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Publisher Routledge

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Review of Social Economy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713708792>

Virtue and Behavior

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To cite this Article Baker, Jennifer A.(2009) 'Virtue and Behavior', Review of Social Economy, 67: 1, 3 – 24

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/00346760802586000

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00346760802586000>

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Virtue and Behavior

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Abstract This paper supports Amartya Sen's contention that our moral behavior cannot be represented in economic modeling, given the assumptions accepted by most rational choice theorists. In this paper Sen's argument is supplemented by traditional virtue ethics, which can account for how and why "commitment" is counter-preferential. Yet the changes to economic methodology that Sen recommends are rendered unnecessary by a particular innovation in Stoic ethical theory. If the Stoic distinction between *indifferent goods* and *moral goods* is invoked, economics can proceed apace, under the assumption that it is the science that handles our behavior in regard to indifferents only.

Keywords: stoicism, ethics, value, virtue, rational choice

INTRODUCTION

Morality is incredibly complex. It encompasses our ideals, our habits, what we consciously aim for, and what we unconsciously evade. Any particular decision we make can be morally relevant and, on the other hand, a lifetime can pass without paying ethics much thought. It may be impossible to determine how moral any one person is, even ourselves. If we required that economists acknowledge the ethical bases of our behavior, they would need to involve themselves with matters about which even moral philosophers cannot agree.

So what to do? We cannot pretend moral agency does not exist because it is inconvenient. Ethically minded critics, such as Amartya Sen, Elizabeth Anderson, and Irene van Staveren, have begun to point out the unhappy consequences of ignoring the role ethics plays in our behavior. Do we ask economists to stop their work until they determine the role morality plays in agency? How long would we need to wait?

Review of Social Economy

ISSN 0034-6764 print/ISSN 1470-1162 online © 2009 The Association for Social Economics

<http://www.informaworld.com>

DOI: 10.1080/00346760802586000

This paper points to an alternative solution. It pushes ethical theory out of philosophers' seminars and journals and into a practical role. Ethical theory is a wildly underutilized but crucial resource when it comes to our analysis of human behavior. It patches together the (incomplete) information we have about human nature, offering us comprehensive (even if provisional) accounts of moral psychology. Without such accounts we employ unanalyzed, vague, or incoherent assumptions about our nature, assumptions that critics of the dominant approaches in economics have been worrying about for some time. Ethical theory is also the place in which to develop our normative yardstick. We cannot look to human behavior without wondering if we approve and evaluating the goodness of the results, and ethical theory is designed to generate such consistent measures. So I wish to mitigate critics' concerns over what economic methodology says about agency by placing the burden of our ultimate explanations of behavior (empirical, psychological, and normative) on ethical theory, not economic theory. This should leave economists free to proceed apace, without having to wait on answers we do not have so that ethical motivation can be incorporated into their accounts.

Of course, not just any ethical theory will manage to bridge ethics and economic rationality. Certain features are necessary, and I suggest the Stoic account of ethics is best-suited to the task. As is typical of virtue ethics, one of its hallmarks is a well-developed account of moral psychology. Its bi-level account of value is what renders Stoicism unique, however. It carefully distinguishes, and then relates, moral and non-moral value. For these reasons I recommend the Stoic account (now available in a completely modernized form; see Becker 2001) for having the potential to incorporate economic analysis, and the tremendous benefits the field of economics has brought, into a comprehensive take on the goodness in our lives.

Amartya Sen's critique of the standard model of economic rationality is the most widely known, as he laments that ethical motivation is only "rarely addressed" by economists. It was not always this way, however; ethical motivation had been "explicitly accepted by the pioneers of utility theory in economics (such as Mill, Jevons, Edgeworth, and Marshall)" (Sen 2007a: 23). Rational choice itself is not incompatible with the acknowledgement of ethical motivation, according to Sen. So economists' lack of attention to such motivation is needless and harmful, keeping rational choice from being properly descriptive, explanatory, and predictive. Its omission impairs our conceptual understanding of rationality and our understanding of the reasoning that goes into our choices (Sen 2007a: 20–23). There are also normative and political implications, as rational choice is often invoked in order to defend institutions (Brennan 2007: 109; Sen 1973, 2002: 42–52).

Economists have long recognized that *sympathy* for others can factor into our goals and our welfare. But Sen does not regard sympathy as representative of ethical behavior; rather, he emphasizes *commitment*, as illustrated by voting, politeness, and work motivations aside from income. He gives it a negative definition: it is what we do when we are not motivated by our own goals or the pursuit of our welfare (Sen 1977: 326–327). In the case of ethical commitment, one must be concerned about others’ interests “over and above the extent to which one’s own well-being or interest is directly influenced by the well-being or interest of others” (Sen 2007b: 350). This view puts Sen squarely within an ethical tradition that dates back to Plato, who also talked of the category of behavior that is *prohairoumenos di’ auta*, or done “for its own sake.” Despite this, contemporaries of Sen remain incredulous. You can find critics writing as if they are indulging a quirk of Sen’s as they report the difference between sympathy and commitment in terms of whether the agent has obtained a “warm glow” (Hausman 2007: 57; Brennan 2007: 122n1).

