Sen's Identities

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter analyses the concept of identity developed by Amartya Sen in recent work, especially in the book *Identity and Violence*. It discusses the relationship between identity and solidarity, arguing that, the former is necessary but by no means sufficient for the latter, so that, contra what Sen sometimes suggests, identities are not simply forms of solidarity. It then argues that Sen's account is both morally and methodologically individualist which seems right and that it is also correct in seeing identities as, in a certain sense, normative. But it then shows that his account is also rationalist, in treating identity as grounding reasons for thinking and acting, and that this leaves out the important role of non-rational factors in the social and political mobilization of identity. This means that some of Sen's policy proposals, while helpful, will not deal with some serious cases where identity leads to political violence.

Keywords: identity, moral individualism, methodological individualism, Muslims, rationality, solidarity

> One of the central issues must be how human beings are seen. Should they be categorized in terms of inherited particularly the inherited religion, of the community in which they happen to be born, taking that unchosen identity to have automatic priority over other affiliations involving politics, profession, class, gender, language, literature, social involvements, and many other connections?

> Sen (2006: 150)

AMARTYA Sen's work on the recently much-discussed topic of identity displays his characteristic combination of acuity and humanity, theoretical insight and practical engagement. It also exhibits his preoccupation with developing an understanding of rationality that is normatively more sophisticated and a good deal more richly textured than most economic—and I would add, most philosophical—accounts. His book *Identity and Violence* (Sen 2006), which brings together much of his thinking on these questions, is splendidly cosmopolitan in its range of reference, touching on histories from every continent and over three millennia. And, by and large, the central normative arguments strike me as correct, and the applications of his ideas to particular cases tend to support policies I agree with. So it is, from many points of view, a very fine work.

In the course of the book Sen mentions, at one point, his teacher Joan Robinson's commenting that she thought Indians were "too rude" (Sen 2006: 31). He offers this as a not entirely serious example of an identity stereotype that he knew he could not escape. He has also called himself an "argumentative Indian" (Sen 2005) and it was, I suppose, this argumentativeness that Robinson was responding to. So I expect that he would prefer it if, rather than simply elucidating the many things **(p.476)** that I agree with in his analysis, I focus, in that argumentative way, on places where I think the analysis could be strengthened and taken further, as we struggle to make sense of these difficult and important questions. (This is harder for me than for him, I suspect: Ghana and England, where I grew up, are not nearly so happily argumentative!)

I. Identity and Partitioning: A First Proposal

It will help to lay out first, however, the main strands of his analysis. *Identity and Violence* is written for the general reader and it naturally proceeds not by offering technical definitions of terms, but rather by showing them in use, often in examples drawn from history or everyday life. But we can see the account of identity he is presupposing by attending carefully to the way he develops his argument. Here is the first sketch, early on in the first chapter, of the nature of identity:

> A person's citizenship, residence, geographic origin, class, politics, profession, employment, food habits, sports interests, taste in music, social commitments, etc., make us members of a variety of groups. Each of these collectivities ... gives her a particular identity.

> (Sen 2006: 5)

My particular identity, then, is fixed—or at any rate shaped—by the complete set of these memberships. Now there are, as Sen says, many such "systems of partitioning" the people of the world, "each of which has some—often far-reaching— relevance in our lives" (10). Partitioning, of course, is simply a matter of dividing people into sets. It is, we might say, a purely logical matter. But Sen is clear from the beginning that being a member of a group entails more than simply sharing a property. What else is required?

We could begin by looking at the sorts of examples Sen offers. He is at pains to insist how diverse each person's identities are; we have already seen this in the abstract characterization of the collectivities I have just quoted. And he offers us, early on, some specifics in his own case:

> I can be, at the same time, an Asian, an Indian citizen, a Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry, an American or British resident, an economist, a dabbler in philosophy, an author, a San-skritist, a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man, a feminist, a heterosexual, a defender of lesbian and gay rights, with a non-religious lifestyle, from a Hindu background, a non-Brahmin, and a nonbeliever in an afterlife (and also, in case the question is asked, a nonbeliever in a before-life as well). (19)

 (p.477) Lest we worry about whether this list is complete, he insists that "there are of course a great many other membership categories which, depending on circumstances, can move and engage me" (19).

