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[issue 20 contents](#)

[PAE Review index](#)

[home page](#)

Capabilities: From Spinoza to Sen and Beyond

Part I : Spinoza's Theory of Capabilities

(*Part II: A Spinoza-Sen Economics Research Program* will appear in the next issue)

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In a recent article in this review, Emmanuelle Benicourt (2002) challenges heterodox economists to explain why they consider Amartya Sen's theoretical approach a real force for reform in economics. I would like to communicate here what I see as a real force for change in Amartya Sen's approach to the economic dimension of human development. I would like to describe some of the genealogy of the approach, and also to show the potential that this critical tradition has for the renewal of economics.

Before I embark in my task I would like to refer to Emmanuelle Benicourt's orthodox/heterodox partition of economics, which I do not think is very useful. Both categories are too heterogeneous to be helpful. If we consider what I think is a more useful categorization, that between conventional and progressive economics (or similar characterizations, such as conservative/radical, bourgeois/socialist, etc.), we will find orthodox and heterodox economists in both categories. Amartya Sen, for instance, is an orthodox economist, as both he and Emmanuelle Benicourt point out (Amartya Sen says "mainstream economist"). He is an orthodox economist because he uses the conventional apparatus of ordinary neoclassical theory. But as I see it, he is a *progressive* orthodox economist, since he applies this conventional apparatus to the advancement of a progressive cause, namely, the cause of equality.¹ The equality he advocates is not merely economic/utilitarian, but refers also to all other dimensions ("functionings") of human existence. A quite radical message indeed, articulated in the suave and diplomatic language of neoclassical economics. One can only speculate if this is an Aesopian strategy of telling subversive truths in covered language, or if it would be better or more effective to develop a more appropriate heterodox idiom to say the same thing. But it must be admitted that many a heterodox economist would shy away from so radical an objective for economic science and human development.

I will argue here that Sen's radical approach to human welfare is not new, and that the original source of the approach contains other important and deep insights. I will also argue that this same source inspires some present-day approaches to natural science, and could also inspire the renewal of economics that Emmanuelle Benicourt longs for.

The “hideous hypothesis” of *The Ethics*

The source I am thinking of is *The Ethics* of Baruch de Spinoza.² Spinoza's doctrine of capabilities in *The Ethics* prefigures rather explicitly Amartya Sen's ideas, but it does not seem that Sen was aware of it. For one thing, Amartya Sen is very open and magnanimous with his sources and credits - he refers to Aristoteles' *Nicomachian Ethics*, Marx's *Manuscript of 1844* and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* as sources of inspiration.³ Also, the doctrine of capabilities, in spite of its crucial importance in Spinoza's message, is barely mentioned, is not given the importance it deserves in most of the expositions, commentaries and criticisms of *The Ethics* I am aware of.⁴ This was perhaps due to the fact that the doctrine appears among what are considered the most difficult and “mystical” propositions of the last half of Part 5, which usually repulse narrowly conceived positivism. In these last propositions Spinoza explains when and in what sense the human mind can be said to be eternal.

In effect, in 5.39 (Part 5, Proposition 39), Spinoza affirms that

*He, who possesses a body capable of the greatest number of activities, possesses a mind whereof the greatest part is eternal.*⁵

Let us recall that *The Ethics* is composed in the axiomatic-deductive mode, with all propositions deduced from preceding propositions, lemmas, axioms and definitions.⁶ Proposition 5.39 is demonstrated as follows.

Proof. He, who possesses a body capable of the greatest number of activities, is least agitated by those emotions which are evil ([by proposition] 4.38) - that is (4.30) those emotions which are contrary to our nature; therefore (5.10), he possesses the power of arranging and associating the modifications of the body according to the intellectual order, and, consequently [5.14, missing in the Elwes version], of bringing it about, that all the modifications of the body should be referred to the idea of God [or Nature, or Substance; i.e. self caused, infinite, eternal being]; whence it will come to pass that (5.15) he will be affected with love toward God, which (5.16) must occupy or constitute the chief part of the mind; therefore (5.33), such a man will possess a mind whereof the chief part is eternal. QED.

The first proposition referred to in the proof is crucial for the understanding of Spinoza's doctrine of capability. Proposition 4.38 states that

Whatsoever disposes the human body, so as to render it capable of being affected in an increased number of ways, or affecting external bodies in an increased number of ways, is useful to man; and is so, in proportion as the body is thereby rendered more capable of being affected or affecting other bodies in an increased number of ways; contrariwise, whatsoever renders the body less capable in this respect is hurtful to man.

Proof: Whatsoever thus increases the capabilities of the body increases also the mind's capability of perception (2.14); therefore, whatsoever thus disposes the body and renders it capable, is necessarily good or useful (4.26, 4.27); and is so in proportion to the extent to which it can render the body capable; contrariwise (2.14, 4.26, 4.27), it is hurtful, if it renders the body

in this respect less capable. QED.

That is, the proof says that whatsoever increases the capabilities of the body also increases the mind's capability of understanding. And what increases our power of understanding is certainly good.

In order to prove that whatsoever increases the body's capabilities also increases the capabilities of the mind, the proof uses Proposition 2.14, which states that

The human mind is capable of perceiving a great number of things, and is so in proportion as its body is capable of receiving a great number of impressions.

Spinoza could also have stated that the reciprocal statement is also true; that whatsoever increases the capabilities of the mind augments also the capabilities of the body. That is, the proof could have used the often quoted Proposition 2.7, base of Spinoza's so called body/mind "parallelism" theory:

The order and connexion of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.

The Note to this proposition further affirms this same idea, that is, that

[...] substance thinking and substance extended are one and the same substance [God or Nature], comprehended now through one attribute, now through the other. So, also, a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing. This truth seems to have been dimly recognized by those Jews who maintained that God, God's intellect, and the things understood by God are identical.

