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IDENTITY, COMMITMENT, AND MORALITY¹

ABSTRACT

In his critique of a maximizing conception of rationality Amartya Sen relies on notions like ‘commitment’ and ‘identity’. In my article I compare Sen’s account of practical rationality and identity with Kantian accounts of practical rationality, particularly those of Christine Korsgaard and Elizabeth Anderson. Korsgaard and Anderson consider the concept of practical identity as crucial for understanding the connection between rationality and morality. Sen’s account, as I will show, does not follow the Kantian line altogether since Sen does not identify the rules of rationality with the rules of morality. I argue that Sen’s account amounts to a middle position between Humeanism and Kantianism, and I defend such a middle position.

1. Introduction

The maximizing conception of rational choice defines ‘rationality’ as the greatest satisfaction of one’s interests and one’s preferences. This definition of ‘rationality’ does not rely on specific assumptions with respect to self-interest or altruism since preferences and interests can be self-centred or other-regarding. However, a prominent reading of the maximizing conception of rationality assumes that interests and preferences are self-centred. The self-centred interpretation of rationality (rational choices are guided by the principle of maximizing one’s personal advantage) underlies, for example, the *homo economicus* paradigm which is, as critics claim, still dominant in mainstream economy.²

The critics of the *homo economicus* conception of rationality have focused mainly on developing a broader conception of rational agency where rational choice includes more goals

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² This claim is controversial. Some theorists argue that nothing like a self-centered conception of rationality is presupposed in economics, the concept of rationality assumed is defined merely by formal conditions like consistency of preferences. Cf. Partha Dasgupta, What Do Economists Analyze and Why: Values or Facts? In: *Economics & Philosophy*, 21, 2, 2005, 221-278.

than merely the pursuit of narrow self-interest.³ According to this line of criticism we cannot reduce the notion of one's self to a being whose preferences are represented simply by a utility function where 'utility' is read as one's own advantage or welfare. Instead, so the argument runs, we should presuppose a notion of the self according to which the self is capable of critically reflecting on his or her preferences and goals. Moreover, the identity of such a self is formed by principles and commitments.

In Amartya Sen's work on rationality we find a prominent and forceful example of rejecting the narrow self-interest conception of rationality. Sen has made use of concepts such as sympathy, commitment and, more recently, *identity* to broaden the framework of rational choice.⁴ Sen's introduction of the concept of identity raises the question which systematic role the notion of identity plays in his argument, and in which way he conceives identity, rationality and the principles of rational and moral action to be related to each other. Some parts of Sen's writings suggest that the appeal to identity remains on the level of pointing out that our identities differ due to the principles of rational agency adopted: a strategic egoist, for example, is a different person than an altruistic agent who takes the existence of other persons into account and responds to their needs. But, as I want to show, what is at stake here is not the well-known issue of the plurality of identities, but a more systematic point. The question is whether Sen's critique of the narrow self-interest paradigm of rationality does not commit him to adopt a basic notion of 'practical identity'⁵ that includes those normative elements to which his critique of the *homo economicus* paradigm appeals. So the issue is whether commitments, shared goals, identifications with collective endeavours and moral principles have to be seen as constitutive elements of the 'practical identity' of a rational agent.

Such a strong notion of practical identity we find in recent Kantian accounts. Kantian philosophers, for example Christine M. Korsgaard and Elizabeth S. Anderson, explicitly have reformulated the connection between rationality and morality in terms of identity.⁶ Korsgaard considers, along the idea of self-legislation, a Kantian universalization principle as

³ By 'narrow self-interest' is meant here 'one's own advantage'. Self-interest as such can have two meanings: 1. that something is in the interest of the person 2. that it is the person's egoistic interest. 'Narrow self-interest' refers to the second meaning.

⁴ See e.g. Amartya Sen, Goals, Commitment, and Identity, in: Sen: *Rationality and Freedom*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press 2002, 206-224; also Sen: Social Identity, in: *Revue de Philosophie Économique* 2004.

⁵ The term 'practical identity' is due to Christine M. Korsgaard. She uses the concept to refer to the most abstract level of rational agency. See Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996. For a more detailed exposition see section 4 of this paper.

⁶ See Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*; Elizabeth S. Anderson, Unstrapping the Straitjacket of "Preference": A Comment on Amartya Sen's Contributions to Philosophy and Economics, in: *Economics and Philosophy* 17, 2001, 21-38.

constitutive of rational agency and our practical identity. Anderson argues that instead of the principle of maximizing expected utility we should conceive the universalization principle to be the defining element of our practical identities.

In my paper I will argue that the critique of the rational choice paradigm Sen develops does not commit him to such a strong notion of practical identity as we find it in recent Kantian accounts. My thesis is that an abstract notion of practical identity according to which the self is defined as a being capable of rational reflection and critical assessment is sufficient to allow us to criticize accounts which favour self-interest rationality too exclusively.

My paper has, apart from these introductory remarks, four parts: In section 2 I explore Sen's position on commitment and identity more fully. I defend Sen against the objection that his reading of commitment generates the implausible consequence that we would have to adopt the goals of others. I also try to show (section 2) that an acceptance of the model of rationality that Sen proposes - critical scrutiny and reflection - does not entail that we have to give up the belief-desire model which underlies implicitly the rational choice paradigm. In section 4 I compare Sen's appeal to identity with the accounts of practical identity Korsgaard and Anderson offer. Both, Korsgaard as well as Anderson, assume a close relation given between rationality and morality: the rules of rational agency are the rules of morality. Sen, however, does not presuppose such a close link between rationality and morality as Kantian philosophers though he presents a conception of reflective rationality and rational agency which is open to moral reasoning and receptive of moral considerations. He is far from considering the basic moral principles as constitutive parts of our practical identity. In the final section I defend Sen's position and try to show how it can be seen as an account that avoids the problems of a radical Humean position on the one hand and a strong Kantian position on the other.

