

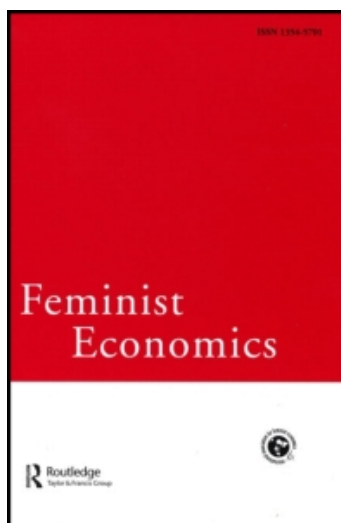
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CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

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CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

*Amartya Sen talks with
Bina Agarwal, Jane Humphries,
and Ingrid Robeyns*

BA, JH, IR: What factors first led you to examine gender concerns intellectually? For instance, you have often said that your experience during the Great Bengal famine shaped your interest in and work on famine. Have any such social or personal experiences shaped your work on gender?

AS: My interest in inequality, which goes back to my school days, was initially quite fixed on class divisions. My involvement with gender inequality grew more slowly. There was much greater concentration on class in standard politics (including standard student politics), and when in the early 1950s I was studying at Presidency College in Calcutta, it was taken for granted that class divisions were incomparably more important than other social divisions. Indeed, when later on, in the late 1960s, I started working on gender inequality (I was then teaching at Delhi University), many of my close friends still saw this as quite an “unsound” broadening of interest, involving a “dilution” of one’s “focus on class.”

But, in addition to that political issue of priority, it is also true that class-based inequalities are, in many ways, much more transparent, which no one—even a child—can miss, without closing one’s eyes altogether. Even my sense of agony and outrage at the Great Bengal famine of 1943, to which you refer (and which did strongly shake even my 9-year-old mind), was also linked to the class pattern of mortality. Aside from the anger and outrage at the fact that millions could actually die of hunger and hunger-related diseases, I was amazed by the extraordinary recognition that no one I knew personally, through family connections or social ones, had any serious economic problem during the famine, while unknown millions, men, women, and children, roamed the country in search of food and fell and perished. The class character of famines in particular and of economic deprivation in general was impossible to escape.

There was, of course, evidence of inequality between men and women as well. But its severe and brutal manifestations (on which I researched much later—from the late 1960s to the 1990s) were well hidden from immediate observation. And the less extreme expressions were confounded by a prevailing attitudinal fog. For example, in comparison with

the firm aspirations of the boys in my class, the girls, even very talented ones, seemed far less ambitious, with much less expectation. But this had the outward appearance of a difference in their respective “preferences”: “Who are you to tell people what they should do with their lives?” My troubling thoughts about the widely held implicit belief that men’s preferences were more focused and their interests, as a result, demanded more attention than women’s, seemed to be superficially answered by the fact this was an assumption that women typically made themselves—not just men. I was really struck by the fact that the female students seemed as convinced as the boys that there was no real issue of gender inequality, at least in their lives.

I guess those discussions, confusing and frustrating as they were at that time, later helped me to understand, in retrospect, how gender inequality survives and flourishes, working in a valuational mist that engulfs all and which works by making allies out of the victims. Many years later when I started working on gender inequality, those baffling memories proved very useful for my understanding of the nature and mechanism of gender inequality, and got me particularly interested in studying the role of values and “positional” observations as part of the process that sustains gender disparities. But, of course, I had not seen all this at all clearly in my student days.

Indeed, later on, when I got involved in gathering new empirical data on gender inequality, the attitudinal fog made regular appearances. For example, in the spring of 1983, I studied (with the help of wonderfully enthusiastic associates) the health status and weight of every child below 5 in two substantial Indian villages, and found that girls, born as healthy as the boys, gradually fell behind, mainly as a result of differential healthcare. But even though the physical evidence for it was quite conclusive, I was still being reassured by the parents that boys and girls received much the same attention, except that the boys’ “needs” were quite different from those of girls. Also, when the admission data from Indian hospitals that I was able to collect and use (with the help of a great collaborator, Jocelyn Kynch) gave clear evidence that girls had to be a lot more ill for them to be taken to a hospital, compared with boys, the family’s own beliefs and theories seemed to perceive little discrimination in treatment, only a sharper recognition of the seriousness of the ailments of the boys. So my early encounters, when I was a student, with the role of tilted attitudes and positional observations and slanted habits of thought did prove, in retrospect, highly educational for me (even though I did not know in my student days what a good education I was receiving through the frustrating conversations).

