

On Ethics and the Economics of Development*

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Abstract: This paper examines the implications of some of the growing literature at the borderline of ethics and economics for development debates. It argues that this literature has already had considerable impact on development economics, particularly as a result of work on well-being and capabilities. Other areas where there has been considerable growth include population ethics and the area which explores the link between the contractarian tradition in moral philosophy and game theory. Work here has had less impact on development economics, and there is considerable scope for more work. Finally, both ethics and economics have been criticised for taking too abstract a view of human beings. Each has begun to take on this line of criticism and work which responds to it in various ways – such as by taking account of issues relating to identity, allowing for hard choices and fuzziness - is relevant to development.

Keywords: ethics, economics, capabilities, well-being, human development

Introduction

In his Royer Lectures, entitled *On Ethics and Economics*, Amartya Sen (1987) restated certain strong links between ethics and economics. He noted the “contrast between the self-consciously ‘non-ethical’ character of modern economics and the historical evolution of modern economics largely as an off-shoot of ethics” (Sen 1987, p. 2). Sen went on to make the case for a re-engagement between the two subjects. He concluded his lectures by suggesting that: ‘the case for bringing

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economics closer to ethics ... lies ... on the rewards of the exercise. ... the rewards can be expected to be rather large' (Sen 1987, p. 89).

Two decades on, we can stand back and look at both progress, and the lack of it, in this re-engagement. In this paper, I shall not focus purely on *development economics* at least in the form in which it is currently defined and taught. Nor shall I focus on *development ethics* which is now a clearly delineated field in development studies (Goulet 1995 and 2006). Both areas are often too narrowly defined for the purpose at hand, and part of my concern is with how the territory of development economics might be altered through the re-engagement with ethics. Instead, I shall be concerned, more generally, with how *some* of the recent work at the borderlines of ethics and economics connects with debates and work in development. What follows thus only constitutes a partial discussion of the general topic of ethics and the economics of development.

In mapping out some recent work in the area of ethics and economics in relation to development I structure the paper in terms of the three major traditions in modern moral philosophy. That is, I organise what follows in terms of themes that fall within, or engage with, respectively, utilitarianism, contractarianism and 'virtue ethics'. In the case of the third of these, I shall restrict myself to one line of argument within the literature which focuses on the idea that certain ethical theories have taken too abstract a view of human beings and must allow for their complexity. Inevitably, there is some overlap between the discussion of these three traditions since they all engage with many of the same issues. Furthermore, given his extensive work in this area over the last few decades, it is not surprising that Sen's work engages with themes in all three traditions.

The paper is organised as follows: section 2 focusses on topics relating to the utilitarian tradition in ethics - particularly issues relating to well-being and freedom; in section 3, topics in the contractarian tradition relating particularly to justice and social norms are discussed; section 4 focusses on issues about the complexity of human beings in the light of criticisms of an overly idealised picture of agents in some parts of ethics and economics and; section 5 concludes.

Utilitarianism, Freedom and Well-Being

Both ethics and economics are, at least in part, concerned with human well-being and about how we ought to act. Ethics is notoriously concerned with questions

such as: what is the good life?; what ought I to do?; and what action is right or just? In economics, analysis of welfare and public policy engages with these issues. Utilitarianism – in its various forms - has answers to these questions, though the answers vary according to the version of utilitarianism that is involved. It is thus unsurprising that it has had considerable influence both on public policy and on economists who work on welfare and policy issues.

Hedonist versions of utilitarianism see 'utility' or 'well-being' in terms of pleasure and the absence of pain (e.g. Mill 1962); desire or preference-based views see it in terms of desire or preference satisfaction, where the relevant desires or preferences may be informed or rational (Harsanyi 1982, Brandt 1992, Griffin 1986). Depending on the version of utilitarianism adopted, the right action, or the rule to be adopted, or the disposition to be cultivated, is one which maximises either the sum or average of utility. The early forms that utilitarianism took – especially the versions developed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill – had considerable influence on the development of neo-classical economics particularly in the writings of William Stanley Jevons (1871), who believed that individuals were pleasure seeking 'utility' maximisers. Modern economics has dropped some of Jevons' utilitarian commitments. Nonetheless, some of the modern 're-engagement' between ethics and economics involves returning to the utilitarian tradition, and making specific moves away from it.

