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The role of freedom in Sen's Capability approach

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Abstract

Is someone free when he has the power to achieve something? Or is someone free when he is not prevented by external constraints from doing something? Berlin's Two Concepts of Liberty and Rawls' Justice as Fairness are two prominent answers to these questions. Sen echoes Berlin and Rawls when he argues that both positive and negative freedoms are important. However unlike Berlin, He refuses to theorize the dichotomy between positive and negative freedom. Concerning Rawls, he thinks that the 'primary goods' concentrate on the means to freedom, rather than on the extend of the freedom that the person actually has (Sen, 1984:81). Sen suggests that there is only one sort of freedom, a positive freedom which concerns what people are free to do, as well as what they actually do. Therefore, Sen's approach includes both a negative (the absence of constraint) and a positive feature (the presence of real opportunities). This conception resembles the one advocated by Green. However, if Sen acknowledges link with Rawls and Berlin, he fails to admit that he has been inspired by Green. The aim of this paper is twofold. First we seek to present the role of freedom in Sen's work. Second we aim to show that the Sen's conception of freedom was enriched by the writings of Green.

1 Introduction

What is freedom? This is a question that has been debated over the centuries by political theorists, philosophers and economists even though they failed to put it in the centre of the debate¹. Although there has been a shift since the 1970s in the direction of freedom, mainly due to the work of Rawls, this work has focused primarily more on the means to freedom than on freedom itself. Rawls considers that rights and freedoms are part of the set of ‘primary goods’. These are the means, such as income, wealth, liberty, etc., that help people to pursue their respective objectives freely. For Sen, making comparisons of the primary goods different people have is not quite the same as comparing the freedoms actually enjoyed by different persons, even though the two can be closely related (Sen, 1992). Primary goods, he insists, are means to freedom, but they cannot represent the extent of freedom, given the diversity of human beings in converting primary goods into the freedom to pursue their respective objectives (Sen, 1992 :27). Besides Rawls, Sen also acknowledges link with Berlin’s *Two Concepts of Liberty*. However, unlike Berlin, he refuses to theorize the dichotomy between positive and negative freedom. Instead, he suggests that there is only one sort of freedom, a positive freedom which concerns what people are free to do, as well as what they actually do. Therefore, Sen’s approach includes both a negative (the ‘external’ absence of constraint) and a positive feature (the presence of real opportunities)². This particular conception of freedom resembles the one advocated by Thomas Hill Green (Green, 1937)³. The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents Berlin’s Two Concepts of Liberty. Section 3 concerns the role of freedom in Sen’s work. Section 4 discusses Green’s conception of freedom and argues that it is echoed in Sen’s work while a final section concludes.

2 Berlin’s Two Concepts of Liberty

Berlin’s *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Berlin, 1969) is probably an inescapable starting point for discussing the concept of freedom in political philosophy. By outlining the distinction between positive and negative liberty, Berlin, ‘opened up critical discussion of the concept of freedom in much the same way that Rawls later opened up discussion of social justice’ (Crowder, 2004 :189). Berlin is the first to have introduced the classical distinction between the conceptions of liberty as freedom from coercion, on the one hand, and, as freedom to achieve valued outcomes, on the other.

1. Salles (2000) notes that “Traditional economy has forgotten the concepts of rights and liberty, whereas they are at the root of normative economics”.

2. For Sen, freedoms only exist if there is the presence of valuable options or alternatives, in the sense of opportunities that do not exist only formally or legally but are also effectively available to the agent. Sen’s conception of freedom can therefore be understood as an opportunity concept of freedom.

3. For Green, freedom consists of two senses : internal and external senses of ability or power to act according to our will or preference (Green, 1937 :10).