To turn to a different type of influence, I should also add one tremendously tragic personal experience, much later in life, that helped me to understand better one particular aspect of gender inequality. In 1985, with the sudden death of my wife, Eva Colorni (who was a strong

influence on my work on gender), I had to raise, as a single parent, two children (respectively 10 and 8 years old when Eva died), through their childhood and teenage years. I did, of course, have excellent help from my friends, but I also acquired a much clearer understanding of some of the problems that working mothers face in pursuing a career while looking after children. This “learning by doing” directly enriched my understanding of gender relations, and especially influenced my conceptual formulation of the interconnections between household obligations, outside work, and the division of benefits and chores of family life.

BA, JH, IR: Your work has been inspirational to feminist scholars on many fronts. Indeed many of us claim you as a feminist economist. Have some feminist writings also influenced you? Also, has a gender perspective contributed to any of your theoretical formulations?

AS: I am very interested in the works of contemporary feminist economists, and I have enormously benefited from the richness of contributions in this growing field (this journal itself, under the proficient editorship of Diana Strassmann, has done a tremendous job in facilitating this remarkable development). But a long time ago, my interest in feminist ideas was particularly stimulated by Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. It is, of course, a truly visionary book, and it made me think about subjects I had tended to neglect in my earlier years. I was, however, also interested in the question as to how such a great book could be altogether ignored by philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham, who would have gained so much from reading her. This applies not only to the issue of women’s deprivations, but also to such general matters as the understanding of how to think about “rights” in general, especially for any deprived group, women or any other underprivileged group.

Indeed, in the same year in which Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* was published, that is in 1792, Jeremy Bentham was busy writing his *Anarchical Fallacies: Being an Examination of the Declaration of Rights Issued during the French Revolution*. Bentham chastised the French revolutionaries for “abusing” the concept of rights, by seeing them as social demands, rather than as legal commands: “from real laws come real rights,” he said, “but from *imaginary laws*” can come only “*imaginary rights*.” This made Bentham jump to the conclusion that what the French revolutionaries were talking about was “simple nonsense” and perhaps even “rhetorical nonsense, nonsense upon stilts.” That bit of legalism, combined with Bentham’s inability to get anything out of his ethical hat other than the rabbit of utility, led him to overlook the great reach and expanse of political and moral thinking that the idea of the rights of the underprivileged could constructively stimulate. The full title, incidentally, of Wollstonecraft’s book is *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: with Strictures on Political and Moral*

Subjects, and it is the inescapable need for political and moral reasoning that is often missed, even today, when one theorist or another chastises the very notion of “human rights” as being imaginary nonsense.

Mary Wollstonecraft was also ahead of the “human rights” thinkers who, while differing from Bentham’s legalism, saw human rights to be, as it were, “legal rights in waiting,” that is, as ethical claims that must be legalized for them to be effective. Wollstonecraft’s analysis of the variety of processes through which subjugation and deprivation come about pointed to the constructive role that “recognition” can play (even without formal legalization). This provides a kind of theoretical backdrop to the nonlegal but influential “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” adopted in 1948 (more than 150 years after Wollstonecraft’s book). It also provides a prescient understanding of the need for activism (well reflected in modern feminist movements – campaigning for rights of women and also of underprivileged men), employing a variety of means, such as political agitation, public debates, and monitoring of iniquities and abuses. Since the deprivations of different groups have much in common, Wollstonecraft’s gender perspective opened the way to the understanding of other kinds of denials and rejections. That, by the way, is one reason why the relevance of feminist economics extends far beyond the specific domain of gender relations (important as that domain is).

