‘Happy Slaves’? The Adaptation Problem and Identity Politics in the Writings of Amartya Sen

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<th>Journal:</th>
<th>International Journal of Social Economics</th>
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<td>Manuscript ID</td>
<td>IJSE-09-2015-0232.R1</td>
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<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Research Paper</td>
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<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>Amartya Sen, Adaptation Problem, Identity Politics, Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Benthamite utilitarianism</td>
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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between Amartya Sen’s notion of adaptation and his views on identity politics by focusing on the issue of slavery and, more specifically, on the example of the happy or contented slave. The methodological approach adopted is that of conceptual analysis, as is typical for work of this kind. The paper concludes that the example of the happy or contented slave is indeed a fruitful one for those interested in exploring the relationship between Sen’s views on ‘the adaptation problem’ and his views on identity politics, especially in relation to the subjection of women. Here Sen’s debt to the ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill is particularly important. One implication of the argument of the paper is that there is a need to consider more carefully the differences that exist between the views of Wollstonecraft and Mill, so far as the example of the happy or contented slave is concerned. One practical implication of the paper is that, hopefully, it establishes the continued relevance of the ideas of thinkers such as Wollstonecraft and Mill today, not least because of the influence that they have had on theoreticians such as Amartya Sen. The paper addresses issues which are of considerable social and political significance, especially for women in underdeveloped societies today. The example of the happy or contented slave has not received much discussion in the literature on Sen, although Sen himself has suggested that the distinction between happiness and contentment is an important one, which does merit further discussion.
Introduction

'The utilitarian approach attaches no intrinsic importance to claims of rights and freedoms...It is sensible enough to take note of happiness, but we do not necessarily want to be happy slaves.'


In this article I shall attempt to connect what appear at first sight to be three separate issues. The first is what is usually referred to as 'the adaptation problem.' The second is slavery and Amartya Sen’s attitude towards it. The third is identity politics. In my view, focusing on the example of the happy or contented slave is a good way in for those who wish to understand Sen’s views on the part that the phenomenon of adaptation has to play in the sphere of identity politics, especially so far as the subjection of women is concerned. The article has three parts, in which each of the above issues is discussed in turn.

Part One

Sen on the Adaptation Problem

'A slave in fetters loses everything – even the desire to be freed from them. He grows to love his slavery.'


The phenomenon of adaptation or of adaptive preferences has been discussed by Amartya Sen on more than one occasion over the years (Sen, 1984: 191; Sen, 1987: 11; Sen, 1997 [1992]: 55, 149; Sen, 1999a: 62-63, 284; Sen, 1999b: 19; Sen, 2002a: 82; Sen, 2006a: 82; Sen, 2006b: 9; Sen, 2009: Sen, 2012 [1987]: 45-46; Sen, 2014a [1999]: 14-15). It has also received quite a lot of discussion in the secondary literature on Sen and his ideas (Brannmark, 2006; Clark, 2009; Khader, 2009; Qizilbash, 2006a; Qizilbash, 2006b; Qizilbash, 2009a; Teschl & Comim, 2005). Sen’s discussion of the adaptation problem arises in the course of his critique of Benthamite utilitarianism and of the theoretical assumptions of neo-classical economics, especially in its most recent variant, rational choice theory. Arguably the most significant and influential recent example of this kind of thinking is Richard Layard’s Happiness: Lessons from a New Science (2005).

The classical formulation of the adaptation problem, which is most often cited by commentators (e.g. Bok, 2010: 55; Qizilbash, 2006b: 25-26; 91; Sumner, 1996: 66, 91, 162; Sumner, 2006: 4-5), can be found in On Ethics and Economics, in which Sen comments on the situation of ‘the traditional underdogs’ of contemporary society, both from the standpoint of their happiness and from that their well-being. The difficulty with Benthamite utilitarianism, he argues:

‘arises from the particular interpretation of well-being that utility provides. To judge the well-being of a person exclusively on the metric of happiness or desire-fulfilment has some obvious limitations...A person who has had a life of misfortune, with very little opportunities, and rather little hope, may be more easily reconciled to deprivations than others reared in more fortunate and affluent circumstances.'
The metric of happiness may, therefore, distort the extent of deprivation...[T]he hopeless beggar, the precarious landless labourer, the dominated housewife, the hardened unemployed or the over-exhausted coolie may all take pleasures in small mercies and manage to suppress intense suffering for the necessity of continuing survival, but it would be ethically deeply mistaken to attach a correspondingly small value to the loss of their well-being because of this survival strategy (Sen, 2012 [1987]: 45-46; see also Sen, 1987: 11; Sen, 1999a: 62; Sen, 2006a: 82; Sen, 2009: 274-75, 282-83).

