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## Identity and Commitment: Sen's Conception of the Individual

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Tinbergen Institute Discussion Paper

# Identity and Commitment

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# Identity and Commitment: Sen's Conception of the Individual

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## **Abstract**

This paper develops a conception of personal identity for Amartya Sen's capability framework that emphasizes his self-scrutinizing aspect of the self and related concept of commitment, and compares this conception to the collective intentionality-based one advanced in Davis (2003c). The paper also distinguishes personal identity and social identity, and contrasts Sen's framework with recent standard economics' explanation of social identity in terms of conformity. Sen's concept of commitment is examined in two formulations, and the later version is related to Bernard Williams' thinking about identity-conferring commitments. The paper concludes by arguing that explaining personal identity as a special capability and possible object of social-economic policy provides one way of resolving the debate over whether the capability framework ought to have a short-list of essential capabilities.

**Keywords** Sen, personal identity, social identity, commitment, reflexivity, theory of conformity, collective intentionality, Bernard Williams, capabilities, Nussbaum

Amartya Sen has made examination of the behavioral foundations of economics and in particular their connection to different interpretations of 'privateness' in the concept of a person a central theme of his work. He has also associated this investigation with the question of how we might talk about the self or the identity or identities of a person. This paper examines the conception of individual or personal identity in Sen's thinking, and argues that although he frames his views primarily in terms of how individuals identify with others, his thinking about 'privateness' and commitment offers both foundations for an alternative conception of the self and individual

identity, and also a promising means of avoiding problems that arise when one thinks about identity in terms of social identification. This alternative thinking about commitment and the personal identity, moreover, forms a link to his later thinking about functionings and capabilities, and makes it possible to argue that the capability framework either employs or can make use of an understanding of personal identity. This paper offers an interpretation of this possible identity framework, and also discusses how it might be used to address one of the leading criticisms of Sen's approach to thinking about capabilities, namely, that it lacks a short list of essential capabilities.

Section one reviews Sen's 'privateness' framework and how it is related to commitment. Section two discusses his views on identity as social identification and his thinking about individual identity and rationality. Section three distinguishes two identity frameworks, personal identity and social identity, and discusses the problems associated with treating personal identity as social identity. Section four sets forth my earlier interpretation of Sen's thinking about personal and social identity in terms of collective intentionality theory. Section five provides a related but different interpretation of Sen's thinking on personal and social identity that rather emphasizes the concept of commitment, and draws on Bernard Williams's understanding of integrity as based on identity-conferring commitments. Section six addresses the critique that Sen's framework that it fails to identify a short-list of essential capabilities, and argues that treating having a personal identity as a capability provides one way to answering this critique. Section seven provides four concluding comments on the paper's motivations.

## **1 The 'privateness' framework: Four Features of the Self**

Sen distinguishes three aspects of the self or concepts of the person that operate in one form or another in standard economics' characterizations of self-interest, and then contrasts all three with a fourth aspect of the self and concept of the person associated with commitment (Sen, 1985; 2002, pp. 33-37, 206-224). The three standard types of 'privateness' are:

*Self-centered welfare:* A person's welfare depends only on her own consumption and other features of the richness of her life (without any sympathy or antipathy toward others, and without any procedural concern).

*Self-welfare goal:* A person's only goal is to maximize her own welfare.

*Self-goal choice:* A person's choices must be based entirely on the pursuit of her own goals (Sen, 2002, pp.33-4).

Though these different aspects of the self are often lumped together and insufficiently distinguished in standard economics, Sen shows how they are independent from one another, and can thus play different roles in different behavioral models. We might also note that these three types of 'privateness' can be ranked in the order he provides according to the degree to which they emphasize an individual's own subjectivity. Self-centered welfare concerns only an individual's own satisfaction (or desire fulfillment), but self-welfare goal allows other individuals' satisfactions to enter into an individual's satisfaction through sympathy (or antipathy), and self-goal choice allows for non-welfarist goals that are altogether removed from an individual satisfaction (such as pursuit of social justice). If we rather emphasize the reflexivity of 'privateness' in terms of three ways that individuals affect themselves subjectively by the choices they make, these three aspects of 'privateness' can be ranked according to the degree to which this reflexive relation incorporates considerations external to the individual. Only self-centered welfare is independent of such considerations. Individuals affect themselves by their choices without any external mediation. But self-welfare goal allows for concern for other particular individuals' subjective states, and self-goal choice goes further to allow for concerns that transcend particular individuals' subjective states altogether.

Sen's fourth concept of the self is associated with individuals being able to form commitments. He originally introduced the concept of commitment by contrasting sympathy and

commitment (Sen, 1977), but with the subsequent distinction between self-welfare goal and self-goal choice commitment – both of which make individual well-being depend upon something other than the individual’s own consumption – making choices based on one’s commitments comes to be understood as a matter of making choices irrespective of any personal gain or loss. As he puts it,

Commitment ... is concerned with breaking the tight link between individual welfare (with or without sympathy) and the choice of action (e.g., acting to help remove some misery even though one personally does not suffer from it). Sympathy alone does not require any departure from individual-welfare maximization: but commitment does involve rejection of that assumption (Sen, 1982, p. 8).

Extending the interpretation above of Sen’s ordering of the three types of ‘privateness’ in terms of decreasing degrees of subjectivity, we may add that commitment eliminates subjectivity understood as individual satisfaction as a dimension of choice altogether. But since the reflexivity of ‘privateness’ is a matter of how individuals affect themselves subjectively in the choices they make, is commitment, in “breaking the tight link between individual welfare ... and the choice of action,” still a reflexive relation? That is, does commitment’s elimination of subjectivity also involve an elimination of any sort of self-referencing?

