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**Rethinking human well-being:  
A dialogue with Amartya Sen**

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# Rethinking Human Well-Being: A Dialogue with Amartya Sen

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## Abstract

[The paper undertakes a critical dialogue with the perspective of human well-being offered by Amartya Sen. As is well-known, central to Sen's perspective on human well-being is the notion of functioning and capability of individuals. But these notions lack an emphasis on self-development and self-organization, i.e. how individuals can self-organize themselves to achieve their functioning and capability. What is missing from Sen's perspective of human well-being is a perspective of self-development, self-organization and self-criticism of the justificatory grounds of freedom. Another difficulty with Sen's notion of well-being is the way it is presented as different from the agency aspect of the human person. The paper argues that this dualism between agency and well-being is not helpful to come to terms with what Sen himself calls a comprehensive redefinition of human development as a quest for freedom. The paper interrogates Sen's dualism of negative and positive freedom and argues that the challenge here is to overcome this but this is difficult within Sen's frame of reference because of lack of an ontological striving or self-preparation in his scheme. This neglect of self and self-preparation does not enable us to realize the full potential of Sen's quest for wider supportive environment of human well-being consisting of internal criticism of traditions, a plural framework of secular toleration and an epistemology of positional objectivity. The paper finally argues that even freedom cannot be an end state and development as freedom needs to be supplemented by a quest for development as responsibility]

The bonded laborer born into semislavery, the subjugated girl child stifled by a repressive society, the helpless landless laborer without substantial means of earning and income are all deprived not only in terms of well-being, but also in terms of the ability to lead responsible lives which are contingent on having certain basic freedoms. Responsibility requires freedom. The argument for social support in expanding people's freedom can, therefore, be seen as an argument for individual responsibility, not against it. The linkage between freedom and responsibility works both ways. Without the substantive freedom and capability to do something, a person cannot be responsible for doing it. But actually having the freedom and capability to do something does impose on the person the duty to consider whether to do it or not, and this does involve individual responsibility. In this sense, freedom is both necessary and sufficient for responsibility. Xxx Development is indeed a momentous engagement with freedom's possibilities.

(Amartya Sen (1999), *Development as Freedom*, p. 284, p. 298).

How can the Fichtean free ego undergo the suffering that would come to it from the non-ego? Does the finitude of freedom signify the necessity by which a will to will finds itself in a given situation which limits the arbitrariness of the will? In finite freedom, there can be disengaged an element of pure freedom. Xxx In this self, outside of essence, one is in a deathlike passivity! But in responsibility for the other for life and death, the adjectives unconditional, undeclinable, absolute take on meaning. They seem to qualify freedom, but wear away the substrate, from which the free act arises in essence.

(Emmanuel Levinas (1974), *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 123, 124).

Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Xxx By the imagination, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the person with him...His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then begin to tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels.

(Adam Smith (1976), *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 9)

## The Problem:

Human well-being is an important concern for Amartya Sen. A redefinition of human well-being in terms of enhancing the functioning and capability of individuals constitutes a significant contribution of Sen to rethinking welfare and development as a quest for freedom. In this paper, I carry out a dialogue with Sen's conceptualization of human well-being and bring forth some of the foundational difficulties that this has. One of these relates to, as we shall see, Sen's lack of attention to self and self-development in thinking about human well-being. The paper argues that one of the principal difficulties with Sen's notion of well-being is that it lacks a notion of creative, transformative self and his notion of capability is too much welfare-centric and does not embody the seeking and quest for being, becoming, self-development and self-realization on the part of the actors. But the problem of a lack of a critically reflective self is not confined only to Sen's thinking about well-being, it also permeates his efforts in related domains such as in his thought about freedom (Sen 1989; 1999), his notion of social criticism (Nussbaum & Sen 1987; Sen 1998b) and vision of secularism and multiculturalism (Sen 1996; 1998b), and more over his epistemology (Sen 1994) as well. In all these domains, i.e in thinking about freedom, criticism, secularism, and the epistemology of positional objectivity Sen's reflections have provided us invaluable resources to rethink our predicament in a novel way but the realization of the full potential of such a project is limited because Sen takes the self for granted and thinks that the task of creating a good society is primarily a task of collective action at the level of state and society. However, as the paper begins with such a critical engagement with Sen, it must be mentioned at the outset that in his most recent work, *Development as Freedom*, Sen (1999) seems to be making some departures from his earlier approaches to thinking about human well-being as there is no longer a rigid dualism between agency and well-being here compared to what existed in his earlier conceptualization of the issue and there is some effort to discuss the nature of responsibility in thinking about human well-being eventhough this gesture towards responsibility does not traverse much of the path that lies in front of us in this field. Against this backdrop, the paper argues that a redefinition of human well-being in terms of development of "functioning" and "capability" of individuals and of development as freedom needs to be supplemented by a reconceptualization and realization of development as responsibility where freedom is an object of both ontological and social commitment.

## On Human Well-Being: Sen and Beyond

In his conceptualization of human well-being, Sen makes a distinction between objective parameters of well-being such as longevity, nutrition etc. and the "subjective utility in the form of pleasure, satisfaction, desire fulfilment, which can be influenced by social conditioning and a resigned acceptance of misfortune" (Sen 1987a: 20). As against the utilitarian matrix of subjective perception as a measure of individual well-being, Sen writes: "Deprived groups may be habituated to inequality, may be unaware of possibilities of social change, may be resigned to fate, and may be willing to accept the legitimacy of the established order. xx But the real deprivations are not just washed away by the mere fact that in the particular utilitarian matrices of happiness and desire-fulfilment such a deprived person may not seem particularly disadvantaged" (ibid: 10)<sup>1</sup>. Sen offers his own positive agenda of human well-being: "The well-being of a person may plausibly be seen in terms of a person's functionings and capabilities: what he or she is able to do or be (e.g. the ability to be well-nourished, to avoid escapable morbidity or mortality, to read and write and communicate, to take part in the life of the community, to appear in public without shame)" (ibid: 8). Sen provides us a glimpse of his own conception of human well-being at the center of which are human "functionings" and "capabilities": "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 combination of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection. 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" (Sen 1993: 31).

