

SEN'S ECONOMIC PHILOSOPHY

Capabilities and Human Development in the Revival of Economics as a Moral Science

L.A. Duhs, School of Economics Discussion Paper No. 366, June 2008, School of Economics,
The University of Queensland. Australia.

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Abstract

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EPrint Type: Departmental Technical Report

Keywords: economic philosophy, economic development, freedom, human capabilities.

Subjects: 340000 Economics;

ID Code: JEL Classification: A12, A13, O10.

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Science

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Alan Duhs

ABSTRACT

Sen joins a line of economists – including Cropsey, Schumacher, Myrdal, Ward, Higgins and Etzioni – who have objected to the implicit political philosophy within orthodox neo-classical economics. He argues that the good or just society requires policies to remove all forms of “unfreedoms”, and policies to equalise the extent of capability deprivation. This capabilities approach calls for a rejection of utilitarianism, libertarianism and Rawlsianism in favour of the conception of justice provided by his putatively Smithian/Aristotelian approach. In taking the expansion of freedom to be both the principal end and the principal means of development, however, Sen ignores other philosophical positions which lead to quite different conclusions. Accordingly, his argument remains incomplete and unpersuasive, and the most fundamental questions remain to be resolved.

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1. Introduction

Sen's project is not unique. His goal is to develop a superior ethical theory or framework from within which to distil appropriate social policies in the context of developing countries. He considers that all the properties underlying the general consensus on traditional welfare economics are eminently contestable, and dismisses Pareto optimality as "a very limited kind of success". He seeks to divert attention away from the metric of exchange value and the maximisation of income to the development of human capabilities and rights. He offers a view of development in which freedom is both the principal means and the primary end of the development process. Sen's message is that human "unfreedoms" are decreased as human capabilities are increased.

Sen explicitly considers and rejects the three ethical or philosophical perspectives provided by utilitarianism, libertarianism, and Rawlsianism. Implicitly, he also rejects Posner's wealth maximisation argument as a fourth alternative. Before him, others to have contested utilitarianism as the putatively superior theoretical or ethical framework include John Rawls, E. F. Schumacher, Richard Posner and – in the development economics context - Gunnar Myrdal and Benjamin Higgins. Thus, the appropriate context in which to apprehend Sen's attempt to develop a superior decision making framework is one which explicitly considers utilitarianism and available critiques of it.

2. Sen's Putatively Superior Ethical Theory In Comparative Context

Ultimately, however, Sen endorses his own position as a composite of utilitarianism and libertarianism. The argument in this paper is that his position is best seen as a re-writing of Rawls, however, with some modification of just what the “primary goods” are that need to be lifted for the worst off section of the population. *Sen's concept of fairness or justice requires an equalisation of “capability shortfalls”*, as distinct from Rawls's conception of justice as “maximin” “fairness”. An adumbration of the historical context in which Sen's argument is offered is an essential backdrop to an appreciation of his case:

1. Utilitarianism: Utilitarianism has remained a mainstay of economic argument for most of the last two centuries, despite critiques from various sources.

1.1 Benthamite utilitarianism and its development: Bentham was emphatic that we are all subservient to the two sovereign masters of pleasure and pain, and that the utilitarian calculus provides the superior – and indeed only viable – principle to guide actions in both normative and positive spheres. J.S. Mill soon modified the Benthamite understanding of utilitarianism by insisting on the recognition of qualitative (as well as quantitative) differences between the pleasures. Hence Mill's famous quip that it is “better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied”.

Sen's objection is more that destitute people make an accommodation to their poverty and distort their own apprehension of utility prospects. His concern is less with the qualitative difference between the pleasures than with the qualitative difference between the capability of fortunate and unfortunate people to enjoy those pleasures. Sen's concern is thus with something close to the opposite of the “utility monsters”

who are of concern to Posner ie his concern is with the deprived rather than the depraved.

As Sen sees it, Pareto optimality may come “hot from Hell”, (1987:32) and Pareto optimality is entirely compatible with leaving some people in extreme misery while others roll in decadence and luxury. This leaves it “an extremely limited way of assessing social achievement” (1987:35), and “a very limited kind of success”. What it captures is (merely) the efficiency implications of utility accounting. Accordingly, a utilitarian/Paretian approach can yield results at odds with our basic intuitions, and at least tacitly Sen offers as a criterion of the acceptability of an ethical theory the notion that a theory must be rejected if it is inconsistent with those basic intuitions. In this respect he replicates Posner. Sen carries his critique of utilitarianism further and objects that “to identify advantage with utility is far from obvious” (1987:38) – and that if some interpretation of advantage other than utility is accepted, then Pareto optimality (defined as it is in terms of individual utilities) would cease to be even a necessary condition, let alone a sufficient condition, for overall social optimality (1987:35-39; also 1979). He concludes that welfarism - in which social welfare is a function of personal utility levels alone - is therefore potentially disastrous, especially when the utility information is poor.

For Sen, orthodoxy thus has a lot to answer for, especially in the context of development economics.

1.2 Posner’s “correction of utilitarianism” (1979): Posner is emphatic that although many may take economics to be identical with utilitarianism, it is not so, and progress in economics (and law) is to be made by recognising the limitations of

utilitarianism and by adopting a superior maximand. Accordingly, Posner offers his wealth maximisation criterion as that putatively superior social goal or maximand.

For Posner there are several major objections to utilitarianism, chief amongst which are the indefiniteness of utilitarian measures, the uncertainty of the appropriate domain for utilitarian calculations (ie do foreigners, the unborn or animals count?), the difficulty of making interpersonal comparisons of utility when estimating changes in aggregate social utility, and - perhaps most of all - the perversity of having to accept in a utilitarian calculus the perverse utility accruing to “utility monsters” (who derive pleasure from watching the suffering of others, in contravention of our common basic intuitions).