In his most recent account, Sen is not merely asserting—as he did in his 1977 paper, “Rational Fools”—that a person’s choices are not always based on his or her own welfare, but also that a person’s choices are not always based on her own goals. Goals are not antithetical to committed behavior, but it is not a matter of making another’s goals your own. In committed behavior “one restrains the pursuit of one’s goals to make room for others to pursue their goals” (Sen 2007b: 350). As all admit, these features render Sen’s proposal, given current practice, “architecturally problematic” (Pettit 2007: 28). Sen’s recommendation is at odds with economists’ professed allegiance to psychological abstraction and methodological simplicity (however infrequent and dubious the formal defense of these methods may be). Yet I’d suggest that the primary obstacle Sen’s recommendations face is the extent to which commitment is misunderstood (Schmid 2005).¹

My first aim in this paper is to defend the plausibility of commitment. I attempt to clarify what it is, and how common a phenomenon it is, by situating it in an account of moral psychology (specifically, the one upon which traditional virtue ethics is dependent). Sen, of course, does not attach a psychological account to his proposals, and any number of moral

¹ Sen’s account is misunderstood in spite of his efforts to place it alongside well-known accounts such as that of Bernard Williams. As an example of how such explanations have not helped, Hans Bernhard Schmid (2005) writes that Sen’s position on the “controversy between internalist and externalist accounts of commitment” is unclear, and points to a confusing footnote from Sen, in which Sen claims to be in line with Bernard Williams, because, “unlike Williams’ internalism, ‘external reference’ externalism is about choice, not about persons” (Sen 1995: 30).

psychologies could lend support to his claims. But there are benefits to offering even one well-vetted story on how committed behavior comes about. Placing commitment in historical and theoretical context should ward off skepticism regarding its very existence, and will allow common misinterpretations (one of which takes Sen to merely mean “acting on principle” by commitment) to be eliminated. An account of moral psychology is the fertile ground necessary to respond to efforts to interpret commitment as merely one kind of goal or preference among others.

My second aim is to demonstrate that one particular account of virtue ethics, the Stoic account, accommodates Sen on commitment *without* requiring the alteration of the methodological assumptions that continue to underlie what Sen (2007b: 342) terms “brand named Rational Choice Theory (RCT).” (By terming it “brand named” and referring to it as RCT, he means to signal that practitioners of rational choice need not adhere to these assumptions.) According to Sen, the passive acceptance of the following continues to block the recognition of ethical motivation:

Self-welfare goal: A person’s only goal is to maximize his or her own welfare, which rules out incorporating within one’s own objectives other considerations (such as the welfare of others) except to the extent that it influences the person’s own welfare.

Self-goal choice: A person’s choices must be based on the exclusive pursuit of her own goals, which rules out being restrained by the recognition of other people’s goals, except to the extent that these goals shape the person’s own goals. (Sen 2007a: 18)

Uprooting these assumptions would impede current economic practice, as it would require a complex revision of its methodology (van Staveren 2001).² My Stoic proposal avoids this by allowing us to accept self-welfare and self-goal choice provisionally, but within a larger account of moral psychology. A full description of rationality and agency will be the province of the larger, more comprehensive account, and self-welfare and self-goal choice will be recognized as heuristics for dealing with the social issues of procurement and distribution of material resources.

I conclude by contrasting the Stoic approach to an alternative response to Sen, the attempt (which Sen himself undertakes) to develop a “moralized”

² Sen himself only suggests the direction in which such a revision should go; Irene van Staveren (2001) has set out a Aristotelian approach to modeling that is a more complete example of an alternative to Rational Choice Theory (RCT).

account of economic rationality. I argue that such efforts will fail to meet the justificatory requirements of a normative approach to economic policy.

THE APPLE, THE WINDOW SHADE, AND THE TILL

Sen, Pettit, and Brennan

Sen's objection to the "usual" construal of preference is not, of course, a concern over "the binary representation of individual choice" (1973: 253). His objection is to the notion that "preference (or a general-purpose 'utility function')" can be taken for "an all-embracing depository of a person's feelings, values, priorities, choices, and a great many other diverse objects" (2002: 589). To examine what is at stake in this issue, let's turn to the examples Sen uses to demonstrate that commitment cannot be classified as a goal or preference. The first of these is the case of two boys sharing apples, which Sen uses to illustrate the "contrast between sympathy and commitment" (1977: 328). "Boy A and Boy B are before a plate of two apples, one large, one small. Boy A tells boy B, 'You choose.' B immediately picks the larger apple. A is upset and permits himself the remark that this was grossly unfair. 'Why' asks B. 'Which one would *you* have chosen, if you were to choose rather than me?' 'The smaller one of course,' A replies. B is now triumphant: 'Then what are you complaining about? That's the one you've got!'" (1977: 328). Sen points out, "A would have lost nothing from B's choice had his own hypothetical choice of the smaller apple been based on sympathy and not commitment. A's anger indicates that this was probably not the case" (1977: 329).

In a recent dialogue, Sen explains that Philip Pettit would analyze the case differently. A, in generously offering the choice of apples to B, has acted on a goal in which "the good of another is prioritized." However, once B chooses the larger apple, the "novel" and "occasion-specific" goal of prioritizing B has been abandoned (Sen 2007b: 351, citing Pettit 2005: 15). Pettit argues that Sen has merely failed to recognize that something so short term and reversible is still a goal. Mistakenly, Sen has limited his analysis to the possibility that all goals are "standing goals" (Pettit 2007: 46). Yet there is no reason, Pettit writes, "to suppose that the goals which agents try to advance are internalized or integrated in any sense." As Pettit explains, people may "vary in their primitive desires from moment to moment and from context to context" (Pettit 2007: 45). Pettit's proposal, if right, would explain the case of the boys as one where A only momentarily has feelings of altruism for B, feelings that dissipate before he gets disgruntled. It would also meet what

Pettit reports as our common sense expectation that altruistic behavior done for us by others is done truly for our own sake. If you are handing me an apple, in other words, you are not at all sincere if you do not mean for me to enjoy what you are offering.

