Abstract.
The concept of self interest remains underdeveloped in sociology although central to economics. Recent methodological and social trends, however, render a sociological indifference to the concept untenable. The term has enjoyed historical predominance in the West since the sixteenth century. While it is seen in modern economics as a singular motivating force, Adam Smith regarded self interest in economic action as necessarily moderated by sympathy. In addition to its problematic economic conceptualization self interest has an experiential basis in unequal power relations. An alternative to the concept of self interest is presented by Amartya Sen in his account of commitment. Inconsistencies in this statement of commitment render it an unsatisfactory corrective of self interest theory. The distinction between present and future interests, referred to by Sen but not integrated into his account of commitment, is used in the paper to demonstrate that the necessary distinction between self-interested and other-interested action is not sustainable.

Key words.
Adam Smith, Amartya Sen, commitment, interest, self, sympathy, temporality.

Introduction.
An understanding of modernity in terms of individuating processes has always coexisted in sociology with an intellectual commitment to explanation of such processes in terms of supra-individual social mechanisms or entities. Thus the concept of self interest, that is core to the theoretical foundation of economic science, has in sociology been neglected through sceptical disregard, a stance endorsed by Talcott Parsons’ critique of the utilitarian tradition and its implicit commitment to the concept of interest (Parsons 1968: 51-74). Today, however, a sociological indifference to the concept of self interest is no longer tenable because of methodological and substantive developments. Methodologically, the rise of rational choice theory in sociology (Coleman 1990; Goldthorpe 2000) effectively introduces the concept of self interest as an independent variable. Substantively, major social transformations from the last third of the twentieth century point in the direction of pervasive declining efficacy of institutional participation and commitment, rendering social life increasingly personalized, privatized and individualized (Putnam 2000; McPherson et al 2006) through which self interest becomes a dominant category of individual motivation, identity and social legitimation.

While the broader category of social, collective or group interest has been developed by earlier generations of sociologists, including Arthur Bentley (1967) and Ralph Dahrendorf (1959: 173-89), and more diffuse or multiplex notions of interest have been outlined by classical sociologists, including Karl Marx (1970a, 1970b), Max Weber (1978: 29-31, 297-99, 302-307, 926-39) and Georg Simmel (1971), the concept remains largely absent from sociological discussion today, with some notable exceptions (Swedberg 2005a, 2005b). The narrower concept of self interest seems to be subject to an academic division of labour, through which sociologists tend to ignore it and economists embrace it. Any treatment of the concept, in the form of intellectual reconnoitre, for instance, or an argument concerning its meaningful content and relationship with other concepts, will inevitably draw upon sources in economics, in which the discussion is more complete. The idea, in economics, of an individual person aware of their own identity which distinguishes them from others and
which enjoys continuous existence entails that the individual’s subjective desires or preferences inform their necessary satisfactions and welfare. This apparently coherent conceptualization, however, is logically and empirically unstable for a number of reasons; indeed, it is shown at the end of the present paper that self interested action is indistinguishable for other-interested action, but on grounds not typically found in either sociological or economic accounts. Before that point of the argument is reached, however, other tensions in the conceptualization of self interest are revealed.

The purpose of the argument here is to explore aspects of self interest for a sociological recovery although not simple endorsement of the concept that avoids unhelpful refinements found in the economics literature, in which there is a fulsome appropriation of it. Critical engagements in sociology with economics have occurred during episodes of self-clarity, from Weber, to Parsons, to Callon – and the traffic has by no means been one-way (Zafirovski 2005). The review conducted here is of an economics mind-set rather than a comprehensive or up-to-date summary of a literature, that mind-set being mainstream and therefore there is no discussion here of the heterodox or institutional schools of economics, widely seen as ‘sociological’ in their approach.

The first part of the discussion below, in considering the historical predominance of the concept of self interest in the West since the sixteenth century, reveals that its best known economic advocate, Adam Smith, saw self interest operating only in concert with the moderating influence of sympathy. Indeed, Smith cautioned against the idea that self interest is a singular basis of human motivation. It is briefly shown that in its neo-classical form, however, self interest is regarded as sufficient in economic explanation.

In the second part of the paper, after indicating limitations in the maximizing notion of self interest, its experiential basis is located in unequal power relations and a non-economic form of self interest is identified which has political significance in so far as it indicates caution against paternalism and domination. Given the importance of a sense of one’s own interests against those defined by others, the question of choice and interest is contrasted with structural accounts of self interest in sociology and determinative accounts in economics which draw upon the theory of revealed preferences.