One difficulty that I want to point to is already evident, I think, in both the variety of ways in which Sen picks out the properties he is interested in and in the diversity of the list of groups to which he says he belongs. It is a simple point, though I hope, by the end, to persuade you that it is an important one: not all of them would ordinarily be thought of as constituting identities. Let us look at the list.

Asian, fine. That's a standard exemplary identity (though which identity the word "Asian" picks out is very different in, say, India, England and New England). But is *Indian citizen* an identity? Normally, I think, we should say that, strictly speaking, being Indian is an identity, but that being an Indian citizen is a legal status and not an identity. There are people of Indian ancestry who are not Indian citizens (many of them in Pakistan and Bangladesh, for example, but also in Britain, North America and the Caribbean). State institutions (inside and outside India) recognize Indian citizens and respond to that status. But in most social life in most places it is not the juridical status but the Indian identity that matters. Furthermore, while citizenship matters to many Indians, their identity as Indians is likely, in their thinking, to be separable from their citizenship, not least because (as Sen points out in a different case) someone who has given up one citizenship for another "may still retain considerable loyalties to her sense of" her original identity (29).

Continuing on down the list, I wonder, too, about at least four others of the groups to which Sen belongs: strong believers in secularism and democracy, defenders of lesbian and gay rights, people with non-religious lifestyles, and non-believers in an afterlife and a before-life. These are, of course, in Sen's most abstract characterization, "partitions", which—being non-empty classes—do indeed have members; but I think Sen belongs to the class of Indians in a different way from the merely logical way in which he belongs to the class of,

say, people with non-religious lifestyles. And I think that this distinction in ways of belonging is important for theoretical and for practical reasons.

Now Sen himself insists, as I say, on the distinction between merely having a property in common and sharing an identity. He observes that "classification is cheap, but identity is not" (26). He considers, by way of example, the case of "people who wear size 8 shoes", pointing out rightly that there are possible stories in which this might indeed become a basis for "solidarity and identity". (He sketches one such tale, which involves a Soviet-style bureaucracy that allows size 8 shoes, and only size 8 shoes, to become scarce.) As we'll see in a moment, solidarity presupposes identification, so we don't need to mention the latter explicitly. So we're left with the suggestion that what makes something an identity is the fact that it's a group whose members have solidarity with one another: that partition plus solidarity equals identity.

 (p.478) To make sense of this proposal we need to say a little here about what solidarity involves. Solidarity has, of course, an affective dimension; but let's focus—since the context here is one of identity as a matter of social policy—on the way in which solidarity works in decision and action. By A's acting out of solidarity with his fellow Xes we presumably mean something like this: that A, conceiving of himself as an X, is disposed to seek to assist the flourishing of other Xes *because they are fellow Xes,*. He is disposed, for example, to do things for Xes *as Xes*; and to do so *as an X himself*. This double intentionality of solidarity—it involves acting both *as an X* and towards other Xes *as Xes*—would mean that having an identity would require you to conceive of yourself in a certain way, so that you could not have an identity that you did not recognize. This is a schema for acting in solidarity. It is important that Sen is unlikely to allow us to characterize this as a matter of our having a bare preference for our fellow Xes. Solidarity, as he understands it, is responsive to reason: "People see themselves—and have a reason to see themselves," he says, "in many different ways." So acts of solidarity are not *actes gratuits*: they are choices among options, for reasons, under constraints (15).