Posner’s putatively superior maximand is of course subject to criticism, and indeed stands in direct opposition to Sen’s Aristotelian stricture that wealth is *not* what we are seeking to maximise, since wealth is merely useful for something else. A limitation allowed by Posner himself is that very poor people do not fare well under his criterion, and indeed people without money enter into a wealth maximising criterion only insofar as they enter into the utility function of someone who has money. Posner’s criterion is therefore unlikely to commend itself for use in the developing country context, or indeed in any context where the goal is to *establish* a market economy, rather than to refine an established one, where other objections nonetheless may apply. Despite this admitted shortcoming, Posner argues that *all* major ethical theories - utilitarianism and Kantianism being the other two he recognises - are subject to shortcomings. His contention is not that his criterion is perfect for its intended purposes, just that it is less fallible than the available alternatives. Posner’s critics would add a second shortcoming, namely that in his

system people have rights, but only insofar as they can pay for them. Clearly there is no notion of Natural Right here, as there is in ancient philosophy. In effect, rights are apportioned in proportion to wealth – and thus for Posner, economy is polity. In effect, Posner has redefined jurisprudence as economic efficiency. Sen emphatically rejects any such notion that economy is polity or that economic efficiency is justice. He aspires instead to a notion that the essence of fairness or justice is represented by equality of shortfalls in the attainment of individual human capabilities. Sen's stance on rights is quite different from Posner's, but is nonetheless not one of ancient Natural Right. Sen does not explicitly discuss Posner's theory, but implicitly dismisses it in rejecting libertarianism and utilitarianism as alternatives to his own capabilities approach.

While Posner objects to utilitarianism on the ground that it cannot debar or minimise the actions of “utility monsters” which conflict with our widely held basic intuitions, he evidently does not accept that many will find a redefinition of jurisprudence as economic efficiency as itself being in conflict with such intuitions. It conflicts with Sen's intuitions however. A third objection to Posner's approach is that in his system – as in utilitarianism - all values are of equal value, even if the ability to pay for them is unequal. Again there are those – evidently including Sen, Myrdal and Higgins - who find this core point in conflict with basic intuitions. While sharing Posner's discomfort with utilitarianism Sen's specific objections are different. His concern is not with the deprived so much as with the functionings of the deprived, and he emphatically rejects the notion that income or wealth constitute superior maximands.

2. Libertarianism: Sen rejects libertarianism as too limited in its approach. Whereas libertarians tend to stress negative freedoms, Sen is more focussed on positive

freedoms in his development work. Poverty is not a violation of negative freedom but rather of positive freedom because a “person in extreme poverty is not free to do many things”.

Sen criticises those libertarian theories (e.g. Nozick’s) that place a high priority on freedoms, insofar as they advocate that a person has the right to pursue anything he likes provided he does not violate the constraints that restrain him from interfering in the legitimate activities of another. Sen objects that such libertarian arguments place too much stress on processes and not enough stress on actual results or consequences. A “consequent-independent theory of political priority” is unacceptable to Sen, and in his view giving such a priority to liberty may still lead to “the violation of substantive freedoms of individuals to achieve those things to which they have reason to attach great importance” such as avoidable mortality, being well nourished, healthy and educated. No one’s rights may be violated in a famine, for example, but people still suffer severe deprivations.

Emphasising the *freedom to be able to do* stipulated things, as against *freedom from* external restraint, Sen objects that libertarian theory is indifferent to the “substantive freedoms” people may or may not be able to exercise. For Sen “To ignore consequences in general, including the freedoms that people get or do not get to exercise, can hardly be an adequate basis for an acceptable evaluative system”. It ignores not only those things to which utilitarian and welfarist theories attach great importance, but it also neglects the most basic freedoms that we have reason to treasure and demand. Even liberty does not warrant as absolute a priority as libertarian theories insist it must have. Accordingly, for Sen, an understanding of justice needs a broader informational basis than that on matters of negative freedom.

His concern therefore is with freedom in terms of both its positive and negative dimensions.

Sen's approach to development therefore departs from the libertarian view and is encapsulated in the conception of freedom within his understanding of human development. For him (2000:3), positive and negative aspects of unfreedoms are involved in the fight against both economic tyranny (poverty) and political tyranny:

Development can be seen, it is argued here, as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy... Development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states.

3. Rawls' "*correction of utilitarianism*" (1972): In Rawls' position there is no social progress unless the position of the worst-off segment of the population is being improved. Progress at the bottom end is a prerequisite for aggregate social progress, and what he therefore wants is a set of distributional weights favouring the poor. Rawls does not dispute the basic utilitarian position that each person's view of the good for him or her is the good for him or her. (Nor does Sen, once basic 'distorting' deprivation is deemed to have been overcome.) Using the notions of "the original position" and "a veil of ignorance" Rawls advocates a social contract featuring a maximin criterion as superior to uncorrected utilitarianism, in an avowedly Kantian approach.

Those who reject Rawls' "improvement" include Harsanyi (1975) and Allan Bloom (1975). Harsanyi's objection is that Rawls merely introduces a set of unjustifiable,

arbitrary weights which effectively *distorts* calculation of changes in the level of aggregate social welfare. For Harsanyi, there is no legitimate reason for discriminating against some citizens merely because they happen to be rich (or at least not decidedly poor) or healthy (or at least not decidedly ill) or capable (or at least not decidedly incapable). In Harsanyi's view utilitarianism remains superior to Rawls' "improvement" and whenever the two approaches give different recommendations, it is the utilitarian view which remains more defensible. Accordingly, Harsanyi re-endorses utilitarianism. This of course conflicts with Sen's view insofar as Sen argues that there is indeed reason for discriminating in favour of those who are presently very poor, or ill-educated, or less capable of apprehending life's opportunities and availing themselves of them. Although Sen rejects Rawls, he does not do so for Harsanyi's reasons, and indeed it is the argument of this paper that Sen's rejection of Rawls is more nominal than real.

Bloom's critique of Rawls is more destructive. Bloom's argument is that Rawls' case is a misinterpretation of three philosophical traditions i.e. that it is a misinterpretation of the state of nature teachings of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, a misinterpretation of Kant's moral teaching, and a misinterpretation of Aristotle's teaching on happiness. In short, Bloom sees Rawls as nothing more than "utilitarianism made contemporary" by working backwards from what was popularly wanted in 1972 – in the form of a protective welfare state – to an underlying principle able to justify that result. In very blunt terms Bloom dismisses Rawls as having done no more than contribute to the loss of learning to which he was ostensibly providing a remedy.

