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Commitment and Goals

Comment on Christoph Hanisch, "Negative Goals and Identity"

Abstract:

In this Comment, I examine Christoph Hanisch's recent contribution to this journal. In commenting on Hanisch's essay, I offer an interpretation of Amartya Sen's notion of 'commitment' which makes committed choices both uncontroversial and quotidian. This interpretation contrasts with those which see some of Sen's pronouncements on commitment to be obviously false, counterintuitive or psychologically impossible.

Keywords: Commitment, self-goal choice, Amartya Sen, rational choice.

Contributions which shed light on Amartya Sen's notion of 'commitment' are always welcome, for Sen's term often elicits incredulity or confusion, particularly amongst those schooled in 'rational choice theory'. Christoph Hanisch's recent essay in this journal is edifying in its attempt to clarify whilst demonstrating how tricky it is coherently to expound the concept of commitment in a way that makes it intuitively appealing rather than metaphysically mysterious. In what follows, I limit myself to commenting on but a few aspects of Hanisch's essay which judiciously defends Sen but also attempts to clarify some of the latter's "more ambiguous formulations of goal-displacement" (165).[1] Indeed, it is Sen's more recent formulation of commitment—to involve a violation of what he calls "self-goal choice"—around which much controversy seems to lie. In this Comment, my guiding principle is to interpret commitment—especially its more controversial characterizations—in as simple and non-controversial a way as possible. I suggest that one can go a long way with an interpretation according to which commitment is intuitively plausible and straight-forward, though I concede that there might remain some depictions of commitment which will continue to raise eyebrows.

Let us proceed with self-goal choice which Sen (2002, 34) presents thus: "A person's choices must be based entirely on the pursuit of her own goals." This tenet of rational choice theory is a limitation which Sen believes should be transcended; the rationale for theoretical transcendence of self-goal choice lies in his

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[1] All page references unaccompanied by author's name or year of publication refer to Hanisch (2013).

thinking that, practically, people make decisions which violate self-goal choice. Philip Pettit (2007) contests the plausibility of violations of self-goal choice. He descries in Sen's work two types of violation, the first "goal-modifying commitment", the second "goal-displacing commitment". In the former, one ascertains that one's choice would adversely affect other people, and one alters one's proposed course of action in accord with their interests (Pettit 2007, 31). This might involve an agent acting in a way that does not maximize her self-interest, a possibility that Pettit embraces for the ease with which it can be accommodated by the traditional theory of rational choice: goal-modifying commitment, he writes, "does not require a serious departure from rational choice theory" (Pettit 2007, 32). Only goal-displacing commitment represents a far-reaching departure from rational choice theory, for such departures from self-goal choice seem to entail that an individual can choose to act not on his own but on others' goals (Pettit 2007, 32).

Sen does not distinguish goal-modifying and goal-displacing commitment by name, though Pettit is convinced that he, Sen, "is quite clear about the distinction" (Pettit 2007, 31). I am less convinced that Sen has such a distinction in mind but will refrain here from comment thereon. Instead, I examine how Hanisch tries to save Sen from Pettit's critique which alleges that goal displacement is contrary to the canons of common sense as well as to the more refined version thereof offered by rational choice theory.

Hanisch's defence of Sen makes use of an aspect of rationality which Sen sees as fundamental to the concept. Rational individuals, Sen holds, are capable not only of satisfying given preferences; they are also able to subject their preferences to critical reflection and to ask which preferences they want or ought to have and to satisfy (Sen 2002, 36). Enter Hanisch's eccentric artist and soon-to-be parent. The artist, in Hanisch's example, realises, once his partner is pregnant, that his career is both time-consuming and precarious; putting the interests of his child first, he gives up his artistic endeavours and becomes a full-time father, a calling through which, he anticipates, he will better ensure a secure and happy future for his child (164). The artist's goal of pursuing his artistic career is displaced *in toto* by the goals of his child, which the now ex-artist allows to guide his action.[2] If, on reflection, the artist determines that the interests of his child are best served by his becoming a full-time father, we have a case of goal displacement: reflection on the child's goals (or, as the case may be, the father's imputation of goals to his child) leads the father to give up all professional artistic pursuits. Some interpreters might take umbrage at the idea that the father is pursuing his child's goals. To circumvent the awkwardness of this locution, we ought, they hold, to say that the father is still pursuing his own goal, but that the goal has changed in accord with his reflection on the

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[2] In our first encounter with the eccentric artist (162), Hanisch depicts him as maintaining an artistic career, namely as a commercial architect, a career which better caters to his child's interests than being an independent (and eccentric) artist. In this version of the example, then, the artist's goal to pursue an artistic career is not relinquished but modified; hence we have a case of goal-modifying, not goal-displacing commitment.

interests of his child. The following is Hanisch's (relatively uncontroversial) interpretation of the father and his goals:

> "The prospective father does not literally 'take-in' his child's future goals in the sense of the latter's intentional perspective and stance suddenly replacing his own. Rather, goal-displacement takes place in so far as the father no longer takes his current goal of being an artist as choice-guiding and replaces it." (165)

Hanisch's interpretation takes, as it were, the sting out of some interpretations of what Sen understands by violations of self-goal choice. For instance, his interpretation of the father's choice need not be described as "putting aside one's own goals and acting on those of another", as Pettit (2007, 28) casts some instances of commitment. I return to characterisations of commitment shortly, but wish here to note that Hanisch's interpretation of the artist/father makes goal-displacing commitment a rather quotidian affair, for such decisions are common. When the father cooks dinner for his child rather than reads a good novel, or drives his spouse to the station on a rainy workday rather than stays in bed, his choices are committed in a goal-displacing manner; relinquishing one's seat to an elderly person on an underground train similarly answers to the name "goal-modifying commitment", for, in doing so, one (a) takes into account the goals, needs, interests, etc. of another person and (b) in light of (a), gives up the pursuit of one course of action (sitting down for the duration of the journey) in favour of another (giving up the seat). The simplicity of this interpretation is something I laud, but is commitment really such a mundane matter? Let us consider what Sen has to say.

Consider a case that Sen invites us to ponder and which we may call his "plane example" (2007, 348). Imagine that one occupies a window seat on a passenger plane and that one's immediate neighbour requests that one lower the shade to block out the sun which is inhibiting his enjoyment of a computer game. Although game-playing pursuits are not something of which one approves, and although lowering the shade will prevent one's enjoyment of the sun's rays and hence lower one's own well-being, one nevertheless accedes to the request. If this example answers to the description of "goal displacement" (recalling that Sen does not use this terminology), then goal-displacing commitment is not in the least mysterious. Indeed, Sen's depiction of such commitments can be interpreted in a way that is not the least metaphysically suspect; he abjures, for instance, the contentious idea that, when acting committedly, an individual relinquishes her own goals and pursues "other people's goals" (Sen 2007, 347; 351); others' goals, he writes, "may affect the person's choice *without* their taking the form of goals that the person can be seen as pursuing himself" (2002, 214 emphasis added).

Let me note that the plane example has the following twist: one's concession in lowering the shade is not something one believes will redound to one's neighbour's good; in fact, one thinks that computer games stultify the mind and engender ignorance in players who should pursue more erudite pastimes. The

shade-shutter makes a choice in the expectation that its consequences will re-
dound to nobody's well-being: his own well-being is obviously lowered, for he
would rather bask in the sun above the clouds; his neighbour's, from the per-
spective of the shade-shutter, is also lowered because, by acting as a fillip to
his neighbour's pursuit of the game, the shade-shutter believes he his complicit
in addling his neighbour's mind, and, being of a non-vengeful disposition, the
shade-shutter, we may assume, derives no comfort from this thought. If we
switch our perspective from well-being to goals, we might conclude that the
shade-shutter is not pursuing a goal of his own; for it is neither his goal to
shut out the sun, nor is it his goal to allow a stranger to addle his brain with
computer games. The only goal which is realised in this example, it appears, is
the game-player's goal to play a computer game, a goal which the shade-shutter
helps his neighbour to pursue (Sen 2007, 349). The latter statement, let it be
noted, is different from saying that the shade-shutter pursues not his own but
his neighbour's goal. (We may add, parenthetically, that the shade-shutter and
the game-player disagree whether the pursuit of this goal is actually in the in-
terest of the game-player, but this should not distract us from the conclusion
Sen (2007, 352) draws, to wit: the shade-shutter is pursuing no goal of his own.)
I return to this depiction below, but turn now to what Hanisch calls "negative
goals".

Sen's plane example bears similarity to what Hanisch (165–167) describes
as the displacement of "negative goals". Hanisch's discussion of negative goals
has the aim of showing that, *pace* Sen (at least in some of his formulations),
a person's choices are never "completely detached" (166) from her goals, for a
person always has negative goals, that is principles which she could never break
in the pursuit of any positive goal to which her choice is orientated. My negative
goals are "constraints" on my choices; they delineate "spectra of permissibility"
within which all my choices fall, and outside of which I do not permit myself to
go (165–166).