2.1 Negative Freedom

According to Berlin, negative freedom is a “freedom from” external obstacles or limitations that can be imposed to a person by governments, institutions and other persons. Anyone who deliberately causes, or forces you to act in a certain way reduces your negative freedom :

“I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree.”(Berlin, 1969 :122)

For Berlin, constraint must consist in some act of interference, by some external agency, with the capacity of another agent to pursue “possible choices and activities” (Berlin, 2002 :36). The obstacle for him need not be intentional and he puts it, “the criterion of oppression is the part that I believe to be played by other human beings, directly or indirectly, with or without the intention of doing so, in frustrating my wishes”. By being free in the sense I mean “not being interfered with by others”. “The wider area of non-interference the wider my freedom” (Berlin, 2002 :170)⁴ .

2.2 Positive Freedom

In contrast, the positive view sees freedom not in terms of the presence or absence of interference by others, but in terms of what a person is actually able to do or be. Positive freedom is therefore a “freedom to” achieve something, freedom to follow a certain form of live (Berlin, 2002 :178). In other words we can say that positive freedom focuses on a person’s capability to choose to do (or not to do), to achieve (or not to achieve) something, rather than on external constraints that prevent someone from doing something. Berlin adds that the positive sense of the word refers to the idea of being one’s own master as opposed to being acted upon by external forces (Berlin, 2002 :178). I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men’s acts of will. He suggests that the freedom of an agent consists in their having managed most fully to become themselves with the idea of my self at its best (Berlin, 2002 :179). The positive concept is thus that, as Berlin summarizes, ‘whatever is the true goal of man. . . must be identical with his freedom’ (Berlin, 2002 :180). Berlin in formulating this definition must have had

4. Berlin distinguishes lack of freedom from lack of ability and he insists that “I am free only if I am capable of exercising ability, should I choose, without interference” (Berlin, 2002). If I say that I am unable to jump more than ten feet in the air, or cannot read because I am blind, it would be eccentric to say that I am to that degree enslaved or coerced. The blind man is just incapable of exercising the ability to read under any circumstances. Coercion implies the deliberate interference of other human beings within the area in which I could otherwise act (Berlin, 1958). Therefore, to be unfree, is to have been rendered incapable of exercising an ability I possess. But the blind man has not in this way been disempowered ; he is simply not in possession of the relevant ability (Skinner, 2002).

Green in mind⁵. Green does not explicitly speak in that word of ‘positive’ liberty⁶ but he provides a definition of freedom that resembles that of Berlin. ‘Real freedom’ according to Green, consists in “the whole man having found his object” (Green, 1937 :3). To attain freedom is thus to have attained “harmony with the true law of one’s being” (Green, 1937 :17). To speak of freedom of a man is to speak of the “state in which he shall have realized his ideal of himself” (Green, 1986 :241).

3 Sen’s Notion of Freedom

One of the motivational departures of Sen’s theory of capabilities is discontent with the liberal notion of freedom as non-interference.⁷ Sen seeks to overcome the dichotomy between negative and positive freedom. For Sen, both positive and negative freedoms are important and only a mutual connection between them can provide a broader informational base for assessing the value and role of freedom from an ethical and social point of view (Sen, 1990 :12). According to Sen (Sen, 1988 :274), it may not be fair to define freedom in a particularly narrow and negative way, but to draw on the wide appeal that the notion in the broader sense enjoys. He insists that the concept of positive freedom is broader than that of negative freedom, since the latter only focuses on the absence of external constraints whereas the former refers to a capability to do (and to be) and thus includes both a negative (the ‘external’ absence of constraints) and a positive feature (the presence of real opportunities).

In his ‘entitlement approach’ to the economic analysis of famine, Sen proves that famines can occur - killing millions of people - despite a high and undiminished general level of food availability in the economy as a whole (Sen, 1999 :165). What causes these large famines is not the decline in food production or availability, but the loss of ‘entitlements’ (Sen, 1988 :10 ; 1999 :160-168). The negative freedom - freedom as non - interference by others - is not sufficient to explain the causes of such famines. “It is pa-