2. *Sen's Account of Rationality, Commitment, and Identity*

Sen's objections against the *homo economicus* conception of rationality reflect different stages of his thinking and bring accordingly different concepts and considerations into play.⁷ In his essay *Rational Fools*, Sen distinguishes between sympathy and commitment as a way of questioning the assumption that rational choice is directed to maximize one's self-centered welfare. Sympathy refers to situations where our welfare is affected by how other persons are

⁷ For a detailed account see John B. Davis, *Identity and Commitment: Sen's Conception of the Individual*, in: Fabienne Peter and Hans Bernhard Schmid (eds.), *Rationality and Commitment*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (to appear).

doing. This can have a positive and a negative dimension: our personal welfare can be negatively affected by the suffering of other people or positively by the happiness of persons close to us. Sympathy takes other persons into account in so far as they have an impact on our personal welfare. Sympathy is a form of altruism since it responds to other persons and their welfare.

Commitment is independent from self-centered welfare.⁸ A commitment is defined by Sen as a practical reason a person has that is independent of the gains and losses for the person in case he or she acts on that reason.⁹ Commitments allow us, as Sen points out, to block the step from the rather innocent assumption that a person who chooses rationally is maximizing his or her utility (general maximization) to the controversial and highly implausible assumption that the person is always maximizing his or her own interest or advantage: “The characteristic of commitment...is the fact that it drives a wedge between personal choice and personal welfare, and much of traditional economic theory relies on the identity of the two.”¹⁰ In the case of a commitment the person acts out of a sense that something should be done – independently of its impact on the welfare of the person.

Sen’s notion of commitment is complex and one has to be careful not to confound it with our common notion of commitment where being committed often means acting from a duty or a sense of a (moral) obligation.¹¹ Acting on moral principle is merely one version of being commitment. The defining element of commitment, as Sen understands the term, is that it amounts to a non-welfare optimizing way of acting. It can, but need not lead to a decrease in welfare, but in any case it does not bring an increase in welfare.

The notion of commitment does have a non-moral and a moral dimension. Sen’s definition of commitment is broad enough to cover both forms of commitments. Non-moral commitment means acting in accordance with social rules, e.g. the rules of a club, a certain group or community. The moral meaning of commitment refers to the special case where we act on the basis of moral principles. Sen considers moral commitments to be important and relevant within a broader conception of rational choice and a broader understanding of practical rationality; the process of critical scrutiny of one’s goals and ends has to include moral considerations and guidelines. When he discusses the various modes in which reflective

⁸ Sen, Why Exactly is Commitment Important for Rationality? In: *Economics and Philosophy* 21,1, 2005, 5-14, here: 7.

⁹ See Sen, *Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory*, in: Sen: *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1982, 84-106, here: 91ff.

¹⁰ Sen, *Rational Fools*, 94.

¹¹ Cf. Daniel M. Hausman, Sympathy, Commitment, and Preference, in: *Economics & Philosophy* 21, 1, 2005, 33-50. Hausman criticizes those readers that “have assimilated Sen’s distinction between sympathy and

rationality includes moral considerations and principles as grounds of restrictions on self-interest maximization, Sen often refers to Adam Smith's theory of moral sentiments and Kant's moral philosophy.¹² He criticizes that the standard interpretation of rational choice theory "has denied room for some important motivations and certain reasons for choice, including some concerns that Adam Smith had seen as parts of standard 'moral sentiments' and Immanuel Kant had included among the demands of rationality in social living (in the form of 'categorical imperatives')".¹³ And Sen mentions explicitly the universal law formula of the categorical imperative as one method of establishing moral objectivity and articulating criteria for the reasons on which we may act as moral agents.¹⁴

In his more recent work Sen puts more weight on the connection between identity, commitment and the principles of rational choice. He distinguishes between four aspects of the self that are relevant to choice: 1) self-centered welfare (welfare in this sense depends only on the consumption of the person; there are no relational concerns) 2) self-welfare goal (the only goal of a person is to maximize her welfare; considerations about the welfare of others are only taken into account if doing so has an impact on the welfare of the person) 3) self-goal choice (the person pursues her own goals and the goals of other persons are only taken into account if they are relevant to the person's own goals), and 4) the self in the form of self-scrutiny and one's own reasoning.¹⁵ The last dimension brings into focus an abstract notion of identity: a rational self able to develop a reflective and critical attitude towards the reasons motivating his or her choices.¹⁶ The question is whether the self in the fourth mode belongs to a completely different level which cannot be integrated into the standard rational choice structure like the other three aspects of the self.

Sen develops a complex picture of rational choice – an assessment of our goals and preferences is indispensable. Maximizing behavior is for him at most a necessary condition of rationality. If the ends of an action are weird or crazy then maximizing behavior is 'patently stupid' and cannot qualify as rational. Maximization, as Sen points out, provides us with a

commitment to the everyday contrast between action motivated by altruistic concerns and action motivated by adherence to principle" to be mistaken. (41).

¹² Cf. Sen, Introduction: Rationality and Freedom, in: Sen, *Rationality and Freedom*, 22, 25, 28; Sen, Maximization and the Act of Choice, in: Sen, *Rationality and Freedom*, 162 (n 5), 191, 192; Sen, Information and Invariance in Normative Choice, in: Sen, *Rationality and Freedom* 367f.

¹³ Sen, Introduction: Rationality and Freedom, 28.

¹⁴ Sen makes it clear that Kant's account has nothing to do with strategic considerations or a self-interest version of contractualist thinking: "Kantian analysis is not grounded on the strategic rationality of conduct, or on the idea that if one follows the maxim (or generally behaves well towards others), then others are more likely, for one reason or other to reciprocate.... Rather, Kant's claim was that a person has a reasoned moral obligation to follow such a maxim no matter what others do." Sen, Maximization and the Act of Choice, in: Sen 2002, 192 (n53).

¹⁵ Sen, Introduction: Rationality and Freedom, 33ff.