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1. Bharat Jhunjhunwala, a critic of Sen, considers this as an instance of Sen's privileging of the objective over the subjective. Jhunjhunwala writes: "Sen makes a valid point in not taking the self-expressed state as the final word on one's welfare. The trouble arises when he seeks to replace it with an external evaluation of his 'real' state. The underdog may well bear the burden well but if he were to be given the chance to *reflect* whether he wishes to carry that burden, it would seem, that he himself would say that his situation was not cheerful. Instead of doing so, Sen brings in an external person to assess the 'fact' of his being disadvantaged. In doing so Sen negates the poor man's autonomy and places the arrogant assesment of the outsider above it" (Jhunjhunwala 2000: 27). But though I agree with Jhunjhunwala that the autonomous self must be an agent in the critical reflection of one's state, at the same time, Jhunjhunwala seems to totally disregard the need for a dialogue between the self and the external observer in coming to a critical awareness of one's condition. But critical awareness of one's situation is always facilitated by the work of what literary critic U.R. Ananthamurthy calls "critical insiders." What Jhunjhunwala calls external observer is, in fact, "critical insider" in Sen. This is clear when we look at Sen's work on criticism where Sen values internal criticism rather than any external criticism (Sen & Nussbaum 1987). Therefore, Jhunjhunwala seems to be bordering on unfair and inconsiderate criticism when he attributes Sen of arrogance.

Sen makes a distinction between the well-being and agency aspects of human beings. While in the well-being dimension, human beings are concerned about their own individual and individualistic well-being, in their agency aspect they are concerned with the well-being of others, and even committed to realize this. For Sen, "The well-being achievement of a person can be seen as an evaluation of the 'wellness' of the person's state of being. Xxx This, does not, of course, imply that a person's well-being cannot be 'other-regarding.' Rather, the effect of 'other-regarding' concerns on one's own well-being has to operate through some features of one's own well-being" (Sen 1993: 36). Sen writes: "We can see the person, in terms of agency, recognizing and respecting his or her ability to form goals, commitments, values, etc. and we can also see the person in terms of well-being" (1987b:4). Sen writes further in the very next line: "The dichotomy is lost in a model of exclusively self-interested motivation in which a person's agency must be entirely geared to his own well-being" (ibid: 41). But though Sen attributes this self-interested view of human well-being to utilitarianism (see Sen & Williams 1982) and throughout his work offers a trenchant critique of self-interest as the motor of human action which is evident in the following lines of Sen, "Why should it be *uniquely* rational to pursue one's own self-interest to the exclusion of everything else" (1987b:15), Sen does not interrogate (at least at this stage of his life; as we shall see in his latest *Development as Freedom*, there is a softening of this dualism) this utilitarian construction of well-being itself. Sen writes: "It is possible to distinguish between a person's 'well-being' and 'agency'. A person may have various goals and objectives other than pursuit of his or her own well-being" (Sen 1987a: 9). Such other-regarding pursuits are a part of the agency aspect of the human person. But should it not also become an integral part of the quest for well-being? A foundational critique of utilitarian self-interest requires a critique of this dualism and a willingness to show that pursuit of self-interest in order to be a source of well-being requires an integral attention to the other. But Sen does not do this for a major part of his thinking until an unacknowledged reformulation of such a dualism in his engaging latest work in which Sen himself writes: "...our conception of self-interest may itself include our concern for others, and sympathy may thus be incorporated within the notion of the person's well-being, broadly defined" (Sen 1999: 270). Thus here Sen provides us a broad definition of human well-being whose potential was certainly not fully realized in his earlier narrow conceptualization of human well-being as concerned with individual self-interest.

In the same paragraph in *Development as Freedom*, Sen goes on to write: "...going beyond our broadly defined well-being or self-interest, we may be willing to make sacrifices in pursuit of other values, such as social justice...This kind of departure involving commitment (rather than just sympathy), invokes values other than personal well-being or

self-interest (including the self-interest involved in promoting the interests of those with whom we sympathize)." Thus while we find in Sen's latest meditations an unacknowledged shift of position in his distinction between well-being and agency, there is no such transformation of perspective insofar as the corollary dualism between sympathy and commitment is concerned. This dualism limits our effort to realize human well-being and works against the spirit of Adam Smith (1976) himself, a main source of inspiration for Sen, in whose moral sentiments we find a creative flow between sympathy and commitment rather than a rigid boundary.

In his now famous 1976 Oxford Lecture, "Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory," Sen makes his distinction between sympathy and commitment, a distinction which is not just an analytical one but one that Sen seems to be endorsing as a guide to life. Sen writes: "[Sympathy] corresponds to the case in which the concern for others directly affects one's welfare. If the knowledge of torture of others makes you sick, it is a case of sympathy; if it does not make you feel personally worse off, but you think it is wrong and you are ready to do something to stop it, it is a case of commitment. I do not wish to claim that the words chosen have any great merit, but the distinction is, I think, important. It can be argued that behaviour based on sympathy is in an important sense egoistic, for one is oneself pleased at other's pleasure and pained at other's pain, and the pursuit of one's own utility may thus be helped by sympathetic action. It is action based on commitment rather than sympathy which would be non-egoistic in this sense. (Note, however, that the *existence* of sympathy does not imply that the action helpful to others must be *based* on sympathy in the sense that the action would not take place had one got less or no comfort from others' welfare) (Sen 1983 : 92). After 17 years, in his essay, "Capability and Well-Being" Sen reproduces this dualism uncritically. Sen first presents the rock edicts of Emperor Ashoka: "And, if misfortune befalls the friends, acquaintances, companies and relations of persons who are full of affection [towards the former], even though they are themselves well-provided for, [this misfortune] is also an injury to their own selves" (Sen 1993: 37). Then Sen comments: "The inability to be happy, which will be widely recognized as a failure of important functioning (even though not the *only* important one, except in the hedonist version of utilitarianism), may arise either from sources within one's own life (e.g. being ill, or undernourished, or otherwise deprived), or from sources outside it (e.g. the pain that comes from sympathizing with others' misery). While both types of factors affect one's well-being, the case for excluding the latter from the assessment, specifically, of one's living standards, would seem fairly reasonable, since the latter relates primarily to the lives of others, rather than one's own" (ibid: 37 / 38).