This is particularly true of modern work which, broadly speaking, falls in what one might term 'the economics of well-being'. I use the term to distinguish this stream of work from more standard work within the tradition of 'welfare economics'. Two distinctive features of this work are that: (1) it moves away from standard assumptions made in previous work in economics about the nature of welfare; and (2) it re-engages with philosophical questions about the nature and substance of well-being. Both features mean that this stream of work is part of the re-engagement of ethics and economics that Sen signalled in his Royer lectures. Indeed, Sen's works over the decades, as well as the more recent work of Partha Dasgupta, have both these distinctive features.[1] Both have distanced themselves from various notions of 'utility' and 'welfare' - such as 'preference satisfaction' and 'happiness' - which are inherited from certain utilitarian philosophers. Their views of well-being mark a return to something more akin to the notion of *a flourishing human life* which Aristotle discussed in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Barnes 1984). Furthermore, both have argued for the importance of freedom as a distinct concern alongside 'utility'.

The re-engagement of ethics and economics has - in these cases - led to a vibrant literature about how to conceptualise and measure the quality of life. Sen's work over many years has involved developing a distinct alternative to utilitarianism in both philosophy and economics. He has argued that the quality of life is best thought of in terms of the *capability* to lead a life which is valuable or which one has reason to value (Sen 1993 and 1999). The notion of 'capability' captures what people *can* do or be, and in this sense their opportunities, or 'positive freedoms' to lead flourishing lives. The immediate implication of this approach for development economics is that 'development' can be *defined* in terms of an expansion of capabilities, or freedoms (Sen 1984 and 1999). The approach also involves viewing poverty in terms of a failure to be able to do and be certain basic things, as well as thinking about egalitarian justice in terms of 'capability equality' (Sen 1992). It is important to note here that Sen does not claim that capability captures all relevant factors for moral or economic decision making, so that his goal is not to replace the exclusive focus on 'utility' in some parts of economics with a similar singular focus on 'capability'. Even in the domain of freedom, Sen (2002a and 2005a) thinks that capability well captures only one aspect of freedom which he calls its 'opportunity' aspect rather than its 'process' aspect (which relates to issues such as non-interference and freedom of choice). His writings on development (Sen 1999) as well other areas such as gender (Qizilbash 2005a) allow for both aspects of freedom and thus do not focus on capability alone. The capability approach has been most widely accepted amongst development economists but its influence has also broadened to other fields within economics and indeed to other disciplines. Its strong influence on development work arose, in part, because development economists had, for some years, been looking for alternatives to standard economic approaches to thinking about and measuring the quality of life. The literature on capability is closely related to earlier work on 'basic needs' (Streeten *et al.* 1981). Sen (1985a) has ensured that his approach is rigorously formulated. It also has a considerable pedigree in philosophy. Sen has invoked Aristotle, Marx and Smith amongst others in developing the approach. A variation of the approach has also been championed by a leading neo-Aristotelian - Martha Nussbaum - who has developed her own version of it (Nussbaum 1988, 2000 and 2006). Much work on this approach has been theoretical or philosophical, and includes a growing literature in development ethics (Crocker 1992 and 1995, Gasper 1997, Qizilbash 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 1998, 2002b, Clark 2002 *inter alia*). However, Sen (often in collaboration with Sudhir Anand) has also developed various capability measures for the United

Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This applied work has ensured that the approach has become influential in the policy arena, particularly with the annual publication of the UNDP's human development reports (UNDP, various years). The UNDP's capability measures - such as the human development index (HDI), the human poverty index and the gender empowerment measure - have themselves become the subject of a growing literature in development economics (Hicks 1997, Foster, Lopez Calva and Szekely 2005 *inter alia*). Sen's work on capabilities has thus launched various lines of research at both theoretical and applied levels which have borne fruit. While the capability approach has made less headway outside development economics - in part because it poses a serious challenge to standard welfare economics - it is increasingly influential and has been one of the most successful varieties of re-engagement between ethics and economics.[2] Questions about the application of Sen's version of the approach remain. Their importance is underlined by the fact that some of them are raised by commentators who take very different views - both supporters and critics of the approach.[3] The relevant questions include: which capabilities are relevant in any context? how do we make interpersonal capability comparisons? what weights ought we to give to different capabilities? how are freedom or opportunities best measured? Sen and others have begun to address some of these issues (see Alkire 2002, Pattanaik and Xu 1990, Qizilbash 2007a, Robeyns 2003, and Sen 2004a and 2005a *inter alia*).

Recent work by Partha Dasgupta (1993 and 2001) covers similar ground engaging with the relationship between economic analysis and foundational concerns. The key similarity between Dasgupta and Sen as regards the content or nature of well-being is that both think that concerns relating to freedom need to be accounted for in thinking about the quality of life. Dasgupta allows for freedom as part of well-being, and, to that degree, he follows various philosophers in the utilitarian tradition, from John Stuart Mill (1962) to James Griffin (1986) who allow for liberty and autonomy as constituents of well-being. On Dasgupta's account - crudely put - well-being is 'utility' - in some narrow sense - *plus* freedom. There is a clear contrast with Sen here, inasmuch as Sen (1985b) insists on treating well-being and freedom as *distinct* concerns. However, as regards the application of these different views to problems such as international comparisons of well-being - which are relevant to public policy - the important difference is not primarily philosophical. It is that Dasgupta (1993 pp. 108-116) has tended to use a method of ranking (the Borda rule) which uses rank order scores - 'ordinal

information' - rather than information about differences in levels of achievement - 'cardinal information'. By contrast, cardinal information is used in the UNDP's capability measures which are based on Sen's work.

Dasgupta (2001, pp. 139-161) has also distinguished well-being from *wealth*, and – citing Adam Smith - argued for the importance of the latter. He sees the natural resource base as a form of wealth, the importance of which has not been properly appreciated in economics. Measures of 'genuine investment' which relate to this notion of wealth lead to quite different rankings of nations as compared to rankings according to Gross National Product and the UNDP's HDI (Dasgupta 2001, pp. 156-161). Dasgupta's work here falls in a well-known tradition which attempts to incorporate the value of the environment – understood as a form of natural capital - into standard measures of well-being and income (Pearce, Markandya and Barbier 1989). This contrasts with an alternative - if, sometimes, related - approach to thinking about environmental concerns in terms of equity between different generations (Anand and Sen 2000 and Qizilbash 2001 *inter alia*), though in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) - better known as the 'Brundtland commission' - entitled *Our Common Future* the foundational concern for inter-generational equity is combined with a concern to put a value on the environment which can be factored into economic decisions. Dasgupta's work is also rare in as much as it addresses important issues in ethics about population levels and future generations which notoriously raise problems for some forms of utilitarianism. Much of the work here begins with Derek Parfit's (1984) discussion of the 'repugnant conclusion' which some moral theories might lead to. 'Classical' utilitarianism - which focusses on maximizing the *sum* of happiness in society - might appear to lead us to conclude, for example, that it is better to have a huge population of people whose lives are barely worth living (but who have 'positive utility', in some sense) than a smaller population of people all of whom have lives well worth living. The danger of reaching this conclusion leads some instead to focus on the average level of well-being in society. However, there are also problems with this alternative (Parfit 1984 and Broome 2004). Indeed, an enormous literature on this subject – variously referred to as 'population ethics' or the 'welfare economics of population' - has emerged at the borderlines of ethics and economics (see Blackorby, Bossert and Donaldson 1997, Broome 2004, Qizilbash 2005b and 2007b). This research is deeply relevant to development economics – in as much as considerations relating to conceptualising sustainable development and putting a value on potential lives must play a role when environmental concerns are brought into the field of

development economics. Here again economics must engage with ethics, since I suspect that without engaging with foundational questions one cannot make much headway in this area.

