Sen's Perfectionist 'Reason To Value'

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Abstract: Amartya Sen, the initiator of the Capability Approach, rejects perfectionism and the idea that theorists can, or ought to, predefine what capabilities we have reason to value. Instead he insists that the route to social justice stay true to the liberal ideal of value pluralism and human diversity and demands a content-neutral procedure of reflective scrutiny. This paper investigates the theoretical underpinnings assumed in such a procedural account. Can it avoid perfectionistic assumptions? I think it cannot for two reasons. First, it is clear that a deliberative process is taken to be valuable without it being a product of such a process. It is thus taken to be a priori valuable. Consequently, the capabilities that enable citizens to successfully partake in such a process are taken to be what we have reason to value. Second, I argue, Sen's procedural approach is primarily aimed at enhancing freedom understood as personal autonomy. I then ask if Sen successfully can deflect perfectionistic allegations by referring to a formal and content-neutral account of autonomy. Again, I conclude he cannot. This suggests that Sen's rejection of perfectionism is untenable.

Key words: perfectionism, anti-perfectionism, personal autonomy, social justice, Capability Approach.

Amartya Sen, the initiator of the Capability Approach (CA) rejects that we, as theorists, can determine what capabilities citizens have reason to value. This is an anti-perfectionistic stance. Instead, Sen insists on a content-neutral procedure aimed at raising the cognitive and epistemological awareness of each citizen, as a sort of political and moral education. This 'education' occurs in the interactive dialogues Sen advocates. Here the social conditions in society can be formulated and transmitted while the participants - in the light of this information - are allowed to question and re-evaluate what there are reasons to value. Such scrutiny is thought to lead to an increased self-knowledge. The idea is that such a procedure of reflection and deliberation is warranting that citizens autonomously choose to do and be what they genuinely value.

The debate between content-neutral and perfectionistic stances to theorizing justice can be described as one concerning objectivity and subjectivity in defining the good life. Is there a good for Paula irrespective of whether she prefers it or not? Does she have a reason to value poetry writing rather than playing X-box? Education rather than housework? Exercise rather than drugs? Liberal theories on justice have since Wollenstonecraft, Rousseau and Mill revolved around the value of freedom. The tension in most liberal theories lies in their concern for individuals' own judgments on what is good for them while recognizing that these judgments to a large extent are shaped by factors that lie outside the agents' control. How a liberal and just society ought to deal with these issues is a dilemma that theorists of liberal justice need to address. Can there be a content-neutral process towards social justice or are we dependent on a perfectionist conception of what ought to be valued in a good life? The problem is that while the former construction

needs to defend itself from relativism, the latter faces an elitist problem that threatens to disrespect the liberal ideal of value pluralism.

Today many political theorists agree that 'freedom' translates into what is generally understood as personal autonomy (Raz 1986, 12). And in this paper I will take the view, shared by other scholars, that Sen's concept of freedom coincides with personal autonomy (Olsaretti 2005; Crocker 2008; Argenton and Rossi 2013).

The two following questions then arise. The first concerns whether autonomy can be said to be a foundational and objective value in Sen's theory. I will argue that it is. And placing personal autonomy at the centre of theories of justice is indeed a common approach among proponents of deliberative democracy (Raz 1986; Macedo 1999; Anderson 2013). But as reasonable as this construction may seem, it is far from uncontroversial. This is so as it disqualifies other strategies for selecting what we have reason to value such as relying on tradition, authority or religion (Gutman and Thomson 1996).

While I am sympathetic to Sen's procedural strategy, I disagree with that such a procedure is content-neutral.

A note of clarification. In lack of a better word I will use 'substantial' to denote Nussbaum's list-approach. By substantial I here mean that it has content that explicitly picks out certain predefined capabilities that we have reason to value such as having bodily integrity or being able to laugh and play.