But in order to realize human well-being, there is now a need to go beyond this dualism between self-regarding activity and other-regarding activity, beyond egotism and altruism. Other-regarding activity is not only and not solely self-sacrificial, it is also self-nurturing. But Sen looks at other-regarding activity primarily through the prism of self-sacrifice. Sen quotes Adam Smith: "Man, according to the Stoics, ought to regard himself, not as something separated and detached, but as a citizen of the world, a member of the vast commonwealth of nature and to the interest of this great community, he ought at all times be willing that his own little interest should be sacrificed" (Sen 1987b: 23). But the process of this relationship can also be viewed as a process of self-expansion or discovery of one's wider connected self. And here we can have in mind not only mysticism but also what a fellow rationalist philosopher Habermas writes: "I think all of us feel that one must be ready to recognise the interests of others even when they run counter to our own, but the person who does that does not really sacrifice himself but becomes a larger self" (Habermas 1987: 94). Thus the relationship between the recognition of one's interest and the interest of the other is not only one of sacrifice of interest. In fact, in his recent reflection on this Sen comes closer to having such a larger conception of self-interest as he writes: "Space does not have to be artificially created in the human mind for the idea of justice or fairness--through moral bombardment or ethical haraunging. That space already exists..." (Sen 1999: 261-262). To be fair to Sen, Sen did not miss such a conception of the human person even in his earlier days but then he confined this to the agency aspect of the human person. In his recent meditation, Sen seems to be discovering this larger space in the very heart of self-interest itself, at the core of his vision and practice of human well-being.

Though Sen proceeds with a distinction between agency and well-being, he nonetheless hints at the necessity of effecting a transition from the well-being aspect to the agency aspect in one's life. Though Sen brings a dimension of perspectival criticism to this transition as evident in the following lines of Sen: "The question relates to the way the states of the affairs are to be seen--an issue of some importance in analyzing the limits of consequentialism" (Sen 1992: 58), he brings this in a footnote and he himself says that his agenda has taken only a "formal" route. But in the journey from "well-being" to agency, there is now a need to pay attention to the substantive route that it takes. The outline of such a practical approach, as contrasted with Sen's admitted mere formalism, is available in Habermas's agenda of practical discourse. Habermas (1990) tells us how individuals in societies are continuously engaged in a moral debate and a critical reflection on the foundation of their society and its institutional order. In such an engagement, they analyze the supposed ethical claims of existing institutions from the points of view of justice and human dignity. Habermas calls this engagement "discourse ethics" and tells us that for the

participants in discourse "the normativity of existing institutions seems just as open to question as the objectivity of things and events" (Habermas 1990: 108). As Habermas argues, "For the hypothesis-testing participant in a discourse, the relevance of the experiential context of the life world tends to pale" (Habermas 1990: 107). Further, "under the unrelenting moralizing gaze of the participants in discourse, familiar institutions can be transformed into so many instances of problematic justice" (Habermas 1990: 108; also see Habermas 1998).

As is well-known, Sen considers happiness as an inadequate measure of human well-being. But here it may be borne in mind that the utilitarian construction of happiness is not the only construction of happiness nor the only path of realization of happiness. Consider, for instance, what a noted sociologist—not a mystic—writes about happiness as an integral goal of a worthwhile life even in modernity: "Modernity achieved no longer uses conformity to the law of God or social utility as a criterion for evaluating modes of behaviour; its only goal is happiness. A happy individual is one who is aware of being a subject and of being recognized as capable of social actions designed to heighten his or her awareness of being free and creative. This personal happiness is inseparable from the desire to make others happy, from involvement in their quest for happiness and from compassion for their unhappiness" (Touraine 1995: 367-368). Sen equates utility with happiness as evident in his following lines: "The capability to be happy can, of course, be sensibly included among the relevant capabilities, but this is quite different from using utility (or happiness) as the measure of all types of benefits, or (even more ambitiously) as the ultimate source of all value (as in different versions of the utilitarian approach)" (Sen 1987: 20). But a foundational critique of utilitarianism requires a critique of this utilitarian equation of seeking for pleasure with attainment of happiness. But Sen does not do this. In fact, it is possible to have a view of happiness which transcends the limits of pleasure-seeking in itself and we get a glimpse of such a reformulation in the work of Lawrence Sumner. In Sumner's reformulated agenda of welfare, happiness, and ethics, well-being consists in "authentic happiness, the happiness of an informed and autonomous subject" (Sumner 1996: 172). Sumner urges us to realize the distinction between "feeling happy and being happy: the former is an occurrent episode in a life while the latter is a relatively stable response to the conditions of that life" (Sumner 1996: 155). As Sumner further tells us, "When you feel happy everything looks rosy, including your life as a whole; contrariwise, when you feel despondent or depressed, then nothing seems to be going right. The solution to this possible distortion by passing mood is to seek self-assessments which are considered or reflective--that is, consistent over time and representing your settled view of your level of life satisfaction" (ibid). Thus to strive for happiness is not to run after momentary pleasure alone but to strive

to realize equanimity in life which enables one not to lose one's peace of mind when confronted with either adversity or affluence. Sen takes this peace of mind as a helpful contribution to human well-being for granted and looks at only its so-called status-quoist dimension. Here, "part of the problem is that," as David Clark argues in a recent thesis on Sen, "Sen does not sufficiently see that some of the functionings themselves come into being and depend ultimately on mental attitudes" (Clark 1999: 25). In this context, even agitation over one's objective ill-being requires a peace of mind and Sen's capability approach needs to "include a more substantial account of psychology of well-being" (Clark 1999: 1). Quest for happiness as realization of peace of mind provides a more secured and sustainable subjective foundation to the objective quest for human well-being (Giddens 1994, 1998; Melucci 1996). This quest is not unimportant on the part of the poor and the deprived as well.