¹⁶ See Sen, Goals, Commitment, and Identity, 216, 217.

good understanding of an important part of the discipline of rational choice. Rationality in the sense of critical scrutiny, however, extends beyond that.¹⁷ The crucial thing is, as Sen emphasizes, the interpretation of the maximand – and this demands ‘careful assessment and scrutiny’ following rules of ‘reasonableness’ in exercising practical rationality.¹⁸ Such an understanding of rationality sees rational agents as reflective beings who are in their deliberations guided by normative standards. This way commitments influence the choices of the person, and thus the narrow self-interest principle is relativized.

Self-welfare goal and self-goal choice are transformed by commitments. The self-goal choice (or goal-priority) condition states that each individual pursues his or her goals without being restrained by any other values or norms. Sen suggests two forms of commitment to relativize the self-goal choice condition in order to escape dilemmas of individual strategic behavior. Commitment, as Sen writes, “can take the form of modifying the person’s *goals*, [...] or can alter the person’s reasoned *choice* through a recognition of other people’s goals beyond the extent to which other people’s goals get incorporated within one’s own goals”.¹⁹ Following Pettit we can call these two forms of being committed goal-modifying and goal-displacing commitment.²⁰ Goal-modifying commitment means that one modifies one’s goals because they affect others negatively and are not compatible with cooperation and agreement. Goal-modifying commitments do not transcend the maximizing and goal-directed structure of choice and remain within the framework of rational choice. However, things are different in the case of goal-displacing commitment. Here we are committed to others in a way that their goals not only transform, but replace our own goals. In the case of goal-displacing commitment the sense of identity “takes the form of partly disconnecting a person’s choices of actions from the pursuit of self-goal”.²¹

In two illuminating articles Philip Pettit and Hans-Bernhard Schmid have analyzed Sen’s account of goal-displacing commitment and the questions it raises.²² Pettit objects that the notion of goal-displacing commitment is “highly implausible” since it means that we no

¹⁷ Sen appeals here to ‘reasonableness’ which reminds of Rawls’s distinction between reason and rationality. Rationality is self-interest strategy, reason is the reflective form of rationality. I do not follow this terminology as it suggests a dichotomy between reason and rationality as two separated conceptions of rationality. My point is that there is one unifying conception of rationality that integrates the idea of self-interest rationality and reflective rationality. Rawls himself saw reason and rationality as part of one conception of practical rationality. See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press 1993, 48-54.

¹⁸ Sen, Introduction: Rationality and Freedom, 41.

¹⁹ Sen, Introduction: Rationality and Freedom, 35.

²⁰ Philip Pettit, Construing Sen on Commitment, in: *Economics & Philosophy* 21, 1, 2005, 15-32, here: 18.

²¹ Sen, Goals, Commitment, and Identity, 216; cf. Pettit, Construing Sen on Commitment, 20.

²² Pettit, Construing Sen on Commitment; Hans Bernhard Schmid, Beyond Self-Goal Choice, in: *Economics & Philosophy* 21, 1, 2005, 51-63.

longer act on our own goals.²³ Schmid points out that the form of identification Sen demands when suggesting that commitment can be extended to pursue the goals of others “amounts to some paradoxical self-elimination”.²⁴ Goal-displacing commitment, these critics claim, amounts to a violation of self-goal choice which is counter-intuitive since self-goal choice is a basic condition of our identity and the explanation of action. Pettit criticizes that Sen’s suggestion goes against common sense as well as against basic presuppositions of rational choice theory since the idea of self-goal choice “is close to the core of the common sense psychology of which minimal rational choice theory is an explication”.²⁵

Besides the alleged lack of plausibility in the idea of goal-displacing commitment there is a second source of uneasiness to which critics point, namely that Sen’s defense of this condition entails to give up the belief-desire schema. To accept goal-displacing commitment would mean, as Pettit objects, to abandon the framework of rational choice theory and moreover the belief-desire model that is at the basis of self-goal choice.²⁶ However, the belief-desire model seems to be indispensable to an account of acting since the structure of choice is goal-directed. This raises the issue whether the conception of choice Sen presupposes is coherent.

Should we follow this line of criticism? Does the idea of goal-displacing commitment really violate common sense? Should we read Sen’s stronger version of commitment in a sense that it violates common sense facts about identity and plausible assumptions of the rational choice paradigm? I think we should not accept an interpretation of Sen’s position like the one that fuels the criticisms outlined above. Pettit reads goal-displacing commitment in a literal sense: People do not pursue their goal-system but a goal-system “that outruns our own goals”.²⁷ There are, I would suggest, ways to understand Sen’s ideas that bypass the objection that his account of commitment goes against basic facts about identity and rational choice.

The distinction between goal-modifying and goal-displacing commitment as such is fairly clear. Sometimes we modify our goals; sometimes we replace them by new goals. If one realizes that the goal to write a novel of 1000 pages extends one’s talents, capacities and energies, one might modify the goal and pursue the more modest aim of writing a short story of 50 pages.

²³ Pettit, *Construing Sen on Commitment*, 19.

²⁴ Schmid, *Beyond Self-Goal Choice*, 57.

²⁵ Pettit, *Construing Sen on Commitment*, 21.

²⁶ The structure of goal-oriented choice and the structure of acting assumed by belief-desire model are similar: if you have goal x (you desire x) and if you believe that you can realize it by taking means y then you have to do y.

²⁷ Pettit, *Construing Sen on Commitment*, 19.

Equally we can make sense of goal-displacing. A person might be dedicated to the goal of being a writer; but after years of unsuccessful (and welfare-reducing) struggles to publish one single book the person might give up this goal altogether and replace it by another: for example, the person might now have the goal to become a musician. These changes are common shifts in orientation and projects. Goal-displacement of this kind is not counter-intuitive and it is not in conflict with obvious assumptions about identity since the displacement of goals is situated within the structural identity of the person.