The structure of the paper is as follows: I commence with a brief description of the procedural and the substantial approaches of the CA. A definition of perfectionism is provided and I show how Sen is committed to anti-perfectionism. An overview of previous perfectionistic allegations is then presented. In section five I identify two processes in Sen's approach, the institutional and the personal. In section six an overview of two main strategies for conceptualizing personal autonomy is provided. Section seven shows how the main function of Sen's personal procedure is one that is aimed at enhancing personal autonomy, broadly constructed. In section eight I show that a procedural notion of personal autonomy cannot avoid a perfectionistic foundation and that furthermore Sen's notion of autonomy seems to include a substantial one. The last section will conclude that Sen's deliberative process tacitly embraces a perfectionistic account of certain capabilities that are assumed to be a priori valuable. His rejection of perfectionism is therefore found to be untenable.

I. THE SUBSTANTIVE VS. THE PROCEDURAL ROUTE TO JUSTICE

The CA is a theory of social justice that centers round the idea that citizens ought to be free to choose to turn capabilities that they 'have reason to value' into functionings. There has been a long discussion regarding the meaning of 'we have reason to value' in the CA context of CA. Some scholars have argued that Sen and Nussbaum are perfectionists in disguise (Arneson 2000; Deneulin 2002; Sugden 2006; Claassen 2014). As an effect the CA has regularly been accused of perfectionism, the idea that certain values, traits or

capabilities, are considered a priori essential for humans to live a good life. Apart from any other aspects of legitimation and justification a perfectionistic account can come with, this is seen as problematic for CA for two reasons: a) it threatens to disrespect the political liberal ideal of value pluralism, and b) if CA is resting on foundational assumptions of what is valuable, it seems to be failing to live up to its own standards.

Sen argued, when introducing the CA, that levels of citizens' capabilities to achieve valuable functionings was the proper metric when assessing and promoting social justice (Sen 1979). He thus opposed aggregated measurement of utility such as gross national product, resources or other focus of a single value such as utilitarian or deontic principles. Another important starting point was to protest against the Rawlsian transcendental, institutional and ideal approach to social justice (Sen 2006; 2009). He found Rawls's theory of justice to neglect human diversity in at least two respects, namely that people differ in their capacities to transform resources into capabilities, and that there exists more than one reasonable principle of justice (an objection that led Rawls to adjust his theory in *Political Liberalism*). Capabilities are 'real opportunities' to valuable functionings, i.e. doings and beings. For instance, if eating is a valuable functioning, being able to eat is the corresponding capability. As pointed out by Sen, the moral significance of a fasting man and a starving man is huge. The difference being that a fasting man has the option to eat would he choose to do so. This option is, however, closed for the starving man, as he has no capability to eat. There is also another ethical point Sen makes with this example, namely that welfare is not always a relevant metric in social justice. Since freedom to give up welfare for other ideas of the good is a valuable opportunity for those who think there are reasons that overrule personal welfare. To fast and freely give up being properly nourished on religious or political grounds is an example of such capabilities. Sen thus refutes monistic theories of the good and contends that there is not one single value that always trumps other values. He consequently has a broad and plural approach to ethical evaluation.

The CA has over the last decades developed into a broad framework of theories, Martha Nussbaum being one of its most prominent contributors. It can be used for a number of purposes. But at the most general level it can be divided into scholars who use it in assessment and development of social justice in a more applied discipline and those who use it as a framework to theorize about justice. The theoretical side of the CA can be further divided into two main groups, the substantial and the procedural, where Nussbaum and Sen can be said to represent each faction. The two main claims shared by all Capabilitarians are that the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance and that is to be understood in terms of people's capabilities that they have reason to value (Robeyns 2016). The wedge that separates the procedural and the substantial views is what they respectively perceive as a reason for us to value something. In effect, how and why the valuable capabilities are selected. Those who maintain that a substantial account of justice is required promote a list of capabilities that we have reason to value (Nussbaum). The procedural approach rejects that and argues that no such substance can be defined without an ongoing deliberative process (Sen). This divide in

how the selection of the valuable capabilities is made, i.e. what we have reason to value, has been called the "Achilles Heel of the CA" (Claassen 2016). But before we can see if and how Sen is guilty of perfectionism, we need a working definition of it.