When discussing the adaptation problem, Sen offers three criticisms of Layard and of Benthamite utilitarianism. The first is that Benthamite utilitarians identify happiness and well-being. In response to this, Sen insists that happiness or 'utility' should not be identified with and 'does not adequately represent well-being' (Sen, 2012 [1987]: 47; Sen, 2009a: 270, 272). The point about Sen's underdogs, of course, is that there is a mis-match between their actual well-being and their reported happiness. Sen distinguishes clearly between well-being and happiness. Moreover, he attaches more importance on the whole to the concept of well-being than he does to that of happiness. As Mozzaffar Qizilbash has noted, although references to happiness are 'central' to utilitarianism, they play a 'relatively limited role' in Sen's version of the capabilities approach (Qizilbash, 2006b: 22). This is not to say, however, that Sen attaches no importance at all to happiness. For that is not the case. His point, rather, is simply that although happiness is necessary for well-being, it is not sufficient. There is more to well-being than happiness. In Sen's opinion, 'the utilitarian conception' offers a 'defective' understanding of well-being. For although 'being happy' is a 'momentous achievement,' what the situation of the traditional underdogs shows is that 'it is not the only achievement that matters to one's well-being' (Sen, 2012 [1987]: 60).

Sen's second criticism of Layard and Benthamite utilitarianism, focuses on their subjectivism. According to Sen, although they do 'pay attention to each person's well-being,' nevertheless they regard 'well-being as essentially a mental characteristic, viz. the pleasure or happiness generated’ (Sen, 1999a: 58). As Sen understands it, this is the view that first person reports about well-being are authoritative. Hence it is not possible for anybody to make a mistake when making such reports. This view might be termed 'welfare subjectivism.' As Sen puts it, this form of welfarism sees value 'only in individual utility, which is defined in terms of some mental characteristic, such as pleasure, happiness or desire.' On this view, happiness is a matter of having certain sensations or feelings. In the words of Layard, happiness is nothing more than being cheerful or 'feeling good,' whereas unhappiness or misery is simply a matter of 'feeling bad' (Layard, 2011 [2005]: 6). The point about Sen's traditional underdogs is of course that their self-reported happiness is relatively high, whereas their actual well-being, according to any objective measure of well-being, is much lower than these reports would suggest.

Sen refers to 'the insufficient depth of the criterion of happiness or desire-fulfilment in judging a person’s well-being' (Sen, 2012 [1987]: 46). For although 'happiness and the fulfilment of desire may well be valuable for the person's well-being,' nevertheless they cannot 'on their own or even together' serve as an measure or indicator 'of well-being,' properly or adequately understood (Sen, 2012 [1987]: 46). In Sen's opinion, then, although the Benthamite utilitarian interest in people’s well-being does have 'obvious attractions,' nevertheless this is only true if we get away from their 'utility-centred mental-metric way of...
judging well-being.’ (Sen, 1999a: 60). We need an alternative way of assessing well-being, one which pays attention to ‘objective circumstances’ as well as to subjective mental states (Sen, 2012 [1987]: 55).

The third of Sen’s criticisms of Layard and Benthamite utilitarians is that they fail to appreciate that well-being, no matter how it is understood, ‘is not the only thing that is valuable’ for human beings, or for a good quality of life (Sen, 2012 [1987]: 46-47). We have seen that Sen argues that there is more to well-being than happiness, in Layard’s subjectivist sense of that term. However, Sen goes further than this. According to his theoretical schema, there is more to a good quality of life than well-being, just as there is more to well-being than happiness. If well-being properly understood (including subjectively conceived happiness) is a necessary condition for a good quality of life, nevertheless it is not sufficient. Something else is also required.

What is that something else? Sen’s answer to this question is freedom. He states that there are two reasons for criticizing Benthamite utilitarianism. The first is that it ‘ignores achievements other than those reflected in one of these mental metrics’ of ‘pleasure, happiness or desire,’ for example those things that Sen associates with the notion of well-being. The second is that it ‘concentrates only on achievements’ and in consequence overlooks completely the importance of the value of freedom for a good quality of life. As Sen puts it, Benthamite utilitarianism is an approach to ethics which ‘ignores freedom’ altogether (Sen, 1997 [1992]: 6). By freedom, here, Sen has in mind those capabilities, or substantive opportunities, that are required if individual agents are to be able to pursue the things that they consider to be valuable or worth pursuing. His critique of Benthamite utilitarianism is that it does not take into account the contribution that freedom makes, not to well-being, but to the quality of life.

Robert Sugden has claimed that Sen regards freedom ‘as an essential part of well-being’ (Sugden, 2006: 17). If this were correct then it would follow that in Sen’s view an increase in freedom would ceteris paribus necessarily lead to an increase in well-being. It is clear however, from what Sen says about the example of Mohandas Gandhi, in which an increase in freedom was associated with a consequent reduction in well-being, that Sen does not think that this is the case (Sen, 2009a: 290; Sen, 2009b: 286; Sen, 2006b: 21). In Sen’s opinion, although freedom is certainly a good thing, and increased freedom does ceteris paribus necessarily lead to an increased quality of life, this is not because freedom is a constituent of well-being. According to Sen, increased freedom is not a necessary means for increasing well-being, because my well-being might increase without any prior increase in my freedom. Nor is increased freedom a sufficient condition for increased well-being, because (as in the case of Gandhi) one’s freedom might increase without any consequent increase in well-being.

