

Review of: "Economics Rationality in the World of Amartya Sen"

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Evi Mariani does two things very well in this manuscript. Mariani clearly states Sen's complex position on rationality and draws out fairly well the contrast with conventional neoclassical economics.

I emphasize something different in my response: what Sen almost does. Sen almost moves us beyond an individualist ontology, but not quite. Mariani hints at this but leaves the argument (as does Sen) working at the level of individual ethical decision-making.

Let me point to two examples.

Sen is justly famous for the argument that it is irrational for actors not to reflect on their preferences. This does open a space more ethical reflection as Sen understands and Mariani emphasizes. But the process of reflection appears to be largely individual. Though it is hinted that the contents of ethics might come from belonging to a group, there is no recognition that the content of preferences might be subject to a collective process of reflection – only a hint.

Sen also is justly famous for his discussion of capabilities as the goals or content of economic life. Though Sen knows capabilities have a social element, he continues to talk about these as provided for or cultivated in individuals. But if these capabilities are dependent on relations among individuals in a group, among societies in a world system, and among species perhaps, then our unit shifts from individual to the social – to the relational. Sen implicitly points us in this direction, but we must drag him further than where he wants to go. After all, he was trained as an economist and struggled to break free of the individualist ontology.

Let me draw attention to one other point. Mariani uses Hacking's article about child abuse to show the way language shapes the world to imply an analogy to economists' use of the term rationality. I think the point could have been made more sharply. The rationality postulate (or axiom) purports to reflect a reality apart from the terms or language we use. But it in fact shapes the world it claims to simply reflect. There is some work on how studying economics shapes the behavior and attitudes of the students in the direction the axioms would suggest. Economic actors are made.

If economists wrote textbooks based on Sen's assumptions, how would that shape the world?

The manuscript is thought-provoking and it could be more so than it is.