Sen's heart lies with the disadvantaged and we cannot but salute this passion of Sen for the poor. But the poor and the disadvantaged are not only objects of welfare and the difficulty is that Sen's "functioning" and "capability" do not embody striving for self-development on the part of the poor. Not only that Sen's agenda of "functioning" and "capability" also suffers from the problem of insufficient commitment to responsibility. As Lera-Lee (1997: 4) argues: "Questions of responsibility .. are a necessary condition to bridge the capabilities approach with the real worlds of practice and compromise. Thus, in order to make the transition from theory to practice, the capabilities approach must incorporate responsibility ascription in its theoretical justification" (Lera-Lee 1997: 4; also see, Qizilbash 1998). Despite Sen's celebration of human agency, one does not find much of an agent-view of the disadvantaged in his writings and his capability approach to human well-being lacks an objective of self-actualization or self-realisation. But the crucial significance of self-development for the realization of human well-being becomes clear when we engage ourselves with the agenda of an interlocutor such as Giddens. Giddens speaks of positive welfare and writes:

Schemes of positive welfare, oriented to manufactured rather than external risk, would be directed to fostering the *autotelic self*. The autotelic self is one with an inner confidence which comes from self-respect, and one where a sense of ontological security, originating in basic trust, allows for the positive appreciation of social difference. It refers to a person able to translate potential threats into rewarding challenges, someone who is able to turn entropy into a consistent flow of experience. The *autotelic self* does not seek to neutralize risk or to suppose that 'someone else will take care of the problem'; risk is confronted as the active challenge which generates self-actualization (Giddens 1994: 192).

Realization of an autotelic self or responsible self is an integral part of realization of human well-being. But one misses this in Sen. The problem here is far more fundamental as Sen has difficulty in going beyond the societally articulated view of self. But in the work of self in the dynamics of culture and society there is a trans-social dimension too which points to a dialectical and creatively reflective relationship between self and society. The trans-social view of self is possible to imagine when we come to terms with the issue of autonomy of agency and the emergent character of our formed preferences. We get glimpses of such a view in what Kenneth Arrow writes about Sen's perspective of freedom: "Freedom as an ordering over sets is a derivative from the underlying principle of freedom as autonomy. More concretely, the range of preferences and the uncertainty about them can be interpreted in several ways. One is from the point of view of individual, at a stage when his or her preferences for the future are yet to be formed. An individual is autonomous even with respect to the self" (Arrow 1995: 11). The autonomous self of the individual is not a derivative of the social order; it is a creative self and is probably closer to Adam Smith's "impartial spectator." In several places in his work, Sen invokes Smith's notion of "impartial spectator" but Adam Smith's view of this really points us to a trans-social view of the self. As one commentator writes:

...in revising the sixth (1790) edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith abandoned his idea of a harmonious society in which public opinion can be seen as a guide to moral action and proposed instead a psychological mechanism for the development of an internal conscience. xxx In the move from the first to the sixth edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the impartial spectator is internalized, removed from any facile identification with public opinion, and virtue casts of its moorings in the public sphere. While men are, in this reading, still social beings, what permits sociability is not the dissolution of self in any general will but the constitution of self through that higher morality imparted by the impartial, internal spectator--higher than the mere motive of recognition and approval on the part of 'high society,' a motive that Smith was to view with increasing apprehension through the closing decades of the eighteenth century (Seligman 1995: 209; emphases added).

Here the impartial spectator is not the uncritically internalized generalized other of society but the critically reflective self which has the reflective distantiation from the taken-for-granted norms of society and subject these to critical scrutiny. In his 6<sup>th</sup> edition of *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith "had become even more skeptical of popular opinion" and the impartial spectator is the "abode of conscience within oneself" (Raphael & Macfie 1976: 16). As two influential interpreters of Smith tell us: "The originality of Adam Smith's impartial spectator lies in the development of the idea so as to explain the source and nature of conscience, i.e., a man's capacity to judge his own actions and especially his own sense of duty" (Raphael & Macfie 1976: 15). Furthermore, "Smith's impartial spectator is not the

actual 'man without' but an imagined 'man within.' When I judge my own conduct I do not simply observe what an actual spectator has to say; I imagine what I should feel if I myself were a spectator of the proposed action" (ibid: 16).

Thus in the work of impartial spectator there is a reflective dimension of the self. It is this reflective dimension which makes an individual critical of not only the unjust social arrangement but also oneself. This dimension of self-criticism has not been properly habilitated in Sen's notion of well-being though in his recent work there is suggestion of a different kind of inquiry. For instance, in his recent Romannes lecture at Oxford, Sen begins with the question of "whether the binary relation of 'being a friend of' can be taken to be reflexive, so that I could legitimately claim to be a friend of myself" (Sen 1998b: 1). But Sen does not pursue this deep ontological question further. His inquiry leads him only to a rational deconstruction of social identity. But this deconstruction of our social identity also calls for a deconstruction of our self-identity and the question here is how a self becomes a friend to herself and when and how she turns an enemy to herself. Sen himself begins his suggested ontological journey with the reflection: "On reflection I came to the conclusion that I was a friend--indeed a close friend [of myself]" (Sen 1998b: 1). But how does one become a close friend of oneself? Does it require and involve any self-preparation or self-striving?