II. PERFECTIONISM AND SEN'S ANTI-PERFECTIONISM

As was mentioned initially, perfectionism is the idea that we can identify objective accounts of the good. Political perfectionist theorists develop policies or theories of justice that are informed by that account. While the objective good may differ, all perfectionists defend some identified "states of affairs, activities, and/or relationships as good in themselves and not good in virtue of the fact that they are desired or enjoyed by human beings" (Wall 2012). Perfectionistic judgments could for example include valuing activities such as poetry writing or being healthy or engaging in critical thinking. They are considered to be adding to human flourishing independent of whether they are preferred by someone or not. Their absence is consequently taken to diminish the quality of life (Hurka 1998). A perfectionist account is then an attempt at stating what capabilities we have, objectively, reason to value and someone who objects to liberal neutrality (Lowry 2011). This is not to say that all attempts at objectively defining what we have reason to value are versions of perfectionism. Any ideal theories of the good are attempts at thru use of theoretical argument deduce what is ultimately valuable. What distinguishes perfectionism from e.g. deontological or instrumental theories of the good is that it is pluralistic in regard to value and that it focuses on human functionings.

There is a strong connection between perfectionism and Aristotelian essentialism which holds that the intrinsically valuable skills that support human flourishing do so in virtue of them being constitutive of humans. In other words, that which is 'truly' human is what makes us flourish. The perfectionistic and essentialistic capabilities are thought to be what distinguishes us from animals and what are considered social and refined human properties. Perfectionism is often seen as opposed to liberalism as liberalism is the doctrine that people should be allowed to pursue their own idea of the good without interference. We will, when discussing perfectionism, take it to mean "an ideal people ought to pursue regardless if they now want it or would want it in any hypothetical circumstances, and apart from any pleasures it may bring" (Hurka 1990, 17).

Sen rejects that any theorist could identify, objectively, what we have reason to value. "The problem is not with listing capabilities, but with insisting on one predetermined canonical list of capabilities, chosen by a theorist without any general social discussion or public reasoning. To have such a fixed list, emanating entirely from pure theory, is to deny the possibility of fruitful public participation on what could be included and why" (Sen 2004a, 77-78). By stating that theorists cannot, and ought not, define what capabilities we have reason to value as there is no one set of capabilities that are always trumping, Sen objects to perfectionism (Sen 2009, 41). Or at least he rejects that we could, as theorists, know what these capabilities are that we always have reason to value.

III. PREVIOUS CHARGES FROM PERFECTIONISM

As mentioned, the charges at CA from foundationalism have often been cast in perfectionist terms. One can group the critique into two main camps: internal and external. The external objections come from scholars who criticize the CA from 'outside' the CA community (Sugden 2006; Pogge 2010; Valentini 2011). These objections concerns CA at a more general level, for instance the critique of choosing capabilities as the relevant metric. The internal critique comes from fellow Capabilitarians within the CA (Deneulin 2002; Khader 2009; Claassen 2011). The dispute within the CA is often related to what is known as 'the list-debate'. The list is of course Nussbaum's list of ten basic capabilities that she takes to constitute a threshold limit of what each citizen ought to be granted and then freely choose what to turn into a function. Sen and other proponents of a procedural approach of the CA reject this strategy as they find it to be mistaking "what pure theory can do" (Sen 2009). We can thus identify two 'levels' of accusations of perfectionism: a) at a general level targeting CA theories of justice broadly constructed, and b) as an internal dispute between proponents of a procedural route (also called democratic or non-ideal) and those who advocate a substantial route (also called perfectionistic or foundational) route to justice. The standard reply from both Sen and Nussbaum to accusations at the general level has been that by focusing on capabilities rather than functionings, the liberal ideal of freedom to choose is maintained and perfectionism is avoided. The success of that reply has been questioned (Sugden 2006; Khader 2009; Terlazzo 2014).