The argument then turns to the critique of the behavioural foundations of economics developed by Amartya Sen. Sen famously provided an alternative to the concept of self interest in his distinction between sympathy, which he regards as ultimately self interested, and commitment, which he regards as inherently non-self interested. It is shown that this distinction is not stable in the form Sen presents it, and that the concept of commitment is not an adequate alternative to self interest. The distinction between present and future interests is referred to by Sen but not integrated into his account of commitment. In the final section of the paper this distinction is more fully considered. It is shown that the means of determining one’s future interests, while different from those required to determine present interests, are identical with the means for determining another’s interests: the necessary distinction then between self-interested and other-interested action cannot be sustained.

The predominance of self interest: an historical summary.

In defining modernity in terms of an historic move from ‘status’ to ‘contract’ Henry Sumner Maine famously characterized contract as attainable for a person not only free of the familial and traditional superordination essential to status, but also possessing the ‘faculty of forming a judgment of their own interests’ (Maine 1905: 150). The idea that self interest necessarily underpins individual behaviour is an assumption of Western thought at least since the seventeenth century, if not earlier. The English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, for instance, held in Leviathan, first published in 1651, that ‘of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some good to himself’ (Hobbes 1962: 68). A century earlier Thomas Wilson, in The Arte of
Rhetorique, published in 1553, observed: ‘Take awaie the hope of lucre, and you shall se fewe take any paines’ (Wilson 1977: 50). The currency of this notion is further supported by the idea, recorded in the Southampton Court Leet Records of 1587, that it is ‘a happy man that can make his bargain so well to take it when there is profit and refuse to serve when the profit faileth, and to raise it at his own will for his best advantage’ (Bland, Brown and Tawney 1914: 296). Similarly, more than a century and a half before Adam Smith’s famous statement concerning the human propensity to ‘truck, barter and exchange’ (Smith 1976: 25), John Wheeler was able to declare that there is ‘nothing in the world so ordinarie and naturall vnto men, as to contract, truck, merchandise, and trafficque one with another, so that it is almost vnpossible for three persons to converse together two houres, but they wil fall into talke of one bargaine or another, chopping, changing, or some other kinde of contract’ (Wheeler 1601: 2-3).

The view, that individual self interest is a primary element of human behaviour, is commonly regarded as written into classical political economy by the eighteenth century. A well-known historical discussion shows that the concept has in fact had a variable career, although an absence of awareness of important sources means that the statement of leading exponents (Hirschman 1977, 1986; Holmes 1990) remains incomplete (see Barbalet 2007, 2008: 93-97). Of particular concern here is that the qualification of the principle of self interest made by Smith is too often overlooked. The sustaining text of the supposition of self interest is the frequently quoted passage in Smith’s Wealth of Nations: ‘It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest’ (Smith 1976: 26-7). But Smith is not here advocating self interest as a singular motive force of economic action so much as indicating a rather different proposition, namely the harmonisation of individual and social needs or interests through the market. This is especially clear in Smith’s statement of the idea that ‘whatever capital [an individual] can command ... to his own advantage’, that individual is ‘necessarily [led] ... to prefer that employment which is most advantageous to the society’ (Smith 1976: 454; see also 456). The market is a public good, according to Smith, and this – rather than the exclusivity of self interest – is surely the point of his famous ‘invisible hand’ metaphor.