The defect Sen sees in Rawls is that Rawls focuses on the distribution of resources rather than on the enhancement of a person's capabilities. Insofar as Sen's

Development As Freedom is effectively a re-write of Rawls – with some modification of Rawls not for wanting to lift the floor, but for mis-specifying the “primary goods” which need to be lifted – Bloom’s critique of Rawls remains potentially applicable to Sen (and indirectly to Sen’s philosopher collaborator Nussbaum (1993), whose review of Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* (1987) is as misconstrued as it is dismissive). Sen knows what he wants in the here and now. He wants improved living and opportunities for the world’s poorest. If utilitarianism, libertarianism and Rawlsianism don’t themselves justify what Sen wants, what does? Given the humaneness of the goal, it might be expected that something must. Sen seeks – and purports to find - this desirable and necessary ethical underpinning in Smith and Aristotle, or at least in particular interpretations thereof.

4. Higgins on Economics and Ethics in the New Approach to Development (1978):

Well before Sen’s *Development As Freedom* Higgins emphatically argued that there is an urgent need for a return to a combination of moral philosophy and objective analysis, in an analytical return to something closer to Smith, Malthus, Marx and Mill. In line with Sen he dismisses as false the putative “scientific objectivity” of welfare economics and positivism. To insist that economists ought not make value judgements about what constitutes improvements in economic and social welfare is itself a value judgement of colossal proportions. Higgins accordingly anticipated a revolution in development economics in which moral philosophy is reinjected into the argument. Indeed, Sen’s *Development as Freedom* might be seen as the start of, or part of, that revolution. Like Sen, Higgins objects to the narrowing of the scope of economics since the marginalist revolution, and he objects that the notion of “maximising welfare” is not sacrosanct because of the value judgements and assumptions implicitly in welfare economics (including the assumption that people

know what is best for them, just as Sen objects that to identify advantage with utility is far from obvious). Both Higgins and Sen therefore argue that some conception of a “good society” is inevitably being pursued, and in their respective views this requires going well beyond a Paretian optimum.

Higgins’ paper appears to have escaped critical attention and essentially has been ignored rather than rebutted. Much of his argument coincides with Sen, however, and he notes that the basic needs approach fashionable in the 1970s involved an almost complete rejection of the philosophical underpinnings of neoclassical economics, and that the so-called Unified Approach (involving dignity, social inclusiveness and other aspects of life) required recognition that standard neoclassical analysis could make only a limited contribution. In short, for Higgins it followed that economists who support the free market on supposedly scientific grounds are in fact being highly unscientific. For Sen, “the role of values cannot but be crucial”, and there is reason to be dismissive of the metric of exchange value since it assigns zero value to everything except commodity holdings (e.g. rights, morbidity, education).

Sen may give a more detailed consideration of the development of human capabilities and freedom, but much in Higgins provides a direct parallel.

5. Sen and his capabilities approach (2000): Amartya Sen is the most recent entrant into this campaign to find an ethically superior maximand, or conception of justice, within which to apprehend human development. He has pushed his capabilities approach for some time now, most recently in *Development As Freedom (2000)*. In the context of development economics he therefore now advocates an “improvement” on the usual utilitarian normative approach - per medium of a recognition of what

constitutes human capabilities and what accordingly constitutes an appropriate re-definition of poverty (with less emphasis on financial poverty and more emphasis on unfulfilled human capability). For him (1987: 35), the orthodox “criterion of Pareto optimality is an extremely limited way of assessing social achievement”. Thus (1987: 45)

“a person who has had a life of misfortune, with very little opportunity, and rather little hope, may be more easily reconciled to deprivations than others reared in more fortunate and affluent circumstances. The metric of happiness may, therefore, distort the extent of deprivation, in a specific and biased way. The hopeless beggar, the precarious landless labourer, the dominated housewife may all take pleasures in small mercies, and manage to suppress intense suffering for the necessity of continuing survival, but it would be ethically deeply mistaken to attach a correspondingly small value to the loss of their well-being because of this survival strategy”.

In short, the metric of utility is influenced by contingent circumstances, and it is in this context that Sen explores his ‘capabilities approach’ as an alternative conception of well-being in the form of the capability to achieve valuable functionings. This approach – which he notes derives from Smith, Marx and Aristotle – is a way of seeing well-being which has powerful implications for the assessment of living standards, poverty, inequality and social justice. The conception of justice he recognises is one in which the social maximand is neither aggregate utility (as in orthodox economics) nor wealth (as for Posner), but one in which holistic human development is maximised by equalising capability shortfalls. A view of well-being not primarily based on preference, but on some ‘objective’ circumstances may of course undermine the simplicity of the picture of self-interested choice implicit in the behavioural assumptions underlying the ‘fundamental theorem’ of welfare economics.

Self-interested choice may well diverge from these other, non-preference-based notions of well-being. On this point Sen runs parallel to Cropsey's 1955 little known but potent Aristotelian critique of welfare economics, while yet subsequently diverging significantly from Cropsey's apprehension of human capability and development, because of significant differences in the interpretation of Aristotle (Duhs 1994; 1998). Sen's conception of an ethically superior maximand, or perspective on teleology, is certainly not Cropsey's.

At the most fundamental level what Sen does is give rise to the need to recognise the importance for economics of the way in which one political philosophy or another silently infiltrates its way into economic debate. This may well be without any real awareness on the part of many economists participating in that debate (as was noted by Schumacher when he observed that economics is taught today without any awareness of the view of the nature of man thereby being promulgated, and by Benjamin Ward when he objected that both neoclassical and Marxist theories reflect implausible theories of man). Sen, for his part, is implicitly saying that he does recognise that such an implicit teaching of the nature of man is present in economic teaching, and that there is reason to take economic philosophy more seriously. He nonetheless fails to be either as explicit or as complete as he needs to be if his argument is to be compelling.

3. An Appreciation Of Sen's Case

What then is Sen's case? For Sen (*Development as Freedom*, 2000), development consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms. Expansion of freedom is therefore viewed both as the primary end and as the principal means of development.

He sees individual agency as central to addressing relevant deprivations, but nonetheless recognises that freedom of individual agency is inescapably qualified and constrained by extant social, political and economic circumstances. Accordingly, he seeks to combine extensive use of markets with creation of social opportunities.