In *Srimad Bhagabad Gita*, a key text in Indian spiritual tradition, there is a line: *Atmaieba Atmana Bandhu, Atamaieba Ripu Atmana*, which means the self is a friend to herself, the self also can be her own enemy. The self becomes friend to herself when she takes care of herself and attends to the other, being inspired by the vision and practice of embodied universality. One becomes an enemy to oneself when one does things which are self-destructive which destroys one's functioning and capability and also the functioning and capability of others. We get inspiration for such a mode of reasoning when we read Ricouer: "...what one loves in oneself is not the desiring part that motivates friendship for the sake of utility or pleasure but the best part of oneself" (Ricouer 1992: 185). Realization of human well-being requires the subjective preparation of individuals being friends to oneself and learning not to be enemies to oneself in the first place. This subjective preparation contributes to the creation of a discursive and social environment where human well-being is a subject of both self and social commitment. This simultaneous location provides human well-being a more sustainable foundation compared to the present state of Sen's articulation where human well-being has a foundation primarily in a desirable social order. But this desirable social order must have its supplement in a desirable self which in turn must be supplemented by ontological striving, *sadhana* and appropriate self-cultivation.

This dimension of self-cultivation is missing from Sen but there is a very deep suggestion about this in Adam Smith. Smith speaks of the art of cultivation of the virtue of self-command. In fact, through self-command it is possible to establish the bridge between the well-being aspect and the agency aspect of the human person as Smith writes: "The man who is himself at ease can best attend to the distress of others"

(Smith 1976: 153).

Smith's emphasis on self-command is not dissociated from his emphasis on cultivating an impartial spectator within oneself. In fact, "the approval of the impartial spectator is really directed at that proper exertion of self-command" which enables the prudent man to "attach almost as much importance to future enjoyment as to present" (Raphael & Macfie 1976: 9). What is to be noted is that in Adam Smith, this art of self-cultivation is not only an ethical engagement but also an aesthetic one. As Raphael and Macfie tell us: "Both Hume and Smith learned from Hutcheson [their teacher] to keep aesthetics in mind when thinking about ethics" (ibid: 14). This probably enabled Smith to realize that ethics is not only concerned with the other but also involves an appropriate relationship with oneself, an appropriate relationship which cannot be taken for granted and needs to be cultivated in whose cultivation there is an aesthetic engagement at work. This aesthetic engagement is quite clear in what Smith writes about self-command which for him is a superior prudence: "This superior prudence when carried to the highest degree of perfection, necessarily supposes the art, the talent, and the habit of disposition of acting with the most perfect propriety in every possible circumstance and situation. It necessarily supposes the utmost perfection of all the intellectual and of moral virtues. It is the best head joined to the best heart" (Smith 1976: 216). The aesthetic dimension is again quite clear in Smith's approach to the practice of ethics and the realization human well-being: "The command of the less violent and turbulent passions seems much less liable to be abused for any pernicious purpose. Temperance, decency, and moderation, are always amiable, and can seldom be directed to any bad end. It is from the unremitting steadfastness of those gentler exertions of self-command, that the amiable virtue of chastity, that the respectable virtues of industry and frugality, derive all that sober lustre which attends them " (ibid: 242).

In this aesthetic cultivation of ethics, Smith is building not only on his teacher Hutcheson but also on the Stoic tradition which has recently inspired the articulation of an alternative ethical agenda in the work of Michel Foucault who urges us to realize that "the search for an ethics of existence" must involve an "elaboration of one's own life as a personal work of art" (Foucault 1988: 49). An ethics of existence here is an "attempt to affirm one's liberty and to give one's life a certain form in which one could recognize

oneself, be recognized by others, and which even the posterity might take as an example" (ibid). Foucault talks about the need for "self-restraint" in one's ethical life which has close parallels to Adam Smith's notion of self-command. Thus both Adam Smith and Michel Foucault, building as they do on the Stoic tradition, point to the need for an aesthetic deepening of the agenda of ethics, a deepening which we find in many other contemporary interlocutors as well (Ankersmith 1996; Benhabib 1996, MacIntyre 1999; Welsch 1997). But Sen's conception of well-being as well as the method of its realization is basically ethical and does not realize that without the an aesthetic art of self-cultivation, the ethical cannot fulfill itself; in fact, it faces the danger of turning hegemonic on the one hand as it involves imposition of an a priori ethical agenda by the self on the other (cf. Ankersmit 1996) and on the other hand turns into only a pious hope which becomes sour as years pass by as it fails to generate genuine self-participation for the worthy goals of the ethical (see Quarles von Ufford 1988, 1999).

Sen has brought a freedom-centered perspective to thinking about human well-being and development. But this freedom-centered perspective suffers from the same problem of dualism, namely the dualism of positive and negative freedom (Sen 1989). Sen's lack of a trans-social and transcendental view of the self does not enable him to overcome his dualism between negative and positive freedom. While Sen's distinction has some promise, from the point of view of the self, the challenge is not only to be preoccupied with one's negative freedom (i.e., one's protected private space from the interference and disturbance of the other, society and the state) but also with enhancing the positive freedom in the lives of others. But this requires self-preparation, cultivation of self. The other unattended issue in Sen's perspective of freedom is how the agents of freedom are aware of the arbitrariness of their supposedly free will. To put it in Sen's own words, how agents become critics of negative freedom and become a seeker of positive freedom. In this context, Charles Taylor's critique of Isaiah Berlin's initial distinction between negative and positive liberty, the distinction on which Sen himself uncritically builds his own distinction between negative and positive freedom, is illuminating. For Taylor, negative liberty is untenable since freedom cannot just denote "the absence of external obstacles, for there may also be internal ones" (Taylor 1979: 193). As the noted political theorist Fred Dallmayr helps us understand: "Once this is recognised, freedom must mean not only the removal of "external obstacles", but also the ability to deal with "emotional fetters" and to channel human inclinations" (Dallmayr 1999: 17). For Dallmayr, "even when highly spiritualized, negative liberty still bears traces of self-centeredness" while positive liberty, while even emphasizing social and political commitments "sidesteps self-transcendence in favor of some collectively chosen goals" (Dallmayr 1999).