I can similarly describe the impact that other feminist writings, new and old, have had on my thinking. Even Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, though focused on rather different issues, gave me some ideas that proved useful in my being able to understand how it comes about that many deprived women readily accept the fog of pro-inequality apologia as a true description of reality. Incidentally, Marx’s concept of “false consciousness,” with which de Beauvoir was very familiar, applies much more readily to spurious perceptions regarding gender inequality than to class inequality, in which Marx himself was most interested. Similarly, Ester Boserup’s *Women’s Role in Economic Development* gave me several insights, especially about the linkage between women’s economic activities and the deals that women get.

I do see myself, in part, as a feminist economist, in addition to having other descriptions to which I respond. This is partly because of my direct involvement with gender-related issues, but also because of my conviction that the perspective of gender inequality gives us real insight into asymmetries and deprivations of other kinds as well. Inequality (in which I am comprehensively interested) may not be an undifferentiated whole, but nor is it a mechanical mixture of disparate components that do not interact with one another, nor in any way resemble each other.

You ask about the impact of feminist ideas on my “theoretical formulations.” There is quite an embarrassment of riches here. My understanding of inequality and deprivation in various fields was directly

influenced by what I learned about the nature, causation, and mechanism of gender inequality. For example, my skepticism about relying on utility or on unscrutinized preferences for moral assessment, or for political evaluation, or for social choice, has been strongly influenced by what I have learned from studies of gender inequalities, particularly about the role that adaptive preferences and attitudes play in socially sustaining these inequalities. This certainly has had a substantial impact on the formulations I have used in moral and political philosophy, and in social choice theory, and also on my understanding of the process of economic development and social change.

BA, JH, IR: Many argue that although you have written extensively on gender inequality, you do not directly address the question of power within gender relations. Do you agree?

AS: I do not think I can agree with that. I cannot even understand how it could be possible to discuss gender inequality extensively (as it is suggested, I have done), without going into the question of power within gender relations, since power is so central. In fact, the importance of power is part and parcel of my understanding, both directly and indirectly, of gender inequality.

First, if one is assessing gender inequality not in the mental or psychological scale of utilities, but primarily in terms of the real “capabilities” that women and men respectively have (which is how I formulate the problem), the powers they respectively have – to do or be what they value – are constitutively important. This can vary from such elementary powers as not being subjected to physical abuse or violent assault and the freedom to lead unsubjected lives (where power can enter in a very crude form) to having the opportunity to develop one’s talents and to achieve self-respect and the respect of others (where power can take more sophisticated forms). So power is directly involved in the “assessment” of gender inequality.

Second, on the “causal” side, one type of power asymmetry leads to, or helps to facilitate, power asymmetries of other types. Power has a central role in what I call “cooperative conflict” which is central to my understanding of gender inequality within the family and ultimately in the society at large. Women and men have both *congruent* and *conflicting* interests affecting family living. Because of the extensive areas of congruence of interest, decision-making in the family tends to take the form of the pursuit of cooperation, with some agreed solution, usually *implicit*, of the conflicting aspects. Each of the parties has much to lose if cooperation were to break down, and yet there are various alternative “cooperative solutions,” each of which is better for both the parties than no cooperation at all, but which respectively give different, possibly *extremely*

different, relative gains to the two parties. In the emergence of some cooperative solution among the many that are available, the powers of the two parties play a crucial part: for example, the more powerful party can obtain more favorable divisions of the family's overall benefits and chores.

There are, thus, far-reaching causal impacts of the presence and use of powers of different kinds, from physical powers (even the asymmetry in brute physical strength) to institutionally mediated powers (such as the social powers arising from traditional roles inside and outside the household). I would have some difficulty in grasping how someone can read, say, my "Gender and Cooperative Conflict" (in the Irene Tinker collection: *Persistent Inequalities*, 1990) or the chapter on "Women's Agency and Social Change" in *Development as Freedom* (1999), and still think that I am not interested in the role of power in gender relations. Perhaps the point is not about whether the *concept* of power is being used, but about the frequency with which the *word* "power" occurs in my writing (as opposed to the ones I tend more often to use, such as "empowerment" or "capability" or "freedom" or "agency" or "threat" or "vulnerability").