It is not claimed here that Smith denies that self interest is a possible and significant element of human behaviour. But it is important to recognise that for Smith pure self interest is dysfunctional in economic society and could never be its basis or foundation, a position closer to the economic pamphleteers of the previous century (see, for instance, Fortrey 1970: 218-9; North 1970: 511-2) than to the neo-classical economics writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Indeed, unmediated self interest is subject to Smith’s critical attention, as when he reports the inclination of employers to form combinations, often covert, to protect and advance their own interests at the expense of a larger interest, and also the behaviour of ‘prodigals’, who through ‘passion for present enjoyment’ forgo savings or social wealth, and ‘projectors’, who through ‘injudicious’ activity generate social waste (Smith 1976: 84, 339-41). In The Theory of Moral Sentiments Smith anticipates Amartya Sen’s well-known reservations concerning the practical impossibility of purely self-interested action when the latter proposes a reductio ad absurdum: ‘“Where is the railway station?” he asks me. “There”, I say, pointing to the post office, “and would you please post this letter for me on the way?” “Yes”, he says, determined to open the envelope and check whether it contains anything valuable’ (Sen 1977: 332). Smith avoids such a reduction to rampant egoism by showing that self interest, or what he calls ‘self-love’, cannot unconditionally determine behaviour in society, for the self-interested action of one person will ‘always appear excessive and extravagant’ to another (Smith 1979: 83), so that it is necessary for each person to ‘humble the arrogance of self-love, and bring it down to something which other men can go along with’ (Smith 1979: 83).
The mechanism that mutes or temporizes self-love, according to Smith, is sympathy, which he shows can operate by viewing one’s own conduct through the eye of the ‘impartial spectator’ (Smith 1979: 83,135,137). The impact of the moderation of self-love by sympathy is not to prevent ambition, but necessarily to avoid foul play: ‘In the race for wealth, and honours, and preferments, [one] may run as hard as he can, and strain every nerve and every muscle, in order to outstrip all his competitors. But if he should justle or throw down any of them, the indulgence of the spectators is entirely at an end’ (Smith 1979: 83). Indeed, Smith says that: ‘Those great objects of self-interest ... properly called ambition ... which when it keeps within the bounds of prudence and justice, is always admired in the world, ... [but] when it passes the limits of both these virtues, and is not only unjust but extravagant’ (Smith 1979: 173). But even here in its latter form, ambition continues to attract social approbation while its achievement of ‘uncommon advantage’ derives from ‘earnestness’ and ‘enterprise’ (Smith 1979: 173). Smith’s point, then, is not that personal ambition is not possible, or should necessarily be curtailed, but that unbridled self-love is simply self-defeating, and by virtue of constraint through habit and experience, it in fact fails to predominate in society (Smith 1979: 135-7). Against those who insist on the irreducible primacy of self-interest in action and explanation (Smith 1979: 308-13; 315-17), Smith argues for the prior sociality of self interested human action through sympathy (see also Smith 1979: 304).

Implicit in the limitations of self-love or self interest and its necessary supplementation with sympathy is the notion of the non-exclusivity of self interest in market behaviour and the explanation of that behaviour. Indeed, Smith warns against the reduction of all inclinations or preferences to a single metric, of ‘deducing all our sentiments from certain refinements of self love’ (Smith, 1979: 13). Similar cautions against reducing human behaviour to a form representing only self interested motivation can be found in historically more recent discussion in economics, such as in Frank Knight’s (1971: 52-4) account of the limitations of the notion of perfect competition, for instance, and in Alfred Marshall’s acknowledgement that while ‘egoistic motives’ may drive ‘business life’ there is also ‘vanity and recklessness … delight in doing … work well for its own sake … [and] sacrificing [oneself] for the sake of family, neighbours or country’ (Marshall 1966: 22). And yet for these and other economic writers self interest continues to hold a monopoly position in accounts of specifically market behaviour or economic action more generally. The heuristic unavoidability of recourse to self interest in economic explanation is accepted by both Knight and Marshall, for instance, as it is clear in Francis Edgeworth’s foundational statement: ‘the first principle of Economics is that every agent is actuated only by self-interest’ (quoted in Sen 1977: 317). The qualification, that such a principle serves exposition of an account of means rather than ends and is therefore not a description of human values (Robbins 1932: 89-90), is ambiguous in subsequent discussions.

A tendency of economic analysis over the twentieth century has been to effectively dismiss the qualifications of Knight and Marshall above and argue that the concept of self interest can be appropriately applied to non-market as well as market relations (see especially Becker 1976, 1993; Becker and Murphy 2000). Un-priced and non-tradable ‘goods’ in social and political settings can be given what Becker calls ‘imputed shadow prices’ (Becker 1976: 8) in order to provide an economic account of human behaviour in general. This can be achieved by accepting, in Becker’s words, ‘the assumptions of maximizing behaviour, market equilibrium and stable preferences, used relentlessly and unflinchingly’ (Becker 1976: 5).

Self interest, maximization and choice.
The quotation above from Becker reminds us that the concept of self interest is frequently associated with the idea of ‘maximizing behaviour’ and through it the notion of rationality.
This can be briefly dealt with before considering non-theoretical, non-doctrinal or experiential bases of self interest.

According to economic thought market action is rational when it maximizes self interest on the basis of internally consistent preferences. The maximization hypothesis has drawn various criticisms, however, even within the economics discipline. These include, for instance, the argument that its form is metaphysical and therefore proper operationalization of the concept is not possible (Boland 1981), and also that the concept is unnecessary in economic analysis as the simpler and more realistic notion of ‘positive gain’ is sufficient (Alchian 1950). An associated concept of ‘satisficing’ and its correlative notion of ‘bounded’ rationality, which acknowledges cognitive limitations of self interested actors (Simon 1957), has supported the rise of an alternative approach to mainstream economics in the form of ‘behavioural’ economics. This latter approach, against the supposition that economic behaviour results from maximizing choices by rational agents participating in exchanges about which information is free and freely accessible, holds that behaviour is animated by context-specific choices revised by past experience and new learning. It assumes that realistic psychological and sociological processes and not formal rationalistic principles underpin economic behaviour (see Akerlof and Shiller 2009; Loewenstein 2008).