In fact, Sen fourth aspect of the self and concept of the person associated with commitment is quite explicitly reflexive. The fourth aspect of the self considers individuals as being able to engage in reasoning and self-scrutiny.

A person is not only an entity that can enjoy one’s own consumption, experience, and appreciate one’s welfare, and have one’s goals, but also an entity that can examine one’s

values and objectives and choose in the light of those values and objectives (Sen, 2002, p. 36).

Interest in Sen's thinking about commitment often centers on the shift it involves from subjective satisfaction to values taken to be objects about which we may reason. Indeed it is easy to suppose that, since the idea of affecting oneself subjectively through one's choices gives clear expression to the idea of the individual as a reflexive being, commitment framed in terms of reasoning rather than subjective states does not involve a reflexive relationship. However, Sen's clear coupling of "one's own reasoning and self-scrutiny" (*Ibid.*) demonstrates that he sees his concept of commitment as possessing a reflexive dimension. Further, he also explicitly associates commitment and self-scrutiny with the "problem" of "the 'identity' of a person, that is, how the person sees himself or herself" (Sen, 2002, p. 215). Thus, to better understand this connection, we turn to Sen's stated views on identity.

## **2 Sen on identity, commitment, and agency**

Sen's primary way of talking about the concept of the identity of a person is that of social identity, or the idea of identifying *with* others. Once one goes beyond the trivial or logical concept of identity – the idea that an object is necessarily identical with itself – "we shift our attention from the notion of *being identical* to that of *sharing an identity*, and to the idea of *identifying* oneself with others of a particular group" (Sen, 1999, p. 2). One source of this notion of identifying oneself with others in Sen's thinking is his ordering of aspects of the self and types of 'privateness' in standard economics' characterizations of self-interest. Thus, the long-standing emphasis in standard economic theory on self-interest, he notes, excludes from the outset the idea that individuals might identify with others in deciding on their objectives and making their choices (*Ibid.*). Yet if one intends to broaden the behavioral foundations of economics, one may move progressively through a set of enlargements of the individual, first, by opening the door to



the idea that one's self-interest may be influenced by sympathy (or antipathy) toward others (self-welfare goal), next by including the idea that one's goals may include considerations other than one's own welfare (self-goal choice), and finally by supposing that one may act on principles altogether removed from one's own personal welfare as when one identifies in some way with others (commitment). Thus, identification with others through commitment merely carries Sen's ordering of types of 'privateness' that underlies his classification of the different features of the self but one step further. At the same time, this additional step is a significant one, not only in "breaking the tight link between individual welfare ... and the choice of action," but indeed in raising the issue of whether or how the individual even remains an individual when identifying with others.

An second source of the idea of identifying with others is Sen's early interest in multiple preferences and meta-rankings. One good reason to suppose preference rankings are incomplete and at best offer incomplete quasi-orderings is that individuals might have multiple preferences which they cannot immediately reconcile. Sen's original interest in multiple preference rankings stems from his desire to improve the behavioral foundations of economics, analyze various moral dilemmas, and investigate social cooperation, but his explanation of *why* we might have multiple rankings is that we have multiple social identifications with others.

Community, nationality, race, sex, union membership, the fellowship of oligopolists, revolutionary solidarity, and so on, all provide identities that can be, depending on the context, crucial to our view of ourselves, and thus to the way we view our welfare, goals, or behavioral obligations (Sen, 2002, p. 215).

We might then say that one sees oneself *as* a certain type of person, and having different meta-rankings means one can also see oneself simultaneously *as* different types of persons. Note that seeing oneself as a certain type of person suggests one is still a distinct individual, albeit under

some description. Yet at times Sen's association of social identification and commitment threatens to undermine this interpretation, as when he asserts that seeing oneself as a member of a social group goes beyond sympathizing with members of that group, and involves "actually identifying with them" (*Ibid.*).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this strong sense of social identification is important to his view of the seriousness with which we need to look at the issue of our having multiple social identifications, since having multiple meta-rankings produces "conflicting demands arising from different identities and affiliations" (Sen, 1999, p. 30). From this perspective, we might thus say that for Sen the issue of whether or how an individual identified with and having commitments to others remains a distinct individual is a matter of whether the that individual is able to sustain a personal unity and integrity across these conflicting multiple associations.

Interestingly, Sen suggests we might understand social identification in terms of our use of first person plural speech.

The nature of our language often underlines the forces of our wider identity. "We" demand things; "our" actions reflect "our" concerns; "we" protest at injustice done to "us." This is, of course, the language of social intercourse and politics, but it is difficult to believe that it represents nothing other than a verbal form, and in particular no sense of identity (Sen, 2002, p. 215; also cf. p. 41).