BA, JH, IR: In your frequent references to Kerala's success with gender-related development indicators, you mainly highlight state policy. But don't you think Kerala's largely matrilineal tradition, which gave most women notable property rights and made daughters more sought after than sons, is also a critical and interrelated factor?

AS: I entirely agree that the presence of a matrilineal tradition of property ownership and inheritance in Kerala has made a major difference. In fact, I have discussed this connection in *Development as Freedom* (pp. 220–1), and also in my joint books with Jean Drèze, *Hunger and Public Action* (1989: 224–5) and *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (1995: 142–3). Perhaps I should emphasize it more, compared with other favorable features of Kerala, such as an early commitment to public education and especially education of girls (related to state policy in Travancore and Cochin, the two "native states" – formally outside the British empire), and a firm history of radical politics (originally getting dialectical strength from the fact that the hold of upper classes and castes, which was challenged by the new left-wing politics, was stronger in Kerala than in most parts of India).

However, there may be two difficulties in making the matrilineal property rights the central story. First, this system of property inheritance applies only to a part of Kerala's population and not to the whole of it. Of course, the Nairs (the most notable among the matrilineal communities) were influential in state policy and there is certainly a connection there, and also in the "demonstration effect" of women's property rights for a significant section of the state's population, but the picture is not as simple as it would

have been if the system actually gave (as you say) “most women notable property rights and made daughters more sought after than sons.” The contribution of matrilineal property rights for a part of the population has to be placed within a fuller picture, which must recognize several other favorable features of Kerala.

Second, to put great emphasis on historical luck (in having a “matrilineal tradition” of property rights over centuries) may well be unduly discouraging for what can be done here and now. That is one reason for highlighting state policy, as you rightly say I do, but state policy can be concerned not only with education and other measures of women’s empowerment, but also with reforming ownership and inheritance rights in favor of women, which too can enhance the agency and power of women. I should perhaps mention in this context, that when India became independent in 1947, in the newly formed state of Kerala (based mainly on the ground of a shared language, Malayalam), the bulk of the population came from the two “native states” outside the British empire (Travancore and Cochin), but another bit came from the old province of Madras. Malabar – from British India – was immensely backward socially in comparison with Travancore and Cochin, including in the role of women. But a uniform state policy, with particular emphasis on helping Malabar to “catch up,” has made, by now, the different parts of Kerala nearly indistinguishable from each other in terms of social development. To rely too heavily on the luck of having a “favorable history” can be unduly pessimistic.

BA, JH, IR: In what ways do you think gender analysis has had an impact on mainstream economics?

AS: Well, I don’t think it has yet had the kind of impact it should have, and I am sure will eventually have. There is, however, already a very widespread recognition that in the apparently neutral and open-minded tradition of mainstream economics, there are implicit biases which lead to an over-concentration on some questions rather than others which are of particular interest to disadvantaged groups in general and to women in particular. So, in this sense, a significant contribution has already been made through questioning the complacency about neglecting some significant issues, and this is having the effect of broadening the agenda of investigation. When I had to organize, as President-elect of the American Economic Association, the annual meeting of the Association in 1994 I was very impressed by the number and quality of contributions that were submitted on inequality which were clearly influenced, in one way or another, by gender analysis, and broadly speaking, the feminist perspective.

The exact question you have posed is hard to answer for two distinct reasons. First, there is no agreed reading of what constitutes “mainstream

economics.” For example, is development economics a part of mainstream economics? If it is, then the impact of gender analysis is clearly well reflected in the kind of issues that have received attention in recent years, at least in a part of what is seen as development economics. Also, the economics of the family cannot but be influenced by gender analysis, and certainly in recent years there have been many contributions that take the interests of women and men within the family as distinct entities, rather than their being submerged in some uniform formulation of the undifferentiated interests of “the family.” So the answer to your question will depend partly on whether the economics of the family is seen as lying firmly outside mainstream economics or not.