The internal list vs. no-list dispute has been the source of much heated discussion. The charge against the substantial list view is that it threatens to disregard any reason to value that is not in line with a theoretically predefined conception of the valuable. Nussbaum's list of ten central capabilities is thought to threaten value pluralism and human diversity. It is, according to critics, elitist as agents' values can be deemed 'wrong' or 'right' according to some value-template (Sen 2010, 248-9; Sugden 2006). Nussbaum's reply to this is twofold: a) that it corresponds to a cross cultural overlapping consensus and so is therefore both legitimate and justified, and b) that it is open ended and can change. Sen's procedural view, on the other hand, brings with it the potentially coercive forces of majority rule, meaning that the capabilities valued by citizens that are not in line with what the majority values may legitimately be suppressed. The worry is that it becomes relativistic if there is no substantial notion of the valuable, such as a categorical rule, a monistic value or a list. Such substance, it is thought, would be instructive to a separation of the adaptive preferences from the non-adaptive ones. A procedural and content-neutral approach is then in a sense 'empty' and not useful in the pursuit of social justice (Nussbaum 2011, 70). Another concern is that history is full of examples of societies where majority-rule has led to abhorrent results. So whether the preferences are adaptive or not, the question if they are good, right and just seems to be another. This is so since what a majority at some point may decide does not always seem to correspond to our intuitions on the right and the good.

It is generally recognized that Nussbaum's list-strategy is more vulnerable to accusations from perfectionism. Sen's procedural approach on the other hand, while generally seen as less elitistic, is more eluding. While he insists on the primacy of public deliberation in quite specific types of dialogues, as will be shown below, he says very little of what this procedure concretely entails. Who should do the deliberation? Where? On whose initiative? This invites two questions. First, is Sen justified in rejecting a predefined list while not be clear on what the procedural approach entails more in detail? Second, can Sen successfully avoid perfectionism by referring to this procedure? I will for the remainder of the paper be preoccupied with the second question.

IV. TWO PROCESSES – THE INSTITUTIONAL AND THE PERSONAL

In order to make the argument that Sen's procedural approach is dependent on a particular and controversial view of what is good for agents, we need to reconstruct his procedural approach. The democratic and deliberative process he claims to be central to social justice can be divided into two sub processes, the institutional and the personal. The institutional concerns the public deliberation that is mediated through the institutions of democracy such as public debate in media, the process of balloting, free speech and free press. But there is another equally important process of deliberation Sen requests, a personal one. It is the process of interactive dialogues, which although underspecified by Sen, are substantiated enough to enable us to deduce that he takes them to be a more demanding, participatory process that urges each citizen to engage in critical scrutiny of one's actions and values. These dialogues, to Sen, represent another type of necessary element in the procedural approach to social justice. This second procedure of individual reflective scrutinizing dialogues is what I will focus on for the remainder of the paper as it is more intimately connected to the exercise and development of personal autonomy.

There can be no doubt that the process of interactive dialogues is key to Sen's concept of 'reason to value' (Sen 2009, 44, 89-90, 110; 2008, 108; Robeyns 2012). It is crucial since he takes the responsibility for justice to be something that cannot be 'handed over to institutions' or theorists to define and implement. Instead, justice is connected with personal judgement and the actual behaviour of the citizens in society (Sen 2009, 86). This is the basis of his frustration with what he calls Rawls's transcendental institutional approach. Sen claims that Rawls was neglecting the fact that much injustice in society is done by individuals' conduct towards each other and does not depend on whether there are perfectly just institutions in place. For example, bullying or systematically exercised oppression is not automatically impeded by the existence of just institutions.

So, even though institutional democracy for Sen is necessary for freedom and the remedy of injustice, he complains of the domination of what he perceives as a narrow understanding of democracy (Sen 1999, 158; 2005, 14; 2009, 45, 127, 324-27). He thus takes the procedures of political choice (like voting) to accommodate rather "little information except in the discussion that may accompany these exercises" (Sen 2009,

93). Justice requires that each citizen reflects upon and adjust their actions in accordance with what they think they have reason to value in relation to social justice. To Sen these dialogues are viewed as a necessary *complement* to institutional democracy, not sufficient to warrant justice in them themselves (Sen 1999, 158; 2005, 13).