Since by "sense of identity" Sen means social identity, we have a suggestion here that social identity as reflected in first person plural speech might be understood in collective or shared intentionality terms.<sup>2</sup> Though he does not develop this idea systematically, he nonetheless alludes to the convention-based (Shwayder, 1965; Lewis, 1969), reciprocal feedback framework used by

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<sup>1</sup> This is reinforced in something of an aside where Sen suggests, following Marx, that it might even be said that private interest itself is socially determined (Sen, 2002, p. 215n). But Sen's treatment of the different senses of 'privateness' as all aspects of the self goes against this.

some contributors to the collective intentionality literature (e.g., Tuomela, 1995; Davis, 2003a) when he comments on an apparent tendency in experimental game theory for players to want to know the identity of fellow players (Sen, *op.cit.*). Thus he associates “we” language and social identification with the notion that not only players’ choices but also identities are somehow mutually constitutive of one another in games. Sen’s focus is on how one-shot Prisoners’ Dilemma games may become Assurance games, but if we broaden the framework to, say, repeated game formats where the Folk Theorem applies, or allow for pre-play communication sorts of considerations, all sorts of results are possible, some of which it seems fair to say might make use of explanations of social identity in some form of first person plural speech, collective intentionality analysis.<sup>3</sup>

Returning the question of personal identity, then, how does Sen’s thinking about social identification fit with his emphasis on individual choice as central to the behavioral foundations of economics? Sen maps out his answer to this question in relation to communitarian critiques of liberal theories of justice. Such critiques, he notes, have at times been employed to argue that individuals’ reasoning abilities are effectively captive to their (pre-existing) social identities, which are “not a relationship they choose (as in a voluntary association) but an attachment they discover, not merely an attribute but a constituent of their identity” (Sandel, 1998, p. 150; quoted in Sen, 1999b, p. 16). On this view, one’s identity is something one discovers – communitarians sometimes say ‘perceive’ – and the way that one reasons then depends upon this identity.<sup>4</sup> Sen’s response is to this is to reject the false dichotomy it involves between perfectly autonomous choice and perfectly determined choice.

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson (2001) draws this connection, and links it to the concept of identity in Sen.

<sup>3</sup> In a non-collective intentionality context, I investigate whether the reciprocal feedback structure of games permits an understanding of individual – not social – identity in connection with the Harsanyi incomplete information game approach in Davis (2003b).

<sup>4</sup> One might add that with multiple identities – a matter put aside in the communitarian critique – it is difficult to talk about reasoning at all.

The alternative to the “discovery” view is not choice from positions “unencumbered” with any identity (as communitarian expositions often seem to imply), but choices that continue to exist in any encumbered position one happens to occupy. Choice does not require jumping out of nowhere into somewhere (Sen, 1999b, p. 23).

That is, choice may be influenced but is not determined by social identification. Social identities are indeed important. So is choice.

But while we may agree with him about this in principle, one would also like to know more about how this might be the case. Hints come in Sen’s characterization of the fourth aspect of the self associated with commitment where he links “one’s own reasoning and self-scrutiny” (Sen, 2002, p. 36). We saw above that on this view a person is someone who is able to “examine one’s values and objectives and choose in the light of those values and objectives” (Sen, 2002, p. 36). As if answering the communitarians again, this passage continues,

Our choices need not *relentlessly* follow our experiences of consumption or welfare, or simply translate *perceived* goals into action. We can ask what we want to do and how, and in that context also examine what we should want and how (Sen, *Ibid.*; emphasis added).

Note, then, that this ability individuals are said to have to stand apart, as it were, from their goals and objectives in order to scrutinize and evaluate them in a reasoned way, gives them a status as agents that is absent in Sen’s first three aspects of the self. First, from the vantage point of the individual, there is a fundamental difference between this sort of reflexive relationship and those associated with the other forms of the self Sen distinguishes. For self-centered welfare, self-welfare goal, and self-goal choice, when individuals make choices they are *affected* subjectively by own consumption, sympathy or antipathy, and non-welfare goals respectively. But individuals

engaged in reasoned self-scrutiny are not only *affected* but also *affect* themselves subjectively in virtue of adding their evaluation of the effects of their choices upon themselves to those effects themselves. Second, from the vantage point of others, whereas reflexivity operates in Sen's three original aspects of the self in terms of increasingly non-private, other-referencing sorts of considerations, in the case of his fourth aspect of the self, reflexivity involves a relation between an – at least loosely – identifiable social group and the individual with a now elevated status as an agent able to engage in some form of self-evaluation. I thus suggest that Sen's response to (strong) communitarian thinking about individuals and their social identities is to say that individuals have identities that are in some sense independent of their social identities. That is, they have both social identities and personal identities.

In section five I examine this idea at greater length in connection with its chief vehicle in Sen's thinking, namely the concept of commitment. Before doing so, however, I turn in the next section to the relationship between the concepts of personal identity and social identity, and to the risks associated with failing to articulate an independent concept of personal identity. As will emerge, as a necessary feature of the concept of personal identity I require some understanding of the individual as an independent being not reducible to any of the social identities that the individual may happen to possess. Much of the literature on identity in economics and other social sciences, I believe, fails to understand personal identity in these terms, though the consequences of this, I will argue, are that one may find oneself without any conception of the individual as an independent being whatsoever.