Sen's focus consequently involves a shift in attention from low income to deprivation of basic capabilities. In turn he regards (2000: 116) the complementarity between different institutions - particularly between non-market organisations and the market – as a theme of his book. As far as Sen is concerned the State to date has been guilty of both over-activity (e.g. in running a licence Raj) and under-activity (e.g. in the continuing neglect of eliminating unequal education and social opportunities), and the present need is to recognize that even when there is more room for markets, complementary non-market facilities require careful and determined public action (2000: 143). Accordingly, developing countries generally need public policy initiatives to create social opportunities. For Sen, the overall achievements of the market are thus deeply contingent on political and social arrangements. [Stiglitz's position is somewhat similar, given that his practical policies and stress on complementarity of State and market are similar, albeit Stiglitz is less determined to enquire explicitly into underlying moral and political philosophy.]

Sen offers his 'capabilities approach' as a superior conception of social ethics or justice. He criticises utilitarianism for its indifference to freedoms or rights. He criticises libertarianism for having no direct interest in happiness or desire fulfilment. He criticizes Rawls' notion of primary goods as not being the appropriate space for evaluative purposes. His own approach effectively merges libertarianism and utilitarianism into a modified form of Rawlsian 'floor lifting' in 'capabilities space',

and concentrates on individual freedoms (not utilities), while incorporating sensitivity to consequences (utility). His notion of ‘capabilities’ has its roots in feasible functionings and he notes that the concept of functionings has distinctly Aristotelian roots. In neo-Aristotelian manner, he notes that his capability perspective shifts primary attention away from *means* “to *ends* that people have reason to pursue, and, correspondingly, to the *freedoms* to be able to satisfy these ends”. Whether Aristotelian endorsement of his final position could be expected, however, remains much in doubt.

Sen accepts that his book is strongly Smithian (as against Aristotelian), but he again disputes the common view that Smith was the single-minded prophet of self-interest (2000: 271). Sen stresses (2000: 288) that responsible adults must be in charge of their own well-being, and it is for them to decide how to use their capabilities. But the capabilities that a person actually has – and not merely theoretically enjoys – depend on the nature of social arrangements. There are two problems here. First, even if Sen is right to assert (2000: 294) that the development of human capability in leading a worthwhile life is central to Smith’s analysis, the same may be said of Myrdal’s analysis and of Aristotle’s analysis – yet they are all different, and those differences remain to be confronted. Secondly, the circumstances in which extant social arrangements warrant confrontation and alteration, in the interests of developing individual capabilities, will inevitably remain contentious.

In respect of the expansion of social opportunities and requisite public policy initiatives (e.g. in providing basic education and health facilities and other public and semi-public goods), Sen’s case is that efficiency arguments supplement equity arguments in supporting public assistance. Basic education tends to have a public

good component, as well as a private good component, and to Sen it is remarkable that some market enthusiasts now recommend to developing countries that they should rely fully on the free market even for basic education. More to the point, he notes that the countries of South Asia have been relatively slow in the creation of social opportunities – relative to South East Asia - and this “has acted as a barrier to economic development” (2000: 45). Similarly, recognition of a woman’s role is one crucial aspect of “development as freedom”, and one which warrants noting that some variables relating directly to women’s agency (e.g. female literacy) often play a more important role in promoting social well-being (including child survival) than variables relating to the general level of opulence. In short, “trickle up” is still a notion with some currency.

Providing support for instruments that were previously missing, however, remains different from confronting the existence of traditional social customs which might be regarded as actually obstructing development prospects (or arguably the expression of individual freedom and capability). It was in this context that Myrdal endorsed the need for “strong states” – for he too argued that the capabilities a person has depend on the nature of social arrangements. Born into Indian society, for example, does a person *chance* to be Hindu, or *choose* to be Hindu? [Duhs, 1982; note also Hacking, 1996 regarding the point that most of us have values which we just did not choose] Is the acceptance of Hinduism in those circumstances a free expression of individual agency (as Sen implies), or an accident of historical chance which constrains individual agency (as Myrdal implies)? Sen is content to limit his argument about the links between the freedom of individual agency and the social circumstances which constrain it to the easier cases of adding something that was previously missing (e.g. basic education), and he tends to ignore the more difficult and confrontationist

questions which Myrdal highlighted (although they too impact upon social opportunities and individual freedom and capability). He does this because his approach is not Aristotelian at all, appealing only to historical or civil rights, not Natural Rights, and because – despite his strictures elsewhere (Sen, 1987) about the limited way the word “rationality” is used in economics – he does not believe that appraisal of alternative human ends or goals is within the reach of rational analysis. Adults must simply choose for themselves which cultural constraints to accept and preserve. Chance will evidently not dominate choice, and there is no transcendent yardstick by which evaluative comparison of two states of affairs may be made. Accordingly, he puts his faith in enhanced freedom and market processes rather than follow Myrdal in endorsing the need for “strong states”. Ultimately there is no higher standard for Sen than the whimsical choice of ends of each individual. Within the broader philosophical literature, this might alternatively be either celebrated, with Nussbaum, as respect for individual diversity, or decried, by Straussians, as an unwillingness to address the question of humankind as a generic species. For Sen, if not for Aristotle, development is freedom and freedom is development. His approach remains in the modern *sui generis* individualism mode which does not recognise a generic rationality for the human species as such. Moreover, his approach remains in the German historical tradition, and remains apart from the Ancient Greek tradition of appealing to nature. Hence his acceptance that his own approach is ultimately a composite of utilitarianism and libertarianism. Accordingly, as Bloom also says of Rawls, Sen’s position is effectively “utilitarianism made contemporary” by working backwards from a pre-determined political goal to a theory which will sustain that choice.