Now, we know also from the Note to Proposition 2.1 that

[...] in proportion as a thinking being is conceived as thinking more thoughts [or, what is the same, as an extended being is conceived as capable of more activities], so it is conceived as containing more reality or perfection.

This relationship between increased capabilities and increased perfection or reality can be used for an alternative explanation of our starting Proposition 5.39, on the relationship between capability and eternity. Spinoza affirms in the same Note to 2.1:

Therefore a being which can think an infinite number of things in an infinite number of ways [or, what is the same, which can perform infinite acts in an infinite number of ways], is, necessarily, in respect of thinking [or in respect of extension], infinite."

Infinite thoughts are timeless, eternal thoughts. A being capable of thinking infinite thoughts would be thinking eternal thoughts. Such a being would be so sharing, as to say, in eternity, insofar as it thinks infinite/eternal thoughts.⁷ Also, psychophysical identity ("parallelism") would suggest that a mind which is thinking infinite thoughts has an extended correlate which is performing infinite acts. This would be one way of interpreting the relationship between capability and eternity in Proposition 5.39.

Spinoza's demonstration of 5.39 quoted above recurs to his idea of *scientia intuitiva*. The proof says that the larger the capabilities of the body, the greater the faculties of the mind (and vice versa, we should add); in particular, the greater is the capability of the mind of rationally comprehending its emotions. The mind will be thus more able to form clear and distinct ideas; that is, ideas that can be referred to the idea of God or Nature, since whatsoever is (or is conceived in the mind), is in God or Nature. Spinoza calls this ability of the mind *scientia intuitiva*, and this type of knowledge *third kind of knowledge*, by which the mind conceives things under the form of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*).⁸ Now, the mind, regarding its own power of comprehension, is affected of pleasure, being this pleasure accompanied by the idea of God or Nature (so much the more in proportion as it understands itself and its emotions). According to Spinoza, pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause is love. Pleasure accompanied by the idea of God or Nature is what Spinoza calls *intellectual love of God*. This intellectual love is an activity whereby God or Nature - insofar it can be explained through the human mind - regards itself accompanied by the idea of itself. Since God or Nature is an absolutely infinite being, this love of the mind is part of the infinite love wherewith God or Nature loves itself. This love, this knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis*, is possible for the mind insofar as it conceives its own body under the form of eternity. And this idea, which expresses the essence of the body under the form of eternity, is necessarily eternal.

The above ideas are indeed difficult and mind-boggling.⁹ They nevertheless clearly point towards the idea of human growth or human perfection as the increasing realm of human capabilities of thought and activity, that is, of effective freedom (cf. Sen 1999). Human perfection depends on expanded domains of activity for every individual on every conceivable dimension of human existence, which implies also increased domains of knowledge and understanding in enlarged dimensions of thought. Human development does *not* depend on increased levels of "utility" derived from consumption.¹⁰

Notes

1. There are many well known economists in this category. Serge-Christophe Kolm could for instance be mentioned, as a continental member of this class.

2. The "hideous hypothesis" of "that famous atheist" was "the doctrine of the simplicity of the universe, and the unity of that substance, in which he supposes both thought and matter to inhere" (Hume 1911 [1739-40], p. 229). (I must say that I do not agree with the word "simplicity" in Hume's description; the reasons why will be apparent in what follows.) According to Jonathan Israel (2001, p. 159) "hideous" could had been an ironic characterization. Hume belonged in fact to the same banned category of radical Enlightenment thinkers such as Diderot, Voltaire and Spinoza himself (Israel 2001, p.109). Curiously, Diderot's article on Spinoza in the *Encyclopédie* could be also said to be "ironic."

3. See for instance Sen (1988). By the way, the young Marx was a dedicated student of Spinoza (see e.g. Rubel 1978). Aristoteles' ideas do not exactly prefigure Sen's (or Spinoza's) notion of capabilities - see e.g. the discussion of the "Aristotelian Principle" in Rawls (1999, § 65).

4. As an assiduous reader of Spinoza literature, I know that I am aware of only one small portion of it. According for instance to the Swedish bibliographic database (<http://www.libris.kb.se/>) there are 743 Spinoza related books in Nordic libraries - 42 of them published in 2001-2002. (Journal articles must most probably be counted in the thousands. There are also several Spinoza websites.) The increasing rate of publication may perhaps be announcing the near fulfilment of Lichtenberg's (1990 [1800-1806], p.115) famous prediction: "If the world should endure for an incalculable number of years the universal religion [ethics] will be a purified Spinozism. Left to itself, reason can lead to nothing else and it is impossible that it ever will lead to anything else."

5. I quote from the Elwes' version in compact disc in *Lire l'Éthique de Spinoza*, Phronésis, Paris, 1998.
6. The title of *The Ethics* in the original is *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata*. Possibly Spinoza chose this mode of argumentation because of its overwhelming power of conviction. For many centuries *The Elements* of Euclid was second only to *The Bible* in number of extant copies. Also, the prominence of mathematics and natural science was rapidly growing in XVIIth century Europe.
7. For a suggestive comparison of this insight with the insight of meditation, see Wetlesen (1977).
8. Spinoza's first and second kinds of knowledge can be succinctly described as hearsay or opinion and science respectively.
9. *But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare*. Spinoza's own reply in the last words of *The Ethics* comes naturally to the mind.
10. Increased levels of *passive* consumption or leisure, from *The Ethic's* perspective, might indeed be seen as *lessening* human perfection. Cf. Proposition 5.4: *In proportion as each thing possesses more of perfection, so is it more active, and less passive; and, vice versâ, in proportion as it is more active, so it is more perfect*. But of course in most cases increasing capabilities involve increased consumption and/or investment.

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