### **3 Personal identity and social identity**

The reason that some use the concepts of personal identity and social identity interchangeably is that personal identity is often understood to be a matter of the various different ways in which individuals might identify with social groups. It is fair to say that this view does provide one understanding of individual identity, but that individual identity thus understood ought not be

equated with personal identity can begin to be seen by observing the internal tension this creates for the standard economics' characterization of the individual as an independent being. In general, the recent literature in economics on the subject supposes that individuals maximizing their own utility functions acquire personal identities by gaining reputation with others, developing social status, or by creating socially motivated self-images through their identification with others (Akerlof, 1980; Bernheim, 1994; Akerlof and Kranton, 2000; Bénabou and Tirole, 2002). Social identification is thus explained as an extension of standard rational choice models. An important transitional contribution to this literature is Douglas Bernheim's 'theory of conformity' in which individuals pay attention to how other individuals in identifiable social groups feel about them by respecting norms whose observance provides them status in those groups (*op.cit.*). When this attention is strong, that is, if individuals have a strong preference for status in some social group, they will be "willing to suppress their individuality and conform to the social norm because they recognize that even small departures from the norm will seriously impair their popularity" (Bernheim, 1994, p. 844). I suggest that this analysis gives rise to what might be called the 'Bernheim paradox' for this literature, namely, that individuals are rational by ceasing to be individuals.<sup>5</sup> In effect, by moving beyond simple concern with reputation (Akerlof, 1980), which leaves the focus on the individual, to a concern with conformity, which places the focus on the group, individuals' social identities and individual identities are collapsed into the former.

Technically, of course, the individual is still regarded as an independent being, because standard modeling strategy employs a number of well-known axiomatic assumptions generally believed to characterize the nature of preferences in themselves, but effectively chosen to individuate separate preference sets, which are then said to represent individuals 'own' utility functions. Yet though preferences in and of themselves do not display marks or indications of

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<sup>5</sup> In Bernheim's model, 'individualists' are those who have "extreme preferences," that is, they are nonconformists who do not conform to social norms.

ownership, never is it asked why a set of preferences, however formally represented, should be thought to belong to a single individual. Individuality is thus uncritically taken as exogenous from a formal modeling point of view, while ironically from the point of view of the theory's substantive characterization of individuals as beings motivated by a desire for conformity – with 'own' preferences that lead them to "suppress their individuality" – individuality is clearly somehow endogenous to a social process. The standard approach thus begs the question of whether preferences do indeed individuate separate individuals, irrespective of how economists might choose to model them.

These difficulties are compounded when we add that social identification may involve "conflicting demands arising from different identities and affiliations" (Sen, 1999, p. 30) – an issue largely ignored in the status models literature. An older, multiple selves literature in economics (cf. Davis, 2003c, ch. 4) had asked whether there is anything to explain the unity of the individual if the individual is thought to possess multiple utility functions.<sup>6</sup> If individuals have "different identities and affiliations," they could be said to have multiple utility functions. The multiple selves/utility functions literature, however, ran aground on the fact that Arrow impossibility theorem and other like social coordination problems imply that *intrapersonal* individual choice is no less problematic than *interpersonal* social choice (Kavka, 1991). Thus within at least a *utility* function interpretation of multiple social identifications, the assumption that a single individual is involved is unsupported. I have previously argued that for an individual with multiple affiliations or selves to be explained as a single unitary individual, it is sufficient to show that individual to be distinct from other individuals – what I term an *individuation* requirement (Davis, 2003c, *op.cit.*). Both the 'theory of conformity' approach and most contributions to the multiple selves literature ignore the need to provide any such account when they treat individuality as exogenous. Thus even were we to allow that 'individual' identity might somehow be thought about in terms of social identity, in the absence of any account of

what makes the individual a distinct unitary being, the use of the term ‘individual’ must be seen as *ad hoc*.

The concept of personal identity, then, must have at the very least some explanation of how the being in question may be individuated as a distinct being.<sup>7</sup> One way in which this sort of explanation can be accomplished is to develop what is involved in thinking of the individual as an agent in the strong sense, namely as a being able to initiate courses of action, since the idea of being able to initiate something distinguishes a source from which this occurs. Individuals in standard economics are of course also taken to be agents in virtue of their characterization as decision-makers, but in contrast to Sen’s strong sense characterization of agents – self-scrutinizing agents able to *act upon* their goals and objectives – the standard analysis treats ‘agents’ as subjectively *acted upon* by their tastes. This difference can also be seen from the vantage point of how reflexivity operates in Sen’s first three aspects of the self versus how it operates in connection with his fourth aspect of the self. In the case of the first three, individuals subjectively affect themselves by their ‘choices.’ Being affected subjectively is thus the source from which action stems. On the standard view this all comes about when there are changes in the individual’s opportunity sets (Stigler and Becker, 1977). It is unclear, then, how it might be said that decision or action is initiated by the individual. In contrast, reflexivity in connection with Sen’s fourth aspect of the self involves individuals being affected by their choices and *also* affecting themselves in virtue of their being able to evaluate and scrutinize how they may be affected by their actions. While change in opportunity sets still contributes to what brings about action, such change is no longer sufficient for explaining action.

Focusing on this reflexive detachment or independence offers one way in which we might begin to explain individuals as distinct from one another in virtue of their being agents in the strong sense of having the ability to initiate courses of action. That is, it offers a way of

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Schelling (1978) christened the subject ‘egonomics.’



beginning to think about how we might explain individual economic agents' personal identities apart from their social identities. Thus the following section and the one after it offer two related ways of expanding this conception: first, by explaining self-scrutiny within the framework of individuals' expression of shared or collective intentions, and second, by explaining self-scrutiny in terms of integrity-conferring commitments.