While Sen (2000: 289) calls Aristotle one of his sources of ideas, and approvingly quotes Aristotle's conclusion that "Wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful for the sake of something else", he nonetheless does not ask whether Aristotle held a *species* conception of man (as against the modern conception of *sui generis* individualism) which would have obliged him to ask the same question of freedom. Is freedom too merely useful for the sake of something else – that is, for the sake of an overarching teleology? What can we 'do' with more freedom is as good a question as what can we 'do' with more wealth (c.f. 2000: 14). Would Aristotle's concern with freedom have been with freedom as freedom to cultivate reason and the appraisal of human ends, for example, as against freedom to pursue whimsy (Jaffa, 1975)? Conflicting interpretations of such teleological issues are what will set Sen (and his philosopher collaborator Nussbaum) apart from their critics, even when some common ground is accepted that development requires consideration not only of incomes but also of the opportunities people have for good living. In short, explicit and implicit questions raised in Sen's book do much to recall the Myrdal/Bauer debate of the development literature of the 1970s, in which the implicit meanings given to such words as "freedom" and "man" causally explain what the respective protagonists advocate by way of government intervention, foreign aid, policy towards "cultural constraints" and such like (Duhs 1982). Sen ignores Myrdal – despite the common interest in the extent to which social circumstance constrains both individual freedom and economic development - but, unsurprisingly (given his endorsement of freedom as both pre-eminent means and end), he offers an approving endorsement of Bauer's earlier emphasis on the importance of freedom of choice as a criterion of development. Bauer's position on teleology and ontology is emphatically inconsistent with Aristotle's, however, and Sen's twin appeals to Aristotle and Bauer remain problematic. Aristotle is more concerned with what is actually chosen, as a

yardstick of human ‘development’. It is also noteworthy that Streeten (1995) replicates or anticipates Sen in arguing that his approach too is entirely consistent with Adam Smith and in arguing the need for complementary State and market institutions. Far from approvingly citing Bauer as Sen does, however, Streeten is emphatic that it is Myrdal who was prescient and appropriately interdisciplinary.

Tacitly in keeping with Myrdal, however, Sen nonetheless notes that implicit values need to be made more explicit (2000: 80), that in analysing issues of efficiency and equity - or the removal of poverty and subjugation - “the role of values cannot but be crucial” (2000: 280), and that in ‘the metric of exchange value’ (of which Sen is dismissive from the viewpoint of facilitating evaluative judgments or making and aggregating interpersonal comparisons of utility) all variables other than commodity holdings (eg morbidity, education, rights) are implicitly valued at zero. He also shares with Myrdal the criticism and rejection of mechanistic development models (since meaningful development depends on more than just manipulation of capital-output ratios). He notes (2000: 27) that the discipline of economics has narrowed its focus in moving away from teleological and philosophical issues, yet he ultimately ends with the plainly tautological acknowledgement (2000: 288) that an approach to justice and development that concentrates on substantive freedoms inescapably focuses on the agency and judgment of individuals. The real issue therefore is whether Sen has justified an approach to justice and development that (validly?) focuses on freedoms as ends, and whether he has justified the derivative (non-Aristotelian) presumption that the whimsical judgment of individuals cannot be subjected to scrutiny (at least once ‘distorting’ deprivation is left behind). Though left implicit, the key proposition (or assumption) in Sen’s book is therefore the decidedly non-Aristotelian view that the nature of man, whose development we are seeking, is one of *sui-generis*

individualism, rather than one which permits a reasoned view of the human *species* (and human development or teleology) as such. When Sen stresses that his basic concern is “with our capability to lead the kind of lives we have reason to value” (2000: 285), the correct interpretation here of “reason” for Sen (despite his strictures about the limited way in which “rational” is used in economics) is personal whim regarding our individual choices rather than deliberative, evaluative reason à la Aristotle or Cropsey (1955). Accordingly, what is deemed to be “development” in one society need bear no necessary relationship to what is deemed to be “development” elsewhere. Sen’s comment (2000: 272) that “It is the power of reason that allows us to consider our ... ideals as well as our interests... To deny this freedom of thought would amount to a severe constraint on the reach of our rationality” is itself evidently very restricted in its reach. It is apparently not meant to run beyond *individual “choice”, whim or inclination*, despite his comment that to deny the extensive role of values [c.f. Myrdal] in human behaviour would amount to “the limiting of our rationality” (2000: 272; Sen 1977, 1987), and despite his original emphasis on the way social circumstance constrains individual agency. Just at what point individual agency is sufficiently unconstrained to warrant wholesale acceptance of individual preference remains a moot question, as is the question of whether the failure to apply deliberative reason to the choice of human ends itself constitutes “a severe constraint on the reach of our rationality”.

Sen’s recognition of a deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements is reminiscent of Myrdal’s sociology of development, albeit Sen’s identification of freedom as the main object of development (2000: xii) lacks the crypto-teleological implication evident in Myrdal. [Myrdal’s ten modernisation ideals include grassroots democracy, in keeping with Sen’s aspirations. For Myrdal, too,

“values cannot but be important”, and an historically constrained middle ground is required in stipulating the goals of development, since both value relativism and timeless value absolutism are implausible and unacceptable to Myrdal.] For such reasons of complementarity, the use of formal economic models is a double-edged sword for Sen insofar as the structure of such models “can conceal some implicit assumptions” (2000: 262), inasmuch as capitalism works effectively through a system of ethics that provides the vision and the trust needed for successful use of the market mechanism and related institutions” (2000: 263). Myrdal could no doubt be seen to have preceded Sen in demanding “an adequately broad view of development... to focus the evaluative scrutiny on things that really matter” (2000: 34), and Sen notes (1997: 9) that there was a view of development, linked to Myrdal, that considers a “soft-hearted” government as being inimical to development, such that on this view development requires, in its early stages, the suppression of human rights, particularly those related to democracy and civil and political rights. In short, Sen and Myrdal diverge when they broach valuational and teleological issues (e.g. as to whether economic development may be inimical given that it may eliminate national traditions and cultural heritages), and accordingly they diverge too as to whether “more freedom” or “strong states” is what is required in the search for development.

As noted above, Sen stresses that “it is simply not adequate to take as our basic objective just the maximisation of income or wealth, which is, as Aristotle noted, ‘merely useful for the sake of something else’ ” (2000: 14). He thereby implies the relevance of teleological questions, but nonetheless stops short of explicitly addressing them. He acknowledges (2000: 285) that a central challenge in the contemporary world is our idea of an acceptable society, but he does not seek to argue that human reason is capable of defining or rationally apprehending just what that is

or what constitutes a developed state. He likewise accepts that a sense of justice is among the concerns that moves people, and considers the idea of justice to be innate in, or natural to, man. Contrary to his non-teleological approach, this in itself implies a generic goal for mankind as mankind [cf Pangle, 2003]. He seeks to defend individual differences, pluralism and consumer sovereignty, notwithstanding his insistence that wealth – if not freedom - is useful only for achieving something else (which itself putatively transcends individual differences or whims and implies a generic goal). He seeks to consider how freedoms of different types contribute to good living, without defining what is the Good Life – or at least by implying by default that the Good Life is what each individual takes it to be for himself or herself. He acknowledges that the Aristotelian account of the human good was explicitly linked to the need to “first ascertain the function of man”, but, albeit crypto-teleological in such ways in places, his view essentially remains within the modern ambit of *sui generis* individualism - a realm in which individual human reason is deployed to select the *means* to be used to pursue an end, but not to question the relative worth of the *ends* chosen by different individuals or societies.