A proposal of this kind fits with the general tenor of Sen's approach. It is fundamentally methodologically *individualist*, by which I mean, to borrow a formulation of Thomas Pogge's (1992: 48), that it begins from the premise that "the ultimate units of concern are human beings, or persons—rather than, say, family lines, tribes, ethnic, cultural, or religious communities, nations, or states". (I think it is a little unfortunate that the term "individualism", which has, in ordinary usage, a whiff of unsociability about it, should have come to be the technical philosophical label for this position. So it is perhaps worth saying at once that individualism of this sort is the basis for an extensive concern for others.) Throughout the book, when Sen attends to the uses of identity, it is their uses to individual men and women that matter. The strategy here is the classical strategy of welfare economics, ranking social outcomes as a function of the

interests of individuals. But Sen is also deeply committed to recognizing the range and complexity of the demands that reason and morality place on those individuals, so that their interests are defined by something far richer than their preferences. The ethical problem of identity as Sen understands it begins with the question of what roles an individual agent's identity is permitted or required to play in her choices. And he believes that in making our way through life—in making decisions—we are entitled to cultural liberty, to the "freedom to preserve or to change our priorities" (113). One of his complaints against many contemporary understandings of identity is indeed that they deny "the role of reasoning and of choice, which follows from our plural identities" (17). This fundamental commitment to individual liberty—a Millian respect for individuality —begins with the thought that it is individuals, not collectivities, that matter, but it adds the further idea that individuals should play the largest role in determining their own fates. This is to go beyond methodological individualism to what we might call "ethical individualism". Sen is theoretically committed to **(p.479)** respect for individual agency: to "recognizing and respecting", as he once put it, each person's "ability to form goals, commitments, values, etc." (Sen 1988: 41) (though, it's important to add, he thinks a concern for well-being important, too; and he knows these two concerns may pull us in different directions).

For these reasons, this first proposal—with its focus on individuals responding to one another for reasons—seems consistent with Sen's general approach.

But, unfortunately, I don't think that it's right. Of course, not every partition of human beings—not even every partition whose members care about each other — is a membership group with which people identify. So there's certainly more to identity than mere partitioning. The problem is that that more, as I'll now try to show, isn't solidarity.

II. Beyond Solidarity

It is easy to see that having solidarity is not necessary for identity. There are many paradigm social identities that, far from involving solidarity, actually work against it. It is part of the point of the attitudes that homosexuals are taught to have towards themselves in a homophobic culture that they should regard themselves and each other with contempt. It was a significant social and political achievement to get American homosexuals in the 1960s and 1970s to come to see solidarity with each other as a possibility. Such processes are a characteristic step in the modern politics of recognition. But I don't think we can understand what happens in such cases unless we suppose the members of the group were already more than a mere partition; we must recognize that they had a shared identity before they sought solidarity with each other. Similar things can be said about other groups held in social contempt.

Could the analysis be half right, though? Could solidarity be sufficient for identity, even if it isn't necessary? I think so, but for a reason that makes the claim less illuminating than you might like. For, as we saw, solidarity requires identity; or, to put it another way, solidarity entails identity on its own. So of course partition *plus* solidarity entails identity.

The way that identity showed up in our account of solidarity suggests a way forward. We will understand identity if we understand the double intentionality of solidarity: if we understand what it is to think of yourself as an X and to think of others as Xes too. Being an X is an identity of the relevant kind just in case there is such a thing as thinking of yourself—and thinking of other people—as Xes. In other words, we need to understand what it is to think of someone as an X.

 (p.480) Well, in one sense, we all know what this means. We think of ourselves as all kinds of Xes all the time: Sen's list of his own identities is an instance of a pattern we could all reproduce, *mutatis mutandis*. But can we give a more elaborate explication of what is involved? I think that Sen's account suggests that we can, and that we should do so by focusing precisely on the notion of reason that plays so central a role in his work.

III. Identity and Reason

Consider one of the many interesting and important things that Sen says about Muslim identity in his book. He points out that some were disappointed when an "important meeting of Muslim scholars in Amman in Jordan" in 2005 declined to treat people as apostates—as no longer being Muslim, that is—so long as they believed in Allah, in Muhammad, and in the other pillars of the faith and did not "deny any necessary article of religion" (Sen 2006: 81). While most of these scholars might also agree that many, perhaps all, acts of terrorism are wrong, they declined to agree, in particular, that a person who carried out such a wrongful act thereby ceased to be a Muslim. This point is important, as Sen argues, in discussions about how to approach terrorists who claim to be acting as Muslims; for reasons internal to the history of Muslim doctrine, we are not going to be able to persuade most Muslims to treat someone as an apostate solely because he is a terrorist.