Justice and Social Norms

Central concerns in development – particularly those relating to justice - are the focus of the contractarian tradition in ethics. The best known modern work in this tradition is John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*. The contractarian tradition treats morality as the outcome of an (actual, imagined or hypothetical) agreement between relevant parties. This approach can lead to distinctly different conclusions to a utilitarian approach, or even a 'welfarist' view which focuses narrowly on 'utility' while possibly departing from utilitarianism in other ways. In Rawls' modern development of this tradition people agree on principles of justice behind a 'veil of ignorance' in an 'original position' where they do not know their conceptions of the good life, or their level of resources, social positions or natural talents. One of the principles Rawls argues will be agreed – the difference principle - gives a particularly high priority to the least well-off group in society, when the advantage of people is evaluated in terms of their holdings of 'primary goods' – goods which are all-purpose means or 'needs' of citizens. These are heterogeneous, including such goods as: income and wealth; the social bases of self-respect; and basic rights and liberties. The contractarian tradition inevitably connects with Sen's work, given Sen's concern with poverty and justice. However, there are important differences between Rawls and Sen. Sen (1992) argues that primary goods are means rather than ends, and that various people need different levels of primary goods to lead flourishing lives. His approach takes account of human diversity in a way that Rawls appears not to. Furthermore, while Rawls provides a list of primary goods, and argues for giving a particularly strong priority to the least well off group, Sen refuses to provide a definitive list of valuable capabilities and a list of evaluative weights in outlining his capability approach, in part because of a concern with *consensus* or 'reasoned agreement' about any such a list and weights. This concern with agreement no doubt emerges partially from Sen's engagement with the contractarian tradition (Sen 1993, p. 48 and Qizilbash 2007a).

In his more recent work, Sen (2005a) argues – in part following Rawls' own writings on public reasoning (e.g. Rawls 1993) – that issues relating to lists and

weights are matters for public discussion. Underlying the argument is something approaching a contractarian (or 'democratic deliberation') view that public discussion is required if certain values and weights are to be an acceptable basis for social decisions (see Qizilbash 2007a). Nonetheless, Sen (2006) does explicitly reject aspects of the contractarian tradition – in particular by arguing that public discussion should not be restricted to people within the group to which principles of justice will apply. On Sen's view outsiders or 'distant voices' may also be introduced into public reasoning. Here he cites Adam Smith's writings about the 'impartial spectator', suggesting that those who view things from a distance may be impartial in a way that people within a society are not. If norms within a society strongly favour the interests of one group – e.g. men – at the expense of another – e.g. women - then the voices of people across the globe may be important in engaging with possible injustices.

Another strand of work at the borderline of ethics and economics - associated with David Gauthier (1986), Bob Sugden (1985) and Ken Binmore (1994, 1998 and 2005) - relates the contractarian tradition to recent developments in game theory and bargaining theory. The links between this literature and development economics have not yet been extensively explored. Some links are, nonetheless, made by Dasgupta. In his account, morality is understood as the outcome of a multi-stage game (Dasgupta 1993, chapter 3). In more specific parts of his work, specific norms – such as fertility norms - emerge from a game involving self-fulfilling beliefs (Dasgupta 1993, pp. 371-6) and gender inequality is understood in terms of the solution to a bargaining game (Dasgupta 1993, pp. 324-336). Issues relating to bargaining and gender have of course been discussed by others, notably by Bina Agarwal but also famously by Sen himself (see Agarwal 1994, and Sen 1990). Furthermore, game theoretic arguments of this sort are now commonplace in development economics, and some of them are relevant to issues, like corruption (Bardhan 1997), which matter for ethics. But the literature in development economics is rarely connected directly to contractarian ethics, and more work is needed before the extent of its value to development economics is appreciated. Clearly, this work may be used to analyse the manner in which moral and social norms emerge and change in the process of development. Claims are also sometimes made about the relationship between norms, culture and development (see Sen 2006b *inter alia*). For example, Sen has argued for the importance of moral and social norms in shaping and motivating behaviour arguing that much of economics tends to ignore the influence of moral and social

norms (Sen 1974, 1977 and 1985b). Recent work has extended that argument to specific considerations in relation to development, arguing, for example, that such norms are relevant to formulating corruption-deterrence policies (Sen 1999, pp. 275-8 and Qizilbash forthcoming b).