V. SEN'S 'REASON TO VALUE'

We have now identified the process of interactive dialogue as central to Sen. But why does Sen take it to be so important to social justice? Because he thinks that we may base our values and preferences on *false beliefs* about ourselves and about the social conditions in society. Due to 'the beings we are' Sen believes this can cause us to adapt to our limited cognitive and epistemological perspective and lose sight of valuable functionings that are relevant to social justice.

Whether Sen takes certain functionings to be objectively or subjectively valuable to us is really cutting to the heart of this paper's focus. Why do we need a reason to value? asks Sugden (2006). Why can we just not value whatever we may value without having to state a reason to support our choice? The crux is that while Sen insists on a procedure in order to heed the liberal ideal of value pluralism and human diversity and so to counter any dogmatic conception of the good, he also recognizes reasons to doubt our subjective preferences. Subjective preferences are "malleable," and not to be uncritically taken at face value (Sen 1999, 54). Adaptive preferences and positional illusions are such phenomena that may undermine the reliability of subjective preferences. Adaptive preferences are, according to Sen, problematically shaped by deprivation and may therefore not reflect what a person has reason to value (Sen 1979; 2009, 274-75). To use one of Sen's examples, a woman can for example reject the value of education in a society where female education is banned in order to psychologically cope with the social context she is in. She has then adapted her preferences by, at a conscious or unconscious level, downplaying a function that she (presumably) has reason to value. To dismiss the value of education may be a pragmatic solution for her. To accept the social structure and thus be accepted may be the only option as rebelling against such an arrangement may cost too much to her. But, and here lies the problem, maybe it is a 'true' and 'authentic' preference on her behalf? If so, is it not parochial, dogmatic and elitist to assume she has succumbed to oppression? In other words, how do we know when a choice is an effect of deprivation and social pressure and when it is autonomous and genuine?

Sen believes that positional confinement is central to epistemology, and that justice requires that we try to go beyond our limited perspective. Our observation of an injustice is necessarily affected by where we stand in relation to what we observe. He illustrates by the illusion that the moon and the sun look the same in size from earth. If we do not take into consideration that we are further away from the sun than the moon, we may be misled to believe they are similar in size. If we do make appropriate corrections we are likely to be misled by what Sen calls "positional illusion." Our task in relation to social

justice is to bring ourselves to a position that does not alter our evaluative judgment depending on whether we are rich or poor. To do that we are dependent on self-scrutiny and knowledge of the society from other perspectives. But, he argues, "there is nothing to guarantee that this exacting scrutiny will always occur, since we are capable of much self-indulgence in our views and opinion of things in which we are directly involved, and this may restrain the reach of our self-scrutiny" (Sen 2009, 197). Sen, in short, claims that since we are epistemologically and cognitively limited by our single perspective, social justice *necessarily demands* that we go beyond our positions and interest and subject our beliefs, values and assumptions to the scrutiny of others in order to 'aid' us in our self-scrutiny (Sen 2009, 155, 169, 180, 197). As we cannot consider what we are not aware of, scrutiny is vitally dependent on epistemological input and normative suggestions from other perspectives.

Sen is very careful to emphasize his gratitude to Rawls and agrees with him that justice requires fairness and that fairness is found in an ideal of impartial reasoning and objectivity (Sen 2009, 31-49, 114-18; 2010). The question then becomes: *Can* we become impartial and objective and if so *how*? Sen's short answer to the question is that we simply cannot become *completely* impartial but we can become *more* impartial (Sen 2009, 41). This conviction is reflected in his comparative (rather than transcendental) methodology for the pursuit of justice. His answer to how to become more impartial is through a systematic framework of critical and creative dialogues (Sen 2009, 127). A strictly hypothetical approach to impartiality is misguided as we, given the 'beings we are,' may still fail. Instead he stresses the importance for a democratic system to include opportunities for articulation of, and the reflection on, experiences of lives led at other positions in society. When we become aware of relevant facts and evaluations from other perspectives we are, according to Sen, allowed to "transcend our positional confinement" and critically scrutinize our own priorities in a less partial way (Sen 2009, 167-72).