Once we bring such self-critical questions to freedom we can realize that freedom, though necessary for responsibility, is not sufficient for it. Embodiment of responsibility requires looking up to the face of the other and the mirrors of desires within oneself and going beyond the self-justificatory world of freedom itself (Levinas 1974, 1995). This, in turn, is facilitated by appropriate self-development. Development then means not only enhancing the functioning and capability of bonded laborers or enhancing the life expectancy of disadvantaged groups such as the Americans within an affluent society such as the US, it also means self-development on the part of the free agents where they do not just assert the self-justificatory logic of their own freedom but are willing to subject it to a self and mutual criticism, embodying a "permanent wakefulness" to the face of the other (Levinas 1995). In Sen, freedom is an end state but without the self-development of actors and institutions from freedom to responsibility there would be very little resources left to rescue human well-being from the tyranny of freedom.

Sen (1987c) considers freedom of choice central to human well-being. But it is helpful to link both freedom and free choice to an art of life or what Foucault calls "form of life" which the actor has chosen and created for herself. Such a linkage would enable us to realize the aesthetic dimension in freedom too which has not received sufficient attention in Sen but its significance for the realization of human well-being can hardly be ignored. We get such an aesthetic connectedness between one's freedom of choice and the form of life that one leads in Gandhi. As Bhikhu Parekh helps us understand, for Gandhi, "freedom consisted in being true to oneself, in living by one's own light and growing at one's pace. It was a form of wholeness or integrity. It involved knowing and accepting oneself as one was, recognizing one's limits and possibilities, and making choices on the basis of that knowledge" (Parekh 1997: 96-97). Thus self-knowledge is integral to the exercise of free choice where freedom does not consist in "choice per se" but "in making choices" that are "in harmony with and being capable of integrated into one's way of life" (ibid: 97).

When self-knowledge as an aspect of discovery of self and experiment with oneself accompanies one's exercise of free choice, there is not only a repetition of one's initial starting point but also a transformation of one's initial position. But in Sen there seems to be little recognition of the need for such a self-transformation. Sen's uncritical Rawlsianism may be the cause behind such a reluctance. Rawls seems to be an epitome of critical engagement for Sen as evident in the following lines of Sen: "... not only communitarian critiques but the Rawlsian approach itself must provide more room for choice and reason in dealing with our diverse affiliations and identities. Xx This extension would not be, in any sense, anti-Rawlsian in spirit" (Sen 1998b: 31). But is there enough resource within Rawls

for cultivating what Rawls himself calls "the capacity for justice" in the vision and the practice of actors (Giri 1998a)? As a recent critic argues, "Rawls' theory of justice is a failure in the sense that it does not succeed in realizing its ambitions, namely, reproducing the feelings of justice actually experienced by people" (Boudon 1996: 269). Here it is helpful take note of what Rawls himself writes:

But our conceptions of the good may and often change overtime, usually slowly but sometimes rather suddenly. On the road to Damascus Saul of Tarsus becomes Paul the Apostle, yet such a conversion implies no change in our public and institutional identity, nor in our personal identity (Rawls 1993: 32).

But the challenge of justice, namely the capacity for justice, requires precisely such a conversion in the life, orientations and commitments of actors by which goodness becomes a "matter of character" (Heller 1987).

The Rawlsian agenda of justice has close parallel with Sen's agenda of universality. This concern with universality takes an admirable and inspiring Kantian turn in Sen when he writes: "Human beings are not only the most important *means* of social development, they are also its profoundest end. Being a fine piece of capital is not the most exalted state that can happen to a human being" (Sen 1998a: 734). Sen also offers a radical agenda of universality before the current fashionable preoccupation with sustainability. Universalism "as an elementary demand for impartiality," for Sen must include concern for both the future generations as well as the disadvantaged in the present generation. In the words of Anand and Sen: "The demand of 'sustainability' is, in fact, a particular reflection of universality of claims..applied to the future generations vis-a-vis us. But that universalism also requires that in our anxiety to protect the future generations, we must not overlook the pressing claims of the less privileged today" (Anand & Sen 1994: 1).

But how do we cultivate the capacity not to overlook and generate this concern? Is public action enough for this? Moreover what is the nature of public action today when both the idea and practice of the public and society are undergoing fundamental transformations? What is the nature of social intervention today when sociologists themselves are talking about the death of the social at the contemporary juncture?. We may not totally subscribe to such a reading of social transformation but we cannot miss this altogether either. For instance, sociologist Alain Touraine who complements Sen for broadening the meaning of development as realization of subjective rights writes in the same essay, "Sociology without Society:" "Sociological analysis must acknowledge the death of human beings as social beings, of

*homo sociologicus*. Human beings are no longer defined by their social roles; in other words, the idea of society has lost its significance" (Touraine 1998: 132). In this context, the challenge of self-development has an epochal relevance (see Melucci 1996). One finds glimpses of this in Sen's collaborator Nussbaum's work. Nussbaum tells us in a recent essay how for the realization of equity, it is important to cultivate mercy (Nussbaum 1993). And in this cultivation the sympathetic self has a vital role to play which cannot be substituted by law and society. Nussbaum further tells us that literature helps us in cultivating this art of mercy: "the motives for mercy are engendered in the structure of literary perception itself" (Nussbaum 1993: 109).