One might object that this example does not help to make Sen's account more plausible since in this case the goal-displacement is internal to the person and therefore cannot pose a challenge to identity. The issue on which critics focus is the fact that Sen's idea of goal-displacement means to identify with others and to adopt their goals. And this endangers the common notion of identity of the person.²⁸

We find, I suggest, an answer to this problem if we take into account the different dimensions of the concept of identity, namely the distinction between social identity and the more abstract notion of identity that corresponds to a self that is able to reflect and to structure its experiences in a coherent and systematic way. Identity in this more abstract sense unifies our various social identities. If we displace one goal by another (we give up writing a book and devote our time to become a musician) our social identity might change. The same happens when we leave our country and immigrate to another country. Due to immigration our social identity transforms and we might end up with a 'double identity': being Indian-American or African-Austrian. But our abstract identity, our identity as a being capable of a reflection and a sense of ourselves, is not affected by transformations in our social self-understanding.

Goal-displacement, so we can see now, does not affect our abstract sense of identity. The capacity of critical reflection, assessment and scrutiny which is at the basis of goal-modifying commitments remains untouched by changes in our social circumstances. Even if we abandon our goals and adopt those of others neither the condition of self-goal choice nor the condition of identity are violated. We move here on the abstract level of identity: persons reflect on their goals and the goals of others and the displacement of their goals and the adoption of the goals of other persons come about because persons might come to realize that they have good reasons for this displacement. The replacement might be justified by rational reflection and deliberation.²⁹

²⁸ Schmid, in his paper, emphasizes this point.

²⁹ This rules out, for example, that the person gives up her goals because of manipulation or force.

The case of goal-displacement in the example of the frustrated writer mentioned above seems easy and obvious. So why should there be a problem in the case where you displace your self-centered goals and endorse those goals that another person adopts? I would suggest treating this case in a similar way as the case of the person displacing one of her goals by another. We sometimes realize that there are good and compelling reasons why we should not insist on pursuing a specific goal we have since the costs of doing this might be too high for others. We even might come to realize that we have good reasons to endorse the goals of another person. It would be nonsense to understand ‘adoption’ here in a literal sense. If I enjoy being lazy and eating sweets I might come to give up this goal and adopt my friend’s goal of daily jogging then of course I do not take on the “my friend’s jogging-goal”, but I come to endorse the content of this goal on the ground of my deliberations about my physical condition and health. Goals are not physical entities like apples that we can take and pick up but normative constructions. They become a subject’s goal by the endorsement of the subject. If “adopting the goals of others” just means to have good reasons to endorse the content of those goals and to accept their pursuit then the implausibility of the idea of displacing our goals by the goals of others disappears.

There remains a further objection, namely that goal-displacing commitment amounts to abandoning the goal-maximizing structure inherent in the rational choice paradigm and the belief-desire model. My thesis is that this objection is groundless. Sen’s account does not violate plausible assumptions about the structure of choice that underlie the rational choice paradigm. I will argue in the next section of my paper that an account of practical rationality that appeals to objectives like commitments and moral principles can do justice to the goal-maximizing structure and incorporate the belief-desire model. I will use Kant’s account of rationality as an illustration. Kant, as I try to show, puts forward an account that includes means-end reasoning and instrumental rationality as part of practical rationality. So it seems quite dubious why Sen’s conception of practical rationality that is structurally similar to Kant’s conception (though more modest as far as the claims of morality are concerned) should not be able to do justice to the goal-maximizing structure of choice.

3. Instrumental Rationality and Identity

Instrumental rationality is usually characterized as means-end rationality. Whenever you have an end, you are rational if you pursue it in an effective way and take the necessary

means to realize the end. As a condition of rationality, instrumental rationality seems in a way self-evident.³⁰

There is, however, a more specific understanding of instrumental rationality present in considerations of rationality; instrumental rationality in that sense is associated with a specific sort of ends, namely utility in the sense of self-interest maximization. In that case the means-end requirement is directed to a very specific end, namely maximizing one's advantage in a self-centered way. The claim that instrumental rationality is self-evident holds only in regard to the means-end requirement. The self-evidence of the means-end principle does not support the specific interpretation of instrumental rationality which is often more or less tacitly presupposed in the *homo economicus* paradigm: being rational means to maximize one's own advantage. The defenders of narrow self-interest rationality often do not pay attention to the fact that the association of instrumental rationality with specific ends like utility maximization ('utility' defined as the person's personal advantage) needs an additional justification. There have to be given arguments why maximizing one's own advantage should be the appropriate end of rational behavior as such.

Means-end reasoning as such is neutral in regard to the ends. Whenever you have an end, it is rational to take the means. This does not necessarily amount to arbitrariness since the means-end principle can be connected with an assessment and evaluation of ends. An evaluation of the ends is indispensable for the rationality of persons and their doings. It makes a great difference whether we consider the ends of actions to be acceptable or even valuable or whether we think the aims are worthless. To just follow the demand that one should take the appropriate means to a desired end does not guarantee overall rationality. If the ends are bizarre or crazy, the person's choice of the most effective means to realize the desired end does not save an action from the verdict of irrationality.

Take Amartya Sen's example of a person cutting his or her toes.³¹ Sen presents two versions of this case. The first version is that the person tries to cut his or her toes with a blunt knife. The other version is that the person tries to cut his or her toes with a sharp knife. The toe-cutter with the blunt knife does not even pay respect to the means-end requirement; the toe-cutter with the sharp knife is at least instrumentally rational – he or she uses an instrument that is adequate for the purpose. By the standards of reflective rationality the persons cutting their toes are irrational in both cases. We do not want to characterize such a person as rational

³⁰ James Dreier, for example, expresses this point more strongly: 'The special status of instrumental reason is due to its being the *since qua non* of having reasons at all.' James Dreier, Humean Doubts about the Practical Justification of Morality, in: Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (eds.), *Ethics and Practical Reason*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1997, 98, 99.