The function of the interactive dialogues is to enable citizens to broaden 'the informational basis of evaluations' and in the light of this insight scrutinize one's own priorities and beliefs (Sen 2009, 169, 179-82, 219). Sen's discussions of adaptive preferences and his concept of positional objectivity are central for his view of the advancement of objectivity and impartiality, and hence moving away from pure subjectivity (Sen 2009, 4-5). Adaptive preferences and positional illusion are then two concepts that denote possible pitfalls for individuals when theorizing about what we have reason to value. Sen points out the fallibility of human rationality when saying that our "entire understanding of the world, it can be argued, is thoroughly dependent on the perceptions we can have and the thoughts we can generate, given this kind of creatures we are" (Sen 2009, 169-70).

The 'reason' in Sen's reason to value is then not to test whether it is conductive to a particular idea of a good life but rather a test that the preference is endorsed after reflection for some reason (Sen 2009, 15). The personal process that occurs in an interactive dialogue ensures that agents test their behaviour, assumptions and values in order to revise, reject or embrace them (Sen 2009, 180-81). The 'reason' in the 'reason to value' is

thus to warrant that the agent is self-directing and free to value, act and live a life according to autonomously shaped ideals. This means that the process of the interactive dialogues aims at articulating a reason and so necessarily bringing it up to a level above cognition. Sen's 'reason to value' is, it seems, thought to be the antidote against adaptive preferences and positional illusions.

If one accepts that Sen's procedure to a large extent is aimed at the enhancement of personal autonomy, both its exercise and its development, we can conclude that autonomy is a foundational value, which is assumed prior to any procedure. Consequently, Sen's approach relies on a specific idea of what is good for people. Or to use Hurka's definition "an ideal people ought to pursue regardless if they now want it or would want it in any hypothetical circumstances, and apart from any pleasures it may bring." Now, if autonomy is a foundational value based in a perfectionist conception of what is good for persons, can Sen avoid such an allegation by referring to a specific content-neutral notion of autonomy?

VI. CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF AUTONOMY

Autonomy is arguably one of the most explored notions in moral and political philosophy and for obvious reasons it will not get an in-depth treatment here. My point is to give a sketch of two different ways of conceptualizing personal autonomy, a formal and a substantial one. At the most general level, personal autonomy concerns the ability for self-determination. A person is seen as autonomous when her actions, desires and character can be said to originate from herself (Taylor 2005). To be autonomous is to claim ownership over one's actions as well as being able to give reasons for those actions. If preferences and values, on the other hand, are uncritically adopted and no justificatory reasons can be provided, the agent is not considered autonomous. Similarly, if the preferences are effects of external coercion and manipulation or internal compulsion and false beliefs you are, on most views, not seen as self-directed.

Interestingly, notions of personal autonomy can standardly be grouped into one of two main divisions; a formal and content-neutral notion or a substantive one (Dworkin 1988; Benson 2005). The formal autonomy concept is the idea that someone is autonomous if her preference meets certain conditions internal to the agent. Conditions such as e.g. coherence over time (e.g. Waddell Ekstrom 2005), according to a plan (e.g. Bratman 2005) or some hierarchical constraints (e.g. Frankfurt 1971) such as second order volitions. For instance, according to such a view, the fact that I smoke can be an expression of my autonomy if the preference coheres with my other preferences, fits with my life plan or if I on reflection want to want to smoke. Otherwise I am, in relation to smoking, non-autonomous as I am a victim of addiction and unable to steer my life in the direction I believe I have reason to value. The substantive notion of autonomy is and not only looking at subjective cognitive processes internal to the agent, but is sensitive to the external environment where the preferences are shaped. Substantive-external accounts of autonomy is the idea that only some of those decisions that meet the formal