In tackling hunger, Sen urges us to realize the significance of entitlement for food and a wider resource base. But how do we cultivate a capacity for this in our individual lives and learn to share food with others, especially hungry in our daily lives? For this we can build on certain aspects of Indian traditions where it is believed that sharing of food is central to us being human. Here we can undertake a Nussbaum-like journey into the appropriate narratives in our literary traditions. The *Bhavishtyapurana* of *Mahabharata* describes the plight of a king Svetakuta who had got a place in heaven for his good work while on Earth. But in heaven also Svetaketu felt hungry. When he asked Brahma, the Lord of the Heavens, why he is still feeling hungry even in the heaven and how he can satisfy this hunger, the Brahma told him:

O Sveta, you indeed undertook tapas of high order in your earthly life. But you nurtured only your own body. Not even a morsel of food was given out of your handsxxx Since you did not ever give food on earth, therefore, even here in the heavens you are destined to suffer the pangs of hunger and thirst. Therefore, partake of the flesh of your body that you have nurtured so well during your life on earth (Bajaj & Srinivas 1996: 13 / 14).

For Bajaj & Srinivas to whom we should be grateful for bringing this important story to our attention: "...no amount of giving of diverse riches in charity can substitute for the giving of food. All the righteous living of King Sveta and all his generous gifts could be of no avail in offsetting his failure to give food. Because, giving of food is not a matter of merely earning virtue, which may be exchanged with virtue earned otherwise. Giving of food, before sitting down to eat, is a matter of the essential discipline of living...and in the nature of a debt repaid" (ibid: 18). The story of Svetaketu and the provocative comments of Bajaj and Srinivas provide a challenge of sharing of food in our own lives, an art of sharing which must supplement Sen's theory of entitlements. We must realize that not only "no amount of generous gifts could be of no avail in offsetting...[our] failure to give food," no amount writing about poverty, hunger and deprivation and even the theory of entitlement

can redeem us our sin of not sharing food with others. Sharing of food is also here a metaphor of sharing of other resources and capabilities of life with those who do not have, and can be a starting point of a wider ethics of sharing, indeed an ethics of friendship (cf. Derrida 1997).

### **Nurturing a Wider Environment for Human Well-Being: Internal Criticism, Secularism and Positional Objectivity**

Though human well-being is crucially dependent on functioning and capability of individuals, it also needs a wider supportive social, political and cultural environment. Building on Sen's larger work, it is possible to delineate a few important features of such a supportive wider environment. The first important characteristic here is a social and cultural environment which recognizes plurality of traditions and identities where internal criticism of tradition resists any totalizing and totalitarian construction of it which binds and bounds human freedom (Nussbaum & Sen 1987, Sen 1998b). But in Sen such an internal criticism of tradition is primarily a rational criticism. Sen is committed to rationality as a tool of criticism. Not only that, he is also committed to rationality as a foundation of a good and desirable life; his famous article, "Rational Fools" is not a critique of rationality but, as Sen himself says, is a critique of a narrow conception of rationality. He derives this commitment to rationality from Adam Smith as Sen tells us in a recent interview: "In the case of Smith, the influence is primarily that of the Enlightenment vision, that is, the idea that human society can be made a lot better through rational assessment of cause and effect. The use of reasoning and rational assessment can really make a major difference to eliminating the horrors that characterize many societies and to making people's lives better, freer and more fulfilling" (Sen 1998c: 9). But can rationality be a sole guarantor of human well-being? Here Sen is silent on the horror that the Enlightenment project itself has created such as the horrors of creating a disciplinary state (Nandy 1988) and the holocaust (Bauman 1988; Uberoi 1978). When we probe this deeper we can find that there are problems in according an unquestioned primacy to rationality as a tool of criticism of life in general and internal criticism of tradition in particular. In speaking of Indian traditions where Sen has developed his framework of internal criticism of tradition, rational criticism is not the only tool of criticism of tradition, spiritual criticism has been an influential stream as well, as embodied in varieties of protests against human indignity and exploitation in the Bhakti (devotion) movements of India and in the work of saints and prophets such as Swami Vivekananda, Kabir, Naryana Guru, and Mahatma Gandhi (Giri 1998b). In proposing "sovereignty of reason" as a guide to human well-being Sen (1997) has recently enlisted the support of Rabindranth Tagore but reason in Tagore is not only and solely the rationalist reason of

Enlightenment; it is replenished with a deeper flow of consciousness, always part of a greater spiritual striving. Since the pursuit of human well-being is a matter of reflective quest and deliberation rather than one of repetition of tradition, it is important to emphasise that the critical exercise involved here is not only and solely rational; it is spiritual too. There is a danger to human well-being when it is made solely rational as it lacks the resource to interrogate the self-justificatory starting point of rationality and the varieties of social sacred who through the technology of power present themselves as the transcendental sacred--as the unquestioned gods of secular modernity (cf. Unger 1987). Spiritual criticism here provides the necessary supplement to the rational critique of life and tradition.

It is beyond doubt that in his redefinition of human well-being in terms of functioning and capability Sen has helped us go beyond the utilitarian construction of the human self. Its significance cannot be underrated (Sumner 1996: 162). But even while helping us going beyond utilitarian construction of the human self, Sen's transcendence is only within the limits of rationality and lacks an engagement of "leap of faith" as we get in an interlocutor of utilitarianism such as Kierkegaard. Here it is helpful to compare Sen's critique of the utilitarian self with that of Kierkegaard without being judgemental and with a view to widen our universe of discourse. In Kierkegaard's critique of the utilitarian self, "Faith is a process in which the self pierces through the inherently utilitarian structure of its ontological constitution by virtue of the sublimity of the infinite, thereby becoming transformed by the reality of God" (Kodalle 1998 : 410). In such individual self-becoming where there is a going beyond of one's utilitarian self, there emerges an "unconditionality of an ethical commitment that on pragmatic grounds would be wholly inexplicable" (ibid).