³¹ Sen, Introduction: Rationality and Freedom, 39.

because his or her ends seem so destructive, crazy and irrational (at least under normal circumstances). The evaluation of the ends is important for an assessment of the rationality of the person. Exactly this is Sen's argument in regard to instrumental rationality: "Rationality cannot be just an instrumental requirement for the pursuit of some given – and unscrutinized – set of objectives and values."³²

In order that our choices qualify as rational there must be some restrictions in regard to our ends. The restrictions on our ends can come from different sources: They can consist in the demand to move from first-order desires to second-order desires, or they can simply be conventional directives such as the rules of etiquette or politeness, or they can be counsels of prudence or norms of morality. In any case, the standard of morality has an especially strong word in regard to the quality of the ends.

Now, the question is, whether this assessment of ends constitutes a level of rationality that cannot be combined with the rational choice paradigm. The objection is that the conditions of reflective rationality and critical scrutiny which Sen considers as essential, amount to a completely new model. But this is not the case as we can see by looking at Kant's account of rationality.

Kant's distinction between hypothetical imperatives and categorical imperatives is a consequence of his insight that instrumental reasoning cannot be the only principle of practical reason. Hypothetical imperatives have the structure of means-end reasoning, they "represent the practical necessity of a possible action as a means for attaining something else that one wants (or may possibly want)".³³ Categorical imperatives inform us that certain ways of acting are good in themselves. The hypothetical imperative is either a principle of skill or a principle of prudence. In the case of a principle of skill Kant considers it to be irrelevant whether the end is reasonable or good, the relevant issue is *how* we can reach the end.³⁴ The principle of prudence is a hypothetical imperative that tells us to choose the appropriate means to one's own greatest well-being. The categorical imperative, however, commands certain ways of acting without any reference to a purpose that should be attained by it.

Kant presents a unifying conception of practical reason. The conception of practical rationality he defends covers the means-end reasoning and the instrumental principle. This seems plausible. Means-end reasoning and the principle of instrumental reason are necessary components of practical reason. There is no reason to postulate a dichotomy between instrumental

³² Sen, Introduction: Rationality and Freedom, 39.

³³ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated as *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* by James Ellington, in: Kant, *Ethical Philosophy*, 2nd edition, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 25, (Academy edition of Kant's Works, 414).

³⁴ Kant, *Groundwork*, 25, (Academy edition, 415).

reasoning and a conception of reflective practical reason as such. We should, I think, understand Sen's project equally as an attempt to integrate the various conditions and principles of rationality into a coherent account of practical rationality by connecting formal conditions like consistency with the principle of instrumental rationality and reflective rationality. Seen this way, Sen's conception of rationality does not violate basic conditions of rational choice, but integrate them.

We should, however, be aware of a decisive difference between Sen's project and the Kantian program. Philosophers in the Kantian paradigm claim that the paramount and ultimate normative standards for the evaluation of our ends must be the standards of morality. So the structurally uniting element behind our personal identity and our various social identities (expressed in the different social roles we have) is moral identity. However, this Kantian argument which is based on an identification of the standards of practical rationality with the rules of morality is open to criticism. In the following chapter I will look at two slightly different accounts of rational and moral identity within the Kantian paradigm, the positions of Christine Korsgaard and Elizabeth Anderson, and compare them with Sen's position on identity.

4. Practical Reason and Moral Identity

Kant tells us that practical principles "should be derived from the universal concept of a rational being in general".³⁵ So we get to the principles of morality by reflecting on what it means to be a rational being. Christine Korsgaard reformulates Kant's argument in the language of identity. Persons, in so far as they are rational beings, are constituted by the principles of a rational will, and the principles of a rational will are the principles of morality.³⁶ Moral identity is the unifying element behind our various social identities.

In more detail, Korsgaard's argument reads: We, insofar as we are beings with a reflective capacity, must be normatively structured. Normative structures are not only supplied by morality, but also by our social identities, i.e. those normative codes that result from our social roles and social contexts - whether one is a father, a mother, a mafioso or a philosopher. But we cannot develop social identities if we do not attribute value to ourselves, if we do not value our humanity. And to value our humanity we equally have to value the humanity of

³⁵ Kant, *Groundwork* 23, (Academy edition, 412).

³⁶ The main formulas of the categorical imperative are the Universal Law formula, the Humanity formula and the Autonomy Formula. The Universal Law formula demands that we only act on those maxims (subjective principles of action) that we can conceive to be universal laws for all others as well. The Humanity formula demands that we should respect other persons as ends, and should not treat them merely as means. The Autonomy formula tells that the universal law is binding for our will. The Kantian moral principles (Universal Law formula, Humanity formula) Korsgaard considers as constitutive standards of our identity as unified agents.

others. This demands that we consider our humanity as valuable, and the publicity of reason and the rule-based structure of reasons force us to consider the humanity of others as valuable. In other words: The reflective structure of our consciousness demands that you identify yourself with a law, this law is qua law a formal principle of universality, and the material side of this formal principle is to value yourself as a human being.³⁷

Action for Korsgaard is self-constitution.³⁸ The principles of practical reason, i.e. hypothetical and categorical imperatives, are principles of the unification of agency and this explains their normativity. As Korsgaard writes: “The necessity of conforming to the principles of practical reason comes down to the necessity of being a unified agent.”³⁹ What makes actions good or bad is how well they constitute you. A good person is one who is good at his or her unification. Korsgaard wants to show that the categorical imperatives are necessary principles of our actions; our acceptance of them is inevitable since they are part of us as unified agents.

