

## **Some Reflections on Responsibility and Happiness in Economics**

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In this chapter, we use the concept of “Person”, as defined by Emmanuel Mounier and Emmanuel Levinas, for economic purposes. The person has the same characteristics as a philosophical subject, i.e. she is an autonomous consciousness, with the capacity to decide and choose a way of life, the capacity of reflection upon decision (the person is reasonable), the capacity of reciprocity which induces responsibility, and the capacity of making efficient choices through rationality.

In fact, the person, defined in such a way, is a much more complex and complete entity than the individual, as considered by the utilitarianism theory<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, the relationships of this person with others persons can still be analysed in an

utilitarian way, either by considering the social interactions or through the search for a rational solution in the case of focused dilemma.

One of the key characteristics of a person is his capacity to be responsible towards others. A responsibility which results from his involvement in a nexus of social relationships, out of which it is impossible for him to escape. All types of relationship generate a series of rights, on one side, and associated obligations, on the other side, which express the person's level of responsibility towards the others. This can be formally represented by a specific tool: the right and obligation map (ROM).

In his regular search for happiness, the person's consciousness of responsibility may enter an internal conflict. Searching for his individual pleasure on one side may not be compatible with satisfying his social obligation. A balanced solution between responsibility and happiness has to be found. Therefore he can consciously adjust his level of responsibility, by prioritising the various obligations, but this adjustment has to appear reasonable. He must keep in mind that any of her actions have to look reasonable for the others. Such an attempt to conciliate responsibility and happiness leads naturally to a refusal of the simple criteria of satisfaction that the utilitarian philosophy considers. It implies to refer to another type of ethics, the ethics of joy and happiness.

### **1. The Right and Obligations Map (ROM): A Formal Representation of Responsibility**

A person is normally embedded in various social networks, or in institutions, which give him rights but also impose obligations based on reciprocity. A. Sen (1981) already discussed this issue when he discovered that famines occur in situations where enough food is available to feed the whole population but remains stocked. He developed his analysis of entitlements to

explain the surge of the famine. However, this explanation did not fit in well when analysing the 1972 Sahelian famine; despite a situation of starvation, the rate of mortality was much under the level it was supposed to be (Caldwell J. and Caldwell P. 1987). In fact, the distribution of rights and obligations among family relatives, between urban and rural areas, allowed adequate transfers, which helped overcome the situation. But, these rights, and their related entitlements, could only be used once the obligations were fulfilled (Mahieu 2001).

This relation between rights and obligations can be formalised by introducing a specific entitlement tool: the Rights and Obligations Map (ROM). Each person has his own ROM, which defines the set of obligations he is subjected to and the potential rights he disposes of, according to his age and sex, the role played within the family and the social status at a given date.

Two types of relationships are represented by the ROM. First, the family links, or vertical relationships, which are based on the lineage system (patriarchy, matriarchy, etc.). They are usually the most intensive and oppressive ones. Second, the horizontal relationships which express the mutual aid that exists between age groups, community groups, social networks, and which can be used to complement the lineage authority. Both relationships generate rights and obligations based on political, economic, religious and other foundations.

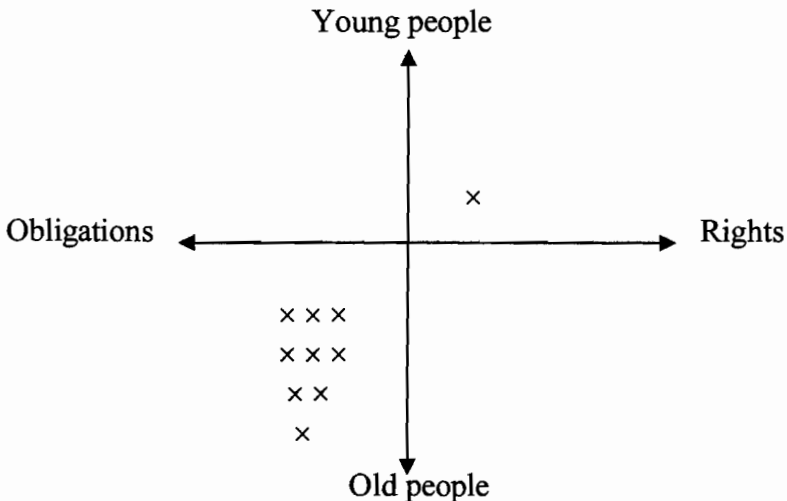
On such a map, the Y-axis of the diagram represents the intergenerational balance of rights and obligations by showing the opposition between younger and older people. On the X-axis, the range beyond zero represents the intensity of rights, in positive terms, and the amount of obligations, in negative terms (see graph. 1).