While Sen performs the service of focusing attention on just what human development should be conceived to be, and just what is the relationship between individual agency and social circumstance, it follows that the most fundamental issues remain to be resolved. The questions he raises are fundamental, albeit often neglected, but the answers he gives are incomplete and do not persuade. Critics, for example Benicourt (2002), likewise conclude that Amartya Sen’s capability approach remains “undeniably neoclassical”, and “just a variation of standard microeconomics”, albeit – without addressing the above economic philosophy issues - Robeyns (2002) dismisses Benicourt’s case as “fundamentally mistaken”. Bowbrick (1986) goes further than

Benicourt and emphatically denounces Sen's well known theory of famines as both "factually flawed" and theoretically unsound. Benicourt (2004) adds that Sen's approach is non-operational for policy makers, since it provides no basis for allocating priorities to relevant capabilities and fails to treat the issue of how to finance the generalities he does endorse about "freedom", education and health. Benicourt demands to know more about just what fiscal system leads to the "equality of capabilities". Cooper (2000) objects that Sen fails to address some hard practical questions e.g. what to do when stability – itself one of Sen's primary freedoms - is the result of a suppression of political freedoms. In a more general attack on Sen-style understanding of freedom, Pope John Paul II says in his 1993 Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (sections 31-33; 74)

"Once the idea of a universal truth about the good, knowable by human reason, is lost...there is a tendency to grant to the individual conscience the prerogative of independently determining the criteria of good and evil and then acting accordingly. Such an outlook is quite congenial to an individualist ethic, wherein each individual is faced with his own truth, different from the truth of others. Taken to its extreme consequences, this individualism leads to a denial of the very idea of human nature... Mention should also be made here of theories which misuse scientific research about the human person. Arguing from the great variety of customs, behaviour patterns and institutions present in humanity, these theories end up, if not with an outright denial of universal human values, at least with a relativistic conception of morality...These doctrines would grant to individuals or social groups the right to determine what is good or evil. Human freedom would thus be able to "create values" and would enjoy a primacy over truth, to the point that truth itself would be considered a creation of freedom. Freedom

would thus lay claim to a moral autonomy which would actually amount to an absolute sovereignty.”

Sen and John Paul II clearly part company in their understanding of teleology and of the generic nature of humankind. Accordingly, they have different understandings of what Sen calls “our capability to lead the kind of lives we have reason to value” (2000: 285). They differ as to their understanding of the limits of human reason, and as to whether Sen’s goal of freedom should ever be regarded as the ultimate human maximand.

The range of economic philosophy territory Sen covers remains too limited to establish the acceptability of his own case, or – by way of corollary - the unacceptability of Aristotelian, Myrdalian and other alternatives to it.

4. Sen And Straussian Philosophy: Alternative Conceptions Of Aristotle And Of Teleology

Much in Sen – with one major difference – can be found in Cropsey’s little known, but incisive, 1955 critique of welfare economics (Cropsey 1955: Duhs 1994). Sen and Cropsey are in agreement that “all the properties on which ‘something like a general consensus’ seems to exist in traditional welfare economics...are eminently questionable” (Sen, 1979b; also see 1987:71). Neither is in any doubt that Pareto optimality is an extremely limited way to measure social achievement or human development. [Also see John Paul II, 1987]. Both accept that it can be disputed that personal well-being is best seen in terms of utility - as it has been by the Ancient Greeks; Schumacher; Myrdal and Higgins, for example - and that if some interpretation of advantage other than utility is accepted, then Pareto optimality would

lose its status as either a necessary or sufficient condition for social optimality. Both accept that that the metric of exchange value is incomplete and inadequate as a guide to social policy, that the reach of human reason has been unduly restricted in orthodox economics, that a sense of justice is innate in, or natural to, man and that a central challenge is to develop our idea of an acceptable society.

Yet Cropsey's perspective on welfare economics and a superior social maximand remains quite different from Sen's. Both Cropsey and Sen consider that their arguments derive from Aristotle. In a nutshell, Cropsey's argument is that what welfare economics does is homogenise the universe of heterogeneous goods and differentiate the universe of the (homogeneous) human species. Loss of these relevant distinctions plainly recalls Sen's argument in "Rational Fools" (1977), in which he argues that the purely economic man is close to being a social moron, and that a person who has no use for distinctions between his/her positivist and normative choices and interests and welfare must be a bit of a fool. The one preference ordering of orthodox economics is a serious abstraction from the real world and from distinctions of fundamental importance. Sen notes that for Aristotle the judgement of social achievement relates to the goal of achieving "the good for man", and accepts that on the basis of this criterion evaluation cannot be stopped short at some arbitrary point like satisfying "efficiency". As he notes, when advantage is equated with utility, efficiency coincides with Pareto optimality, but insofar as the notion of advantage is altered, so is the content of efficiency (and for that matter the conception of equality). Cropsey would agree with this, but he nonetheless parts company from Sen as to just what constitutes "the good for man". How could it be otherwise when they disagree on the underlying philosophical question of what constitutes the nature of man? For Cropsey, the answer to what constitutes "the good for man", human

functionings and a superior social maximand involves a reasoned investigation of a generic teleology for a species (versus *sui generis* individualist) conception of mankind. While “freedom” is the ultimate goal for Sen, for Cropsey there remains the question of what human reason can offer as the end to which that freedom should be put.