#### **4 Self-scrutiny, shared intentions, and personal identity**

Here I review the argument I previously used to develop a conception of personal identity for Sen's capability framework (Davis, 2002; 2003c, ch. 8). That argument proceeded by applying collective intentionality analysis to Sen's understanding of the individual agent, and then asking how individuals thus understood might be thought distinct and re-identifiable. I have already argued that individuals must be seen as distinct from one another. To say that they must also be re-identifiable is to say that an individual must somehow be sustainably distinct from one another. The point of entry for the argument was Nancy Folbre's 'structures of constraint' interpretation of individuals having multiple, conflicting social identifications. As she expresses it:

Individuals cannot be located by a single set of coordinates, because they operate in many different collective dimensions, within many different chosen and given groups. Nor can they be located by a list of all the given groups to which they belong, by a simple 'adding up' of separate positions. The interaction between different dimensions of collective identity affects the choices individuals make about which collective interests to pursue (Folbre, 1994, pp. 52-3).

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<sup>7</sup> There is certainly more to the concept of personal identity, particularly as understood by philosophers, but I postpone discussion of these further elements to sections four and five.

How, then, do individuals manage the “interaction between different dimensions of [their] collective identity?” In her attention to women in particular, Folbre stressed the need for women to be able to move back and forth between their different roles, and not be confined to any single set of roles. This suggests that women need to possess a special capacity to not only be able to move between roles, but also to do so with versatility, that is, to be able to move successfully in and out of often very different roles without high adjustment costs to themselves and others.<sup>8</sup> Having a special capacity of this sort would provide women (or individuals in general) a measure of detachment and independence from their competing social roles, but at the same time it would enable them to actively embrace these different, often conflicting roles.

One way, then, to understand this special capacity as a combination of independence and affiliation with groups is to apply collective intentionality analysis to how women affiliate with social groups. Broadly speaking, collective intentionality analysis examines how distinct individuals may form shared intentions in their interaction with one another (cf. Gilbert, 1986; Tuomela, 1995). My approach to collective intentionality analysis is to explicate the normal success conditions associated with first person plural speech or the use of ‘we’ language. Particularly important here is that such language is used in a performative manner. To say that a form of speech has a performative character is to say that individuals not only communicate in using it but also accomplish some action in doing so. Thus, when individuals use ‘we’ language to express intentions they believe to be shared, they might be thought to be intent upon establishing some shared understanding with others to whom their use of the term ‘we’ applies in regard to the content of the proposition they have expressed. For example, if I say ‘we will finish on time,’ I not only express my own view about when we will finish, but by including others to whom the ‘we’ applies I also seek to establish that others have the same expectation. Emphasizing the normal success conditions associated with using first person plural speech, then,

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<sup>8</sup> For example, one might argue that an important dimension of anti-discrimination law in the United States with respect to women is that it prevents employers from inquiring about family status, and thus restricting

is a matter of whether my action is successful, where an important indication of success is that others do not challenge what I have said.<sup>9</sup>

Individuals having a special capacity to move comfortably back and forth across their different social affiliations may now be understood in connection with their capacity to use ‘we’ language. The capacity to move comfortably across one’s different social affiliations requires being able to both identify with others and yet still preserve an independence and detachment from them. On the one hand, the identification-with-others side of this is captured in how the normal use of ‘we’ language requires identification with the intentions of others to whom this language applies. On the other hand, however, an individual’s expression of a collective intention is still an individual’s intentional expression, and since shared intentions can only be formed by those who have them, such language also requires that the individual have an independence and detachment from others to whom their ‘we’ language applies. We might thus say that under normal conditions individuals *freely constrain themselves* in their expression of collective intentions. Thus individuals might be said to have a special capacity to move comfortably back and forth across their different social affiliations when they are able to successfully exercise their capacity to express collective intentions in social groups.

Needless to say, much more needs to be said about how having a capacity to move *across* one’s social affiliations can be related to the capacity to successfully express collective intentions *within* the groups in which one operates. Here, however, I want to emphasize how anchoring an independence-preserving mobility across groups in how individuals freely constrain themselves within groups – as captured in the logic of normal expression of collective intentions – tells us something about personal identity and Sen’s views. I argued above that the concept of personal identity requires some understanding of individuals apart from their social identification with

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or imposing high costs on their mobility between domestic and employment roles.

<sup>9</sup> Here I put aside complications associated with what happens when normal success conditions are not fulfilled, such as whether others disagree but do not show it and whether there is deceptive use of ‘we’ speech.

others, and said that Sen's emphasis on individuals as reflexively detached agents suggests a way of developing this understanding. Let me now try to explain this in connection with individuals' expression of collective intentions.

An individual's expression of a collective intention, it seems fair to say, involves just the sort of reflexive self-scrutiny and evaluation of own objectives that Sen emphasizes. When an individual asserts, 'we will finish on time,' it is minimally necessary that the individual consider whether individually expressing this intention aligns with what others intend about finishing on time. That is, the individual must scrutinize and evaluate what she or he intends relative to what others might intend. There are two reasons for saying that this distinguishes or individuates the individual. First, the self-scrutiny involved in *considering* one's own expression of a collective intention relative to what others intend itself distinguishes the individual from others. In effect, the individual distinguishes herself or himself in an exercise of comparative thinking. Second, actually *expressing* a collective intention requires that the individual freely bind herself or himself to whatever the content of that collective intention implies. But since only the individual can freely bind herself or himself to something, this act is self-individuating.