If we argue, as Korsgaard does, that the principles of morality (in the form of the categorical imperatives) are constitutive of our identity as a rational and moral being we end up with a moralized notion of identity and the rational will. This way it becomes mysterious to which will our bad actions can be attributed – certainly not to a will whose constitutive principle is acting from the categorical imperative. An obvious way to a solution of this problem seems to be to distinguish between different forms of identity. We find in Korsgaard’s writings a distinction between practical or social identity on the one hand and moral identity on the other hand. So the way to go would be to argue that someone with the social identity of a gangster does bad acts, but that he would act morally if he would adopt a moral identity. But in that case there would be a gap: The gangster need not necessarily accept the moral law, so in his case moral identity would not be the unifying element of his various social identities. To distinguish between social identity and moral or constitutional identity does not help here because the question arises of how the norms making up the social identity can in the case of a unified agent be deviant and violate the Kantian imperatives.

What form of identity does a human being have that does not act in conformity with the categorical imperatives? Does such a being merely have a social or practical identity so that the content of the maxims is determined by his or her social values or group values? But how could this being have maxims at all since unification is missing? Interpreting bad acting

³⁷ This is still a very condensed version of her argument.

³⁸ Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Locke Lectures 2002, Self-Constitution: Action, Identity and Integrity*, <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~korsgaard/>, Lecture One: The Metaphysical Foundations of Normativity, 1.3.4.

³⁹ Korsgaard, *The Locke Lectures 2002*, Lecture One, 1.3.4.

as a failure of self-constitution seems implausible since acting, and therefore bad acting as well, already presupposes self-constitution. When we criticize the actions of persons as morally deficient then we do not necessarily evaluate and talk about whether the identity of these persons is badly constituted or not. So the claim that moral identity is behind all other forms of identity seems much too strong.

Sen, as we have seen, considers reflective rationality in the form of self-scrutiny and assessment as an important aspect of a conception of the self that opens the door to morality and moral considerations. Though Sen shows some sympathy with a Kantian account he does not subscribe to such a strong conception of practical rationality which identifies the principles of rationality with the moral principles.

Elizabeth Anderson, for example, argues that Sen should be more explicit in adopting a Kantian position in order to offer an account of an „alternative, non-preference-based conception of rationality in terms of which committed action makes sense“. ⁴⁰ Anderson agrees with Sen’s proposal to consider acting on the basis of commitment as a possible way out of PD-situations. On the other hand, she criticizes Sen for not developing an alternative conception of rationality that can also make sense of committed action. ⁴¹ Her suggestion is to extend Sen’s theses about rationality into a pragmatic Kantian account of practical reason. ⁴²

Anderson connects identity and rationality. She argues that conceptions of identity are prior to rational principles: the sort of rational principles we choose is a function of the self-understanding of the actors. Whether we choose the principle of expected utility or the principle of universalization depends on whether we see each other as isolated individuals or as cooperating agents. As cooperating agents we need, as she emphasizes, to adopt a more general perspective from which we can coordinate and evaluate the different demands we face as members of different groups. This ‘requires that we transcend our various parochial identities and identify with a community that comprehends them all’. ⁴³ The universalization principle (i.e., to act on principles that it is rational to adopt if one identifies as a member of a collective agent) reflects the deliberative process in such a community as the principle extends to the point of view of each individual. Anderson considers the universalization principle as the constitutive principle of a collective agent and proposes it as the alternative to the

⁴⁰ Elizabeth S. Anderson, *Unstrapping the Straitjacket of “Preference”*, 24.

⁴¹ Sen mentions various elements that should be considered in the formulation of an alternative principle of rational choice such as understanding people’s identities (their memberships in various groups), their joint strategy, and their ways of discussion. Anderson tries to integrate these ideas into a coherent account.

⁴² Anderson, *Unstrapping the Straitjacket of “Preference”*, 21-38.

⁴³ Anderson, *Unstrapping the Straitjacket of “Preference”*, 37. As examples of such a community, Anderson mentions Rawls’s conception of a ‘social union of social unions’ or the Kantian Kingdom of Ends. She mentions

principle of maximizing expected utility. Similar to Korsgaard she claims that the universalization principle allows the step ‘from the rationality to the morality of committed action’.⁴⁴ In the context of global moral problems the universalization principle leads to more ‘expansive, cosmopolitan identifications’ and an identification with humanity.⁴⁵ The test for valid reasons is ‘universalizability among those with whom one rationally identifies’.⁴⁶

This raises some questions. Anderson considers collective action based on identification with a collective as an alternative to the paradigm of self-interest maximization. However, the appeal to identification has to be seen with caution. Identification with a collective is not necessary to transcend the self-interest paradigm of rational choice. Anderson moves from the individual to the collective perspective replacing the principle of maximizing expected utility by the universalization principle. Universalization demands that we consider whether a principle of action can be a principle for all others as well. This results in a society where the others are taken into account, a society in which the members respect each other. But the justification why an individual should adopt this principle rests on the insight that acting in accordance with that principle is right and does not depend on the identification with a collective and a community.⁴⁷

Anderson introduces the notion of practical identity as a more general level of identity beyond social identity. Unlike ‘ascribed social identities of gender, race, caste, ethnicity, nationality’ practical identity is, as she points out, an abstract concept of identity that determines which principles of deliberation we choose and consider as adequate.⁴⁸

There is a difference between Korsgaard’s and Anderson’s account of practical identity. For Korsgaard, ‘practical identity’ means the abstract moral identity an agent has as a being able to deliberate rationally and to act from reasons. The moral principles are constitutive of the identity of the rational person; they are indispensable for the structure of a person acting from reasons. In Korsgaard’s account of rational action, the concept of social identity as such is not specifically important; the concept of identity (in the sense of social identity) does not have justificatory power. That we have social identities is simply a fact, but the validity of the principles of morality is established independently of our belonging to various social groups. What is crucial in Korsgaard’s account is the claim that the categorical

Hegel’s philosophy as a model of such a way to gain a more general practical outlook and she explicitly separates her ‘dialectical reasoning’ from Korsgaard’s transcendental form of arguing.

⁴⁴ Anderson, *Unstrapping the Straitjacket of “Preference”*, 24.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 37 (n9).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁷ But this does not require abolishing the perspective of the individual and identifying with a community of all others so that the perspective of the individual is subordinated to the standpoint of the community.