Although the notion of negative goals is supposed to rescue Sen from his
more ambitious formulations of commitment, it suggests quite a natural in-
terpretation of Sen's plane example which is in keeping with Sen's comments
thereon; for we might surmise that the occupant of the window seat constrains
his choices with the proviso: "Never be disagreeable to strangers (especially to
one in whose proximity one might be spending the next eight hours)." In draw-
ing the shutter closed, then, the occupant of the window seat is, in Hanisch's
terminology, giving up one of his "positive goals" (basking in the sunlight), but
he is nevertheless conforming to his negative goal of not being disagreeable to a
fellow human being. I am unsure whether the positive/negative goal distinction
is useful because one can always formulate a negative goal positively; "never
be disagreeable to strangers", for instance, can be rendered: "always be com-
plaisant toward strangers". Similarly, and to use one of Hanisch's examples of
a negative goal, "do not kill innocents" can be expressed: "preserve the life on
innocents". Sen does without the negative/positive terminology in his discus-
sion of the plane example, but a possible interpretation he gives of the example

resembles Hanisch's idea. The shade-shutter, Sen (2007, 349) writes, is "following a norm of good behavior [...] (to wit 'let others be')", and he describes this norm as "a self-imposed behavioral restraint", rather as Hanisch (166) describes negative goals as "constraints" (though Hanisch would no doubt choose to formulate the restraint/constraint ("let others be") negatively, e.g. "do not stand in the way of others' plans, especially with regard to fairly trivial matters"), though Sen, too, suggests a negative formulation thereof along the lines of "don't be bossy" (Sen 2007, 352). Transgressing one's spectra of permissibility might, as Hanisch (168–170) argues, involve cases which call into question our very identity (as in his variation on Bernard Williams' character Jim which I will not discuss here). But our spectra of permissibility can also involve matters of less existential significance; remaining inside my self-imposed spectra might involve restricting the range of actions I allow myself to perform within some pretty mundane habits and rules of thumb which I wish to uphold for various reasons, some moral, but others not, and not all of which are of import to my sense of identity.

Let us return to the notion that Sen's shade-shutter is not pursuing a goal of his own when he closes the shade. This idea might be contentious for the following reason: if the shade-shutter is not pursuing a goal of his own, then presumably one of two things is true of him:

1. Either he is pursuing his neighbour's goal, or
2. he is pursuing no goal at all.

Interpretation (i) is contentious for reasons given by Fabienne Peter and Hans-Bernard Schmid (2005, 1): people "cannot pursue other people's goals without making them their own". Sen, who quotes this passage (2007, 352), agrees: pursuing someone else's goal without making it your own lies beyond the pale of plausibility. As we have already seen, Sen clearly disavows such an idea, for he writes: "A person's decision not to act only—or even mainly—on the basis of his or her own goals does not require that the person must then be acting according to some 'other people's goals'." (2007, 347) This leaves interpretation (ii) according to which the shade-shutter is pursuing neither his own, nor his neighbour's goal. The shade-shutter is thus apparently "goal-less". I suspect that this is too odd an idea for many to countenance. In light of the contestability of (i) and (ii), one move would be to forbear from detaching the shade-shutter from one of his goals. One could, that is, reinstate a goal to him such that, although he gives up his goal of basking in the sun, in constraining his behaviour, he is pursuing another goal, namely, following the norm of "live and let live". That is, if we interpret norm following as a goal-directed pursuit, we divest the shade-shutter of his controversial state of goal-lessness. Sen obviously resists the idea that behavioural constraint through following norms is correctly interpreted as pursuing a goal, and we can, in his defence, say that he is right to advert to a difference between a goal such as basking in the sun and following a norm. Others, though, might argue that whilst different, seeking to bask in the sun and the pursuit of a norm are both to be understood as goals (in a broader sense of the

term than Sen is willing to entertain), and so whether the shade-shutter closes the shade or stubbornly refuses to do so, his action is goal-directed. Hanisch seems to prefer this latter interpretation; although he does not comment on Sen's shade-shutter, he would, I contend in light of his own examples, describe the shade-shutter's closing of the shade in terms of his negative goals. Here he differs with Sen, and the resolution of this difference would require an analysis of norm following and whether norm following is best described in terms of goal-directed behaviour. This is a task I leave to others.

There is a great deal more to say about commitment and its proper interpretation but the above must suffice for this Comment. To close the matter at present, I presumptuously permit myself a final remark on freedom, a term not discussed by Hanisch or those who examine Sen's notion of commitment. Sen, however, relates his view that self-goal choice be violable to the notion of freedom. To grasp how, consider how other people might reflect on my goals and whether to let a consideration of my goals influence the choices they make. In the language Sen uses to elucidate his plane example, people might choose to be "bossy" towards me (that is, they might disregard my goals), or they might adopt a "live and let live" attitude (2007, 352). By adopting the latter attitude, other people "refrain from those actions that would make it infeasible for [me] to pursue [my] goals" (Sen 2007, 353). In other words, if others let me be, they are extending my realm of negative freedom, and, if letting others be is a reciprocal norm amongst those with whom we associate, we each thereby secure for ourselves the greatest possible negative liberty "compatible with a similar liberty for others" (Rawls 1971, 60). Whether such a maximal realm of freedom is a societal vision which Sen espouses I do not know, but violations of self-goal choice certainly represent means to the end of maximising negative freedom.

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