This doesn't mean they aren't bad people or even bad Muslims. It means that the commonest understanding of Muslim identity, among people who claim it, is one that defines apostasy strictly in terms of turning away from the central articles of doctrine: what's required is denying God, or the Prophet, or the other pillars of the faith, which is something you can do while being otherwise a perfectly good person, and something you can fail to do while being horribly wicked.

Now this debate actually assumes a form that is quite typical in contests over identity. It is about what norms of behavior are required of those who are (to count as) real bearers of the identity. Sen's extensive discussion of Muslim

identity reflects his recognition of the ways in which identities are associated with such norms. Thinking of people as Xes is, in large measure, thinking of them not merely as possessing whatever descriptive properties are taken to be constitutive of the class of Xes, but also as governed by norms associated with that identity. I call these "norms of identification" (Appiah 2005: 68). One difference between merely acknowledging that someone is of Polish ancestry and seeing them as having a Polish identity is that the latter requires us to think that there are things they ought or ought not to do *because they are Polish*. These are the Polish norms of identification.

 (p.481) I assume that, generally speaking, we think people ought to do things only when we think they have a sufficient reason do so: but the "ought" doesn't have to be a moral one. Most Americans think that men in this society have sufficient reason not to wear dresses and lipstick in the ordinary course of life; they think that men ought not to do so. But this ought is not a moral one, for most of us. We don't think it would be wicked to do it. We think it would be strange or odd.

Before going on to say more about the account of identity as normative, I want to expand briefly on a point I glossed over just a moment ago. I spoke of descriptive properties taken to be constitutive of a class. The sorts of things I have in mind are such things as this: having grown up in India is one thing that can make you an Indian; *ceteris paribus*, if you were raised in India, Indian is what you are. There are disputes about exactly what other things not being equal make you not an Indian. Sen mentions Cornelia Sorabji—a sari-clad Parsee who came to law school in England from South Asia in the 1880s. There are, no doubt, people who think that her Christianity and her Parsee ancestry undermined her claim to be Indian (Sen 2006: 159). There are people who think that moving to America and renouncing Indian citizenship undermines it, too. Is Sonia Gandhi an Indian? She's an Indian citizen, certainly. But an Indian? This is a topic that can be debated.

The general point is that there are always conditions of a purely descriptive kind that people mostly suppose you must meet in order to have a certain identity. Most of them have the form of these *ceteris paribus* conditions: you're a man if you have male genitals, but only *ceteris paribus*, since there's androgen insensitivity syndrome, which produces people who are chromosomally male but have female external genitalia, and people disagree about how to classify them. You're a Catholic, if you were baptized in a church under the governance of the see of Rome, but only *ceteris paribus*, since you may have converted or lost your faith. People— people in Ireland, for example—disagree about whether "lapsed Catholics" are still Catholics by identity. The *ceteris paribus* character of the descriptive conditions means that there are usually clear cases of people who

have the identity, even while there are disputes around cases where something about the circumstances is unusual.

But, as I just argued, there are more than these contested *descriptive* conditions for identity; there are *normative* implications to identity as well, normative implications that go beyond meeting whatever descriptive conditions there are for membership. That, I think, is why being an Indian citizen or a secularist, or a democrat and the rest, don't count as identities of the right kind: there are no distinctive norms associated with these groups that are not simply entailed by the descriptive conditions for their membership. To be a democrat is just to believe in democracy: the only normative constraint that places on you is acting in conformity to the norms of democracy. To turn this into an identity there would have to be further norms of conduct and feeling that went with being a democrat. It is because there is a logical gap between meeting the descriptive conditions and meeting the normative **(p.482)** ones that there can be—and often is—a great deal of controversy over what the norms for an identity actually are. Sen himself discusses in eloquent and fascinating detail the history of debates within Islam about how Muslims ought to behave. But there are also norms that are pretty uncontested. Prayer, charity, making the hajj (if you can afford to): all these are uncontroversial demands recognized by Muslims. There are such norms for other kinds of identity, too. Rightly or wrongly, for example, most people not only conform to gender norms in their dress, but they expect others to do so. And the norms not only govern action, they govern feeling: an Indian has a reason to feel shame when the Indian administration does shameful things.