These complaints against the notion of maximization, however, leave the concept of self interest untouched. Indeed, the concept of rationality does not require such a close link between the concepts of self interest and maximization, as Weber’s account of instrumentally rational action and its distinction from value rational action acknowledges (Weber 1978: 24-6). Support of a charity, for instance, may be rational even though it leads to a net reduction in a person’s disposable income and to that extent undermines maximization. If a choice to support a charity were freely taken and did not constitute a failure of will or volitional incontinence but was consistent with some instrumental purpose (e.g. advancing cancer research) or the individual’s values (e.g. public mindedness), then such a choice would meet the prevailing understanding of rationalist preconditions. This type of consideration will be treated more fully below.

The maximizing element of rationalist accounts may be less a requirement that the choice of action is self interested and more that a purported efficient relationship obtains between the means and ends of an action. This latter requirement supports the maximized – or on the basis of proceeding remarks, an optimized – satisfaction of whatever purpose, self interested or not, an action sets out to achieve. The means-ends efficiency axiom of rationalist accounts is conditional, however, on the factual specification of the ends of the action in question at the time that the means are chosen or selected. The difficulty here is that many forms of action which are important in markets, for instance, such as investment, speculation and innovation, have ends that cannot be known at the outset of the action, when the means must be selected. But this consideration takes us into a realm extraneous to the present discussion, although an aspect of it will be taken up in the final section below.

But there is a form of rationality that is not market maximization (or optimization) nor means-end rationality, which requires a robust sense of self interest. This is a form of political rationality which is a necessary element of defence against paternalism or despotism. Indeed, there is an interest in self that is not premised on egoism and social atomisation but assumes, as Smith puts it, that ‘the members of human society stand in need of each other’s assistance, and are likewise exposed to mutual injuries’ (Smith 1979: 85). This leads, in Smith, not just to the possibility but the importance for social relations of subjective self interest:

Every man is, no doubt, by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care; and as he is fitter to take care of himself than of any other person, it is fit and right that it should be so. Every man, therefore, is much more deeply interested in whatever
immediately concerns himself, than in what concerns any other man (Smith 1979: 82-3).

Self interest, in this account, is necessary to prevent interference with the free action of persons in relation to others of a potentially dominating orientation.

Smith’s statement above can be read not only as a rationale for self interest as a concept but also suggests a basis of self interest in social and economic experience. There is nothing more likely to promote a realisation of a person’s own interests than their contravention by others of her aspirations or conduct. An important experiential basis of self interest, therefore, derives from power relations, and especially those internal to principal-agent relationships. The importance of this consideration derives from the fact that power and principal-agent relations are socially pervasive. While the concept of power is inherent in action theory and the sociological consideration of action in general, there is theoretical neglect in characterizations of action per se that a statistically significant proportion of action in any society is undertaken by individual persons on behalf of or as agents of others.

Agency, in this sense, is integral to action in families, employment, friendship, voluntary associations, formal organizations, and so on, which therefore generates situations in which the structure of relationships tends to encourage in the participants a consciousness of their own self interest.

There are at least two parts to the promotion of a sense of self interest that derive from the elements of principal-agent relationships. First, in becoming aware of the risks and costs incurred through serving another’s purpose, the attention of individuals as agents and also as principles is directed to their own interests in contradistinction to those of the other. Second, persons in principal-agent relationships, on both sides, become aware of the possibility of being subjected to the other’s self-interested monitoring, a situation encouraged by an awareness of the asymmetry of information and other bases of power disparity between the parties involved, which is a further defining feature of principal-agent relations. Such monitoring of one’s actions by another reinforces further a sense of a person’s own self interest.

While discussion of the problem of agency in the economics literature often focuses on ameliorating compensation and incentive arrangements, the significant issue from the perspective of consideration of self interest is therefore that self interest is not necessarily prior to agency, but a consequence of it. Kenneth Arrow, for instance, in noting the essentially social and not merely economic nature of principal-agent relations comments on this apparent paradox in agency: ‘the underlying principles are impeccably neoclassical, in that both parties are acting in their own self-interest and are subject to the influence of the market, [but] the variable to be determined is not a price but a complicated functional relationship’ (Arrow 1985: 44). The functional relationship Arrow refers to is an essentially social and dynamic one, which includes not only domination or power but also an emerging sense of self interest rather than a prior self interest, which he assumes.