Second, gender analysis can have indirect effects as well as direct ones, and sometimes the indirect effects can be quite powerful even though there is no immediately visible gender connection. Let me illustrate. One of the lessons from the recent analyses of family economics (through seeing it as a “bargaining problem” or as some other form of “cooperative conflict”) is the recognition that a family arrangement can be very inequitable and unjust even when the different parties gain something in comparison with having no cooperation at all. When there are gains from cooperation, there can be many alternative arrangements that benefit each party compared with no cooperation. It is necessary, therefore, to ask whether the distribution of gains is fair or acceptable, and not just whether there exist some gain for all parties (which would be the case for a great many alternative arrangements).

This elementary lesson from family economics, and its extensive relevance for feminist economics, has an immediate application in understanding the issues involved in the current debates about globalization. The defenders of the present system of globalized economic relations often argue that globalization cannot be bad since it improves the lot of all the countries – the poorer as well as the richer ones. However, as the analysis of cooperative conflict in family economics shows, that outcome, even if true, will not in itself establish anything about the fairness of the system of globalization. What has to be shown is not only that all parties gain something, which will hold for a great many alternative arrangements, but that the distribution of gains is, in some plausible sense, fair, or at least not grossly unfair. The analogy is with the understanding, from gender studies, that to recognize that a particular family arrangement is unequal and unfair, it does not have to be shown that women would have done comparatively better had there been no families at all (“if you don’t like it, pray live on your own!”), but only that the sharing of the benefits of the family system is seriously unequal and unfair as things are typically organized.

Recent debates on globalization have generated much heat and comparatively little light by concentrating on the wrong question, with defenders (or apologists) of globalization claiming that all the parties have

gained, while the detractors (or egg-throwers) claim that the poor have gotten poorer. The lesson to derive from gender studies is that concentrating on the question whether there has been some gain (anything at all) for all is not in itself the right focus of investigation. The poor do not have to get actually poorer for the distribution system to be thoroughly unjust; the issue is the relative sharing of gains, not the presence of an actual loss from the prevailing system of interrelations (which may or may not occur).

BA, JH, IR: You are a rare economist in your weaving of economics with politics and ethics. Most mainstream economists by contrast insistently separate the normative from the positive. Have you found yourself consistently battling mainstream economists as a result? And which thrust do you think will prevail?

AS: There is a long tradition in economics that takes normative issues as seriously as positive ones. That tradition includes not only Smith, Mill, Marx, Edgeworth, Marshall, Pigou, and many others, but also a number of contemporary economists. So in taking normative economics seriously, against the admonition of positivists, I do not feel particularly lonely or abandoned.

The issue of “separation” of normative and positive questions is, however, more difficult and also more complex. I do not take the view that in no sense does such a separation communicate anything useful: there is a difference between saying “the number of people laid off has increased this year” and “it is terrible that the number of people laid off has increased this year.” It is, of course, possible to have a fine philosophical argument as to whether that separation is sustainable in terms of their respective epistemic and ethical contents (I am interested in that question, but it is not central to the practice of economics). On the other hand, it is actually quite important to insist that once our ethics lead us to the kind of questions that we ought to ask, we must then seek, in the case of mainly empirical questions, as factually sound answers as possible (within the limits of the nature of the questions asked). We can rightly grumble that it is a great pity that there is so little work on inequality and so much on efficiency and aggregate growth, but when we start looking at the empirical picture of inequality we should not be guided primarily by our morality, ignoring the evidence that can be found (often with hard empirical work). If I reacted with a little reserve to the very kindly meant remark of my friend Robert Solow that I was “the conscience of economics” (which is quoted quite often), it was because of my conviction that conscience alone could get us nowhere. For example, burning the midnight candle to make sense of unruly and awkward famine data to construct a coherent picture of what happened is not a matter of conscience, but of hard, empirical sweat.