Suppose this is right. Suppose that in order for X to be a serious identity, people have to think there are normative requirements for Xes, ways Xes ought to behave— or, as we might put it, in language that echoes some of Sen's—identity-dependent reasons for action and feeling that Xes should respect because they are Xes. We can immediately see two things that Sen rightly insists on. First, because the descriptive conditions are *ceteris paribus* and contested, we often have a choice as to whether we should think of ourselves as Xes, because we have to decide whether we meet the conditions. And second, even if we meet the conditions uncontroversially—so that our membership strikes us as given, a fact we are faced with—we still have to decide what weight to give the identity, what norms we take it to bring in its wake. As Sen puts it, "Even when the person discovers something important about himself or herself, there are still issues of choice to be faced" (Sen 2006: 39). He is surely right that we have a job to do in deciding what our identities should mean to us, and this requires figuring out what norms of identification we accept and what we are going to ask of our fellow Xes. While respect for human well-being constrains what I can reasonably accept as the normative demands of an identity on myself or on others, there will, in the end, be a wide range of reasonable places to come to, not least because we have to fit our identities together. So, for example, the norms of

identification that a person who is gay and Muslim will come to accept will probably require some sort of accommodation of one to the other, but there is unlikely to be a unique best such accommodation. Sen shares the Millian conviction that we ought to offer everyone a large range of freedom in choosing among the reasonable ways of making such accommodations for him-or herself.

In speaking of the norms people accept, we don't commit ourselves to thinking that the norms are valid. What norms people accept is a non-normative question. There is a separate and important set of normative questions about which norms they are right to accept. Sen's discussion—and his theoretical disposition— insists on the fact that all these choices that individuals have to make require reasoning. We may have to reason about whether we are (descriptively) an X. We certainly have to reason about what that means, making up our minds what the fact that I am an X really gives me reason to do (or think or feel). And we have to reason about which of our many identities are relevant in deciding our priorities in a variety of **(p.483)** contexts, faced with different options and operating under a variety of constraints. We have also to learn how to balance their competing demands. As Sen writes: "Even when one is inescapably seen—by oneself as well as by others—as French, or Jewish, or Brazilian, or African-American … one still has to decide what exact importance to attach to that identity over the relevance of other categories to which one also belongs" (Sen 2006: 6).

As a result, again like Mill, Sen grasps that the fact that we have to make these decisions for ourselves does not mean we have to make them alone. Indeed, if there is one central normative project in his book, it is to persuade people that they cannot reasonably ignore the diversity of their own identities, not least because in acknowledging that diversity they will be acting in ways that advance their own well-being and, often, the well-being of others. In arguing for this, he is offering other people reasons to think about their own identities in ways they might otherwise not recognize as desirable or even possible. He is thinking with us about our identities, and so he is assuming that it is all right to make these decisions in concert with others. He urges on all of us ways of accommodating that diversity that escape the dangers of "singularism", the view that "despite the plurality of groups to which any person belongs, there is, in every situation, some one group that is naturally the preeminent collectivity for her, and she can have no choice in deciding on the relative importance of her different membership categories" (Sen 2006: 25). In the worst case the singularist thinks that there is one identity that will do for all situations; but even those who recognize that different contexts make different identities relevant are mistaken if they think that, say, politics is a context in which only national identity or religious identity is relevant in deciding what to do. There are thus, on Sen's view, three dimensions that help determine the relevance of an identity: first, there is the *content* of the choice we are facing, what our options are and the constraints under which we are acting; second, there are our other identities;

and third, there are our other aims—some imposed on us by morality or reason (aims whose connection with the norms of each identity help determine whether it should be brought into play).