5. T.H Green, Principles of Political Obligation(1886).

6. He does it elsewhere. See for example, Green, 1937 :3.

7. Green is generally portrayed as the originator of the term “capabilities”. Thomas Hill Green and other left-wing British liberals made a good political use of it long before Sen. They took a stand that split the British liberal party : favoring compulsory public education. They insisted that true freedom is a function of a person’s capabilities, what they are actually able to do and to be. It is ridiculous to say that children are free if, due to lack of education, they are not able to have any real choices in life. This point was actually made already by Adam Smith : in *The Wealth of Nations* he praises the Scottish custom of universal education and attacks England, saying that the failure to educate working class children meant that their human powers are “withered and deformed”. Adam Smith argues that education aids in developing broader capabilities and he writes : “ The man whose life is spent in performing a few simple operations. . . has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many events of the ordinary duties of private life. Of the great and extensive interests of his country he is altogether incapable of judging” (*The Wealth of Nations*, 1937 :734-5). That is the key idea of the capabilities approach.(Adapted from an interview with Martha Nussbaum on : <http://ethique-economique.net/Volume-1.html>)

radical that during famines freedom as non-interference could be perfectly honoured with non interference from the government or fellow citizens. Therefore, there is something totally inadequate in focusing on negative freedom only. Because defining negative freedom only in terms of non-interference by others without requiring anything positive to be done in defense of negative freedom when they are threatened with violation is not sufficient” (Sen, 1988 :274). If a person is not free from hunger and lacks the means and the practical opportunities to feed himself or herself adequately, then that person’s positive freedom must be seen as having been thoroughly compromised. On the other hand, his or her negative freedom may be completely unviolated, if this failure to acquire enough food is not a result of his or her having been stopped by interference from others. In capability-oriented reasoning, a person who is poor, uneducated, unemployed, affected by a preventable disease or socially excluded might strictly speaking encounter no interference from the state or fellow citizens, but he or she lacks the required capacities and conditions to live a life of real freedom. There is thus clearly a case for paying attention to the overall freedoms, i.e., a person being able to do this or be that (such as being well nourished, avoiding escapable morbidity and mortality, being able to move about freely, and so on), which Sen calls capability (Sen, 1988 :275).

3.1 Freedom, Functioning and Capability

Capabilities are a central idea of Sen’s notion of freedom. In his 1979 Tanner Lecture (1980), his Hennipman Lecture in 1982, Commodities and Capabilities(1985), he has made a forceful case that assessment of the standard of living should focus on :

“neither commodities, nor characteristics (in the sense of Gorman and Lancaster), nor utility, but something that may be called a person’s capability.” (Sen, 1983 :160)

Capability refers to the freedom that a person has in terms of choice of functioning, where the latter refer to what a person can achieve (such as take part in the life of the community). Sen illustrates this by the example of a bicycle :

“it is of course, a commodity. It has several characteristics, and let us concentrate on one particular characteristic, viz., transportation. Having a bike gives a person the ability to move about in a certain way that he may not be able to do without the bike. So the transportation characteristic of the bike gives the person the capability of moving in a certain way.” (1983 :160)

He recognizes that the capability may generate utility, but argues that it is the capability to function that comes closest to the notion of standard of living. The capability approach can be interpreted in two different ways. It may be concerned with the actual chosen functionings, or with the options that a person has, the capability set (Sen and Foster, 1997). The example Sen gives is of two people who are starving, one of whom lacks food, the other of whom is starving out of choice on account of religious beliefs. Evaluation in terms of social functioning - i.e, starvation in both cases - is closer to tra-

ditional welfare economics, being concerned with outcomes, but this does not capture the difference between the two people, which is that the second person could have made a different choice. To clearly make the difference, Sen writes :

“I would distinguish broadly between two ways of seeing a person’s interest and their fulfillment, and I shall call them respectively ‘well-being’ and ‘advantage’. Well-being is concerned with a person’s achievement : how ‘well’ is his or her ‘being’. ‘Advantage’ refers to the real opportunity that a person has, especially compared with others. The opportunities are not judged by the results achieved, and therefore not just by the level of well-being for other goals, and not to make full use of one’s freedom to achieve a high level of well-being. The notion of advantage deals with a person’s real opportunities compared with others. The freedom to achieve well-being is closer to the notion of advantage than well-being itself” (Sen, 1985b :5).