Contractarian arguments are also relevant to international norms and justice. John Rawls' later writings – particularly his book *The Law of Peoples* - involves an agreement between different 'peoples' - where 'peoples' can in effect be treated as nations - which generates 'inter-people' or international norms. Rawls does not here suggest any application of the difference principle to the world as a whole. There is a considerable and growing literature on these issues, particularly issues relating to global justice (Beitz 1979, Pogge 1994 and Dower 1999 *inter alia*). In an important early contribution Charles Beitz (1979) argued that Rawls' original position might indeed be applied at the global level to derive a difference principle implying a strong priority to the least well-off group across the world. Thomas Pogge (1994) developed a related argument and has argued that some form of global redistribution is even implied by Rawls' own framework in *The Laws of Peoples*. Unsurprisingly, Sen (2002b, 2005a, 2006a) has also been an important contributor to this debate and has related his work on capability to concerns about global justice. Martha Nussbaum (2004 and 2006) has also further developed and extended her version of the capability approach to address global justice. As development debates become global, and debates about the extent of global poverty and inequality are of increasing interest to economists, these contributions to moral and political philosophy will be increasingly relevant to development economics. Indeed, they should provide some of the intellectual and conceptual framework which will define new work in development economics about issues relating to global poverty and justice. Nonetheless, philosophers may also learn from development economics in articulating policy proposals.

4. Human Beings and their Complexity

Recent work on 'human development' in economics focusses on issues about human well-being and justice which have already been touched on. Applied work in this area has developed on Sen's theoretical work on capability. The most visible form that this work has taken is, nonetheless, policy work done by the UNDP, following pioneering contributions by the Pakistani development economist, Mahbub ul Haq (1995). This work insists – following Immanuel Kant – on

treating human beings as *ends* in themselves, not merely as means to other ends. This focus on ends rather than means clearly echoes, and is consistent with, what Sen has to say about Rawls' primary goods approach.

Some economists think that the human development literature involves an elementary misunderstanding. Human beings were, it is argued, always the focus of development planners and economists. Income was simply taken as an imperfect proxy for *human* welfare, expansion of which was seen as the primary end of development (Srinivasan 1994). Nonetheless, the literature on human development has, I suggest, forced development economists to address the nature of human beings. This has had at least one significant consequence which has not often been explicitly recognised. It has, to some degree, brought out the complexity of human beings, because it has made the multi-dimensional nature of well-being central. This point has now become something of a commonplace, but it militates against looking simply at income or seeing it as an adequate proxy.

While the human development literature starts from one of Kant's most famous insights about ends and means, it also echoes certain criticisms of both the Kantian and utilitarian traditions in ethics. It is sometimes argued that these traditions work with too abstract a view of human beings, a view which misrepresents their complexity. This line of criticism is particularly associated with Alisdair MacIntyre (1981) and Bernard Williams (1981, pp. 1-19), and modern 'virtue ethics'. More recently James Griffin (1996) has argued, in the same spirit, that ethics has not engaged seriously enough with the limitations of human agents. Related criticisms have been levelled at economics: the optimising agent of economic theory is, we are told, an abstract being with unbounded calculative capacities who, armed with a single preference ranking, avoids the hard choices and dilemmas which ordinary humans face (Levi 1986 *inter alia*).