Rather, Sen argues that freedom is something that is of value for human beings in its own right, quite independently of the consequences of its being exercised, whether or not it is in fact used by them to enhance their own well-being. Freedom, Sen argues, ‘may be seen as being intrinsically important’ (Sen, 1997 [1992]: 41). It stands alongside well-being as a fundamental value for human beings, both as a constituent of a good quality of life and as a goal of public policy.

On this reading of his views, what Sen values, ultimately, is the quality of life (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993). However, when offering an account of what this involves, he attaches importance to two things and not just one. These are well-being, on the one hand, and freedom on the other. As Sen puts it, ‘the quality of life a person enjoys is not merely a matter of what she achieves, but also of
what the person has had the opportunity to choose from. In this view, a “good
life” is partly a life of genuine choice, and not one in which the person is forced
into a particular life – however rich it might be in other respects’ (Sen, 2014
[1987]: 45). The fact that Sen distinguishes between the notion of well-being
and that of the quality of life, albeit not consistently or systematically, has been
noted by a number of commentators (Sumner, 1996: 68; Sumner, 2006: 17;
Teschl & Comim, 2005: 310-11). However, insufficient importance has been
attached to this distinction, which in my view has not received the attention it
deserves from commentators on Sen’s work.

Sen does not believe that an individual’s success in the pursuit of a good
quality of life can be ‘judged exclusively in terms of his or her well-being’ (Sen,
2012 [1987]: 40). This is so for two reasons. First, the view that it could be so
judged overlooks completely the importance of freedom for the quality of life.
Second, an individual agent, for example Mohandas Gandhi, might have certain
ethical or political commitments. Consequently, he or she might ‘value the
promotion of certain causes and the occurrence of certain things, even though
the importance that is attached to these developments are not reflected by the
advancement of his or her well-being’ (Sen, 2012 [1987]: 40). So far as
achievements are concerned, therefore, any assessment of an individual agent’s
successful pursuit of a good life must take into account the ‘totality’ of their
‘considered goals and objectives,’ which, as again in the case of Gandhi, might
not include their own well-being (Sen, 1997 [1992]: 56). Sen accepts that an
individual agent might have, goals which could have nothing to do with their own
well-being, or which the pursuit and/or successful achievement of which, even if
it enhances their quality of life, may lead to a decrease rather than to an
increase in their well-being.

It should be emphasized that Sen presents the three criticisms discussed
above as applying to Benthamite utilitarianism only. It is less obvious that these
criticisms also apply to John Stuart Mill’s version of the doctrine (see Qizilbash,
2006b; Sen, 2006a; Sugden, 2006; Sumner, 2006). The Aristotelian notion of
eudaimonia springs to mind at this point, for it is sometimes cited as an example
of an objectivist rather than a subjectivist understanding of both well-being and
happiness - two concepts which, as Sen suggests, are often identified with one
another (Annas, 1993: 45-46, 330-32; Annas, 2002; Dybikowski, 1981; Jost &
Shiner, 2002; Kraut, 1979; McMahon, 2006: 7, 25, 36, 44-47, 50, 64-65; Ring,
1979; Sumner, 2002). It has been noted by several commentators that there is
an affinity between Mill’s version of utilitarianism and the ethical eudaimonism of
Aristotle (Nussbaum, 2004; Nussbaum, 2006: 142; Semmel, 1984; Sugden,
2006: 33-34; Sumner, 2006: 14; Williams, 1982; Williams, 1991; Williams,
1996; see also Irwin, 1998). Nor is this too surprising. After all, in On Liberty
Mill makes a point of referring to ‘the judicious utilitarianism of Aristotle,’ and he
repeats Dante’s description of Aristotle as ‘the master of those who know’ (Mill,
1972 [1859]: II, 86). This should be borne in mind when considering what Mill
means when he says that although he regards ‘utility as the ultimate appeal on
all ethical questions,’ nevertheless this ‘must be utility in the largest sense,
grounded on the permanent interest of man as a progressive being’ (Mill, 1972
[1859]: I, 74). As Geraint Williams has argued, for Mill happiness is ‘more akin
to the Aristotelian intellectual and moral virtues than the felicific calculus of

It has also been claimed that there is a striking similarity between
Amartya Sen’s version of the capabilities approach and the Aristotelian
conception of well-being (Benedetta, 2005: 253; Giovanola, 2005: 252-53). In
fact Sen himself draws attention to this similarity, singling out for praise the work that Martha Nussbaum has done in this area (Sen, 1999a: 14, 24, 289; Sen, 2004c: 333fn31; Sen, 2006c [1993]: 30, 46-47; Sen, 2012 [1987]: 3-4, 46fn.16, 64fn7; Sen, 1997 [1992]: 39fn3). In the opinion of some commentators, it is the similarities that the ideas of both Sen and Mill have with the ethical eudaimonism of Aristotle, rather than with Benthamite utilitarianism, that brings their views close to one another on a number of issues (Sugden, 2006: 33-34; Sumner, 2006: 9, 14).