To represent our achievements, Sen introduces the concept of ‘functionings’. Advantage is embodied by what Sen refers to as ‘capability’. Sen defines a functioning as an achievement of a person : “various things a person may value doing or being” (Sen, 1999 :75). To illustrate the contrast between functionings, utility and primary goods, Sen often defines functionings in relation to these other variables :

“A functioning is an achievement of a person : what he or she manages to do or be. It reflects, as it were, a part of the ‘state’ of that person. It has to be distinguished from the commodities which were used to achieve those functionings. For example a bicycle has to be distinguished from possessing a bike. It has to be distinguished also from the happiness generated by the functioning, for example, actually climbing around must not be identified with the pleasure obtained from the act. A functioning is thus different both from (i) having goods (and the corresponding characteristics), to which it is posterior and (ii) having the utility (in the form of happiness resulting from that functioning), to which it is, in an important way, prior.” (Sen, 1985b :10-11)

The valued functionings vary from elementary ones, such as being adequately nourished and being free from avoidable disease, to very complex activities or personal states, such as being able to take part in the life of the community and having self-respect (Sen, 1999 :75). Achieving a functioning (e.g. being adequately nourished) with a given bundle of commodities (e.g. bread or rice) depends on a range of personal and social factors (e.g. metabolic rates, body size, age, gender, activity levels, health, access to medical services, nutritional knowledge and education, climatic conditions, etc). A functioning therefore refers to the use a person makes of the commodities at his or her command. What is centrally important varies in different times and places and among different people. Thus Sen argues that there cannot be a ‘canonical’ list of functionings; the set of focal functionings or capabilities will have to be set and re-set again and again in different ways. What matters in judging a person’s interest, Sen suggests, is not merely their well-being, but their advantage, which is also their ‘real opportunities compared to others’. He then introduces the concept of capability. A capability reflects a person’s

freedom to lead one type of life over another. It is also the alternative combinations of functionings (doings or beings) that are feasible for her to achieve (Sen, 1999 :75). For example, a person may have the ability to avoid hunger, but may choose to fast or go on hunger strike instead. In a wider context, Sen defines capability as the individual freedom, individual positive freedom to achieve functionings such as good nourishment, good health, self-respect, and social integration (Sen, 1996), or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles (Sen, 1999 : 14-15).

Sen illustrates the distinction between functionings and capability as follows :

“A functioning is an achievement, whereas a capability is the ability to achieve. Functionings are, in a sense, more directly related to living conditions, since they are different aspects of living conditions. Capabilities, in contrast, are notions of freedom, in the positive sense : what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead”(Sen, 1987 :36).

In other words freedom can be seen in the form of “individual capabilities to do things a person has reason to value” (Sen, 1999 :56). Such a freedom Sen continues, is a substantive freedom, and not a merely formal one : “freedom as capability is the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations” (Sen, 1999 :79).

3.2 Freedom and Agency

For Sen, in assessing the extend of the real freedom that a person enjoys, it is essential to pay attention to the ‘agency’ aspect (Sen, 1985).⁸ The agency aspect of a person need not be so directly motivated by self-interest. People can also value other things, including the well-being of family members, friends, or even strangers, as well as aspects of life not necessarily directly connected to any specific person’s well-being :

“Agency can be defined as a person’s capacity to achieve, within his or her social context, those things that he or she values. Agency (like well-being) can be analyzed in terms of freedom to achieve and in terms of achievements. Agency freedom is ‘what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important’ (Sen, 1985b :203), and agency achievement is the actual attainment of those ends. A person’s agency aspect cannot be understood without taking note of his or her aims, objective, allegiances, obligations and-in a broad sense-the person’s conception of the good” (Sen, 1985a :203-204).

