



Sentimental fools: a critique of Amartya Sen's notion of commitment

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Received 25 October 1997; received in revised form 8 February 1999; accepted 11 March 1999

Abstract

Commitment is problematic because one sometimes pursues it against one's interest. To solve it, the paper proposes a distinction between 'non-binding' and 'binding' commitments. Non-binding commitment is about ambition, such as becoming a great chef, which bolsters welfare in the pecuniary sense as well as self-respect. In contrast, 'binding commitment' is about honesty. While it diminishes welfare, it augments self-integrity. The neoclassical view reduces both commitments to interest, while the multiple-self approach separates both commitments from interest. The separation permits the confusion of sentimental fools, who enter commitments without regard to interest, with rational sentimentalists, who take interest into consideration. ©1999 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

JEL classification: D0

Keywords: Substantive interest; Non-binding commitment; Binding commitment; Sentimental fools; Rational fools; Rational sentimentalists; Guilt; Disgrace (shame); Embarrassment; Substantive preference; Symbolic preference (self-respect and self-integrity); Lethargic will; Crooked will

1. Introduction

Given that commitment appears to negate interest, some theorists, such as Amartya Sen, propose that agents have conflicting selves. Defenders of the standard approach, on the other hand, deny the existence of the problem; they simply regard commitment as an ordinary preference stemming from a unitary self. While this paper recognizes the phenomenon of commitment as a problem, it tries to solve it without appealing to the multiple-self view.

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	Incentive -responsiveness	Examples	Reward	Negation of preference
Substantive interest	Very responsive	Demand for food, clothes, entertainment	Substantive preference (welfare)	irrational
Non- binding commitment	Responsive (after trying hard enough)	Career or idealistic pursuits	Symbolic preference (self-respect)	Weak will (lethargic will)
Binding commitment	Not responsive	Honesty, no shirking, fairness	Symbolic preference (self-integrity)	Weak will (crooked will)

Fig. 1. The three preferences.

It does so by distinguishing two kinds of commitment and how each relates differently to interest—a necessary distinction to discern admirable acts from sentimental foolishness.

Let us start with three kinds of preferences, which may overlap, facing the self (S):

Situation 1: S decides to enter a training program in the culinary art of French cuisine because the going wage rate for chefs, given the cost of training and the responsibility of the job, is more attractive than other options.

Situation 2: In addition to Situation 1, S has been impressed by the creative art involved in French cooking. He takes on a commitment to try to become the best chef in the city.

Situation 3: In addition to Situation 2, S takes on the commitment to be truthful. In specific, he prepares, in light of his advertisement, dishes made only from fresh ingredients, even when the pecuniary benefit from a cheating strategy is unambiguously greater than expected pecuniary cost resulting possibly from a tarnished market reputation.

Situation 1 involves what I call ‘*substantive interest*’, pecuniary calculation. Situation 2 consists of ‘*non-binding commitment*’ because the promise cannot be obligatory given that the agent is uncertain whether he can fulfill it. Situation 3 entails ‘*binding commitment*’ because the agent is certain that he can meet his obligation. The agent fulfills his binding commitment to enjoy self-integrity. If he fulfills it exclusively out of substantive calculation concerning penalty, it would fail to generate the sense of self-integrity.

While Situation 2 advances substantive preference, Situation 3 by definition reduces it. Nonetheless, both kinds of commitment satisfy a sense of selfhood, dubbed here ‘symbolic preference’ as opposed to ‘substantive preference’. As summed up in Fig. 1, while the negation of one’s substantive interest would be irrational, the negation of either kind of commitment is usually described as the result of weak will. There are two kinds of weak will (‘lethargic’ and ‘crooked’), and two kinds of symbolic preference (‘self-respect’ and ‘self-integrity’), following the two kinds of commitment.

The paper commences with some motivation (Section 1). It distinguishes binding from non-binding commitments (Section 2) and preference from choice (Section 3). Many authors confuse non-binding with binding commitment, which lead them to separate commitment per se from substantive interest (Section 4). Such a separation entails that the agent is constituted of multiple selves (Section 5). Such a view, in turn, makes it impossible to distinguish sentimental fools from rational sentimentalists (Section 6).

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