IV. Taming Identity

When one identity leads people into behavior that is immoral—to intolerance, to aggression, to genocide—Sen suggests that one way we can try to escape these dangers is by appeal to "the power of *competing* identities" (Sen 2006: 4). I am not just a Hutu, I am also a Rwandan, a Christian, a human being: and the latter three identities, which unite me with most Tutsis, can give me access to a solidarity that **(p.484)** opposes the bellicosity of a Hutu Power identity that makes every Tutsi (and many Hutus) my enemy. This is one reason for insisting on the wrongness of singularism: if I only had one relevant identity, there would be no others to draw on in this way.

But the fact that there is a problem to be met here should remind us of another reason why an account of identity focused on its role in solidarity is to be resisted. The connection between identity and violence is mediated as much as anything else by the fact that people of one identity can be mobilized against people of another, contrasting identity. And that brings into focus a dimension of identity that we might miss if we think of identity, as I have so far, as simply a matter of partitioning plus norms of identification. For that leads us to focus on the role of an identity in the agency of individuals who bear it, attending to how those norms shape what they do. The norms of identification for Xes are norms to which Xes are supposed to conform. But the expectation of conformity here is at least as important as the conformity itself. And the expectation is often the expectation not of other Xes but of people of some contrasting identity. Racial norms of identification for blacks (or whites) are kept in place by the expectations of whites as well as blacks (or blacks as well as whites). And once non-Xes have normative expectations of Xes, they will rely on them in responding to Xes, and that will often have the effect of making deviation from those norms costly; indeed, both Xes and non-Xes are likely to put pressure on Xes to conform, enforcing the norms with the sorts of social sanctions that begin with disapproval and ratchet up from there. More than this, while it isn't a conceptual requirement on identities that there should be distinct norms governing the treatment of Xes by non-Xes, it is often the case that there are. So questions of power and hierarchy arise regularly in the structuring of identities; and these, in turn, raise important moral and political concerns.

All this is consistent with methodological and ethical individualism. But recognizing the ways in which others—whether of our own or of contrasting identities— enforce on us codes of behavior for Xes, by way of expectation, enforcement or other forms of norm-guided behavior towards us, underlines the difficulties that face someone who wants to pursue the ethical individualist goal of shaping her life guided by her own reasons, her own identities and projects,

her own ambitions. Part of what Sen is asking for is that all of us should respond with toleration to others as they make their lives by way of identities and understandings of identities that we do not share. He is reminding us that each person's life is, in some fundamental sense, her own.

Sen's treatment of Muslim identity in *Identity and Violence*—it is in many ways the central case in that book—has two major pieces of guidance for us. On the one hand, he invites non-Muslims to recognize the internal heterogeneity of the Muslim world: we are to see both that every Muslim is not just a Muslim and to see that Muslims differ along many, many other dimensions of identity. As a **(p. 485)** result, responding to Muslims as they really are will never be possible if we apply a stereotypic notion of the Muslim. What makes them Muslim is, from an ethical point of view, minimal enough that we can't infer much from it; and in any case, it is never more than a part of what they are. These possibilities derive from the contested nature of Muslim norms of identification and the existence of norms of identification that are associated with each Muslim's other identities.

On the other hand, there is guidance here too—somewhat less explicitly—for Muslims. For Sen invites them, in effect, to recall the tradition of broad inclusive-ness implicit in the view that apostasy occurs only when you deny core Muslim claims. Here again it is the minimal character of shared Muslim identity that he stresses.

The advice to non-Muslims strikes me as helpful and I think the wide readership of his book in Western Europe, North America and South Asia can all profit from remembering these things. But the advice to Muslims strikes me as less obviously helpful. For, while Islamic communities have indeed, as a historical matter, often defined membership in the *ummah* in rather minimal ways, it is also true that there are plenty of contexts, certainly today, in which, for example, Sunni or Shia Muslims each deny that the other are really Muslims at all; and even if they agree that they are all Muslims, they certainly don't agree that they are all Muslims good enough for their presence and their practices to be tolerated. Modern Salafis, in particular, regularly dispute the claim of Sufi or Alawite (or even mainstream Shia) traditions, for example, to be genuinely Islamic.