⁴⁸ Anderson, *Unstrapping the Straitjacket of “Preference”*, 31.

imperative principles are constitutive of a rational being. The step from rationality to morality is made by the argument that we need a principle to structure our reasons and that the features of this principle are fulfilled by the formulas of the categorical imperatives. The systematic point is the functional role the categorical imperatives play as they meet the structural requirements of rational practical deliberation. Practical or moral identity as such is not decisive.

According to Anderson's account identifications of the person either with herself or with social groups are decisive. In the end only a cosmopolitan identity allows us to develop solutions to various moral conflicts. So Korsgaard's transcendental argument⁴⁹ seems to be replaced by a pragmatic one: we need identification with the 'universal community of humanity' because this standpoint enables us to overcome problems that 'can only be solved within a global system of cooperation'.⁵⁰ Anderson concedes that she has no argument to justify the identification with the universal community of humanity as a rational necessity. But our historical experiences show that the adoption of such a point of view would make us aware of various possibilities of solving collective action problems.

Anderson's way of arguing is different from Korsgaard's, as Anderson offers a pragmatic, not a transcendental justification of the principles. Whether we should adopt the universalization principle or the principle of expected utility depends on the particular social context, something Anderson tries to illustrate with the example of gender relations. For women, she argues, it often would be justified to adopt the principle of expected utility; often it would be better in moral terms if women could see themselves as rational egoists instead of committed wives and mothers. Rational egoism seems the strategy to escape oppressive commitments. Anderson does not reject rational egoism, she just thinks it is not the appropriate strategy for women since women in many cases are not in a bargaining situation. Women's preferences include most of the time the well-being of other people; their actions often are the result of commitments. The background norms, Anderson points out, must be neither those of egoism nor those of collective identification, because women can be disadvantaged by following the principle of expected utility as well as if they follow the principle of collective action. To grant women justice, a Kantian perspective seems adequate enabling women to have an autonomously defined self-conception so that they can see

⁴⁹ A transcendental argument in the Kantian sense tries to justify x by showing that x is a condition of the possibility of y and therefore necessary. Korsgaard's argument is transcendental in so far as she tries to argue that the moral principles (i.e. the categorical imperatives in the first two formulations) are the conditions of possibility for being a reflective agent.

⁵⁰ Anderson, *Unstrapping the Straitjacket of "Preference"*, 37.

themselves ‘as a committed member of multiple social groups, among whose claims one must adjudicate in allocating one’s own efforts’.⁵¹

Korsgaard’s identification of the rules of rationality with the rules of morality is, as I have argued, problematic. In that respect Anderson’s pragmatic justification of different principles of rational action seems more plausible. Anderson’s problem is her ambivalence: She develops a reflective endorsement version of a Kantian justificatory program which entails that the principles of rational choice do not reach all the way to morality; the reflective endorsement procedure has to be guided by additional moral standards and principles to justify choices on moral grounds. But in the end Anderson falls back on the strong Kantian ambition of identifying the rules of rationality with the rules of morality. Anderson does this by claiming that our identity as social actors demands our identification with the collective action principle of a collective agent (the universalization principle), which turns out to be a basic moral principle. This argument is basically the same as Korsgaard’s argument: rationality analytically entails morality.

Like Sen, Anderson sees the concept of commitment as part of a form of rational deliberation that is different from the preference-based account. Again, to take commitments seriously does not presuppose the adoption of a collective standpoint and identification with a social group or community. Certainly, how we understand ourselves has an important influence on what we feel committed to. But from the normative perspective, commitments are principles or reasons that have force. And the force or validity of a principle does not depend on the social identity we adopt.

I have argued that we should avoid a notion of commitment and the rational will that ascribes necessarily moral meaning to these concepts.⁵² Otherwise we have difficulties to explain cases of bad acting. In these cases the person is committed to ends, but from the point of view of morality they are the wrong ones.

Choice must be connected to normative endorsement, but not necessarily to morality. Moral and instrumental principles bind us as agents insofar as we necessarily commit ourselves to complying with them through the normative act of choice. There are specific normative commitments regarding the value of the actions we set out to perform. There is a more general commitment to comply with more general principles of moral and instrumental rationality. This general commitment is part of our identity. We need to be committed to certain standards; we need the capacity to reflect, to reason, and to form a coherent set of our

⁵¹ Ibid., 36.

⁵² For a similar line of criticism see R.Jay F. Wallace, Normativity, Commitment, and Instrumental Reason, in: *Philosopher’s Imprint*, 1, 3, 2001, 1-26, www.philosophersimprint.org/001003.

evaluations.⁵³ We should distinguish between a general commitment to rationality (in the sense of adoption of reason and reflection) and more specific commitments.

The difference between moral standards and other standards and values lies not so much in the methodological structure of endorsement than in the specific criteria connected with morality (universalization without contradiction, impartiality etc.) It is in this way that also a certain form of happiness might turn out to be a moral value provided that a justification of ends connected with the rules of prudence (via critical endorsement) is not so different from an evaluation of moral ends.

The solution seems to be to give up the ambitious claim of making the Kantian imperatives necessary and inevitable. We should take them as plausible criteria to test our subjective principles of acting, our inclinations and dispositions. This means to come back to a more modest form of reflective endorsement, a form that is less ambitious in the goals of justification but broader in the scope of what can be an object of moral evaluation and justification.

The same holds for the notion of commitment. Being autonomous and having a will means to be committed to the particular ends that we endorse and want to pursue. If we however subscribe to a notion of autonomy where autonomy is constituted by moral principles then it follows that we identify commitment with morality. But being bound by commitments does not mean that our commitments are in all cases moral ones. The ends we are committed to need not always be moral ends.