Part Two
The Adaptation Problem and Slavery:

‘Freedom has a thousand charms to show/That slaves, howe'er contented, never know.’

William Cowper (cited Sen, 1999: 298)

Let us now consider the issue of slavery and the possibility of there being, as a consequence of adaptation, such a thing as a happy or a contented slave (Boulukos, 2008). What does Sen think about this? Slaves are not usually included in Sen’s list of traditional underdogs. However, in Development As Freedom, Sen does refer at one point to ‘the bonded labourer’ who is ‘born into semi-slavery’ as one of those underdogs who are ‘deprived not only in terms of well-being, but also in terms of the ability to lead responsible lives, which are contingent on having certain basic freedoms’ (Sen, 1999a: 284). Moreover, in The Standard of Living, he employs the example of slavery to illustrate his view that ‘the fulfilment of a person’s desires may or may not be indicative of a high level of well-being’ (Sen, 1987: 11). Finally, as is indicated by his citation of the lines from William Cowper reproduced above, Sen evidently does have an interest in the example of the happy or contented slave. Indeed, as we saw earlier, he argues in Development as Freedom that although it is ‘sensible enough to take note of happiness’ nevertheless ‘we do not necessarily want to be happy slaves’ (Sen, 1999a: 62).

As some commentators have suggested, it does not therefore seem inappropriate to regard slaves as falling under Sen’s notion of a traditional underdog, or to consider their situation when examining Sen’s notion of adaptation (Brannmark, 2006: 74-78; Haybron, 2013: 65, 86-87; Sugden, 2006: 37, 43). For example, according to Robert Sugden what is at issue in Sen’s treatment of the adaptation problem can be ‘expressed in terms of the familiar case of the “contented slave”’ (Sugden, 2006: 37). The problem here, Sugden argues, is this: ‘if slaves are contented, on what grounds can we condemn slavery?’ For if we ‘use a metric of actual desire,’ then ‘there seems to be nothing to criticize’ (Sugden, 2006: 37). In Sugden’s view, Sen’s approach to this issue is ‘to ask whether the contented slave has reason to desire a different way of life, from which she is debarrd by her slavery’ (Sugden, 2006: 37). Sen claims that ‘a moral observer should recognize the evil or unjustness of entrenched deprivation, even if, because of adaptation, the deprived people themselves do not feel unhappy about their situation and feel no desire to change it’ (Sugden, 2006: 37). Sen acknowledges that the ‘subjective experiences of happiness’ is relevant in this context (Sugden, 2006: 37).
However, as Sugden rightly points out, for Sen this is not the only thing that matters. For both well-being and freedom are things that matter also.

It would seem that Sen does not think that it is impossible (either logically or empirically) for somebody who is in such a situation to be happy. Sen acknowledges that in principle there might be such a thing as a happy slave. His claim is not that happy slaves do not or could not exist, but rather that a situation in which they did exist would be an ethically undesirable one, even if they were happy. This view brings Sen into conflict with Richard Layard, who argues that the only reason why slavery could be said to be an ethically undesirable state of affairs is because slaves are as a matter of fact unhappy. In Layard’s view, if slaves were not unhappy with their lot then there would be no reason for anybody to object on ethical grounds to their enslavement (Layard, 2011 [2005]: 121).

It should be noted that Sen also refers occasionally, not to the hypothetical theoretical example of the happy slave, but rather to what might be termed ‘actually existing slavery,’ specifically in the American South both before and after The American Civil War (Sen, 1999a: 7, 28-29, 113; Sen, 2009: 22; see also Boulukos, 2008; Engerman, 2003). One issue that Sen is interested in is the fact that some American slaves at this time chose to become ‘free workers’ even though they would have been economically ‘better off’ if they had remained as slaves. Sen takes this to imply that well-being, in this case in the form of economic prosperity, is not the only thing that human beings value. They also value freedom. Moreover, as in the case of Mohandas Gandhi, the commitment that they have to the value of freedom can and occasionally does come into conflict with their desire to achieve their own well-being. These two patterns of motivation, therefore, are in tension with one another and can on occasion pull in different directions. When this happens, it is a matter of empirical fact, in Sen’s opinion, that the individuals concerned do not always choose either their own well-being over freedom (Sen, 1999a: 7, 28-29, 113; Sen, 2002b: 606fn33). In Sen’s view, this is part of what makes us human.