In terms of the motivation for your question, if I judge it right, we must have some sense of: (1) the extent to which economic analysis can actually help ethical reasoning, and (2) the extent to which ethics can be useful in economic investigations. I have taken a rather interlinked view in claiming that ethics and economics make substantial contributions to each other (and have argued for that perspective in such writings as *On Ethics and Economics*). To state briefly the argument for (1), since values are fact-dependent, factual economic analysis of a relevant kind is central to ethical assessment of situations and policies. Regarding (2), policies need values and thus economic policies do need ethics. Also, facts are endless, and to decide what to look at in empirical economics, we need to have a sense of what is important and valuable. Further, since people's behavior responds to ethical arguments, we have to understand ethical arguments to follow economic reasoning. Even though I have not had a great many followers, neither have I found a great sense of hostility to what I have tried to do. I should be content with that.

BA, JH, IR: You take a rather negative view of identity politics. But for the women's movement, identity politics based on common gender interests has brought some obvious gains, without women necessarily having to deny their other identities. Could you comment?

AS: I quite agree that the identity of being a woman – or for that matter of being a feminist (whether female or male) – can be very important in pursuing gender justice. And it has certainly tended to work that way. My complaint about identity politics is not meant to question, in any way, the contributions that the sense of identity of deprived groups can make in changing the predicament of those groups. Gender or class or caste can be taken up from the perspective of deprivation and can then be an important part of resisting inequality and injustice.

Part of my unease with identity politics lies in the use that is made of the bonds of identity by privileged groups to act against the interest of others. Identity is invoked not only by impoverished groups seeking redress, but also by privileged groups that try to suppress and terrorize the others. For example, the targeting – even genocide – of vulnerable communities is often organized through incitement based on invoking and cultivating the belligerent identity of powerful communities (White supremacists, anti-Semitic “Aryans,” and so on). To take another kind of example, the solidarity of land-owning castes in northern Bihar has been responsible for assaulting and murdering cultivating laborers seeking liberation.

However, more foundationally – and this is the central issue – it is appalling to insist that identity is a matter of “discovery” (to quote a favorite phrase of “identity” activists), rather than its being a matter of choice – and of ethics – for us to determine what importance we want to

(and have reason to) attach to one or other of the many identities that we simultaneously have. It is one thing for, say, a woman activist to decide that the identity of being a woman is overwhelmingly important, given her own values and the nature of the unjust world in which she lives, and quite another for people being led like herds in an organized direction to pursue some intolerant cause or an orchestrated program. People can be suddenly made to feel that they are not really what they took themselves to be: not Rwandans, but Hutus (“we hate Tutsis”), or not Yugoslavs but Slavs (“you and I don’t like Albanians”). “Any kiddie in school can love like a fool,” Ogden Nash had claimed, “but hating, my boy, is an art.” That art is widely practiced by skilled artists and instigators and the weapon of choice often is the imposition of a unique identity that has to be “discovered.” I protest against both (1) the failure to see that we belong to many different groups, so that the identities that we choose to focus on is a matter of our decision, and (2) the incendiary use that is made of identity politics to terrorize the nonmembers of a privileged identity. I am actually writing a book on all this (tentatively called *Identity and Innocence*), but you will not find me grumbling there about choosing to give priority to one’s identity as a member of an underprivileged group.

BA, JH, IR: One field of growing importance in which there are few references to Amartya Sen is environmental economics. Are there aspects of your theoretical work that would illuminate environmental concerns? And are you planning to address such concerns more explicitly in future work?

