some commentators, these are dimensions of analysis, not proposed as mutually exclusive areas of life.) Secondly, illustrative of the well-being versus agency distinction, he distinguishes ‘*sympathy*’ from ‘*commitment*’. ‘*Sympathy*’ is concern for others where one’s own well-being rises/falls as their state of well-being or achievement rises/falls; ‘*commitment*’ is concern that exists regardless of effects on one’s own feelings of well-being (or despite negative effects). Both are pervasive in life, vital for society, and neglected in conventional economics.<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, he stresses how people’s values are malleable and demonstrably influenced by information, experience and debate; hence for example his faith in freedom as the reliable path to fertility reduction.

Possible criticisms of Sen’s conception of people can be stated as a series of over and under-emphases: too much on people as choosers, rather than as actors in a fuller sense; too little on skills and on functionings, compared to opportunities; too little on meanings, and in fact too much on freedom. Let us consider these in turn. I will suggest there is some but limited truth in each criticism. On examination we find much relevant qualification and elaboration already in Sen; and that the capability approach lends itself to enrichment from work with deeper analyses of agency (for example, by Carmen and Giri in this set of papers). There seems no incompatibility.

### **The skills of valuing, choosing, operating and co-operating**

The capabilities approach to development stresses range of choice. In principle this is only for choices between options which one ‘has reason to value’, a phrase Sen often employs. In some formulations and practice by others the principle degrades to: ‘more choice is good’, automatically--including ever more brands, more options for futile over-consumption. The same pattern is seen in consumer theory in economics, and involves neglect of the content and skills of ‘having reason to value’. Conventional economics has treated that phrase as internally contradictory: values are beyond reason, arbitrary and irreproachable components of personal identity and freedom. Sen does not do so.

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<sup>11</sup> Gary Becker has, notes Sen, now included ‘*sympathy*’, but still not ‘*commitment*’. Sen has reformulated conventional efficiency theorems to cover sympathy and commitment, by stating the theorems in terms of the provision of valued opportunities to individuals, without restrictive specification of those values as only self-interested (1993; 1999, p.118).

He emphasises education's potential roles in building capabilities and augmenting effective agency.<sup>12</sup> He cites Aristotle to the effect that 'we need behavioral norms and reasoning that allow us to achieve what we try to achieve' (1999:249); and, in contrast to some philosophers who note but simply take for granted the existence of sympathy and commitment, his system allows that they too are socially fostered or socially stifled. He stresses not only that cooperative values can help in public goods provision, but that they can be strengthened by communicative reasoning, lived example and reflective choice, as well as by evolutionary selection. He is clear that values, not only incentives and policing, are vital for controlling corruption. He emphasises democratic culture as well as democratic forms; and he notes how the behavioural impact of education depends on reaching many people and influencing a local culture, more than on training isolated individuals.

Yet when Sen lists sources of variation of well-being between persons, other than real incomes, the examples he gives for relevant personal heterogeneities are physical, concerning health variables and physical location, and inborn talents (1999, pp.70-1, 80, 88-90). Other sources mentioned include social location and social environment. Not mentioned are the personal but learned skills of reasoning and acting. Mention of 'social capital' and of the demoralizing effects of unemployment are the nearest we get. He refers often to the extraordinarily high mortality and morbidity of Afro-Americans relative to their real incomes -- a case in which skills and morale are likely implicated, not only social location and environment. Sen's treatment of skills of reasoning, valuing, operating and co-operating seems to remain relatively thin (Andersson, 1996). Gaps between opportunity and action, and choosing and doing, while not ignored have not been deeply investigated. Hence the dissatisfactions expressed by Giri and Carmen, amongst others.

### **Freedoms, achievements and meanings**

Culture concerns meanings and values as well as skills. Sen's chapter on culture looks critically at asserted inter-civilizational ('East' versus 'West')

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<sup>12</sup> See P. Sen (1999) for a Calcutta case study of impacts on self-esteem, independence of mind and acquisition of wider contacts; such that women's education appears a far more significant factor than external employment for ending violence by husbands against wives.

differences, rather than at meaning-relativity more generally. His recurrent example of the difference between fasting and starving highlights that the meaning of not taking food depends on whether one has an alternative: fasting means one has (Case 1), starving means that one has not (Case 2). But he goes beyond defining fasts, to propose that the fasting person is better-off: she has more options; she could eat but does not. Yet in principle, a starving person might turn his/her starvation into a sort of protest fast-to-death, let us say in front of some bastion of authority or privilege: she then would not eat even if she could (Case 3; Gasper, 1997). Whether to have more options is valuable depends on the meaning the options have for the actor and her audience. For the person determined to starve to make a political statement, an option of eating is no longer valuable, to *her*. If we take a less extreme case, say a comparison between women with more and less options in life, then the question of relativity to felt meanings and accepted identities becomes acute, as considered by Nussbaum and others including Sen, in the volume *Women, Culture and Development*. (I comment on this further in Gasper, 1996 & 1997.)

In assessing a person's situation Sen gives priority to capability, potential functionings, above achieved functionings. Sometimes he writes as if capability is the sole criterion, implying an overwhelming value placed on choice or a high presumption of sufficient skills. The definition of development can become: more choice. No other aspects of life are specified, rather they are left for: choice. Does Sen overstate the relative priority of capability, and freedom, compared to functioning?<sup>13</sup> Just as 'Development as Freedom' does not discuss when growth becomes imprisoning, it never considers when choice can become oppressive. It would be unfortunate if, having begun in the 1960s by insisting on the need for welfare economics to attend to many more types of information, Sen's recent efforts at synthesis and dissemination contributed to a reductive emphasis on choice alone.

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<sup>13</sup> In practice, capabilities have usually to be imputed from observed functionings, which lessens this issue of value priority. It may also explain why the two terms often seem interchangeable, even for Sen (e.g. longevity can be presented as a capability, and functionings specified as 'what a person is actually *able* to do'; 1999, pp.43, 75, my emphasis). But it returns us to the other issue: observed functionings are only a good proxy for capability if people can be assumed to have the skills, knowledge and attitudes to perceive and take their best (or at least a steady proportion of their) opportunities.

A choice-centred but meaning-thin perspective is typical of modern economics and one strand in modernity.<sup>14</sup> Its limits and dangers are considerable. On the other hand, by retaining in substantial part the language and assumptions of orthodox economics, such as its picture of calculating individuals, Sen has been able to influence economics in particular areas, notably its discourses of welfare and policy.<sup>15</sup> The potential prize is great: influence upon a key target group, mainstream economists and those using such a worldview. If Sen had adopted a quite different picture of persons and agency, he might have acquired (even) more non-economist admirers, but he would have lost most of his audience within economics and thus his most important line for influence.

The conversation between economists and philosophers, to which he has especially contributed, is inevitably different from the conversation between, for example, cultural anthropologists and philosophers. But development studies needs many lines of conversation; and it needs the ones pursued so well by Amartya Sen.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I benefited from comments by Charles Gore and Mozaffar Qizilbash on sections of this paper which appeared in the Newsletter of the International Development Ethics Association (<http://www.carleton.ca/idea/newsletter>), and from other discussions with them, Sabina Alkire, John Cameron, Raff Carmen, Dave Crocker, Nigel Dower, Ananta Giri and Thanh-Dam Truong.

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<sup>14</sup> 'What was previously experienced as fate now becomes an arena of choices... choice...may be designated the modern category *par excellence*' (Berger, 1977:36).

<sup>15</sup> For an example of solace provided by Sen's language of 'beings and doings' for orthodox economists increasingly seeking to describe a world comprised of people not only capitalist firms, see Waelbroeck (1998).



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