The interpretation that I thus previously offered of Sen's thinking in regard to personal identity begins with the problem of social identification, builds on his emphasis on individuals as agents having a capacity for reflexive self-scrutiny, develops this idea in terms of individuals' expression of collective intentions in groups, and explains this as a way of seeing individuals as distinct and independent. The focus on a self-individuating capacity – individuals having a capacity to not only move across social groups while maintaining a relative independence, but also a capacity within groups to freely tie themselves to the consequences of the collective intentions they express – was meant to be a step in the direction of the capability framework. My view was that individuals have the native capacities stated above, but may fail to succeed in exercising them, and thus fail to develop associated capabilities. If we think of personal identity as requiring that individuals be both distinct and re-identifiable beings, then individuals who

regularly exercise this self-individuating capacity in interaction with others are re-identifiable in terms of this capacity. But individuals who fail to regularly exercise this native capacity lack personal identities lose their status as individuals to their social identifications with others.

Thus, this interpretation of Sen's thinking makes personal identity a particular capability among many that individuals may develop. I argue in section six that it is a centrally important capability. What might be thought to be missing from this discussion, however, is Sen's own emphasis on commitment. I consequently turn in the following section to argue that many of the same themes as appear in the analysis above re-emerge when we use Sen's thinking about commitment to develop an account of personal identity.

## **5 Self-scrutiny, rules, and integrity-conferring commitments**

Sen links commitment and the status of individuals as independent, self-scrutinizing agents, but he also links commitment to social identification. How are these two ways in which he speaks of commitment compatible with one another? Here I first review the development in Sen's thinking about the concept of commitment from his early "Rational Fools" paper to his later thinking that associates commitment and the self-scrutinizing aspect of the self. Then I review Bernard Williams's thinking about commitment that dissociates it from desire-endorsement, and interprets it rather as an identity-conferring behavior of the individual.<sup>10</sup> Finally I draw these two sets of views together to suggest an account of how Sen might be said to understand personal identity and social identity in a manner that recalls the collective intentionality-inspired account of these concepts in the previous section.

### *i) Sen on commitment*

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<sup>10</sup> See Sen's recent acknowledgement of Williams (Sen, 2002, p. ix).

As seen above, if we go back to Sen's "Rational Fools" discussion of the concept of commitment, we find him primarily emphasizing the idea that commitment "drives a wedge between personal choice and personal welfare" (Sen, 1977, p. 329). Comparing sympathy and commitment, sympathy involves a concern for others that affects one's welfare directly, while in the case of commitment one's welfare is only incidentally related to one's choice and certainly not the reason for it. One way of expressing this is to say that action based on sympathy is in a sense "egoistic" whereas action based on commitment is by this standard "non-egoistic" (*Ibid.*, p. 326). Alternatively commitment involves "counterpreferential choice" (*Ibid.*, p. 328), though it is still possible that acting on the basis of a commitment may coincide with the maximization of personal welfare. These characterizations of commitment in terms of what it is not are supplemented by suggestions regarding what might motivate commitment: a sense of duty, one's morals, or a sense of obligation going beyond the consequences. At the same time, Sen does not require that commitment draw on moral motives, and emphasizes that morality or culture both offer individuals a basis for the commitments they make. Indeed, in response to the suggestion that we may have two kinds of preferences, subjective and ethical, with the latter reflecting a kind of impartiality (Harsanyi, 1955), Sen notes that an individual may be quite partial in making commitments to "some particular group, say to the neighborhood or to the social class to which he belongs" (*Ibid.*, p. 337).

But Sen's explicit introduction of the reasoning and self-scrutinizing aspect of the self after "Rational Fools" brings out a new and somewhat different dimension to his thinking about commitment and identity. Thus in one important later discussion, where he links the reasoning and self-scrutinizing self and social identification, he also emphasizes the non-instrumental, "intrinsic importance ... attached to following certain rules of behavior" that are operative in the groups with which one identifies (Sen, 2002, p. 217n):

One of the ways in which the sense of identity can operate is through making members of a community accept certain rules of conduct as part of obligatory behavior toward others in a community. It is not a matter of asking each time, What do I get out of it? How are my own goals furthered in this way?, but of taking for granted the case for certain patterns of behavior toward others (Sen, 2002, pp. 216-17).

We might understand this as follows: only reasoning and self-scrutinizing individuals, who are themselves detached in this aspect of their selves from the instrumentality of self-goal choice, are able to recognize in a correlative manner that certain social rules of behavior also have non-instrumental, intrinsic value. Social identification with others, Sen is arguing, presupposes rather than eliminates individual detachment and independence from those with whom one identifies, and it does so just because commitment to others takes the form of a reasoned appreciation of the intrinsic value of the rules operating in those groups. Commitment, consequently, is not an unreflective type of attachment to others, as for example in the standard theory preference-driven conformity approach, but rather a rational recognition of rules associated with social membership that can only be achieved by individuals who have distanced themselves from their own interest as self-scrutinizing individuals.

*ii) Williams on commitment and integrity*

The origins of contemporary interest in the concept of commitment are Williams' use of it in his critique of the theory of action implied by act utilitarianism. Utilitarianism, he tells us, offers "a general project of bringing about maximally desirable outcomes," but leaves out certain other projects, interests, and causes – both small-scale and large-scale – to which individuals commonly find they have made commitments (Williams, 1973, pp. 110-111). This omission cannot be remedied by attempting to interpret commitment in utilitarian terms. While pursuing one's commitments may happen to make one happy, "it does not follow, nor could it possibly be

true, that those projects [to which one is committed] are themselves projects of pursuing happiness” (*Ibid.*, p. 113). On one level, one’s commitments “flow from some more general disposition toward human conduct and character, such as a hatred of injustice, or of cruelty, or of killing” (*Ibid.*, p. 111). But on another level, an individual’s commitments stem more fundamentally from “what his life is about” (*Ibid.*, p. 116). Thus,

It is absurd to demand of such a man, when the sums come in from the utility network which the projects of others have in part determined, that he should just step aside from his own project and decision and acknowledge the decision that the utilitarian calculation requires .... [T]his is to neglect the extent to which *his* actions and *his* decisions have to be seen as the actions and decisions which flow from the projects and attitudes with which he is most closely identified. It is thus, in the most literal sense, an attack of his integrity (*Ibid.*, pp. 116-17).