conditions of autonomy "count as retaining autonomy whereas other count as forfeiting it" (Dworkin 1988). Recall for example the scene of the happy prisoner in Monty Phyton's film Life of Brian. He embraces that he is being tortured because the Romans are "just great" and he deserves being punished by them. While such preferences theoretically could meet the conditions for formal autonomy, it contradicts our intuitions on what it means to be autonomous. An agent, who is considered autonomous on the formal view, could be someone who has simply adapted to the circumstances albeit by internalizing the values. To remedy such deceptions, external and socio-relational features of autonomy are emphasized in the substantive account. It specifically acknowledges that the agents' environment, material as well as relational, to a large part shape people's values and preferences (Okin 1995; Oshana 1998; Nedelsky 2011). The main worry substantivists have with formal accounts is that it is focusing on the subjective, internal and psychological state (Oshana 1998, 82). As the formal account is content-neutral it seems to carry the same relativistic problem as the procedural route to justice was accused of. And pure subjectivity married with the possibility that preferences are a product of external conditions is naturally unsettling for advocates of egalitarian justice such as Sen. Proponents for this, often called feminist approach to autonomy, contend that in order for someone to be autonomous certain external conditions need to be fulfilled such as e.g. not being enslaved (Oshana 1998, 81).

I will not elaborate more on the vast area of nature and conditions for personal autonomy, but will settle for this sketch of two contrasting conceptualizations. With these definitions in mind, we may ask whether Sen can deflect the perfectionistic allegation by referring to a formal and hence content-neutral account of autonomy. As a substantive account of autonomy is a non-neutral view, a commitment to such an account would strengthen rather than weaken the charges from perfectionism. A formal account of autonomy seems the only possible attempt for refutation.

VII. CAN A NOTION OF FORMAL AUTONOMY DEFLECT THE CHARGES?

As we recall perfectionism was defined as "an ideal people ought to pursue regardless if they now want it or would want it in any hypothetical circumstances, and apart from any pleasures it may bring." If we are to reject a perfectionistic account of justice, no presumption on what is valuable can be justified prior to a deliberative process. As we have seen the value of autonomy is however taken to be priori valuable and consequently the capabilities to develop personal autonomy are what we have reason to value regardless if we "now want it or would want it in any hypothetical circumstances, and apart from any pleasures it may bring." While arguably the value of personal autonomy lies at the center of the procedural approach and consequently the perfectionistic ideal of humans as critically reflecting independent and self-determining agents, one may ask if there is a way to avoid this conclusion. Perhaps a further specification of autonomy can alter this perfectionistic appearance? The remainder of the paper will aim at answering two questions. First, which of the given standard ways

of conceptualizing personal autonomy could we ascribe to Sen? Second, can that account deflect objections from perfectionism?

So, what conception of autonomy can we ascribe to Sen? Just looking at the construction of the CA as a theory that focuses on capabilities, i.e. possibilities rather than functionings i.e. making sure people realize certain capabilities, suggests that each individual ought to be free to choose. Such a choice, in order for it to be free (or autonomous) needs to be free from adaptive preferences and objective illusions. Sen thus believes that we *can* be autonomous in relation to these forces, and that it is our rationality along with knowledge of society, that will set us free. The personal process in the interactive dialogues as we saw above, aids this rational decision procedure. Sen sees the *valid* reason-to-value to be those values that we *want* to want to have and refers to Harry Frankfurt and his concept of second order volitions (Sen 2004b, chapters 3-7). There is thus a strong emphasis on the internal and rational process of deciding for oneself. This understanding of autonomy ties in with a formal account, as the conditions are internal to the person while void of substance of what to prefer. Each agent theoretically could want to want whatever in ways that could be considered bad by a majority.