It is apparent that Cropsey and Sen take different paths at turning points which reflect differences in their understanding of teleology and of the way in which, or extent to which, the power of reason allows us to consider our ideals as well as our interests. Accordingly, their divergence also reflects differences in the way they distinguish between “chance” and “choice”, and their perspectives on the limits of human reason and of what it means to be “truly free” to choose. In brief, they reflect different interpretations of Aristotle, including in relation to what is implied in Sen’s deference to Aristotle’s requirement to “first ascertain the functions of man”. They differ as to whether the human propensity to value freedom is the only thing that has “a strong universalist presumption”. Specifically, Cropsey apprehends a universalist presumption in his understanding of the “nature of man” whereas Sen stays within the modern project of apprehending the nature of man ultimately in terms of *sui generis* individualism. For Cropsey man is a species being (as also for John Paul II and Catholic social thought), and the differences between individual men are relatively minor, while for Sen man is essentially individualistic, and the differences between individuals need to be celebrated over and above any common elements which inhere in all men.

For the ancient Greeks, virtue was the chief desideratum. For Hobbes, peace. For Posner, wealth. For libertarians, individual freedom (to do whatsoever) is the chief

desideratum, and for Sen, the ultimate goal is freedom understood somewhat differently. For Cropsey *sui generis* individualism has replaced a species conception of man both in orthodox welfare economics and in Sen, and value relativism and an element of historicism have been accepted in place of any absolutes derived from a natural teleology. As Cropsey puts it, every logic presupposes a metaphysic. The particular metaphysic which underscores Sen's writing is one in which freedom has been installed as the natural teleology of economics and social science, without recognition that it is but the conception of natural teleology from within one, liberal viewpoint. Sen elevates freedom to the position of chief desideratum yet rejects libertarianism because of his understanding of the place of both positive and negative freedom and because he sees it as too dangerous in terms of relativism. Yet he has no real basis whereby to limit that relativism or libertarian freedom or to assist it in any particular direction. Sen's deference to Aristotle - or to Nussbaum's interpretation of Aristotle - leads him to his capabilities approach, but not to Cropsey's generic conception of man, and its consequent implications for the consummation of (generic) human capability and thus for the conception of the Good Life and Good society. Although Sen himself accepts that the demands of a narrowly conceived understanding of rationality have made "many different types of relevant considerations inadmissible in economic evaluation or behavioural prediction" (1987: 71), Cropsey's implied critique of Sen is that he (Sen) is guilty of his own charge, in that he has too narrowly conceived the limits of rationality regarding the choice of human ends. While Sen seeks to endorse what persons would value on "serious and courageous reflection, freed from the limitations imposed by unfavourable circumstances", for Sen the seat of such valuations remains in individuals (and their culturally relative backgrounds) in reaching decisions about 'the lives people have reason to value', while for Cropsey human reason is capable of deliberative

judgement about generic human ends. The phrase “freed from the limitations imposed by unfavourable circumstances” is capable of more than one interpretation.

In Sen’s own terms, is undeveloped reason itself a major source of unfreedom in the quest to develop human capabilities? Given his own strictures about the limited way in which reason has been understood in economics, about the role of values, and about the need to apprehend human functionings and human ends, that is at least a good question. It is also one the answers to which define a point of departure for Cropsey and Sen.

It is in this context of the tension between natural right theory and human rights based theories that Sen’s philosopher collaborator Martha Nussbaum departs so sharply from the Straussian philosopher Allan Bloom. Whereas Bloom teaches natural right theory, Nussbaum’s perception is that Bloom is teaching an unacceptable elitism in rejection of genuinely democratic values. A rejection of democratic values as the definitive yardstick of human good, however, is clearly a different thing from rejecting democracy as a practical political regime. A view of Bloom and Straussian philosophy which is quite opposite to Nussbaum’s is found in Father Ernest Fortin (Foley and Kries, 2002: pp295-297) “Strauss was one of the few nondogmatic teachers that I’ve ever had...it’s hard to overestimate Bloom. He’s the guy who made things come to life for me.... Strauss wasn’t a dogmatist but one who freed us from the dogmas of our age...”

Given the common elements to be found in Sen and Cropsey, but the extent of the final philosophical and policy divergence between them – deriving from their divergent views of the limits of human reason and the apprehension of generic

attributes in the functionings of man and the nature of man – these turning points are well worthy of an attention they are yet to receive.

5. Conclusions

First, while the rich connection between economics and moral philosophy is well hidden in most economics journals, *Sen for his part refuses to disregard moral philosophy as “soft”, non-rigorous and irrelevant*. He examines three philosophical traditions that have laid claim to the proper basis of social justice:

- (i) Utilitarianism
- (ii) Liberalism
- (iii) Rawls’ “maximin”

and argues that while each of these three views holds merit, each can be pushed past its limit to the point where it defies commonsense (eg if a village’s utility is maximised by tormenting its ugliest member). Sen says such tradeoffs should be publicly debated with each case resolved in some democratic way. There are thus no “right” answers for Sen, just historicist ones reflecting currently popular views. This, versus Natural Right, is his ultimate yardstick.

Development as Freedom provides a framework of thought. It urges attention to the question of what should be the ultimate aims of development, and on that score is worthy of support. The questions Sen raises are perennially important. His answers are more problematic however. Sen has highlighted various limitations in the orthodox neoclassical approach to development, and directed attention to the need to develop human capabilities. In short, he has sought to again widen the philosophical and teleological focus of economics and to direct attention to the conscious

articulation of human ends and to consideration of factors which constrain the free exercise of individual agency. He makes plain that the importance of economic philosophy needs to be more generally recognised.

In terms of practical impact Sen's influence is apparent in the UNDP Human Development Index, and may also now be seen in World Bank sponsorship of discussion of the determinants of empowerment and the consequences of it for economic development. He has sought to shift the focus of attention from low income to deprivation of basic capabilities and to the goal of equalising capability deprivation. For Sen, the problems with the market mechanism are not really with the market mechanism as such, but with prerequisite supplementary non-market institutions. What is needed is not suppression of markets, but means of allowing them to function better and with greater fairness. Even when there is a need for more room for markets, developing countries generally need public initiatives to create social opportunities, and such non-market politics require careful public action. Supply of improved human capability, in the absence of growth-primed *demand* for such capabilities, is no panacea, however, as is indicated by the case of Sri Lanka which has been mired in civil war despite its HDI advances.