The example of the happy slave can be connected to a discussion of what might be called the ‘freedom versus happiness debate,’ as we find it in the writings of a number of authors, including both John Stuart Mill and Aldous Huxley (Mill, 1972 [1859]; Huxley, 2007 [1932; 1946]: xiii; XVII, 203-12). The idea, here, is that if it were true that the pursuit of the two values of freedom and happiness necessarily conflict with one another and that we could not have a life which contains both, so that we must choose either a life of freedom without happiness or a life of happiness without freedom, that is to say the life of a happy slave, then which of these options ought we to choose, either as human beings or as enthusiasts for the doctrine of utilitarianism? This is the kind of tragic dilemma that in Sen’s view can lie at the very heart of ethical life (Sen, 2012 [1987]: 65fn8, 70). It is also, of course, central to the plot of Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World.

John Stuart Mill’s attitude towards the example of the happy or contented slave has received some discussion, with contributors to the debate focusing on what Mill has to say about ‘voluntary slavery’ in his On Liberty (Mill, 1972 [1859]: V, 157-58; Archard, 1990; Fuchs, 2001; Hodson, 1981; Sneddon, 2001; Talbot, 2010: 28, 34-38, 45-46, 218-19, 226, 318-19). There Mill places an absolute prohibition on contracts of voluntary servitude, even if those who enter into such contracts appear to do so freely and even though they are ostensibly happy. This has been regarded by some commentators as being a problem for Mill. In their view, it reflects the fact that Mill attaches more importance to
freedom than he does to happiness, in what is a clear case of a conflict between the two. It might be suggested that this is a strange position for Mill to adopt, given his commitment to utilitarianism, which is of course supposed to attach over-riding importance to the value of happiness.

Strictly speaking, of course, neither John Stuart Mill nor any other ‘high utilitarian’ such as Aldous Huxley would acknowledge the possibility of there being such a thing as a happy slave. The reason for this is because Mill regards freedom or liberty as being an essential component of true happiness, or happiness properly understood. From the standpoint of Mill’s version of utilitarianism, although not from that of Jeremy Bentham or Richard Layard, the idea of a happy slave is a contradiction in terms. The distinction that Mill draws between the notion of happiness and that of contentment in his Considerations on Representative Government and in his essay on Utilitarianism is relevant in this connection (Mill, 1972 [1861]: I, 9; Mill, 1972 [1863]: III, 212-13). The significance of this has been emphasised by a number of commentators including Amartya Sen (Nussbaum, 1999: 151; Nussbaum, 2004: 60, 66; Qizilbash, 2006b: 20, 26, 28, 32; Sugden, 2006: 37-38, 44, 46; Sen, 2006a: 82). Indeed, Sen has claimed that Mill’s distinction merits ‘much more intellectual engagement than it has received so far’ in the literature (Sen, 2006a: 82).

According to Mill, strictly speaking it is contentment that is to be associated with the self-reported pleasurable feelings that Benthamite utilitarians wrongly associate with happiness. In Mill’s view, the question to ask here is not whether happy slaves are possible, but rather whether contented slaves are possible. In answer to this question, Mill accepts that they are. His argument is that no form of slavery is ethically defensible. All forms of slavery ought to be legally proscribed (and would be in a free society) even if they are consensual. Mill is opposed to voluntary slavery on ethical grounds, despite the fact that in such cases those who are slaves have freely entered into their situation, are contented, and do appear at first sight to be happy. Mill’s distinction between happiness and contentment helps us to see why the accusation that he contradicts himself when talking about this issue is misplaced. In order for this criticism to be valid it would be necessary for the critic to establish that, in Mill’s opinion, those who sign up to contracts of voluntary servitude are indeed truly happy despite their lack of freedom (see Archard, 1990: 454-57). However, this is precisely what Mill would deny.

The idea of a conflict, tension or trade-off between two conflicting values is also central to the thinking of Amartya Sen. Usually, however, the values in question are not freedom and happiness, but rather freedom and well-being. For example, Sen says at one point that ‘it should come as no surprise that,’ as in the case of Mohandas Gandhi, ‘freedom and well-being need not always move in the same way, or even in the same direction’ (Sen, 1997 [1992]: 59; also, 61; and Sen, 2002b: 606fn33). On the issue of a possible conflict, not between freedom and well-being, but between freedom and happiness, which is our present concern, Sen acknowledges that ‘it is possible to construct different types of scenarios in which more freedom makes one certainly less happy’ (Sen, 1997 [1992]: 59). Huxley’s Brave New World is, of course, a case in point.

A significant feature of Sen’s thought is that he willingly leaves the use of the word ‘happiness’ to his Benthamite utilitarian opponents and accepts their understanding of its meaning. Moreover, he explicitly rejects John Stuart Mill’s suggestion that the best way to respond to the subjectivism of Benthamite utilitarianism is to redefine the concept of happiness (as opposed to that of well-being) along objectivist lines, thereby generating a conceptual distinction.
between true and false, or authentic and inauthentic, happiness. Sen concedes that it is certainly possible, as Mill suggests, ‘to pack more into the notion of happiness than common usage will allow, and to see some objective achievements as part of being “really happy”’ (Sen, 1987: 8-9). And he recognizes that the Aristotelian or ancient Greek concept of eudaimonia suggests such a ‘broad interpretation’ of the concept of happiness. However, he insists that ‘there is not much point in going in that direction, since other notions of value and valuation can be entertained in their own right without their having to be inducted into serious consideration’ through ‘riding on the back’ of the concept of happiness. There are, Sen insists, ‘many other avenues that are exploreable and deserve our direct attention’ (Sen, 1987: 8-9). Sen’s own preferred solution to this problem is, as we have seen, to depart from Mill by drawing a clear distinction between the concept of happiness and that of well-being.