As we have seen there are formal elements in Sen's conception of autonomy. But there are reasons to be hesitant to ascribe a purely formal, content-neutral account to him. His deep commitment to adaptive preferences and objective illusions, we argue, is indicative for his conception of personal autonomy. In order for him to counterweigh these manipulative forces his concept of autonomy would need to be based on something more substantial than a purely formal and subjective construction. Sen's notion of autonomy hence seems to correspond to a more feminist and substantive idea of what needs to pertain in order for someone to be autonomous. Here the epicentre of the tension in Sen's approach emerges. His concern for human diversity and individual self-determination, meaning the capacity to direct one's life according to one's own ideas of the good life, prevents him from explicitly taking a stand on what perfectionist capabilities we ought to pursue. And yet, to be able to handle the implications of the threats from adaptive preferences and positional illusions he seems to rely on a substantive notion rather than a formal one. A substantive view of personal autonomy is undeniably perfectionist, as it takes an explicit stance on what is good for agents. Sen in effect seems to combine the formal and the substantial account of autonomy. This is so as, while he recognizes that social justice demands that our values and preferences are actively reflected upon and rejected, revised or embraced, he denies that such internal and subjective process exhausts the concept of autonomy. It is then clear that Sen cannot successfully refer to a more specified account of autonomy in order to circumvent the perfectionist objection.

One could object and claim that autonomy is a minimal condition for freedom and social justice, no matter how one conceives of it. I agree with that but recognize that this is not as uncontroversial as one may think. This is so as it disqualifies other strategies for selecting what one has reason to value, such as strategies that include reliance on traditions, or authority, be it your grandmother, a tribe leader or a pop idol. Dictates and inspiration from religious leaders and texts are also a common strategy for selecting what we have reasons

to value that does not necessarily include an ideal of personal autonomy (Gutman and Thompson 1996). Let me emphasize that while I believe that placing individual autonomy at the center of a theory of social justice and constructing it around the values of independence, critical and creative reflection is justified, there is no denying that this is a selection of one out of several possible strategies to identify what one has reason to value. It is thus not evident that such perception of what is good for humans is respecting value pluralism and human diversity to a higher extent than Rawls' theory of justice. And as we recall this was Sen's intention. According to him non-parochialism is "a requirement of justice" (Sen 2009, 403).

VIII. SUMMARY

Sen takes his procedural CA to be content-neutral and anti-perfectionistic. I disagree. First, it is perfectionistic as placing personal autonomy at the centre of a theory of justice undoubtedly implies a specific idea of what is good for agents. Contrary to what Sen seems to think, such a construction is not uncontroversial. A theory that is built around the value of personal autonomy nurtures the idea that persons ought to be self-conscious, independent and critically reflecting. Such an approach thus disqualifies other strategies for selecting what there are reasons to value, such as relying on tradition, authorities or religion. This is problematic for Sen's CA as he sets out to respect value pluralism and human diversity to a higher level than competing theories. N.B. the problem is not that he chooses this particular ideal of what is good for humans, but that he does so without recognizing that it entails a particular and perfectionistic view. Sen's CA is thus not content-neutral. Furthermore, based on this foundational ideal of personal autonomy, we concluded that it is possible to derive what capabilities are presumed to be priori valuable, something Sen rejects is possible or desirable for theorists to do. We then investigated if Sen could reply to the perfectionistic objection above by referring to a formal, content neutral account of autonomy. I concluded he could not for two reasons. First, a formal account would lead us to the same conclusion that self-consciousness, independency and critically reflecting are capabilities that we have a priori reason to value. Second, Sen's notion of autonomy sits better with a substantial account as it ties in with his concern for purely subjective evaluations and adaptive preferences. This allowed us to conclude that Sen's procedural approach cannot avoid relying on perfectionistic assumptions.

It has not been the purpose here to defend perfectionism or any kind of paternalism that may or may not accompany it. However, it can be noted that I think Sen could bite the bullet on the perfectionistic account of his approach without it losing its appeal. Even if one could argue, as Sen does, that no predefined conception of the good life is required in order to identify and minimize injustice, it seems rather impossible to set out to identify and minimize injustice without any predefined conception of what is required for *that process*.

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