One’s commitments, then, are not only not instrumental to happiness or other good consequences. Because they “flow from the projects and attitudes with which [the individual] is most closely identified,” they additionally enable individuals to provide themselves a sense of their own integrity as individuals.

As Williams (1981) later further developed this view – the ‘identity view of integrity’ – individuals have and act with integrity when they act on their commitments – those motives, interests, and attitudes that reflect who they are in the most fundamental way. Or, individuals act with integrity when they make what Williams terms ‘identity-conferring commitments.’ The emphasis in this idea suggests that commitment is a relation between individuals and others that



arises out of positions individuals reflexively take toward themselves.<sup>11</sup> Because – or when – individuals make commitments to others, they are able to confer identity upon themselves. Put the other way around, if individuals fail to make commitments to others, they fail to create a sense of personal identity for themselves. But what are we to say about individuals having different, often competing commitments? Williams’ answer, it seems, must be that while individuals’ competing commitments appear to fragment them, the very having and making commitments *per se* invests them with integrity, which itself makes them distinct and unitary beings. Indeed, in his original critique of utilitarianism, Williams saw the absence of any account of the individual as an agent as an important flaw. Utilitarian calculations always exhibit an abstract, impersonal – even “churchy” – quality, tending to slide off toward some kind of “impersonally benevolent happiness-management” (Williams, 1973, pp. 110, 112). Commitments, however, must be made by individuals. That is, by nature they are inherently personalizing. Let us, then, draw on this understanding of commitment to further develop Sen’s own understanding.

### *iii) Sen on commitment and identity*

While their immediate concerns are different, with Sen interested in the behavioral foundations of economics and Williams interested in moral theory, they are both concerned to develop an adequate theory of action, and both agree that the concept of commitment cannot be accommodated within the framework of utilitarian consequentialist reasoning. What additionally appears to be shared between them is the view that personal identity is platformed upon the commitments which individuals make to others, or, that social identification is a means to achieving personal identity. Whereas standard preference-based conceptions of the individual may be seen as seeking to explain the personal identity of individual economic agents

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<sup>11</sup> It can be argued that for Williams commitments need not be made *to others*, but that individuals may simply have certain commitments. I focus here on the case where commitments are at least implicitly made

atomistically, or *apart* from their interactions with others (Davis, 2003c), the Sen-Williams commitment-based conception of the individual may be seen as seeking to explain the personal identity of individual economic agents relationally, or *through* their interactions with others.

For both Sen and Williams this relational view of personal identity relies on commitment having a reflexive dimension. Sen holds that only reasoning and self-scrutinizing individuals, detached in this particular aspect of their selves from the instrumentality of self-goal choice, are able to make commitments to others, because only individuals thus self-engaged are they able to recognize the correlative, intrinsic, non-instrumental value of social rules. Similarly for Williams, individuals act upon themselves when they confer integrity upon themselves by making commitments to others that put aside impersonal, consequentialist utilitarian reasoning. How, then, does this reflexive self-scrutiny or identity self-conferral invest individuals with personal identity? Taking distinctness or individuation as the first and primary element in any account of personal identity, the act of taking oneself as a separate object of consideration is equivalent to treating oneself as distinct and independent. When individuals adopt a position of reflexive self-regard, they self-individuate themselves. For Sen and Williams, then, making commitments to others individuates the commitment-maker.

This account of the individuation side of personal identity focused on commitment is similar to the collective intentionality-based account of individuation in the previous section. There I argued individuals have a native capacity to freely self-constrain themselves when they express we-intentions in social groups. That only individuals can freely self-constrain themselves effectively distinguishes them as distinct individuals. Here, commitment functions in essentially the same way. We might infer, then, that commitment is an act in which individuals freely self-constrain themselves to others. Thus it is interesting that Sen employs ‘we’ language (Sen, 2002, p. 215) when he speaks of commitment and social identification, since this suggests that we are entitled to transfer the individuating character of we-intention behavior to commitment behavior.

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to others.

Note also that I represented individuals' being able to freely self-constrain themselves to what their we-intentions require of them in social groups as a native capacity. In terms of the Sen-Williams understanding of commitment, we might accordingly say that being able to make commitments is also a native individual capacity.