Integral to self interest as underlying the action of persons in the sense described in the preceding paragraphs is the capacity of a person to choose between alternate possible courses of action. The typical sociological treatment of this prospect is to locate individual choice in structural conditions. In consideration of economic self interest, for instance, a focus on its social context, its prior ontological or causal determination by collective factors, and its structural and interactional preconditions and temporizing influences, are summarized in the concept of ‘embeddedness’ (Granovetter 1985; 2003). The consequence of accounting for self interested action in terms of the imperatives of a person’s involvement in social networks, however, is a failure to provide an adequate alternative to accounts of subjectively self-interested motivation and behaviour and in doing so to leave the question of action itself in doubt (Beckert 2003). Indeed, the pervasiveness of the concept of ‘practice’ in recent
sociology, in which behaviour is culturally constrained, habitual, ritualized and otherwise structurally defined (Bourdieu 1992; Turner 1994) leaves no room for the efficacious choice and capacities – individual or collective – assumed by action theory. The ideological claim of economics to methodologically preserve the possibility of choice and volitional initiative, against the structural determinism of sociology, has itself been undermined by theoretical developments in economic science, a fact lamented by at least one economist (Buchanan 1979: 41-63, 109-11, 170-1, 203-8).

Paul Samuelson is generally credited with the objectivist and behavioural turn in neoclassical economic theory through a move away from subjective utility, and therefore the psychological mechanisms involved in individual consumers making choices, by introducing the concept of ‘revealed preference’ which addresses only their observable behaviour (Samuelson 1938). This development formalizes a trend that began, however, at least with Alfred Marshall’s discussion of measurable desires indicated by observable actions as opposed to the inaccessible psychological feelings of utilitarian pleasures and pains (Marshall 1966: 13-9). Anything approaching variation between individuals and therefore the discretionary choices persons might make was in parallel fashion eliminated from economic theory with the Stigler-Becker proposition in which consumer preferences are assumed to be invariant and indifferent between persons in the determination of price (Stigler and Becker 1977). The culmination of these developments in economic theory, in which the subject is constructed in terms of purely observable, determinate and therefore predictable behaviour, performs the feat of eliminating choice and therefore action from market behaviour. The idea of an economic actor as an individual subjectively aware of her own interests and possessing an ability to choose a course of action to satisfy them, ceases to exist in an economic theory in which rational determination through a maximizing imperative has a logic of its own, in Becker’s words reported above, under ‘the assumptions of maximizing behaviour, market equilibrium and stable preferences’ (Becker 1976: 5).

Self-interested and other-interested behaviour: sympathy and commitment.

It is indicated above that a concept of self interest does not necessarily require the premise of maximizing behaviour, nor does it require that self interest be an exclusive motive of action, economic or otherwise. Indeed, it is not contradictory that a person may choose an action that is non-egoistic and serve a purpose related to the well-being of others, either individual or collective. It was shown how this might be facilitated through Smith’s concept of sympathy and related ideas. From the perspective of modern economic analysis, however, other-interested behaviour is subsumed into self interest by treating it as a preference that must be incorporated into an individual’s utility function. This leads to circularity, which Amartya Sen characterizes as the behavioural foundation of economic theory: ‘Behavior, it appears, is to be “explained in terms of preferences, which are in turn defined only by behaviour”’ (Sen 1977: 325). Through a number of connected papers Sen has outlined not only his objections but also proposed an alternative to the notion of market preferences and economic behaviour as being realized or appreciated through self-interested maximizing actions (Sen 1973; 1977; 1985; 1997). It is of relevance to the present discussion that in a paper still widely influential and frequently cited Sen (1977) dismisses sympathy as an adequate modifier of self interest and proposes instead a concept of commitment, which he says has an obvious social locus.

Sen’s distinction between sympathy and commitment is premised on a difference in their supposed relationship with self: ‘It can be argued that behaviour based on sympathy is in an important sense egoistic, for one is oneself pleased at others’ pleasure and pained at others’ pain, and the pursuit of one’s own utility thus may be helped by sympathetic action. It is action based on commitment rather than sympathy which would be non-egoistic in this sense’ (Sen 1977: 326). But if sympathy is egoistic, as Sen claims, then it is so in an
rather than in an important sense, as he holds. Behaviour based on sympathy for another is not directed to self and is therefore not egoistic in terms of its course and intended benefit. The experience of a sympathetic feeling, however, is located in the person who has it. If that is egoistic so be it. The problem for Sen, though, is that this cannot be the basis of a distinction between sympathy and commitment because the thought or the feeling of commitment must similarly be located in the person who experiences them and is therefore also in that same sense egoistic.