AS: I have written a certain amount about environmental economics, but I am not surprised that I have not been particularly influential. I think environmental problems often need a more radical formulation, taking note of their interdependences with other aspects of social choice. For example, the literature on “contingent valuation” asked questions about how much will you be willing to pay to remove some environmental disaster. The answer must depend on many implicit presumptions, regarding what others will do, and what difference I can credibly believe will my own contribution make. The question as posed can be interpreted as either being partly unformulated (“you assume about the others what you like”) or being strangely presumptive in assuming that a socially integrated problem can be seen as an atomistic *as if* market choice (“if your paying \$10 will eliminate – on its own without anyone else paying anything at all – that entire disaster resulting from Exxon Valdez spill, will you be willing to ‘buy’ it?”). The question under the former interpretation is altogether unclear, and under the latter interpretation, it strains one’s imagination too much (“would I spend \$10 if it would, on its own, clear up the entire sound befouled by the Exxon Valdez spill – come again?”). It

also, by the way, violates what Arrow called “the independence of irrelevant alternatives.” A proper statement of the problems calls for a fuller “social choice formulation,” as I tried to discuss in a paper (called “Environmental Evaluation and Social Choice”) in the *Japanese Economic Review* (1995). This argued for eschewing the implicit market models underlying many environmental formulations, and for using instead a broader social choice structure.

A similar difficulty arises in following the powerful reasoning presented by Gro Brundtland and Robert Solow on “sustainable development.” Solow has argued in his monograph *An Almost Practical Step towards Sustainability* (1992) that we can see sustainability as the requirement that the next generation must be left with “whatever it takes to achieve a standard of living at least as good as our own and to look after their next generation similarly.” This is an excellent formulation (dealing with future generations recursively), but we can ask whether the overall standard of living is the only thing we may be concerned with. There are several difficulties here.

First, it is a very anthropocentric concept. Indeed, the preservation of human living standards need not be the only concern that human beings themselves have. To use a medieval European distinction, we are not merely “patients” preoccupied with just our own standard of living, but also responsible and active “agents” who are capable of judging the world around us and undertaking wider commitments. As Buddha argued in *Sutta Nipata*, since we are enormously more powerful than the other species, we human beings have some responsibility towards them that arises from this asymmetry of power. We can indeed make a significant distinction between (1) our ability to preserve the quality of our human lives and (2) our ability to preserve what we think is worth preserving (perhaps including other species), not just to the extent that they impinge on the quality of human lives.

Second, the Brundtland-Solow approach may be too aggregative if we have reason to attach importance to particular freedoms, even when there is no loss in the overall standards of living. To illustrate the difference (with an example that does not involve future generations – only a contemporary confrontation), if it is thought that a person has the right not to have smoke blown on to her face by a heavy – and indiscriminate – smoker, the right to be free of secondary smoking need not be compromised merely because the person thus affected happens to be very rich and endowed with an outstanding standard of living (particularly compared with the miserable smoker). Similarly a fouled environment in which the future generations are denied the presence of fresh air (say, because of some specially nasty emission) will remain foul even if the future generations are so very rich and so tremendously well served in terms of other amenities of good life that their *overall* standards of living

are well sustained. The loss of particular freedoms matters, even when overall living standards are preserved.

Third, exactly *how* the environment and living standards are preserved can itself make a difference in a fuller social choice formulation. If environmental policies lead to the loss of human freedom in the cause of preserving or promoting living standards, then that loss has to be specifically acknowledged, rather than being “submerged” in an aggregative accounting of the standard of living. To illustrate, even if it turns out that restricting human freedoms through draconian policies of coercive family planning (as in, say, the “one-child family” in China) helps to sustain living standards (this is, in fact, empirically far from clear, as I have tried to discuss in “Fertility and Coercion,” *University of Chicago Law Review*, 1996), it must nevertheless be unequivocally acknowledged that something of importance is sacrificed – rather than sustained – through these policies themselves.

One way of putting all these concerns into an integrated formulation is to argue that what we must be concerned with is not just sustaining living standards, but sustaining human freedoms. Indeed, I would argue that the idea of “sustainable freedoms” can add something substantial to the living-standard-based notion of sustainable development. It can combine the very important concept of sustainability – rightly championed by Brundtland and Solow – with a view of human beings as agents whose freedoms matter, rather than seeing people simply as patients who are no greater than their living standards. So I do want to see quite a big advance in environmental economics. However, I would be extremely surprised if this campaign proves to be easy. I am certainly not holding my breath!

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