Sen is a votary of pluralism and human well-being requires a social, cultural and political environment which embodies pluralism rather than annihilates it. For Sen, "to deny pluralism, choice and reasoning in human identity can be source of repression, new and old, as well as a source of violence and brutality" (Sen 1998b: 22). Sen has defended such a plural framework of human well-being in the context of Indian society by putting forward a positive vision of secular toleration. In his recent insightful essay, "Secularism and its Discontents", Sen (1996) argues that the key question for an agenda of secularism is the question of symmetric treatment of religions, groups, individuals and other autonomies. For Sen, a secular state has a moral duty to ensure such a symmetric treatment among religions and does not agree with critics of secularism such as Ashis Nandy (cf. Nandy 1985) that such a practice is inevitably accompanied by the increase in the power of the state to perpetrate violence on people in the name of defending secularism. What is helpful is that Sen just hints at the agenda of positive tolerance in the following lines of his: "There is, furthermore, a real difference between getting symmetry through the sum-total of collective

intolerances of the different communities, rather than through the union of their respective tolerances. Anything that causes the wrath of any of the major communities in India is presently taken to be a political candidate for proscription. We have to ask whether that is the form that symmetric treatment should take" (Sen 1996: 43). But how do we cultivate and facilitate the capacity for symmetric and fair treatment to each other on the part of individuals and groups? Here Sen does not go much farther and deeper. He does not address the ontological preparation that is required for such a mode of life to exist in our society and politics. Is just a reasoned deliberation enough for such a positive toleration to flower in the life of individuals and society? Sen is dismayed by the unreasoned identity shifts that are taking place but the reasoned deliberation that Sen is looking for requires much more than reason; it requires a much more fuller appreciation and acceptance and invitation of the other into one's own and the process of this identification and creation of a non-repressive solidarity requires an appropriate ontological striving which is both rational and spiritual. In fact, the realization of the positive agenda of secularism that Sen pleads for requires a spiritual foundation in as much as it begins with a study of religions of each other and then acceptance of these as worthwhile modes of being and becoming even though the self does not convert herself to the other points of view (Giri 1998). This ontological striving is facilitated by building appropriate institutions of self-learning, mutual learning, dialogue and the public discursive formation of will to which Sen's project would be sympathetic but the lack of an ontological striving in the first place in Sen's admirable positive agenda of secularism and multiculturalism does not enable us to realize its full potential.

It has been a crucial contribution of Sen that the flowering of human well-being requires a critical inquiry into one's given situation of life. Not to be engaged in such a critical inquiry in the name of cultural relativism is for Sen an "abdication of responsibility" (Sen 1998b: 21). At the same time, Sen is not an advocate of universalistic critique which does not make a dialogue with the ways of life in local cultures, hence his plea for a craft of internal criticism of tradition which is grounded in tradition but in its aspiration for a good life, it draws inspiration from multiple sources of human flourishing. In a recent essay, Sen (1994) has delineated the epistemological dimension of such a mode of practice through his framework of "positional objectivity." As against the postmodern deconstruction of objectivity, Sen provides the agenda of positional objectivity thus: "...positionally dependent observations, beliefs, and actions are central to our knowledge and practical reason. The nature of objectivity in epistemology, decision theory and ethics has to take adequate note of the parametric dependence of observation and information on the position of the observer" (Sen 1993: 126). But for this, the objectivity here is not any less objective. At the same time, Sen tells us of the need for developing a trans-positional point of view. But the fact

that he talks about it only in a half-hearted manner and does not confront the issue of what anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere (1990) calls "interpretive validity" is evident in the following lines of Sen:

Observations are unavoidably position-based, but scientific reasoning need not, of course, be based on observational information from one specific position only. There is need for what may be called "trans-positional" assessment--drawing on but going beyond different positional observations. The constructed "view from no where" would then be based on synthesizing different views from distinct positions. The positional objectivity of the respective observations would still remain important but not in itself adequate. A trans-positional scrutiny would also demand some kind of coherence between different positional views (ibid: 130).

The realization of a transpositional point of view requires a transcendental engagement (see Giri 2000) and work on self but the lack of an ontological striving in Sen does not enable us to realize the full potential of such a promising epistemology as well.

#### **By the Way of Conclusion:**

In this dialogue, we have had a chance to look at Sen's perspective of human well-being as it emerges from a critique of utilitarianism and the positive formulation of it in terms of enhancing the "functioning" and "capability" of individuals. We have also seen the need for a wider supportive social and cultural environment which facilitates a proper flourishing of human well-being such as an internal criticism of tradition, a plural framework of secular toleration and an epistemology of positional objectivity. But Sen's agenda of human well-being suffers from a fundamental problem of dualism between self and other, egotism and altruism, negative and positive freedom. Overcoming this dualism is crucial for realising human well-being but this calls for the work of a creative and reflective self, a self which has not received much attention from Sen. The lack of an ontological striving and a quest for self-development is a problem in Sen's conceptualization of human well-being and this ontological lack affects his sociology of multicultural toleration and epistemology of positional objectivity as well. Being aware of the need for such an ontological commitment in our quest for well-being and cultivating a critical, reflective and creative self which learns to be critical of the arbitrariness of one's free will, struggle for one's denied freedom and suppressed dignity, and responsible for the other, and build appropriate social institutions where such a dialogical relationship between self and other is nurtured and sustained is probably the most important task lying in front of us as we explore, holding the courageous and imaginative hands of Amartya Sen himself, the further meanings and dimensions of our "momentous engagement with freedom's possibilities" (Sen 1999: 298).

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