Secondly, while there is much to agree with in terms of the pragmatic policies Sen endorses - including support for broadly based public education and health policies, and other institutions which complement the market - *the fact is that it is possible to arrive at that policy position from more than one theoretical position*. Clearly enough, Sen's approach is pragmatic and well intentioned, and as such it derives support from those who want to intervene to help the worst off. Even those sympathetic to the pragmatic side of Sen's program, however, are able to remain

critical of the incompleteness of the theory or philosophy which underlies it. It should require more than a declaration of support for the poor to convince others that they are listening to a commanding statement of a superior conception of economic justice, ethics and the nature of man. Myrdal, Higgins, Marx and Aristotle – like Sen - would also have rejected the normative frameworks of utilitarianism, libertarianism, and Rawls. *Whatever the similarities and differences, Sen doesn't distinguish his case from their related but evidently unacceptable cases.* Significant questions and nuances are thus glossed over. In fact, despite Sen's rejection of the three alternative ethical perspectives of utilitarianism, libertarianism and Rawlsianism, Sen's capabilities approach is best seen as an endorsement of Rawls' "correction of utilitarianism", and it ends up an endorsement of utilitarianism despite his own ringing condemnation of utilitarianism on the grounds that to identify advantage with utility is far from obvious, and Pareto optimality is a very limited kind of success. We are given no cause to believe that the three philosophical perspectives he rejects constitute an exhaustive list of available and significant conceptions of the questions at issue, and no cause to accept that such crypto-teleological implications as do arise should merely be silently bypassed.

Thirdly, *Sen claims to have arrived at his policy position via the elaboration of a superior ethical framework. In fact, his putatively superior ethical framework is a melange of those three philosophical perspectives which he himself rejects.* The Aristotelian element he adds, related to human 'functionings', derives from one, contentious or limited interpretation of Aristotle, to the neglect of radically different interpretations which characterise Straussian philosophy, for example. Moreover, it is arguable that he does not proceed forward from his supposedly superior perspective to

his policy proposals, but that he works backwards from his preferred policy position to a theoretical perspective which appears to vindicate those policy preferences.

In the context of defining and considering “human functionings” Sen appeals to Aristotle in the context of his objections to the way in which the reach of human rationality has been restricted in the economics literature. But his approach is ultimately non-Aristotelian. He takes his bearings from history rather than nature, and is more derivative from the German historical school than from the Ancient Greeks. His position derives more from Kant and Hegel than from Aristotle. Despite contending that economics has become too narrow, and that questions of teleology and philosophy have been neglected, Sen merely concludes tautologically that if individual freedoms are accepted as the end then individual agency must be endorsed. There is little or no reason to accept Sen’s claim that he has provided a superior ethical theory, from within which to apprehend the issues of economics and development, and at the very least, his analysis of such issues is incomplete and less than fully persuasive. His putatively superior conception of economic justice is distilled from within a particular metaphysical view of the nature of man and teleology, and from a pragmatic point of view is a conception which may also be reached from other theoretical starting points.

Fourthly, *interpretative issues abound*. Sen trusts in Nussbaum’s interpretations of Aristotle and political philosophy. Nussbaum’s interpretations are poles apart from (say) Bloom’s or other Straussian commentators, but no consideration is given to sifting through rival interpretations to attempt a vindication of one over others. On Straussian interpretations (which are increasingly influential in the Bush Whitehouse in 2003 - 2004; see Pangle 2003), Aristotle would be a nay-sayer. He would place

himself on the other side of the Natural Right/ evolving civil rights divide. Moreover, Sen sees his perspective as Smithian, influenced by Aristotle. Streeten also claims a Smithian basis for his perspective, albeit neither his policy perspective nor his interpretation of Smith coincides with Sen's.

In arguing for development as freedom, or freedom as development, Sen is effectively, if tacitly, positing a view of the nature of man [as free, equal and compassionate; cf Rousseau] and of teleology. Albeit crypto-teleological in places, and albeit concerned not to limit the reach of “rationality”, he leaves us without a reason to accept that wealth is merely useful in the service of something else while freedom is axiomatically the ultimate end, rather than merely another means to that end. There are at least some crypto-teleological passages in which Sen reflects some tension or inconsistency with his own acceptance of freedom not just as means, but as the ultimate end or constitutive element of development, and thus of the consummation of human nature. His implicit claim is that he has provided the correct interpretations of such concepts as the nature of humankind, freedom, teleology, and human capability and development. Such claims are never likely to be universally accepted. The Cropsey/Bloom/Straussian understanding is that historicism is self contradictory, that a generic conception of mankind is plausible and that it carries with it a teleological conception antithetical to that of the libertarians and quite distinct from the historicist Nussbaum/Sen view (as is also the case for Catholic social thought: John Paul II Encyclicals, 1987; 1993).

Fifthly, Sen's criticisms of utilitarianism, libertarianism and other ethical perspectives are in fact so pointed that it is remarkable that he can wind up endorsing only slightly modified versions of what he has condemned and rejected. *Much in Sen's exposition*

is consistent with Cropsey's 1955 Aristotelian critique of welfare economics, but Sen resiles from the temptation to take his argument that far. He does so without explicit argument or reason. His reasons for government intervention run beyond Stiglitz's (2001) pragmatic reasons for accepting that there is market failure because of the presence of public goods, externalities and information asymmetries, and extend to a rejection of the framework of welfarism as potentially disastrous, essentially because a utilitarian/Paretian approach can yield results in conflict with our basic intuitions. And that intuition appears to be the final arbiter. Sen's basic intuitions take him to a stinging critique of welfare economics and orthodox development policy, but then lead him not to the Aristotelian position to which he putatively defers but back again to utilitarianism and sui generis individualism (after the removal of offending 'unfreedoms'). Intuition dictates the requisite theory or philosophy – as against allowing a coherent philosophy to dictate requisite policy.

By going so far, and then retreating to a composite of libertarianism and utilitarianism, Sen leaves basic questions unaddressed. His underlying philosophical position is incomplete and unpersuasive. While there may be grounds for joining him in criticising the orthodox neoclassical perspective on development in the name of human capabilities and “functionings”, *there is no reason to conclude that Sen has said the last word on the development of human capabilities or in the search for a superior ethical framework within which to apprehend development policies.* His fame and status, however, are sufficient to ensure that serious consideration should be given to further critiques and extensions of his argument.

Given that Sen himself says that “a misconceived theory can kill” (2000: 209), a more exhaustive critique of Sen’s economic philosophy, and of the philosophy implicit in development economics, is still required.

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