In response to Pettit, Sen gives another accessible yet vivid example. Suppose you have agreed to pull an airplane shade for the sake of your seat-mate, who is playing a loathsome video game. Pettit's suggestion would be that you have simply responded to a "primitive desire," in a novel, one-off way, to take your seat-mate's goal on as your own. First Sen challenges the idea that a person might, even for a moment, assume that her seat-mate will benefit from playing video games. Then, against the idea that you are reacting to a goal, Sen says, "you are not actively pursuing another person's goals, but just letting a person pursue his . . . It would be fairly odd to claim that through restraint you actually show that you share your neighbor's goal that he should devote himself to this mindless game . . ." It is better, Sen suggests, to think of your indulgence of the seat-mate as a "self-imposed constraint" (2007b: 345). It is a lemma of Sen's approach, one we are supposed to find plausible due to the seat-mate example, that "there is a difference between *restraint* and *conversion*" (2007b: 352). You need not subscribe, in even the most tentative or unintegrated sense, to the goodness of playing video games in order to honor your seat-mate's own goals. What is called for, Sen writes, is only to "live and let live" (2007b: 352).

Sen positions himself against both Pettit's interpretation and the insistence of others that it is "nonsensical" to think "altruistic agents cannot pursue other people's goals without making them their own" (Peter and Schmid 2007: 10). But I will offer more in the way of argument. I also avoid the vexed topic of what we expect when others act on our behalf, which depends too much on the description of the case. Instead, I will present an alternative that makes Pettit's proposal seem too elaborate and explanatorily bereft.

But first, let's get Geoffrey Brennan's counter-proposal on the table as well. Returning to the example of the boys and the apples, Brennan agrees with Sen that explaining A in terms of sympathy would be "bizarre." If A had really taken on B's interest in eating an apple, A would be happy that B had gotten the larger piece. But Brennan is unsatisfied by Sen's invocation of commitment, which Brennan feels would also be "bizarre." A is said to enjoy B's consumption of the apple more than he enjoyed his own consumption of it due to his "commitment (in Sen's sense) to B's flourishing" (Brennan 2007: 120). Brennan's invocation of full-blown "flourishing" can be taken as a *reductio*. But the nature of enjoyment is at issue too—does a commitment

to someone's flourishing actually change the appeal of an apple? Is Sen suggesting that the flavor of the apple has actually changed, or that commitment has the ability to transform the molecular appeal of a slice of apple in the mouth?

Brennan's own proposal is that the object of A's desire is not either of the apples, but rather a norm-driven and contextual goal, something like "politeness." In the case of pulling the shade, you are pursuing politeness, or something like "peace between seatmates." Such goals may be more elusive and difficult to track, but they are not different in form from other preferences, and can be formally treated as such; desiring politeness is in no way counter-preferential (Brennan 2007: 120). Norm-compliance, Brennan suggests, is capable of satisfying in its own way. Sen's account of commitment only seems necessary because Sen fails to acknowledge this, and so, implausibly, he focuses on the appeal of the apples.

Brennan is surely right about the ability of norm-following to satisfy us. We are complex enough for this at even an early age (as the parent of a child who loves structure can readily attest). When I introduce examples that deal with the omission of behavior below, rather than active behaviors (like pulling the shade or negotiating apples), I will be able to emphasize a psychological feature of commitment (and element in the case of boys A and B) that Brennan neglects.

And there is a problem with Brennan's reading that might render it unworkable. What about A's anger? It cannot be that he is frustrated that he did not get to be polite, since he did. The goal he was supposedly after was in reach, so why did he confront B about his choice? Was A disgruntled over finding that B does not share his preference ranking for politeness? Why would A prefer that his preference be shared? And A, in voicing his annoyance, has swiftly changed his mind (Pettit would approve!) about his preference ranking of apples and politeness. This seems more than a bit hypocritical on A's part. Is there a shallower dedication to "politeness" than one that lets us bridge it over the matter of a slice of apple?

COMMITMENT AND THE ALTERATION OF VALUE

I plan to argue that concern for "flourishing" can explain A's begrudgement. But first, let us return to the issue of how the taste of an apple can be said to lose its appeal due to commitment. Concern for another's flourishing cannot turn an apple into something else. Yet we "lose our appetite" for things at all sorts of times. Even when famished, there are myriad reasons for failing to pursue a bit of apple; one of these could be commitment. It is quite

common for commitment to alter our desire for all sorts of otherwise pleasing goods.

The case is even easier to make when the examples involve money. Imagine yourself at a checkout counter, ready to pay for your purchases. The clerk has left her station, and the till is left wide open. A large stack of 20-dollar-bills are in reach. No video cameras are on, and there is no real risk that you placing the twenties in your pocket will be detected. Do you deliberate over whether to take the money or not? In such a situation, do you check for the video cameras? I would suggest that, when this kind of thing happens to us in our everyday life (and not when the question is posed in a classroom), we do not even consider taking the money. It is just like how most of us do not pause to look at the amount on any bill that a passerby has dropped before we run to get it back to him or her. Yet, the moment after we pass on the opportunity to take the stack of twenties, we would not fail to point it out if we had not received enough change for our purchase. Money is always and consistently of value to us; we do not need to deny this (or claim that apples change their taste). But we simply didn't want the stolen money, and are not even tempted by money that would be stolen.