8. For Sen, the term ‘agent’ is someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives (Sen, 1999 :19).

3.3 Development as freedom

In his book *Development as Freedom*, Sen argues that “development should be seen as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy”. He contrasts freedom with the “widely prevalent concentration on the expansion of real income and on economic growth as the characteristics of successful development” (Sen, 1990 :41). Sen has argued that development can be seen as a process of expanding the real freedom that people enjoy. Real freedom, for Sen, consists in the person’s “capability to achieve valuable human functionings” (Sen, 1992 :1999). Hence measuring real freedom in terms of indicators such as life expectancy, literacy and educational attainments, levels of nutrition, access to health care, employment, social respect and political participation are central to assessing how individuals and societies are faring. This differs from the narrower view which identifies development with the growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialization, or with technological advance, or social modernization (Sen, 1999). Growth of GNP or of individual incomes can, of course, be very important as means to expanding the freedoms enjoyed by the members of the society. But freedoms depend also on other determinants, such as social and economic arrangements (for example, facilities for education and health care) as well as political and civil rights (for example, the liberty to participate in public discussion and scrutiny).

4 Green’s conception of freedom

In the late nineteenth century, the positive concept of freedom was popularized by the British Hegelian Thomas Hill Green. When we speak of freedom as something to be highly prized, Green wrote,

“We shall probably all agree that freedom, rightly understood, is the greatest of blessings; that its attainment is the true end of all our effort as citizens. But when we thus speak of freedom, we should consider carefully what we mean by it. We do not mean merely freedom from restraint of compulsion. We do not mean merely freedom to do as we like irrespectively of what it is that we like. We do not mean a freedom that can be enjoyed by one man or one set of men at the cost of a loss of freedom to others. [...] When we measure the progress of a society by its growth of freedom, we measure it by the increasing development and exercise on the whole of those powers of contribution to the social good with which we believe the members of the society to be endowed; in short the greater power on the part of the citizens as a body to make the most and best of themselves. Thus, though of course there can be no freedom among men who act not willingly but under compulsion, yet on the other hand the mere removal of compulsion, the mere enabling of a man to do as he likes, is in itself no contribution to true freedom”(Green, 1911 :370-71).

Like Sen, Green subscribes to a sophisticated conception on freedom : he refuses to theorize the dichotomy between negative and positive freedom. Negative Freedom for Green, not being interfered with by others is not the core idea of freedom : “the

mere removal of compulsion, the mere enabling a man to do as he likes, is in itself no contribution to true freedom” (Green, 1911 :371). In Green’s view, what matters when we talk about freedom is the power to do what we will or prefer (Green, 1937 :9), a sort of positive power to do what we value. Sen echoes Green when he argues that freedom can be seen in the form of “individual capabilities to do things a person has reason to value” (Sen, 1999 :56). In *Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract*, Green insists that, in measuring the growth of freedom, what we are measuring is “the greater power on the part of the citizens as a body to make the most and best of themselves” (Green, 1911 :371). He adds that freedom for a man is “the state in which he shall have realized his ideal of himself” (Green 1937 :17). For Green therefore, freedom does not have to do with the opportunity to attain such a condition but rather the actual attainment of it. Sen repeats the same principle with his capability approach when he argues that in the capability approach, freedom concerns ‘the real opportunity that people can achieve’. Capability does not therefore include those freedoms or opportunities that people cannot achieve in reality :

“In this regard, substantive freedom can be seen as the real freedom to achieve valuable combinations of human functionings, where ‘real’ means that such a freedom is not only formal nor abstract but is a concrete and actual opportunity for the person. The idea of capability can thus reasonably be defined as the opportunity to achieve valuable combinations of human functionings” (Sen 2005 :153).

Green sometimes takes the example of “the starving labourer” of the late nineteenth century who had no alternative but to accept the low wages offered by the employers, because refusal will result in starvation. For Green, although the starving labourer is ‘uncoerced’ he is nevertheless unfree because he is unable to exercise his capacities of will and reason. The fact that the labourer is not coerced means that his negative freedom is not violated and yet he is starving. Sen almost gave the same example with people dying from famines while their negative freedom could be perfectly honoured with non-interference from the government or fellow citizens. For Green and Sen therefore, there is something totally inadequate in focussing on negative freedom only and there is clearly a case for paying attention to the overall freedoms, i.e, a person being able to do this or that (such as being well nourished, avoiding escapable morbidity and mortality) (Sen, 1987 :10).