Now, of course, I believe, with Sen, that it would be better for the world if these Muslim traditions were not divided in these ways, since intolerance of this sort has led to acts of cruelty and to bloodshed. But neither of us is a contemporary Salafi Muslim. And it seems to me that, for a Muslim, the question whether, say, Sufism is genuinely Islamic is a question that requires interpreting the Qur'an, the Sun-nah, and whatever other sources of authority you recognize. And someone who is convinced that a conscientious attention to the approved sources entails shunning or even attacking and punishing those who do not conform to the precepts of Islam as he understands them is not likely to find in

ethical individualism an independent reason to change his mind. (I need hardly add that the same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to other religions.) A Salafi Muslim can certainly accept Sen's critique of singularism as an intellectual matter. Muslims mostly accept that there are questions on which the traditions are silent and that on these one is free to make one's own way, trying to decide them by whatever indirect light the traditions shed and by the use of human reason and an understanding of human nature. Since identity is part of human nature, there is, as a result, nothing to stop a Salafi from recognizing the demands of other identities. But he is likely simply to deny Sen's underlying view that religious identity does not fix what one must do in large areas of life. My point is not that Sen has the wrong attitude here; my point is that his defense of his view is unlikely to dissuade the most dangerous of those whom he is **(p.486)** criticizing. And, indeed, since he is himself a non-believer, they are likely to see his views as unsurprisingly mistaken on these questions of practical ethics and politics, given that he is wrong on fundamental questions of theology.

It will do no good, in particular, to point to those many places and times where people calling themselves Muslims have practiced toleration. They are likely to take the same view of the Mughal emperor Akbar's toleration, for example, that his grandson Aurangzeb did. Sen writes, "Aurangzeb could deny minority rights and persecute non-Muslims without, for that reason, failing to be a Muslim, in exactly the same way that Akbar did not terminate being a Muslim because of his tolerantly pluralist politics" (Sen 2006: 16). But all that shows is that a dispute about whose practice to follow is a dispute *within* Islam; it does not give Muslims a reason to favor the tolerant side.

Because most Muslims recognize that disagreement about these matters is consistent with being Muslim, the distinction that a Muslim needs is not that between Muslims and non-Muslims but between right and wrong ways for a Muslim to behave. It would be a grave mistake to think that it follows from this that a Muslim must think that the norms of identification for Muslims do not fix whether one should be tolerant. All that it shows is that there are debates among Muslims about what the correct norms of identification for Muslims are, and that, as I say, only makes Muslim identity like most others. It is not that I am against interventions by us infidels in these debates, if anyone is listening. But I don't have a high confidence in their efficacy.

Nevertheless, I don't want to underrate the importance of giving those many Muslims seeking a place for toleration of many kinds—for other Muslims, for non-Muslims, for homosexuals, and so on—Muslim exemplars of the past and present. Friends of toleration, Muslim and otherwise, can surely help each other; they are also more likely to get along with each other because they have a shared faith in toleration. But, in the end, one reason Sen and I disagree with the contemporary propagandists for intolerance in the name of Islam is not just that we are ethical individualists who care about the well-being of all people, but

that we think they are wrong about matters of morals and metaphysics. And if, in the name of their mistaken convictions, they plan acts of terror or undermine the rights of women and minorities, then, in the end, we may have to meet them not with reason but with violence. Sen's insight—that violence in the name of identity usually presupposes misunderstandings of identity both descriptive and normative—cannot allow us, alas, to suppose that we can meet that violence simply by trying to correct the misunderstanding. His recognition that the post-11 September war against the Taliban in Afghanistan was justified shows that he understands that sometimes justice requires the sword (Sen 2006: 78–9). So I am not claiming that his theory has no place for this possibility. But the generally hopeful tone of *Identity and Violence* conveys, I think, a greater faith in the power of reason than I am able to share.