Sen introduces another basis for the distinction: ‘While sympathy relates similar things to each other – namely welfares of different persons – commitment relates choice to anticipated levels of welfare’ (Sen 1977: 327; emphasis added). Commitment, then, is about how to proceed rather than what to achieve. ‘One way of defining commitment’, he goes on to say, ‘is in terms of a person choosing an act that he believes will yield a lower level of personal welfare to him than an alternative that is also available to him’ (Sen 1977: 327). This is the salient point, for the ‘characteristic of commitment with which I am concerned here’, says Sen, ‘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’ (Sen 1977: 329).

The types of economic behaviour in which commitment is likely to be important are more probably in markets for public rather than private goods (Sen 1977: 330-1). Public goods, such as national defence or environmental protection, are available to persons irrespective of whether they have paid for them. On egoistic assumptions a truthful revelation of preference for a public good is unlikely: people will lie about such a preference or ‘free ride’ in order to avoid paying to maximize their gain. The ‘presence of non-gains-maximizing answers’ to questions concerning preferences for public goods, however, ‘including truthful ones’, Sen says, ‘immediately brings in commitment as part of behaviour’ (Sen 1977: 332). Thus in choosing to support a public good through commitment to it one is prepared to accept a cost for it through a tax or some other impost and in this sense be indifferent to an egoistic goal of gain maximization.

Another situation in which Sen locates commitment, qualitatively dissimilar to the preceding one, is in work motivation and organization in general: ‘Every economic system has ... tended to rely on the existence of attitudes to work which supersedes the calculation of net gain from each unit of exertion’ (Sen 1977: 334). The relevant commitments here are difficult to separate from loyalty to fellow workers, however, closer to sympathy than commitment as Sen understands it in terms of (volitional) choice. Indeed, the importance of expediency, subservience to authority and habituation in explaining the commitment of persons to the organizations in which they work rather compromises the understanding of commitment offered by Sen. While he is correct to write: ‘To run an organization entirely on incentives to personal gain is pretty much a hopeless task’ (Sen 1977: 335; emphasis in original), managers and workers alike may find it difficult to locate a coherent and meaningful rationale for their organizational behaviour in Sen’s account of commitment.

In attempting to improve Sen’s argument, Elias Khalil (1999) has proposed a distinction between ‘binding’ and ‘non-binding’ commitments. But he fails to note that Sen himself effectively proposes two quite different senses of commitment, without theoretically distinguishing between them. The reduction of individual welfare by payment of a levy in commitment to a public good is necessarily intentional and likely to be recognized by the committed as a consequence of values implicit in their commitment. The commitment that maintains the interdependent and tight-knit relations of occupational communities, on the other hand, may also have the consequence of reducing personal welfare by foregoing work practices associated with higher earnings, but unlike volitional commitment to a public good it results from social solidarity and peer pressure (out of which values may arise) rather than
directly from value choice. It is not possible to simply overcome or ignore the distinction between value commitment and social commitment in attempting to render the concept of commitment unitary and coherent. Indeed, in bringing them together in Sen’s manner means that ostensible consistently must be at the expense of the clear distinction between self interest and commitment that Sen desires to achieve.

The question of consistency between value and social commitment is not discussed by Sen because he fails to treat the distinction between them. The mechanism through which value and social commitment can be regarded as entailing a single process has been identified by Howard Becker, who seeks to develop a non-tautological understanding of commitment because in the literature he surveys ‘commitment ... is in fact synonymous with the committed behaviour it is supposed to explain’ (Becker 1960: 35). Becker identifies a variety of forms commitment, including value commitments that ‘are made consciously and deliberately’ (Becker 1960: 38) as well as social commitment located in occupational behaviour (Becker 1960: 33). The disparate forms of commitment have a common element in so far as they are ‘achieved by [the person involved] making a side bet’ (Becker 1960: 35). This is to say that the ‘committed person has acted in such a way as to involve other interests of his, originally extraneous to the action he is engaged in, directly in that action’ (Becker 1960: 35). In Becker’s account the substance of the side bet is less important than the fact that losing the bet results in an injury to the person’s self interest; people are interested in not only material rewards, but how they are seen by others, generative of social commitment, and also in being true to themselves, as in value commitments. According to this account commitment is therefore contingent, not necessary as Sen argues. Commitment in a comprehensive sense cannot primarily be a mechanism through which value choices and evaluations of value choices are made (Sen 1977: 329), for it is a function of harmonizing interests.