For Sen, to value positive freedom does not, of course entail that no special attention be paid to negative freedom as such and a violation of negative freedom can lead to a violation of positive freedom (Sen, 1987 :10). Green thinks that both negative and positive freedoms are expressions of the same self-seeking principle (Green, 1937 :17). Green also says that by ‘freedom’ we do not mean merely freedom from restraint or compulsion (Green, 1911 :370). Self-realization requires also the absence of certain kinds of obstacles, external as well as internal. Freedom, he adds, consists of two senses : internal and external senses of ability or power to act according to our will or preference (Green, 1937 :10). Internal positive power is the situation where the man is secured from compulsion so as to have the power to do what he wills or prefers (Green, 1937 :9). By

positive ability in the external sense, Green means the power to do what we like, the power to act according to our will or preference (Green, 1937 :10). For Green, internal abilities can be called capacities and external abilities opportunities (Simhony, 1993). We can view opportunities as non-preventing external conditions that allow one to exercise one's capacities : both capacities and non-preventing external conditions must exist (Simhony, 1993). Sen repeats the language of Green when he argues that freedom has at least two distinct but partially overlapping aspects : process and opportunity. The opportunity aspect of freedom concerns our ability to achieve things we value and have reason to value (Sen, 1999 :87)⁹ ; the process aspect of freedom observes that the procedures by which we obtain outcomes may have a value independent of the outcome achieved. In other words, the process aspect is the freedom involved in the process itself (for example, is the person free to choose herself or other people force her or to choose or prevent her from choosing?) (Sen, 2002 :10).

Like Sen, Green believes that the agency aspect of freedom is important and he writes :

“[...] when we speak of freedom as something to be highly prized, we mean a positive power or capacity of doing and enjoying something worth doing or enjoying, and that, too, something that we do or enjoy in common with others. We mean by it a power which each man exercises through the help or security given him by his fellow men, and which he in turn helps to secure for them” (Green, 1911 :371). Individuals are dependent on the social institutions, which in turn are sustained and recreated by the interaction of individuals exercising their capacities and vice versa, as is required by relation of mutual interdependence the two run into each other in a way that makes it impossible to separate them. Social institutions and individual agents are equally constitutive of each other, supportive of each other's maintenance, necessary for each other's development. All this is possible only if there is a common recognition of this freedom on the part of each other by members of a society, as being for a common good ”(Green, 1937 :122).

5 Concluding Remark

In this paper, we did not only want to present the role of freedom in Sen's work, but we also wanted to show that the T.H. Green's conception of freedom enriched the Sen's notion of capabilities.

I have emphasized that Sen's capability approach was proposed as an alternative to Rawls's primary goods on the one hand, and to Berlin's Two Concepts of Liberty on the other. Compared with Rawls, Sen thinks that the 'primary goods' approach concentrates on the means to freedom, rather than on the extend of the freedom that the person actually has (Sen, 1984 :81). Compared with Berlin, Sen refuses to theorize the dichotomy between positive and negative freedom. Instead, he adopts a positive notion of freedom, which sees freedom, not only in terms of absence of coercion, but in terms of the power or capacity choosing the kind of life he or she has reason to value

9. The notion of capability is closely related the opportunity aspect of freedom.

(Sen, 1999 :87). We have also focused on the agency aspects of freedom as well as the role of freedom in development. Indeed, Sen believes that there is a close relation between freedom and development. For him, economic growth is an imperfect proxy for welfare. To better capture the deprivation of human lives, attention should be drawn on the freedom they have to lead a life of value.

Finally the relationship between both Sen's conception of freedom and Green's conception of freedom was scrutinized.

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