The diagram can be used to analyse various situations. For instance, if obligations are totally balanced by rights, in the long run, the distribution of points will be symmetrical. A non-symmetrical distribution appears when the amount of obligations exceeds that number of rights, especially between generations.

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This is the case for the points in the “South-West” quarter of the diagram, which represent the situation of the youngest having many obligations towards older people, either through tradition (as in the developing countries) or by law (the pension system in the developed countries). Therefore, the younger generations can be considered as a “sacrificed generation”, once compared to others. However, this may change over time, during their life cycle, and the “once sacrificed generation” may then become, a few years later, a “lost generation” (for it may become spoiled by affluence and power).

**Graph.1 :The Rights and Obligations Map (ROM)**



Everybody has to fulfil obligations towards the community in order to benefit from rights. Obligations are usually expressed by constraints on time and resources. Resources cover the transfers

of money or goods to the original village and the aid to the members of the community living in urban areas. Time obligations include visits to parents, attending funerals, participation in collective work, etc. For a given level of obligations, time and money may become substitutes. For instance, sending money for funerals or the required goods to parents can compensate being unable to attend and to give time to support the family. All these events are captured through the use of targeted surveys which measure the community pressure on personal income and time allocation.

Substitution between time allocation and transfer of goods can be formalised, in economic terms, by indifference curves of obligations, such as those presented in graph. 2. Each curve expresses, for a given person, the level of obligations based on his double allocation of time and expenses on goods. More generally, the final balance between amounts of time, money, goods, and caring relationships, is a function of the way in which a person is imbedded in community relationships. It depends on the community's preference for this person.

While facing obligations on one hand, the person has also potential rights, on the other, which means that he can use these rights later on, when need be. The effective ability to exercise these rights depends, amongst other things, on how the person respects his obligations towards the community. Some rights can be considered as fundamental for they are related to a social position in the community, to the protection from evil forces and to survival in case of disasters. Rights are circumstantial and concern access to assets, goods and services, e.g. access to the land managed by the community, to children's fosterage, to help for fieldwork, and cash money or gifts in the case of funerals. Having such a set of rights is an insurance against actual or potential difficulties. In West Africa, for instance, subscribing to mutual benefit pools such as the "tontines" enables one to receive collective help in the event of financial trouble.

The main issue, for a given person, stands in the balance between the number of rights and obligations. At the interpersonal level, reciprocal obligations can be analysed, in theory, with the classical Edgeworth box. In practice, rights and obligations may be difficult to compare due to their different substance and content. Obligations often materialise by flows of goods in real terms, while rights remain frequently a potential which can only be mobilised within community. It becomes difficult to set up a balance at the personal level, for it will depend on the relationship between the person and his community.

Moreover, rights and obligations vary according to the socio-economic status of its members. For instance, the "first born" of a family and the "older brother" are more strongly subjected to obligations than other members. On the other hand, they also have more rights. But, since these remain potential, they may in the short-term be overburdened by obligations and be unable to compensate the corresponding expenses with their current resources. By contrast, those who are lower down in the family hierarchy may be never obliged to return, in one way or another, the small benefits they get from their position.

Other distortions or difficulties may appear within this obligation-right pattern, through urban-rural relationships and intergenerational exchanges. For instance, the flows of given goods are usually directed from the village to family members in the urban areas. The village community compensates for this by giving potential rights to land, fosterage for children, and stocks of supplies once the harvest completed. But this may not be sufficient to equitably compensate the efforts made by the urban members for this particular community.

Meanwhile, such relationships generate social capabilities, i.e. abilities to generate social income (e.g. transfers), investment in social matters and social capital through reciprocity. These constitute "altruistic resources", which depend on the person's

social status and are distributed according to social norms, i.e. the set of rights and obligations.

In conclusion, it appears clearly that intra and inter-generational balances between rights and obligations remain a condition for social sustainability at the personal and community levels. This is the case in all societies, whatever their level of development. For instance, the social security and pension system in France are an illustration of such arrangements in the North.

## 2. Responsibility and Happiness: A Conflicting Duet

Each person is plunged into a intragenerational and inter-generational pattern of rights and obligations, which reflects his responsibility towards other people. The introduction of this responsibility, besides his freedom to choose the life he expects to live, may be a source of conflict and therefore of disturbances in his own set of preferences. To a certain extent, his belonging to a series of social networks may restrain his personal search for happiness. Therefore, there is a risk of conflict between the personal quest for a better life (with the objective of reaching happiness in the end) and the level of responsibility towards others.