Benedetta Giovanola has argued that although Sen ‘does speak about happiness,’ he does so ‘very differently than utilitarian thinkers’ – by which she means Benthamite utilitarians (Giovanola, 2005: 253). According to Giovanola, Sen attempts to restore the concept of happiness ‘to its traditionally essential and broader meaning, linked to the Aristotelian notion of eudaimonia, which is commonly translated as happiness, but which instead is closer to “flourishing”’ (Giovanola, 2005: 253). Sen’s version of the capabilities approach, As Giovanola understands it, shows ‘how people can be happy in the sense of “flourishing,” but not in the sense of “subjective well-being” (as used by the welfarist and utilitarian tradition)’ (Giovanola, 2005: 253). Giovanola claims that Sen’s ‘critique of happiness thus addresses not happiness as such, but rather a subjective (and limited) interpretation of it,’ namely ‘the notion of happiness as subjective well-being and utility’ (Giovanola, 2005: 253).

This interpretation of Sen’s views on happiness seems to me to be mistaken. It applies far more to John Stuart Mill than it does to Amartya Sen. In my view, pace Giovanola, Sen accepts rather than rejects the subjectivist understanding of the concept of happiness associated with Benthamite utilitarianism. Sen does not object to the utilitarian understanding of the concept of happiness, on the grounds that is subjective and therefore limited. Rather, on the contrary, he endorses that understanding. What Sen actually rejects is utilitarianism’s subjective (and limited) interpretation of the concept of well-being. As we saw earlier, Sen explicitly distances himself from the views which Giovanola erroneously attributes to him. Giovanola’s remarks seem to me to be accurate as an account of what Sen has in mind when he talks about well-being, as opposed to happiness. However, they are incorrect as an account of what Sen has in mind when he talks about happiness itself.

I noted above that Sen has responded positively to the Mozaffar Qizilbash’s observation that the distinction between the notion of happiness and that of contentment is a useful one for those who are interested in questions of ethics in general, including therefore the problem of the happy slave. We can now see, however, that Sen would have a problem if he attempted to reconcile such a distinction with his own (subjectivist) understanding of the concept of happiness. It is not implausible to suggest that Sen’s distinction between happiness and well-being maps straightforwardly on to Mill’s distinction between contentment and happiness. What Mill calls contentment, Sen describes as happiness; and what Mill terms happiness, Sen refers to as well-being. However, it should not be forgotten that Mill considers freedom to be an necessary component of
happiness, properly understood, whereas Sen does not think that freedom is essential to well-being.

So far as the example of the happy or contented slave is concerned, Sen’s commitment to using the above terminology, in just this way, implies that for him, unlike for Mill, it is perfectly legitimate for us to talk about happy slaves. There is no logical impropriety involved in this. However, if that is true, then it is difficult to see why Sen has suggested that Mill’s distinction between the notion of contentment and that of happiness might be a useful one theoretically speaking. In order for that distinction to be incorporated into Sen’s version of the capabilities approach it would be necessary to revise the terminology associated with that approach along the ‘high utilitarian’ lines suggested by Giovanola. This is something that, hitherto, Sen has been reluctant to do. It would, however, be approved of by those commentators who, like Julia Annas, David Brink and Richard Kraut, agree with both Aristotle and Mill that it makes perfect sense to talk about an objective as well as a subjective conception of happiness (Annas, 1993; Annas, 2002; Brink, 1992; Kraut, 1979). In their view, it is a mistake for Sen, or anybody else, to agree with Benthamite utilitarians that happiness is something that can only be subjectively understood.

### Part Three:

**Identity Politics, Adaptation and the Enslavement of Women**

‘Supposing that women are voluntary slaves – slavery of any kind is unfavourable to human happiness and improvement.’

(Wollstonecraft, 1996 [1792]: 77)

In my view, focusing on the theoretical example of the happy or contented slave is a good way in for those who wish to understand Sen’s views on the part that the phenomenon of adaptation has to play in identity politics, a subject about which Sen has written quite a lot in recent years (Sen, 1999b; Sen, 2000; Sen, 2004a; Sen, 2004b; Sen, 2005a; Sen, 2005b; Sen, 2006b; Sen, 2009b; Sen, 2014b; Sen, Agarwal, Humphreys & Robins, 2003). This aspect of Sen’s thinking has also received extensive discussion in the secondary literature (Comim & Teschl, 2006; Davis, 2007; Kirman & Teschl, 2006; Parekh, 2009a; Parekh, 2009b; Pauer-Studer, 2006; Qizilbash, 2009b; Qizilbash, 2014; Teschl & Derobert, 2008).