This raises the question of whether the second element in any account of personal identity, namely, the re-identification requirement, plays a role in the commitment framework. In the *collective intentionality* account, re-identification is contingent upon individuals being able to regularly exercise their capacity to freely constrain themselves in social groups over time and across different types of social settings in which they participate. That is, re-identification is a matter of individuals developing a special capability. The *commitment* account of Sen's thinking, I believe, has a slightly different emphasis, since while we may imagine that individuals lose or fail to develop this special capability due to a variety of factors having to do with the nature of their lives and experience and with the ways in which societies are organized, when we rather speak of commitment it seems odd to say people are not *always* able to make commitments to others. But if they are always able to form commitments to others, then on the argument here they would always be re-identifiable as distinct, commitment-making individuals, and would thus always have personal identities. That is, having personal identity would not be a capability, but rather a native capacity. In the section that follows, I rather opt for the capability view of re-identification and personal identity as the preferred interpretation of Sen's thinking about personal identity, and accordingly assume that whether individuals are able to form consistently commitments to others over their lifetimes depends on the same variety of factors having to do with the nature of their lives and the ways in which societies are organized. My grounds for this is that this makes whether individuals have personal identities a contingent matter endogenous to the economic process, and thus an object of social-economic policy. In conclusion, therefore, I define personal identity for Sen as a special capability whereby individuals exercise of a reflexive capacity to make commitments in social settings in a sustained way.

## 6 Personal identity and the capability framework

A familiar and oft-repeated criticism of Sen's capability framework is that it lacks a short-list of essential capabilities that, à la Aristotle, would provide a single, universal set of policy recommendations regarding capability development (e.g., Nussbaum, 2003). Sen has consistently resisted the idea that there ought to be an essential short-list of human capabilities on the grounds of flexibility in application and social diversity, but this reply has not been persuasive to some, no doubt in part due to the appeal of having a single, essential view of the individual and a set of universal policy prescriptions. In this section, then, I briefly attempt to reconcile these two positions by arguing for the central importance of one capability: having a personal identity.<sup>12</sup>

One way of looking at capabilities takes them to be freedoms (Sen, 1999a). We have many freedoms according to the many capabilities we develop. More generally, freedom is a central value and behavioral feature of individuals according to Sen. Can individuals, then, be thought to be free beings if they are unable to generally sustain personal identities over their lifetimes? The type of freedom at issue here is a positive freedom to carry out one's plans and goals as an agent. In connection with the concept of freedom, Sen understands being an 'agent' not as in standard principal-agent analysis, but rather in its "older – and 'grander' – sense as someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives" (Sen, 1999a, p. 19). But if individuals are unable to regularly exercise a capacity to freely bind themselves by the obligations and requirements of groups with which they associate, or if they are unable to genuinely form commitments to others, it is not clear how they can be regarded as agents able to act and bring about change with achievements judged in terms of own values and objectives. Thus it seems fair to say that the entire capabilities-as-freedoms framework depends on the one central freedom or capability of being

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<sup>12</sup> For procedural approach to reconciliation that emphasizes social deliberation, see Robeyns (2003).

able to sustain a personal identity. That is, underlying the development and exercise of all our more particular capabilities is a general capability of being able to freely sustain oneself in an environment that everywhere involves social interaction.

The ‘Aristotelian’ capability approach either requires a definite list of essential capabilities or some hierarchical organization of capabilities by importance. If we prescribe social policies aimed at ensuring that individuals have opportunities to develop a personal identity capability, then we indeed make one capability both essential and prior to all other capabilities. But we do not go the full Aristotelian route by filling out a complete list of essential capabilities or by organizing them in some hierarchical order. There seem to be at least two reasons for applying this reading to Sen’s framework. First, it still preserves his intuition that the capability framework works best when it flexibly accommodates social diversity. Second, it reinforces the role of the concept of freedom in that framework by further rooting it in a re-characterization of Sen’s strong sense of agents as beings who also seek to maintain personal identities. As a reconciliation of Sen’s and the more classic Aristotelian approach, this strategy offers perhaps more determinacy in policy determination than Sen’s own open-ended strategy, is still Aristotelian in making one feature of human life essential, but departs from Aristotle in providing a different view of the good life, and in giving pride of place to the more modern value of freedom.

## **7 Concluding remarks**

I close by way of brief comment on four general themes that motivate this paper rather than with a summary of the discussion of the paper itself. First, the paper follows a development in Sen’s own thinking which moves from an examination of standard economics’ characterization of self-interest to a fourth aspect of the self associated with reasoned self-scrutiny, and which gives increased importance and meaning to the concept of commitment. My view is that the issue of personal identity only emerges once this fourth aspect of the self is clearly introduced, and

introduced in connection with the tensions it creates between personal and social identity.

Accordingly the paper takes the development of Sen's thinking along this pathway to have itself created an agenda for examination of personal identity where it formerly was absent. Second, as this previous remark implies, the approach to personal identity here and in thinking about individual behavior in economics in general need not recall the approaches to personal identity taken in philosophy where in recent years different sorts of issues have been investigated. Thus the treatment of personal identity in economics may not and it seems need not conform to other concerns about the concept in philosophy and elsewhere. There are obviously many ways of talking about identity, personal and social, and the discussion in this paper is intended to be specific to a particular history of thinking about individuals in economics. Third, what seems to me to be key to this particular history of thinking about individuals in economics is a failure in most of the literature on the individual to ask whether individuality is endogenous to the social-economic process. That is, this literature fails to establish what makes individuals distinct, and this explains why much of my discussion here and elsewhere makes the individuation requirement a focus. Fourth, what especially distinguishes the treatment of personal identity here is the emphasis on reflexivity. Partly this reflects the emphasis that this concept possesses in thinking about individuals in economics, both in standard economics and in Sen's thinking. But it also reflects what I perceive likely to be the strongest route to successfully explaining individual distinctness and independence given the various determining influences on individual behavior. The discussion in this paper, then, aims to make this concept central by bringing out its role in the development from standard economics' characterizations of the self-interest aspects of the self to Sen's commitment sense of the self.

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