5. Reflective Rationality: A 'Middle Ground'⁵⁴ between Humean and Kantian Rationality

One might be tempted to adopt a strong Kantian account of practical rationality if one thinks that the concept of practical rationality contains more elements than instrumental reasoning and maximization. Strong Kantianism amounts to an identification of the rules of practical rationality with the principles of morality. That is a step that should be avoided. I have argued that it is sufficient to associate practical rationality (in addition to the means-end principle) with a form of critical reflection that makes use of different normative standards.

⁵³ We have to distinguish between different forms of commitments here. The one is that we are committed to act in conformity with the principles of rationality in a general way. This includes principles of theoretical rationality (rules such as consistency and logical inferences) and principles of practical rationality. The other commitments arise in conjunction with the more specific values and standards which we use and apply to our actions.

⁵⁴ The demand for a 'middle ground' has been formulated by Michael Bratman. See Michael E. Bratman, Review of Korsgaard's *The Sources of Normativity*, in: Bratman, *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999, 265-278.

Practical rationality should be connected to a pluralism of normative parameters, and morality is one of the standards relevant in a deliberation procedure. The identification of practical rationality with morality is due to the aim of Kantian philosophy to offer a justification of moral rules that cannot be rejected. The idea is that if we identify morality with practical rationality and consider the rules of practical rationality and morality as indispensable for the identity of a person, then the rules of morality are established as inescapable. But we do not need to rely on such a transcendental argument to show that morality has a strong word in human affairs. Equally we do not need to use a specifically *moral* concept of identity as an anchor and ground for moral normative standards.

There are different conceptions of the self dependent on whether critical reflection in conformity with commitments and principles has a say or not. A ‘Humean being’, for example, is a person driven by her or his impulses and desires, a person who gives in, a person who has no will, a person who has no volitions and resolutions.⁵⁵ This is a person who does not recognize commitments, neither moral nor non-moral commitments. The Humean person just follows his or her desires. Rationality in a normative sense, however presupposes persons who reflect on their aims and attempt to realize them with resolution. Though they are committed to their aims, they do not just blindly follow their desires, but reflect on their preferences and ends. This does not imply that they always and exclusively reflect on their ends from a moral standpoint.

This difference also finds expression in two conceptions of economic identity: According to a certain interpretation of the rational choice paradigm an agent just follows her or his preferences. What a person chooses reveals his or her preferences and his or her wishes. Economic identity in this sense would only be the sum of the consumer’s wishes. There is no critical level to evaluate one’s choices. But this is not merely a barren conception of identity; it is no conception of identity at all since there is no reflective agency to bring the desires and wishes into a coherent set. Identity cannot be reduced to following one’s desires, as a being reduced to his or her desires, wishes and impulses is not a person, but, in Harry Frankfurt’s words, a wanton.⁵⁶

Yet, we can construct economic identity equally on the basis of commitments and normative guidelines – and Sen’s work is an example.⁵⁷ In that case we evaluate the goals of

⁵⁵ One has to be careful: This is not all of what Hume says about agents. At the beginning of Book 3 of the *Treatise (Of Morals)* he presents a skeptical position in regard to rationality and agency. At the end of Book 3, in the third part of the book, he is much more positive in regard to the possibilities of evaluative reflection.

⁵⁶ Harry G. Frankfurt, *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person*, in: Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988.

⁵⁷ Kirman, Alan and Miriam Teschl, *On the Emergence of Economic Identity*, in: *Revue de Philosophie Économique*.

economic activity by normative standards – these standards can be the rules of morality, but need not be so in all cases.

A person who critically reflects about her ends and takes the existence of others into account is a person who is different from a self-centred maximizer or a dog-like follower of his impulses. To point out problems in these self-understandings it is sufficient to presuppose the concept of a rational agent as a person who critically reflects on his or her ends. Critical reflection makes us aware that self-interest maximization might in some contexts be a social and moral deficit and might be legitimate in other contexts (as Anderson's example of suppressed women shows); and a dog-like follower of immediate desires simply lacks the attributes of a reflective agent. So the necessary element binding our different identities together is the identity of being a critically reflective agent.

In a general sense personal identity means self-awareness: a person can ascribe his or her experiences, desires, sentiments, impulses to himself or herself and identify them as his or her own. Social identity refers to the social contexts that form us, the social communities with which we either identify or from which we distance ourselves. Identity in the sense of being a rational reflective person can integrate our personal identity and the social identities we adopt according to the emphasis we place on different social values. To acknowledge that rational agency presupposes a reflective self that recognizes commitments and principles, however, does not amount to the assumption that all different forms of social identities must be backed by a practical identity constituted by moral principles. Our identity certainly is formed by the rules and standards that we accept. Who we are is influenced by the standards that guide our actions and the values and ends that we accept. But this does not support the claim that the Kantian moral principles must be by necessity constitutive of our identity.

In discussions about rationality and identity the alternatives presented are often either a strictly Humean account or a strong Kantian account. The same holds for discussions about economic rationality and identity: the choice seems to be, either to follow a self-interest account based on Humean means-end considerations or to accept a Kantian explanation of the rules of rationality. If, as I have tried to show, we presuppose a concept of reflective rationality then we can avoid taking position between these two alternatives. To start with a reflective structure of our minds enables us to avoid the problems of both accounts and to take the valuable aspects of both positions on board.

The work of moral deliberation - which values to adopt, which ends to reject, which ways of acting to follow - should be done by a reflective agent who not only knows the basics of reasoning, but is aware of morally relevant situations and takes moral standards into

account. The question when and in what way we should act from the standpoint of morality cannot be decided and answered via a specific definition of identity. This also applies to the recent work on the concept of economic identity. To reflect critically on the values and normative presuppositions underlying different understandings of the economic agent is most helpful and important since we might not endorse the specific normative connotations and values at stake. But we should avoid seeing the normative disagreement as a problem of the notion of identity and we should not be inclined to decide the disagreement via a normative reformulation of the concept of identity. Controversies about values have to be decided by normative arguments and not by a projection of normative assumptions on the concept of identity.