So far as gender politics in particular is concerned, it is Sen’s engagement with the ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill on the subjection of women which provides the stimulus for a discussion of the example of the happy or contented slave (Wollstonecraft, 1996 [1792]; Mill, 1983 [1869]). Sen has a keen interest in the relevance of the views of Wollstonecraft and Mill for his own thinking in this broad area (Sen, 2005b; Sen, 2005-2006: 2913-14; Sen, 2006a: 82; Sen, 2009a: 21, 116, 131, 161, 300fn, 322, 361fn, 365, 391-93, 398, 400-01; Sen, Agarwal, Humphreys & Robeyns, 2003; see also Berges, 2011; Engerman, 2003; Qizilbash, 2006b; Qizilbash, 2009b). A number of commentators, including Sen himself, have observed that the views of Wollstonecraft and Mill on the subjection of women might be regarded as early examples of an interest in the phenomenon of adaptation as Sen understands it.
When discussing the subjection of women both Wollstonecraft and Mill think that it is appropriate to employ the terms ‘slavery’ and ‘enslavement’ (I, 16; II, 21, 32, 34-36; III 44, 46; IV, 52, 54, 62, 77; IX, 149; XI, 159-60; XIII, 193; Mill, 1983 [1869]: I, 9-15, 21-22, 24-27; II, 80; see also Ferguson, 1992; Gerson, 2002; McDonald, 1992; Shanley, 1981). Moreover, they both maintain that the subjection of women is grounded, not only on force or coercion, but also on the presence of a certain type consent. We are talking about a situation in which at least some of those who are enslaved appear to freely accept and to voluntarily subject themselves to their own condition of servitude. Wollstonecraft and Mill both argue that these women are willing slaves, and may also be contented ones, although whether they could be said to be truly happy is a matter for dispute.

This idea can be found in Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which, as Sen has noted, Wollstonecraft employs the metaphor of ‘the gilded cage’ to express it (Sen, 2005b: 8). According to Wollstonecraft, in contemporary society although women are enslaved by being confined ‘in cages like the feathered race,’ they are nevertheless also ‘treated like queens.’ They have ‘nothing to do,’ Wollstonecraft argues, but ‘to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch’ (IV, 55-56). The mind of women, Wollstonecraft argues, ‘roaming around its gilt cage, seeks not to free itself,’ as she thinks that it should, ‘but only to adorn its prison’ (III, 43).

It is not only Wollstonecraft who talks about the situation of women as being in effect a form of slavery, albeit of a very specific kind, because those who are enslaved do appear at first sight either to be happy, or at least to be contented with their lot. Consequently, they certainly do appear at first sight to freely consent to their own servitude. A number of commentators, including Sen himself, have pointed out that the same kind of reasoning can also be found in Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (Mill, 1983 [1869]; Berges, 2011: 83; Nussbaum, 2001: 80; Sen, 2006a: 82; Sugden, 2006: 37, 46). According to Mill in that text, men ‘do not want solely the obedience of women,’ they also ‘desire to have, in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one’ (I, 26).

Mill argues that, so far as women are concerned, the men in their lives do everything they can to ‘enslave their minds’ (I, 27). In his opinion this is a significant difference between this and other forms of slavery. For in the case of ‘all other slaves’ the masters ‘rely, for maintaining obedience, on fear,’ whereas in the case of the enslavement of women, what is demanded is not mere obedience only, but rather obedience for a particular reason. What is required is that voluntary obedience which is to be associated with the notion of willing consent (I, 27; see also II, 198-99). It is worth observing that, when discussing the rights and wrongs of voluntary slavery in *On Liberty*, Mill refers directly to marriage contracts in this context (V, 158). He suggests, therefore, that these too might be regarded as contracts of voluntary servitude. Given Mill’s absolute prohibition of such contracts, this has interesting implications for any assessment of his views on marriage and for the logical consistency of his thinking about these issues overall.

There is, however, a significant difference between the views of Wollstonecraft and Mill on the issue of type of consent that is involved in the case of the adaptation of women to their own enslavement. It is useful in this connection to refer to a distinction that has been made by David Held between
the idea of ‘instrumental consent’ and that of ‘normative consent’ (Held, 2013 [1989]: 101-02). This distinction is intended to capture the difference between acting for self-interested reasons, perhaps in pursuit of pleasure, on the one hand, and acting ethically because one acknowledges that a particular course of action is the right thing to do on the other. Action of this kind can be associated with the notion of duty, it being assumed that self-interest and the pursuit of pleasure can and sometimes do conflict with the call of duty.