This is particularly true in societies where the power of the community is so strong and oppressive, that it is difficult to escape from the social obligation of solidarity without the risk of serious sanctions such as exclusion, sorcery matters, or life prosecution. In this case, the traditional obligation of solidarity may become a burden, a kind of plot on generations being "persecuted". In this context, counter-adaptation such as disregarding personal responsibilities is extremely difficult. It may generate other egoistic attitudes based on the dissimulation of information (e.g. hiding the level of the income) and the manipulation of events (e.g. omitting to declare the right personal status), etc.

In practice, the capacity of a person to behave in a purely egoistic way is quite limited since he lives in a social environment that imposes limits and defines his set of associated rights and obligations. No one can deny this situation and effectively avoid it. This is as true in developed countries as it is in developing countries. However, since the legal social security system (e.g. system of family support, health insurance, retirement pension, old age assistance, etc.) is more extended in developed countries, the importance of the traditional pattern of rights and obligations is normally less. Either way, the best solution is to adapt to the constraints of the social environment through thinking and appropriately reflecting upon actions. Responsibility thus informs adaptive preferences and this may even help, through the use of the "affiliation capabilities", to revise the set of obligations without rupture in the social capacity to co-operate.

To summarise, by adapting his preferences, the person will look for a balance between his egoistic and altruistic attitudes. In a context of scarce resources, he will have to adapt according to the corpus of social norms, which defines his responsibility, using assets such as time allocation or intergenerational transfers. In this way, the moral and economic constraints should fit together.

Another question remains: to what extent is a person's quest for happiness compatible with others' quests of happiness?

First, this takes us back to the capacity of relating to others, to participate in others' happiness. M. Nussbaum (2000) considers the capacity for reciprocity as part of the "affiliation capabilities" that she describes in her central list of capabilities, i.e. "to be able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation". R. Misrahi goes further, in his ethics of joy and happiness, by demonstrating that higher levels of happiness are a deeply thought construct which cannot be reached without a strong reciprocal link to others.



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Secondly, admitting reciprocity raises the issue of responsibility when confronted to the question: to what extent will my chosen actions, realisation of capabilities, achieved functionings, positively or negatively affect others? More precisely, what rules could guide the trade off between my personal freedom and responsibility towards others? Taking responsibility into account leads to two alternatives. A priority is given either to personal freedom or to responsibility.

In the European continental philosophical tradition of phenomenology, priority is always given to responsibility, which is considered as an ex-ante phenomenon related to the social context. It induces a self-constrained responsibility, based on the Kantian golden rule "behave as you would like others to behave". It is not, as in the Rawlsian tradition, an ex-post concept. It leaves the person a certain degree of freedom through his capacity to adapt, or to counter-adapt, his set of preferences (Elster 1983).

An extreme case of an infinite responsibility is given by E. Levinas (1983) (for intragenerational responsibility) and H. Jonas (1979) (for intergenerational responsibility). In both cases, the person has limited freedom. For E. Levinas, priority is always given to the other and makes it necessary to sacrifice personal freedom to ensure the happiness of others. For H. Jonas, the "precautionary principle" sets the priority. It ensures that future generations won't suffer from decisions taken by the present generation. For both authors, the priority of the others' happiness makes responsibility supersede freedom.

A different, and intermediary answer, is given by P. Ricœur (1995), who admits neither the rule of infinite responsibility, nor the short-term egoistic view of utilitarianism. He defines, as a primary capability, the capacity of a person to impute responsibility on his current actions. This is a capacity of "imputatio", which expresses the ability to freely assume finite actions and recognize the corresponding impacts on others.

Mostly, obligations need to be fulfilled before rights can be exercised. This shows the relevance of the "imputatio" theory of responsibility and through it "multiple realisability" in various contexts. Happiness still remains the synthesis of joy's events. But it has to be constructed within the framework of a self-constrained freedom, where preferences on finite actions are adapted to fit in with the dominant context.

### 3. On the Ethics of Joy and Happiness

According to R. Misrahi (2003), actions originate from human desire. Desire is a drive and an intrinsic part of human nature, which gives value to all things. Within this desire, there is freedom for choices including the choice to generate joy.

The desire can lead to the sole search of spontaneous individual hedonistic pleasure, but this will be too narrow a view, since we are all embedded in social networks. Our spontaneous desire will inevitably encounter the desires of the others. Differences in desires, whether perceived or real, generate resentment, conflicts and violence. This is a common experience of humanity.

But the human being, i.e. R. Misrahi's Subject, is able to perceive the others consciously. He has the capacity to "project himself on the other as a mirror", i.e. to imagine the situation of another, the risk of conflict when the respective desires do not match, and even to have compassion. As such, it is possible to avoid violence and conflicts, to define rational exchanges through the setting up of agreements and contracts according to which one will give something and receive the equivalent in exchange. This is the juridical expression of reciprocity based on a reciprocal recognition of the other. From this, a new form of ethics can be generated: not based on the usual ethos of pleasure - of spontaneous pleasure since this is often inconsistent with reality - but on an ethos of deeply thought out joy.