These criticisms pinpoint the tendency to simplify the complexity of human life in both ethics and economics. If development economics – and the tradition of work on human development - is to take the complexity of human beings more seriously it too must engage with it more explicitly. Since these criticisms are levelled at both subjects, related literatures are implicitly already emerging in the two subjects. In economics, recent work attempts to deal with worries about abstracting from people's social backgrounds and identities (Akerlof and Kranton 2000), and has drawn out some conclusions for social policy. It can be argued that such work trivialises the issue of identity by treating it, in effect, as a matter of constrained optimization because it sees agents as simply making choices, subject to

constraints, taking into account the fact that they gain 'utility' from how they see themselves. Nonetheless, this research may help us to understand certain issues, like migration and gender, which are central concerns in development economics, better. A concern with identity has also led Frances Stewart (2002) to analyse 'horizontal inequalities' - which include inequalities between ethnic groups. Stewart (2005) has argued that work on capability and human development needs to take these concerns on board. In related work, Sen has sometimes been criticised for a failure to address issues relating to community and identity (Deneulin and Stewart 2002 *inter alia*). However, he too has increasingly emerged as an important voice on these issues and clearly sees the importance of issues relating to both community and identity (Sen 1985c, 1998, 2005b and 2006b, and Qizilbash 2007c). Work on social identity has also emerged in ethics (see Appiah 2005) and engages with 'communitarian' critiques of early versions of Rawls' theory of justice, which suggested that Rawls' account was individualistic (Sandel 1982 *inter alia*). Worries about the abstract or idealised picture of agents in economics have also led to a growing literature on 'bounded rationality' (Simon 1982 *inter alia*), and choice in the face of conflicting, possibly 'incommensurable', values. Some have used fuzzy set theory to formalise the nature of preferences, when agents are conflicted (Barrett and Pattanaik 1989). This line of research is closely related to recent work in moral philosophy (Chang 1997) and at the borderline of economics and philosophy (Qizilbash 1997b and 2002c). The growing literature in ethics may also be relevant to development economics, especially to the study of poverty. The poor face numerous hard choices. Dasgupta has made this point. He tells us that destitution 'brings in its wake ... the moral pain of having to make tragic choices' (Dasgupta 2001, p. 37). This point has, nonetheless, not yet been much related to the literature on tragic choices and incommensurable values, though its possible implications for Sen's capability approach have been raised (see Qizilbash forthcoming a).

The recognition of the complexity of the human condition is clearly also related to conceptual and measurement work in development economics. The plurality of human values is, after all, what has led many to recognise the multiple dimensions of well-being and poverty, and it is that plurality which contributes to the complexity of human choices. So issues relating to the 'incommensurability' of values are relevant to central issues about evaluation in development economics (Qizilbash 1997a and 1997b). While multi-dimensionality and fuzziness are being explored in the literatures on well-being and poverty (Chiappero-Martinetti 1996 and forthcoming and Qizilbash 2002b, 2003, Qizilbash and Clark 2005 and Clark

and Qizilbash forthcoming *inter alia*), they are also relevant to other issues, such as inequality (Basu 1987), environmental evaluation and cost-benefit analysis. In these fields, much remains to be done, and development economists, inevitably, need to engage with related work in ethics.

Conclusions

We can, I think, conclude that the recent growth of research at the borderlines of ethics and economics has already had a significant impact on development economics. Amartya Sen must take the credit for much of the progress. The economics of well-being has been one area which has flourished and explicitly re-engages ethics and economics. Nonetheless, there remain areas where, while the link between ethics and development economics is now clear, it still needs to be made and further explored. Texts and research in development economics need more explicitly to recognise certain contributions at the borderlines of ethics and economics, particularly in the areas of population, social norms, global justice and the complexity of human lives. While this paper only constitutes a partial discussion, we can already see some of the 'rewards of the exercise' of 'bringing economics closer to ethics', as well as appreciate that much remains to be done.

Endnotes

[1] Much of my own work (some of which is cited in the references) can be seen as falling in this area.

[2] For an overview and assessment of this work see Comim, Qizilbash and Alkire (forthcoming).

[3] The commentators include those who are (broadly) sceptical about the approach (Williams 1987 and Sugden 1993) as well as enthusiasts (Alkire 2002 and Clark 2002) and some who have attempted to develop related frameworks involving well-being or needs (Doyal and Gough 1991 and Qizilbash 1996a and 1998).

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