In the case of Wollstonecraft, what Sen calls adaptation is to be associated with the idea of instrumental consent only. Wollstonecraft suggests that gender relationships are ordered in such a way that pressure is brought to bear on women to behave in a way that might be considered capricious, vain and superficial. Many women are encouraged to be self-interested individuals whose lives are dominated by their irrational passions or appetites, and which are therefore given over entirely to the pursuit of pleasure (9; II, 29; III, 41, 43; IV, 55-56, 60; V, 103; XII, 176; XIII, 194). As Wollstonecraft puts it, whereas for men pleasure ‘is considered as mere relaxation,’ many women on the other hand ‘seek pleasure as the main purpose of existence’ (III, 60). In a manner similar to the Stoics, Wollstonecraft suggests that such women are slaves to their own bodily desires (III, 43; V, 103). They are indeed, if not happy slaves, then at least contented ones. Wollstonecraft criticizes the acceptance by these women of their own enslavement from the standpoint of republican virtue, which in her thinking has, of course, more to do with civic or political life than with sexual decorum (I, 11; II, 18, 36; III, 51; VIII, 144; IX, 145, 150; XII, 171, 180, 182; XIII, 198-201; Sapiro, 1992).

In Wollstonecraft’s view, then, there is or ought to be more to life than the pursuit of pleasure. A life appropriate for human beings, who are necessarily both rational and moral beings, is an ethical life: a life of virtue. Indeed, like J. S. Mill, Wollstonecraft argues that it is only in such a life that ‘true happiness’ lies (IX, 146). A society ‘can only be happy and free in proportion as it is virtuous.’ In her opinion, therefore, ‘schools of morality’ are necessarily also ‘schools of the happiness of man’ (XII, 175). This emphasis on the importance of republican virtue is something that Wollstonecraft associates with the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and with the political thought of The French Revolution of 1789 (II, 20; Sapiro, 1992). Despite her criticisms of Rousseau’s views on a number of subjects, not least his attitude towards the education of women, Wollstonecraft agrees with Rousseau on this particular issue. According to Wollstonecraft, then, the adaptation of women to their condition of slavery is to be associated with the absence (rather than the presence) from their lives of morality and virtue.

John Stuart Mill, on the other hand, thinks about the phenomenon of voluntary servitude in relation to women somewhat differently. Unlike Wollstonecraft, Mill suggests that the type of consent that underpins the current enslavement of women is not instrumental but rather normative consent. The consent that Mill has in mind is therefore associated with the presence rather than the absence of a virtuous character. It is something that can be associated with the inculcation in women of conscience, guilt and what Mill suggests is a misplaced sense of duty. Virtuous conduct in women is, Mill argues, a matter of doing one’s duty, for example as a good wife and mother. This involves voluntary ‘submission’ and ‘yielding’ to the guidance, direction and ‘the control of others,’ in particular of course the men who are their husbands and their masters (I, 27). Women are brought up to believe that not only is it ‘their nature,’ but it also ‘their duty,’ to ‘live for others’ and to make ‘complete
abnegation of themselves’ (I, 27; see also Sen, 2006a: 80-85; Berges, 2011: 82-83; Nussbaum, 2001: 80; Qizilbash, 2006b: 28-29; Sugden, 2006: 10-11, 14).

Not surprisingly, Mill attaches a great deal of importance to the education of women in this regard. This is always to some extent education in morality and virtue. The masters of women, Mill argues, in their efforts to secure ‘more than simple obedience’ from women turn ‘the whole force of education’ to the formation of such a virtuous character. From their ‘earliest years’ women are educated to believe that their ‘ideal of character’ is to be associated not with ‘self-will,’ but rather with ‘self-control.’ (I, 27). In his view, therefore, it is primarily by means of moral education, rather than by encouraging their pursuit of pleasure, that men succeed in manipulating women into adapting to their own situation and apparently consenting freely to their own condition of servitude.

As Sen has spoken positively and enthusiastically about the views of both Wollstonecraft and Mill in relation to the subjection of women, it is interesting to speculate as to which of the two mechanisms of adaptation discussed above he thinks is most relevant to the situation of women today. The answer to this question will of course depend on which category of women one has in mind.

Conclusion

I have argued that the critique of Benthamite utilitarianism developed by Sen when discussing the adaptation problem can fruitfully be connected to a discussion of the example of the happy or contented slave. Thinking about Sen’s views with respect to each of these issues sheds light on our understanding of his views regarding the other. I have also argued that a consideration of Sen’s views on these issues helps to illuminate his approach to questions of identity politics, especially the politics of gender. Sen’s engagement with the works of Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill on the subjection of women is important in this connection. The situation of women in contemporary society, as it is conceptualised by both Wollstonecraft and Mill, can be understood in terms of Sen’s theory of adaptation, by referring to the example of the happy or contented slave. We have seen, however, that Wollstonecraft and Mill disagree with one another when discussing the specific form that this adaptation takes. This leaves open the following interesting question. According to Amartya Sen, which of these two different ways of thinking about adaptation, that of Wollstonecraft or that of Mill, is most relevant for our understanding of the situation of women today, especially women in the developing world?

Bibliography