However, switching into such an ethic of joy implies going through several stages of conversion in order to abandon a spontaneous, inconsistent, egoistic and tormented life, and reach a more reasoned and peaceful stage. The first step involves a "knowledge conversion". It is based on the understanding that the Subject itself gives sense to all things in life and that it is not just the reverse. The Subject is at the origin of all the meanings and values. Therefore, he can change the world if he wants to, since he is the one giving sense to all its components. The second step is an "existential conversion". It means that the vocation of the Subject, through the realisation of its full desire, is not ontologically limited to anxiety and torment, but to fulfilment and joy. This happens by understanding the situation, developing a relationship with others, and, more generally, appreciating the world itself. The third conversion is the "reciprocal conversion", i.e. a conversion to reciprocity with others. It involves becoming conscious that the others are also Subjects, i.e. "alter egos" with their own sets of desires.

According to this view, joy is generated by the desire of an autonomous and conscious Subject who has the freedom to make *reflected upon* choices, to *focus* on finite actions in a reciprocal relationship that recognises mutual vulnerabilities, needs and desires. Such a three dimensional attitude gives meaning to all actions, and particularly to those having an economic end. For instance, earnings offer the capacity to achieve freedom and ensure responsibility, the house becomes a loving-living place, food integrates the long-standing culture of the people, and so on.

Within this framework, three types of joy may be experienced by the Subject: (i) by being conscious of creating his life with its autonomy of choice, (ii) by establishing reciprocal and loving relationships with others, and (iii) by enjoying the world in a wider sense.

Happiness is then attained through a combination of deeply thought out choices, at each stage deciding what action should be

undertaken and bringing joy through the corresponding achieved functions. Personal and deep thought lead to a synthesis of related events of joy. This situation constitutes what can be called the "Preferable", i.e. a set of choices and achieved functions, each bringing specific joy. For instance, the joy of understanding things through lectures, of getting the right expected diploma, of making others happy, etc. The sum and interrelated nature of these events of joy lead to happiness and to the enjoyment of the world. Happiness then represents an absolute for the Subject. It is at the top of his preferences. But, it remains a lifestyle generated by the Subject's choices, i.e. his preferred way of being, based on the fulfilment of existence, which leads to enjoyment.

In conclusion, the ethics of joy and happiness define and explain the link which exists between personal actions and a potential "capability for happiness", intrinsic to human nature. But, to reach such an end, the classical individual has to be superseded by the concept of the Subject. Freedom of choice and preferences have to result from reasonable actions, i.e. reflected upon actions, and the focus must be on achieved functions and on reciprocity in relation to others.

#### **4. Conclusion: Enhancing Capabilities Towards Happiness**

The reasonable choices of a Subject, in order to achieve certain functions, bring us back to the key notion of capability, i.e. the "capacity of doing and being" (Sen 1987). On one hand, "the capacity of doing" can generate joy through chosen actions. On the other, "the capacity of being" can bring fulfilment by realising what was initially expected. The combination of the two generates a series of achieved functions, which are sources of joy and which lead to a certain level of happiness.

This expresses what can be called the "capability to achieve happiness", i.e. a capability which is the result of "combined

capabilities" (doing and being) and which respects the two key principles of "each person as the end" and of "multiple realisability" in the various social contexts encountered (Nussbaum 2000). It calls on the idea that improving the people's capabilities during their life cycle will give them the means of achieving functions and realising the life they aspire to. Therefore, enhancing people's capabilities as an objective for development is the best way to improve this "capability to achieve happiness", as they make it possible to bring about one's existence.

Such a process may take time, since it needs a series of freedoms in order to make the reasonable choices, to undertake the appropriate actions, to develop the requested capacities and to achieve functions. But, happiness remains above all a complex process, i.e. the result of a permanent build-up towards higher levels of contentment, and the whole life cycle can be used for such an objective. However, it also requires appropriate public policies to provide useful information to the Subject, to guarantee his freedom of action, to generate social opportunities in education, health, employment, culture, and, more generally, to focus on the improvement of capabilities (Sen 1999).

In this context, the "Preferable" appears as something greater than a set of achieved functions in various domains, even if these might generate joy. It is rather the expression of realised capabilities at their upper level. Naturally, such an end goes further than what is proposed to human beings by the utilitarian standpoint, which mainly remains at the level of the individual, the standard of living, and pleasure.

### Notes

1. See the chapter 8 of this book. See also J-L. Dubois, and F-R. Mahieu, 2003. "Personalism, Capability and Sustainability: From Mounier to Levinas, Ethics for a Socially Sustainable Development". 3<sup>rd</sup> Conference on

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