Let us consider that this is merely a preference for fairness, as Brennan would have it. What his proposal does not explain is the lack of attention paid to the opportunity to steal. We mostly don't even recognize these chances. Shopping is far less relaxing when you are a shoplifter, ever on the hunt for new opportunity. Brennan's account works fine if, like shoplifters, we were to consider the risks of theft and then (unlike shoplifters) decide against it. In that case, it could be that we are acting on a preference for not getting caught. But the behavior I want to highlight is the case where opportunities are *not even noticed*. I take this to be the more typical case, the sort that happens with the greater frequency.

There are four reasons for thinking Sen's account of commitment is superior to Brennan's proposal to treat it as a preference. First, how does Brennan's proposal explain how the money transforms into something undesirable in my examples? If one were merely pursuing some preference to follow a moral principle, surely the money would still be valuable and, unless we built into Brennan's account something unlikely, such as principles being absolute, the value of the money would remain relevant. He would be describing a process wherein alternatives are weighed. But the examples I've given do not involve the weighing of value. There is no time taken for that, for the amount of good (money, apple) that is bypassed is not relevant.

Second, it would be difficult, especially in light of the pessimistic conclusions that can be drawn from experiments in social psychology, to

consider a person who prefers “not stealing” in one situation (or “being fair,” or what have you) to act on that preference consistently (see Doris 2002). Every one of us would steal in certain circumstances, we all cheat at some times, and we can all be rude. What typically explains the variability, the case-by-case and easily modifiable ranking, given to goals like “politeness?” The solution to “situationist” worries about the stability of moral behavior is to deny that the objects of commitment are easily identifiable *principles* of behavior. (Sen and the virtue ethicists are consistent on this point: commitment is a complex psychological phenomenon, and one not reducible to any set of moral principles.)

Third, much of our behavior is habitual in the sense of being nearly “automatic.” This is part of the psychology of traditional accounts of virtue ethics and explains how something can be done “for its own sake” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, henceforth *NE*, 1105a: 33–34).³ The psychological story that fills out Sen’s account (even if there are other options for doing so) offers a mechanism to explain this “automaticity,” which as yet has been an unexplained feature in Sen’s examples (1977: 329).⁴ This will also lend credence to Sen’s proposal over Brennan’s. (We will get to this mechanism shortly.)

Finally, why would A feel resentment over B’s choice? It seems unwieldy to assume that his goals, like quicksilver, just changed midstream. It cannot be his loss of the larger apple, since he chose to be polite over the opportunity to take that. On Sen’s account we can recognize that A’s resentment is over B himself. A has misjudged B. A is experiencing the process of readjusting his assessment of his friend. It is as if you found out someone with whom you were playing a game had just cheated. You didn’t realize you were playing with a cheater. But you wouldn’t then cheat to beat this person. You also (we can stipulate) are not distraught just because you lost (perhaps you won despite your opponent’s cheating). Your disappointment is focused on the person; B would sell A out for a bit of apple (that kind of thing). This

3 The traditional accounts of virtue ethics emphasize the interrelationship between perception, emotion, choice, and reasoning. The purpose of the discussion of these is to provide an account of how they function together to result in virtuous action. The “most valuable” inquiry, Aristotle writes in the *Eudemean Ethics*, is “how and by what sources does virtue arise?” (1216b: 10–12). In one memorable illustration of the type of second nature the virtuous person acquires, Aristotle writes, the “good man, qua good, takes pleasure in morally virtuous actions and dislikes vicious ones, just as a musician enjoys beautiful melodies and is pained by bad ones” (1170a: 4–11).

4 In George Bernard Shaw’s *The Devil’s Disciple*, the “willingness” of a person to be hanged in place of another is described as resulting from commitment and not sympathy. The lines are “What I did last night, I did in cold blood, not caring half so much for your husband, or for you as I did for myself. I had no motive and no interest: all I can tell you is that when it came to a point whether I would take my neck out of the noose and put another man’s into it, I could not do it” (quoted in Sen 1977: 329).

explains why the resentment is voiced to B—because it concerns B! A’s supposed commitment to “politeness” (or another peace-keeping social norm) has trouble accounting for A’s being so vocal. And yet moral concerns are the ones that can often prompt us to defy all sorts of normal conventions.

TRADITIONAL VIRTUE ETHICS AND THE PARADOX OF COMMITMENT

Committed actions do not track our preferences for things like apples, money, and even life. There is something paradoxical in this, just as there is about Platonic theses like “the good person cannot be hurt.” Does a decent person want to be harmed? Of course not. Will a decent person hide behind a child in a shootout? Of course not. Even if, formally, we can think of no more final standard of good than (say) one’s own life, we are not willing to do anything we can to survive. How can we, at times, transcend risk, loss, and pain? Let’s construct an account that makes these phenomena seem possible.

Doing Something for Its Own Sake

I have pointed out that we may not even notice missed opportunities for bad behavior that we are habituated against. This is a hallmark of virtue, according to ancient virtue ethics (see Annas 1993). As an example, many of us have become accustomed to “not stealing” money. By this I mean what Aristotle does: we are inclined to “not steal” in such a situation to such a degree that trying to do so would cause our hearts to beat fast and faces to flush (*NE* VI.5, VI.9, II.5). We have self-regulated or altered our selves by, at some previous point, committing to the norm of “do not steal.” (I say with confidence that there is some point at which we do this, because my young children are currently unabashed about taking what is not theirs.) Money, which is always useful, loses its normal appeal if we would get it a way that we see as “stealing.” Why is this not, as Brennan would have it, a case of simply preferring some norm like “fairness?”