Sen concludes his argument concerning commitment as an alternative to self interest by summarizing the difference commitment-based behaviour would make to conventional economic models. In this context he refers to the arbitrary nature of the assumption of self-interested egoism exosed by Henry Sidgwick, whom he quotes. But it is not clear how the quotation from Sidgwick supports Sen’s argument. Sidgwick’s rhetorical question, ‘Why should I concern myself about my own future feelings any more than about the feelings of other persons?’ does not provide support for the concept of commitment but sympathy. Sidgwick goes on to express doubt concerning a coherent Ego or self, again unconnected with the concept of commitment. Sidgwick says ‘the permanent identical “I” is not a fact but a fiction’ and immediately asks ‘why should one part of the series of feelings into which the Ego is resolved be concerned with another part of the same series, any more than any other series?’ (quoted in Sen 1977: 343). Again, the alluded discontinuity here between self in the present and in the future does not advance the concept of commitment.

Earlier in his paper Sen introduces a related consideration of temporality when he registers scepticism concerning the proposition, derived from the theory of revealed preferences, that it is ‘possible to define a person’s interests in such a way that no matter what he does he can be seen as furthering his own interests in every isolated act of choice’ (Sen 1977: 322). In a footnote elaborating his position Sen adds:

If a person’s actions today affect his well-being in the future, then under this approach his future interests must be defined in terms of the way they are assessed today. In general, there is no reason to presume that the future interests as assessed today will coincide with those interests as assessed in the future. (Sen 1977: 322, note 9; emphasis in original).

The importance of this statement cannot be over emphasized, but it is not clear that Sen properly understands it. First, the problem that arises for future interests must also apply to
future commitments. Second, the problem of futurity indicated in this footnote and in the quotation from Sidgwick above provides the basis of an alternative route to the dismemberment of egoism that makes Sen’s distinction between self interest and commitment superfluous.

Present interests and future interests.
It is commonplace to say that all current actions are directed to future outcomes. Indeed, it is in the nature of action to secure an outcome that is to be achieved through it and which is therefore subsequent to the action in question. This situation generates the problem of the assessment of future well-being in terms of present criteria because present actions have future consequences that cannot be known at the time of the action. An actor’s future interests, therefore, cannot reasonably be assessed on the basis of present criteria. One response to this conundrum has been to claim that the urge to satisfy present interests is necessarily stronger than the urge to satisfy future interests (Smith 1979: 190; Pigou 1948: 24-6). This is a claim ‘so commonly and confidently made’, according to Frank Knight, that the ‘false conception of the nature of the problem’ has been neglected (Knight 1971: 130-1). Knight’s subsequent discussion of ‘time preference’, which shows that the uncertainty of the future does not prevent persons placing a positive value on future goods, points to the ‘absurdity of hedonistic rationalism’ on which an economistic conception of self interest is premised (Knight 1971: 132 note 1).

The difficulties associated with assessing future interests are not simply to cast doubt on the ‘non-empirical source’ of a homo economicus conception of self interest, as Sen (1977: 322) above and Knight here suggest, but also to raise fundamental concerns about the distinction between self-interested and other-interested behaviour. We shall see that this latter consideration necessarily leads us to challenge the idea of a unitary self, in particular the idea that a person’s identity is continuous through time, a proposition raised by Sidgwick in a quotation above and more fully treated in a neglected but important discussion by William Hazlitt (Hazlitt 1969; see Barbalet 2009). This is a radical departure from Sen’s commitment-based critique of self interest theory but is fundamental to an adequate understanding of self interested action. Two issues will be taken up in what follows. First, problems concerning the distinction between self- and other-interest actions will be considered. Second, the question of temporal discontinuity of self, which prevents the extension of present self interest to the future, will also be treated.

A person knows or has confirmed their present interest through the objects of its satisfaction. Objects of their future interests, on the other hand, can only be apprehended by imagining them. This is because the objects a person seeks through action that are to satisfy a future interest are not available to them – will not yet exist – when they commence the action and conceive the object it is to achieve. Thus there is a fundamental distinction, indeed disjuncture, within the category of self interest that relates not merely to temporality, the distinction between present and future interests, but which relates to the different means through which an actor knows their present and their future interests, by sensory experience and imagination respectively. One clear recognition of this pivotal fact is in Knight’s discussion of the consequences for ‘mentality’ of uncertainty, in which it is indicated that ‘things not present to sense are operative in directing behavior’ and therefore that ‘a situation not in physical relations with an organism, not even in existence, influences that organism … it remains true that practically we must regard the situation present to consciousness, not the one physically present, as the controlling cause’ (Knight 1971: 203). The relevance of consciousness over sensation for Knight is that ‘what is present to consciousness’ is ‘more an imaginative construct than a direct communication from the nerve terminal organs’ (Knight 1971: 202; see also Hazlitt 1969: 22, 66-7).
It is important to acknowledge that the notion outlined in the preceding paragraph shares elements of the treatment of sociality in terms of intersubjectivity in the Cooley-Mead tradition of social theory. In this latter approach an imaginative construction of the other’s intentions is projected into the interactions between self and other in the dual production of self image or role and the social relationship in which roles are both deployed and constituted. Indeed, a common source is Smith’s account of sympathy in Moral Sentiments which links Hazlitt’s and also Knight’s argument with that of the American pragmatic sociological tradition.