(p.487) V. Beyond Reason

This worry flows from a wider worry about how we should understand human psychology. A great deal of modern work in a number of fields of experimental psychology suggests that much of what people offer by way of reasons, when asked to account for their behavior, is rationalization. They say they did A as a means to B, but in fact we can show that their behavior has a different cause. Getting the range of rationality right—one of Sen's great projects—is only going to be helpful in predicting, and thus managing, human behavior if people are in fact usually guided by these richer notions of rationality. In the particular case we have been exploring, the way identity leads to violence is not usually by way of a person's reflectively deciding that I, as an X, have a reason all things considered to attack some non-Xes. Sen mentions the appalling treatment of the prisoners at Abu Ghraib as an instance of the pathology of identity. But that sort of mistreatment of prisoners can be produced in a few days, as Philip Zimbardo (2007) showed in experiments with Stanford University students many years ago, among people whose antecedent identities were pretty much the same. It may be easier for someone who behaves in these ways to tell a story about his behavior if his victims are of some obvious contrasting identity, but the identity story almost certainly doesn't explain the behavior. There is a general point here, the general point that is the main burden of modern social psychology: behavior, good and bad, is often best explained by appeal to the situations people find themselves in, rather than to their distinctive thoughts or values (Appiah 2008).

Given these general truths, we should expect (as common sense would also suggest) that once a conflict begins, it isn't usually going to help to point out that you and I, though divided by the identity that has become salient in our context, are in fact also both humans, or lawyers or what not. Sen's thought, which I have already quoted, that we can tame one identity by appeal to others may be true in the study; in the struggles of social life it is usually not much help. His rationalist faith that if we understood that our identities involve choices, we would see that we have choices to make, is attractive; but I am not

sure how much help it would be in Sri Lanka or the Middle East or Rwanda to insist upon it. It is surely true that if the world consisted of people who always thought about their own identities in the sort of way Sen does, many of the world's violent identity conflicts wouldn't occur. But even if everyone started out thinking this way, most could probably be drawn back into conflict in the right sort of context. So, for example, many of the extremely tolerant multicultural members of the Bosnian bourgeoisie would have agreed with most of what Sen says in the years before the collapse of the Yugoslav state. But faced with an economic collapse with the consequent everyday struggle for the necessaries of life, they were not all able to resist being drawn pretty quickly into ethno-religious identifications, conceived of in a mostly singularist fashion.

 (p.488) What would have helped wasn't a better understanding of their identities, but rapid intervention to prop up the ailing economy and sustain the basic institutions that guarantee security. They were victims not of mistaken theories of identity but of a situation in which morally misguided behavior was evoked from people who had more or less the same theories of identity as everyone else.

A large part of Sen's theoretical work has consisted in reformulating social analysis—especially economics and rational choice theories of social action—to include a richer understanding of the demands of reason than the one implicit in the classical model of the self-interested utility-maximizer. Much recent economic theory has focused instead on trying to develop modes of analysis that reflect more fully the role that unreason plays. (This has been a slow process, because modern economics has been committed, by professional habit, to thinking that we can see most social patterns as the result of underlying patterns of roughly rational choice.) But however much you extend your understanding of reason in the sorts of ways Sen would like to do—and this is a project whose interest I celebrate—it isn't going to take you the whole way. In adopting the perspective of the individual reasonable person, Sen has to turn his face from the pervasiveness of unreason.

In insisting on this point I am making a criticism that applies to a great deal of work on identity (including, I should say, my own). Sen has helped us in much of his work to expand our understanding of the richness of reason, and in *Identity and Violence* he has taken that project into an important area of social analysis and offered us guidance in dealing with an important social problem. But work of this kind needs to be complemented, I think, by more extensive attention to the ways in which identities are engaged by human situations, not through norms and values and their rational application, but by way of other, less rational psychological processes. I wish I lived in a world that could be healed simply by getting people to adopt Sen's civilizing vision. I fear, alas, that we do not.

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