The non-cognitive nature of this habituation is what tells against its being reducible to commitment to a principle. We identify with deeply embedded norms in ways in which we are not consciously aware. If you have habituated yourself to “fairness,” it is no longer meaningful to say you are choosing it, preferring it among other options, on a case-by-case basis. Anyone who has graded and re-graded (to no effect) a test whose score they are unhappy with

has experienced what I am describing. When it comes to our habits, the rationale is not always immediately accessible. We do not expect people to sound like geniuses when they get interviewed about immoral opportunities they bypassed (or moral ones they have taken). They often, instead, seem a bit dumbfounded, and we find people who have engaged in heroic behavior saying things like “anyone would have done it.” The automaticity of moral behavior is something that virtue ethics (in contrast to other ethical theories) is well-equipped to account for, since it is what virtue ethics recommends as a goal. The psychological possibility of ethical habituation is what underlies the ethical standard of “doing something for its own sake.”

In *The Republic*, Socrates is challenged by Glaucon to come up with an account of rightness that “is good for its own sake” and not for any benefits, neither here nor in the afterlife. As Chryssipus, one of the founders of Stoicism, explains, to be “choice worthy for its own sake” is to pursue something “not from hope or fear or any external motive” (Diogenes Laertius VII. 89). The ancients distinguish the instrumental benefits that friends bring from the need to care for them, if you are to be ethical, “for their own sake” (Epicurus, Vatican Sayings: 23). And, of course, the ancient eudaimonists define virtue as worth pursuing “for its own sake” (Annas 1993). Only the “base” do “nothing for the common good nor for friendship without calculation” (Arius Didymus, Ecl. ii. 104-6-9).

When scholars express surprise that, according to Sen, not even “a warm glow” can accrue from a person who has acted ethically, they are expressing surprise at the standards moral philosophers have set for ethical justification. As Julia Annas explains, for the ancient Greek virtue ethicists, virtuous action is “done for its own sake, without ulterior motive, as is supposed to be true of an action done for a moral reason” (1993: 123). But it may seem silly to imagine virtuous people getting no pleasure from their behavior, and indeed, asserting that virtuous people get no pleasure from right action would be an inaccurate representation of virtue ethics.

Here is the distinction that is often left out of brief accounts: ethical behavior will not be motivated by desire for conventional goods, including the approbation of yourself or others (“the warm glow”). The pleasure gotten from acting well is not something the virtuous are motivated by, but rather it is an effect of being habituated to doing the right thing. Interpreters argue over exactly what kind of effect, but it can be described as doing moral things with an effortless zest. It is not likely to amass after one good action, but instead is going to be part of living one’s life. Think of the turmoil of the person trying to cheat on an exam, and contrast this to how unaffected the person just trying to take the exam honestly feels. According to traditional

virtue ethics, this satisfaction is fundamentally different from the satisfaction we get from other pursuits. Next, we'll consider an argument to this effect.

Final Ends

One objection to virtue ethics has been that, if you do something for the sake of moral self-improvement, this somehow counts for less (Johnson 2003). This is a fair objection; virtue ethics does value behavior differently depending on the type of motivation involved. We have both experiences: good behavior done in pursuit of some goal, and good behavior done because we are not tempted by the bad behavior that is always a possibility. In the best case (the case of virtue) the bad behavior does not even occur to an agent as a possibility. There is no "calculation," "fear," or "hope" that motivates the right action. Neither virtue ethics nor Sen means to be prescribing some new way of acting. They want to point out the *difference* between two ways in which we already act.

Being able to do things "for their own sake" can, of course, be a goal. It is what people attempting to become more virtuous are aiming for. It would be artificial to try to talk of it in some other way. But it would be misleading to treat it the same as other goals because it cannot be traced to concerns for our welfare and pursuit of other goals. In *Rational Choice and Moral Agency* (1995), David Schmitz does a fine job of explaining this. Beginning with the assumptions of RCT, Schmitz adds a description of the nature of our pursuits and commitments, specifically their evolution and status in our reasoning. He explains that we have multiple, local, and potentially conflicted goals, such as career, family, lunch, the desire to be a good person, and the desire to be well-liked, so there is no possibility of concrete global optima. In other words, we could not be always engaged in means-end reasoning, so we are engaging in rational processes more complex than streamlined versions of RCT suggest.

Having established this much, Schmitz then accounts for the phenomena he describes as "final ends." Final ends may be obtained originally in an instrumental manner, as they are such useful things to have; we seek things to motivate us and to "live for" (1995: 69). But these ends function as they do because they do not remain merely instrumental. Our behavior is best explained, writes Schmitz, by our having many final ends, commitments that we are only going to revise or question as a result of some sort of crisis or dissatisfaction. These final ends, once they have become such, are pursued "for their own sake," meaning that they are recognized by us to be

pre-justified, as it were, and that we are not actively, or instrumentally, justifying them (1995: 59).

An example is our commitment to our children (Schmidtz 1995: 78). Schmidtz lets us recognize that any decision to have children may begin with instrumental reasoning (what will they bring to my life?) and ends by being transformed into what we commonly experience—the deep and abiding commitment we end of having to our children, a commitment that can no longer partake of instrumental justification. We care for our children for their own sake, but originally, they were thought of in instrumental terms. Schmidtz's account is no different than the Stoic account to this extent. According to Stoicism, this same process can apply to all ends of all sorts—ones that are not moral, and ones that are.

Is the plausibility of final ends enough to uproot the methodological commitment most economists have made to self-goal and self-welfare choice, described in the introduction? For the answer to be yes, it would seem to be crucial that this behavior be capable of being represented realistically in economic models. The behavior that results from your commitment to a child might be modeled under the assumptions of self-welfare choice—but what are the implications of representing such behavior in this way? Sen, after all, insists he is not simply after a lack of abstraction or “realism” (1977: 322). It is the misunderstanding of topics including, but not limited to, public goods, that motivates his critique. Let's review the reasons that critics of RCT provide for recommending that current accounts of rationality be “moralized,” or transformed so as to accommodate phenomena including commitment.

First, there is Sen's distinctive reminder that we can mistake sacrifices for preference when we assess the welfare of others, looking to only observable choices and measurable costs. Limited to only the resources of RCT, who is to say the mother who feeds herself last (and least) is not simply acting on preference (see Sen 1999: 126, 192–198)? Given the widespread use of quantitative measures of welfare, it would be difficult to underestimate the potential impact of avoiding this mistake. A second reason is to be able to make normative judgments concerning policy decisions concerning all types of things, from prohibitions on behavior to the content of programs for social welfare.

A third reason is to avoid the bifurcation of morality and economics. Irene van Staveren (2001) articulates a case for why this is important. She believes that more realistic as well as more valid explanations of economic behavior can be represented in formal economic modeling if this bifurcation is avoided. As an example, if a moral phenomenon like trust gets miscategorized, or

equated to risk, it will hamper our ability to understand why and how economic transactions come about (2001: 101–102). A related worry of Sen's is that, due to the influential nature of RCT accounts of rationality, their failure to acknowledge moral phenomenon can damage accounts of the “reasoning that can go into the determination of choice,” because they do not “give reason its due in the idea of rationality in general” (2007a: 20).

Let me begin, not by summarizing what can be gained by “moralizing” rationality, but instead specifying what can be done if we invoke the Stoic account of ethics. The Stoic account maintains that morality is indifferent to the “favorable circumstances that any normal person, including Stoics, would in principle prefer for themselves” (Long 2002: 196). We can identify three components of the Stoic view necessary to this result:

- *Dependence thesis*: morality operates on worldly goods and is manifested in observable behavior in regard to these goods.
- *Independence thesis*: morality is incommensurable with other goods.
- *Neutrality thesis*: morality need not be referenced in order to assess the benefits of various material circumstances.

In response to the first reason listed above, Stoicism as an ethical theory, due to its independence thesis, is fully equipped to assess psychic costs. It can tell us what policy costs in psychic terms (does it reduce dignity?) and, if need be, in only psychic terms. Some, like Elizabeth Anderson (2001), recommend that this be done by emphasizing how distinct economics is from ethics. Economic calculation should be de-emphasized, she argues, as it obscures serious moral harms. The Stoic approach avoids this bifurcation (in response to the third worry) and still enables strong, strident, *determinate* ethical claims about the inappropriateness of various policies (in response to the second). At the same time, due to its neutrality thesis, a Stoic approach allows us to use RCT calculations to detect good and bad policy given measurable outputs. The ability of Stoicism to invoke ethical considerations does not interfere with prudential decisions dealing with general, non-moralized, welfare. The way Stoicism manages this is by distinguishing moral from prudential reasoning (as we have above) and by describing value as being of two kinds.

The Stoics on Value

Value is not an uncomplicated thing to assess. We are aware that for some people winning the lottery can be their downfall. We realize that advantages to some can be of detriment to others. But it is difficult—perhaps because a

lack of material goods characterizes the lives of so many in the world—to stop using, as shorthand, the descriptor of “good” for everything that might, in some context, constitute a benefit to someone. But lottery winnings, material necessities, policies, and behavior are not all the same. If we do not begin to distinguish between types of good, we will continue to confuse moral goodness for material (or external, as they include bodily) goods, and by doing so we will have failed to heed the warning of the ancient Stoics. Equating the value of non-moral goods with moral good will result in our making inaccurate assessments and inappropriate trade-offs. Their concern was not unlike that of Sen and other critics of RCT. The equation of non-moral and moral good predictably resulted intractable confusions over moral, political, and economics issues. Their proposal is aimed at making us ever vigilant to the fact that additions of material goods (growth in gross domestic product (GDP)) do not have predictably or necessarily good results.

Their remedy, the offer of a bi-level account of value, is, as I’ve mentioned, unique. The Stoics did not attempt to draw some line to distinguish higher goods from lower ones—a distinction which is meaningless if the lower goods are required for survival. They did not get themselves into a situation where one meta-preference is indistinguishable from another in terms of moral worth, no commitment capable of being evaluated as better than another. No, the Stoics were at once fully normative (the account provides the resources to evaluate as justified or not any bit of behavior) and sensitive to the irrelevance of ethics to some decisions and to some lives. The bi-level account of value that the Stoics engineered enabled the recognition of commitment (which might indicate that no amount of virtue is worth twenty dollars) without hampering our ability to discuss the value that material goods do manifest.

The category of *indifferent* is crucial to the Stoic approach. The term itself was meant to shock their audience into the realization that there are goods of incommensurable types. All manners of things, including “life, health, pleasure, beauty, physical strength, wealth, fame, and good birth as well as their opposites, death, disease, pain, ugliness, weakness, poverty, disgrace, low birth, and the like . . .” are to be described as indifferent. This word was to serve as a constant reminder of how crucial the use of one of these things is to its normative evaluation. When a course of action or object is referred to as an indifferent, the speaker is specifying which of two scales of value (moral and non-moral) is being invoked.

But this is not to suggest that morality needs to ever be considered (or to remain) irrelevant to any decision concerning an indifferent. Morality is

always free to intrude, so to speak, because indifferents (material and other external goods like health) are what morality acts upon.

Other approaches might specify moral and non-moral good without explaining their relationship to each other in this fashion. In fact, we have some ethical traditions that suggest concern with material inputs is inappropriate to ethical thinking or limited to times when dire need is at issue. There are no such limitations put on Stoic ethical reasoning, and, as a result, there is no conflict in assessing the costs of the indifferents alongside determining right and wrong. The term “indifferent” can be misleading if it suggests that no indifferent is better than any other. This does not follow from the claim that they are not, on their own, constitutive of moral value. Indifferents have the sort of value we are all familiar with—we are aware of how much we need water, for example, and of the value of clean water to a human being. And, as promised, the Stoic distinction between indifferents and moral good allows for the psychological possibility of commitment. It is something, as I hope my description makes clear, in which we quite commonly engage. The efficient use of indifferents can inform the right ethical decision, though, again, a moral choice can also be one made despite great cost (Diogenes Laertius 7.101–103, see Cicero, *De Officiis* I.10, 2.9) Perhaps this only seems like common sense, but it has not been so easy for ethical theories to incorporate all of this into their proposals.

The further benefit to the Stoic account of value is the role it understands economists to play. Its independence thesis allows for independent ethical and prudential grounds for conclusions about policy. On the other hand, the dependence thesis prevents the bifurcation that theorists such as van Staveren deplore; there are no “merely” economic issues. Given any real-world situation, stoicism allows you to assess it in terms of justice and morality or in terms of its utility apart from these. So, clearly, the neutrality thesis of the Stoics also plays an important role. For the Stoics, determining the material needs of others does not proceed through the same route as the generation of other-concern does (as it does for many single-level accounts of ethics). The obligations we have to rectify the bad situation of others (freedom harmed or economically harmed) are not intertwined with our own aim at being virtuous. You are not virtuous if you are not motivated to care for others for their own sake, but this has nothing to do with the determination of any needed and necessary material goods for others. Prudential decisions about general welfare need not be made through special moral reasoning. You do not need virtue to be able to recognize economic necessity. Nor is the encouragement of virtue one of the aims of the distribution of material resources. The Stoic category of indifferents

encourages us to consider the prudential distribution of the very goods that John Rawls (2001) considers primary and that Martha Nussbaum (2000) describes as neutral.

Because of the neutrality thesis, obvious (and economics friendly) evaluations of transactions can take place. Let's return to the example of A and B and the apples. The Stoic account agrees with Sen that the offer of the apple was made "for its own sake," and certainly supports the notion that A's anger is over B's lack of moral development. But on this the Stoics are clear: the transaction and the outcome concern indifferents. If an economist wanted to track exchanges like the one with the apples, a Stoic is satisfied by considering and capturing only what transpires externally. The transaction itself, the materials involved, and the outcome, are all indifferents. Keeping track of indifferents is what economists ought to be tasked to do, according to an account like the Stoic one. In order to promote the general welfare prudentially, and to make personal decisions that count as moral, the Stoic account of ethics makes use of the careful study of transactions concerning indifferents. I began by stating that, in the end, this is a plea for the roles of ethics and economics to be kept distinct. If it is now clear how the results of economic analysis can be, from the vantage point of an ethical theory, of independent value, I will turn to demonstrating how a well-justified ethical approach can interfere with purely prudential economic determinations.

MORALIZING RATIONALITY: THE COSTS OF WORKING WITH A SINGLE SCALE OF VALUE

I would like to show that there is a need for the confidence (and justificatory basis) to make ethical assessments of policy and circumstance, and in this regard the Stoic approach is superior to the option of "moralizing" rationality that Sen himself has endorsed. Sen's proposed solution to RCT is that an alternative principle of rational choice be developed, one that acknowledges people's personal and group identities, their joint strategy, and cultural mores and ways of discussion. Others interested in mitigating the problems Sen has identified want to go further. Both Irene van Staveren and Elizabeth Anderson criticize Sen for what they see as a "lacuna" in his work. For instance, he "does not propose an alternative, non-preference-based conception of rationality in terms of which committed action makes sense" (Anderson 2001: 24). Yet both of these approaches can be described as attempts to "moralize" rationality. Moralized accounts of rationality take into account the ethical bases of our behavior and reject the possibility that

ethical values can be treated as just one type of “resource” that can be incorporated into pre-existing models of preference (see Hausman and McPherson 1996: 220). Sometimes—as in the case of Irene van Staveren’s work—the proposal is that ethical motivation can be represented in formal economic modeling. And sometimes—as in the case of Anderson—the incommensurability between economic and moral good is emphasized (Chang 2001).

In any case, one objective of coming up with a “moralized” account of rationality is the ability to weigh in on inappropriately marketed (or marketable but immoral) practices. As an example, Anderson and van Staveren each weigh in on the issue of paid surrogacy. They each agree that having children for instrumental reasons would “not be a meaningful transfer of the values of the domain of care to the domain of freedom,” and doing so “would undermine our caring for our children if it were done instrumentally for purposes that reside outside the domain of care and the children would notice this and feel uncared for” (van Staveren 2001: 160). The hope of moralized accounts of rationality is that the symmetry (a moralized account of rationality being the right tool for the moral evaluation of policy) means policy decisions can finally be subject to ethical justification. The hallmarks of an ethical justification (in contrast to the more familiar political ones) are how determinate it is and how immune it is from the results of any consensus-seeking process. (These features, though they seem anti-democratic, are necessary in a common-sense way: millions might engage in an activity that can still be determined to be unethical.)

There are three ways in which this type of ethical justification—the sort Sen, Nussbaum, van Staveren, and Anderson mean to offer—suffers in comparison to an ethical theory with an account of moral psychology. First, there is a lack of parallel between accounts of rationality and accounts of morality in this sense: far more is being asserted if people are assumed to be in some way moral. In these views, the degree of morality people embrace is a non-issue, considered unproblematic. Yet there are very few grounds for assuming that people’s morality is developed to a certain extent or that their reactions will be predictable or uniform. The consequences of being irrational or immoral can be described in advance and considered predictable. But the consequences of being amoral? There is no predictable result that comes from living without ethical commitment.

A second concern has to do with the need for one philosophical account of moral psychology to be used in the determination of what these accounts each describe as the harm done to (or by) individuals. This point does not depend upon the traditional account of moral psychology offered by virtue

ethicists being correct or detailed—but because it is a singular account, it can be accessed in justification (by the person making a claim or by a critic). The authors I've mentioned offer only very vague accounts of our moral psychology. For example, van Staveren supplements Aristotle's account of the virtues with Adam Smith's theory of moral sentiments. The Smithean supplement is necessary because "Aristotle largely neglected" the "domain of care," which is corrected with Smith's account of the "moral sentiments" (van Staveren 2001: 81). However, these are not compatible accounts of moral psychology by any stretch.⁵ Integrating the two would take a serious amount of work and be the development of a new proposal (which van Staveren does not do much).

Third, the general recognition of rational behavior is not the same as the diagnosis of a particular case of it. Without making use of one account of moral psychology, the mechanism involved in the rational decisions we make cannot be referenced. As an example, Anderson, in her analysis of Indian women who put their family's welfare ahead of their own, talks of how taking outside work can "inspire" the women to take on additional identities. They "may find," in taking on this work, additional "opportunities" to join a collective identity (2001: 35). These possibilities seem perfectly plausible, but this is not to analyze a case of these new identities being taken (or not). Ethical justification requires more than hand-waving about events and then taking a "bird's eye view" of rationality. For a conclusion to be ethically (and not politically) justified, it must reference the case in question—the specific course of action and process of reasoning involved.

Let me illustrate this last claim—that using moralized accounts of rationality to draw ethical conclusions about policy involves a lack of justification—using the example of paid surrogacy. When it comes to paid surrogacy, Anderson concludes that being hired to carry another couple's baby to term as a surrogate should be banned as a matter of public policy. She can determine in advance that the values involved (those in childbirth and gestation) are not ones that survive commodification. She insists that regardless of demand, and the benefits it might bring to homosexual couples, or heterosexual couples unable to conceive, the practice of paid surrogacy substitutes "market norms" for "parental norms" and "children are reduced from subjects of love to objects of use" (1993: 198).

Anderson is expert at pointing out times when we suffer from confusing market norms with social norms. But when there is a clash, she always seems

⁵ For instance, Aristotle's account of virtue was intended to function as an ideal that very few people could obtain. In his own economic work he does not assume the virtue of most people.

to recommend the same thing: that the social value be upheld. The Stoic approach, in contrast, would point out that this is a failure to recognize the independent value of indifferents. Their objection can be put very simply: there may be a great and pressing need, a necessary economic benefit, that comes from those who take the opportunity to be a surrogate. If Anderson's response to this claim is that the ethical dimension of the transaction is being ignored, the Stoic approach can agree with her about the psychic consequences of a regrettable practice. This does not change the potential benefit (regarding indifferents) involved in the transaction. The Stoic maintains that we cannot simply decommmodify everything of moral value. For one, there is no need for this (see the dependency thesis), and also, that category promises to become limitless (for when is human behavior ever irrelevant to moral value?). The opportunity to work as a surrogate, which might be incredibly life-enhancing for the person offering it, is not any less unjust for that. Everything Anderson says about it might be accurate, but there is no reason to obscure the prudential measure we can apply to it. The virtue of the Stoic account is that it allows us to assess, ethically *and* prudentially, situations and policies, and then to make use of either handle.

The possibility that not everyone encounters or experiences something singular when engaged in something like paid surrogacy is acknowledged. There are economic and ethical dimensions to any practice, and either feature can be addressed depending on the full range of reasons for paying attention to one or the other. There is great variability in our concerns—committed behavior is undeniably a part of rational behavior. But its recognition does not interfere with calculating, in a non-moral way, non-moral costs and benefits.

CONCLUSION

So what kind of threat is self-goal and self-welfare choice to the acknowledgement that agency includes moral motivation, which characteristically involves preferences that are difficult to track? It is a threat only if economics is considered to be all that we have when it comes to our resources for sorting out agency. A useful reminder of the need for a division of labor would be the idea that economics concerns indifferents, the study of indifferents. How we do pursue them, how we ought to pursue them: there would be no need to limit the developments economists initiate in order to analyze our choices concerning indifferents. Let the standards that guide the development of RCT be those of the field. Do choices concerning indifferents have moral and political relevance? Of course they do. Have we left it to only the field of

economics to determine these? Why would this ever be the plan? If we put the matter in terms of this broader question, one wonders the existence of moral agency has been a focus in the way it has been. It also begins to appear as if the success of economic thought, its demonstrable usefulness and success in transmission, is being used against it, as the field gets accused of overshadowing ethical thought only because ethicists have been so unsuccessful at transmitting their ideas and putting them to use. So the ethicists must merely speak up. As Cicero put it, we often have to choose between *utilitas* and virtue. When should we do this, why should we do this? Ethicists ought to be providing us with reasons. It will not do to foreshorten our understanding of *utilitas* because we are so little versed on virtue. Economists are doing remarkably well at supplying us with data on the costs and benefits of decisions about indifferents. It is the ethicists who must do much better.

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