The significance of the apprehension of future objects of self interest through imagination is that this is also the means by which an actor apprehends another person’s interests, by imaginative construction in sympathy. Indeed, the basis of sympathy in imagination is fundamental in Smith’s account: ‘As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel ... it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations’ (Smith 1979: 9). This is a rather different connection between self interest and sympathy than the one usually indicated in hedonistic accounts and which Sen accepts in distinguishing sympathy and commitments, as we have seen. The mechanism of imagination, in apprehending both the objects of a person’s own future interests and another’s interests through sympathy, means that the distinction between and separation of self-interested and other-interested action is no longer conclusive (see Hazlitt 1969: 3, 68, 117).

The importance of this breach in the almost universal disjunction between self-interested and other-interested action, a distinction which is fundamental to not only economic thought but also social thought, is large and warrants close attention. Among other things, it demonstrates the unavoidability of sociality even from atomistic premises when self-interested action and other-interested action can be shown to function through identical means. This makes redundant the conventional sociological challenge to the concept of self interest in which the interactional basis of individual interest, in which individuals are connected with their social contexts, is taken to negate the meaningful possibility of independent self interested decision making (Granovetter 1985; 2003). The perspective presented here also leads to a profound challenge to conceptions of mundane experiences of self.

If it is accepted, as argued in the preceding paragraph, that the means of accessing a person’s present and future self interest are quite different, one based on the sensory apprehension of the objects of their satisfaction and the other based on imagining those objects and the associated interests they could satisfy, then it follows that a person’s future self is discontinuous with their present self. This counter-intuitive proposition can be further addressed by considering the question: how is one person distinguished from another? An obvious answer is that a person can have sensory consciousness only of his or her own direct experiences, whereas the experiences of another person can only be reported to or imagined by them. In this regard, then, a person’s future experiences and feelings, which have not yet occurred and therefore cannot leave any sensory traces on that person’s consciousness and can only be know imaginatively, are the same as the experiences and feelings of another person. It follows, therefore, that no connection exists between a person’s present self and their future self. In Hazlett’s words: ‘I am what I am in spite of the future’ (Hazlitt 1969: 139).

The consequences of a breach in continuous identity or unitary self under conditions of temporal seriality are not unknown in economic theory, although seldom headed. Alfred Marshall, for instance, after stating that the marginal utility of a thing diminishes as the amount held by a person increases, notes its principal limiting condition, namely ‘that we do not suppose time to be allowed for any alteration in the character or tastes of the man himself’, which is to say that the law of marginal utility assumes timelessness and singularity
or continuity of self or, as Marshall has it, the absence of change in a person’s character (Marshall 1966: 79). Marshall goes on to indicate some specific contrary cases, including that ‘the more good music a man hears, the stronger is his taste for it likely to become’, and in such cases, he continues, ‘our observations range over some period of time; and the man is not the same at the beginning as at the end of it’ (Marshall 1966: 79).

The conclusions of Marshall’s antithetic proposition in the theory of marginal utility, concerning a person’s learning through increased consumption of a value and subsequent changes in that person’s character, completely transforms the direction and substance of economic thought as it is understood today. And yet a key element of economic behaviour, which confounds much economic theory but which is consistent with the account in the present paper, is the interest an individual has in being someone other than they are, of improving their condition by changing their character, nature or identity (see Buchanan 1979: 93-112). What is important here, however, is that by introducing a consideration of the future the clear distinction between self-interested and other-interested action breaks down.

**Conclusion.**
The preceding discussion has shown that a conceptualization of self interest does not necessarily lead to axiomatic propositions concerning maximization and rationality. It has also been shown that a consciousness of self interest is emergent in economic and social relations in which power disparities of various types are to be found, and that a sense of a person’s own self interest is essential in combating paternalistic, autocratic and unequal relationships of all kinds. It is for these reasons that self interest will remain a pervasive element of conventional discourse irrespective of how it is valued as an analytic category of social or economic theory.

In economic relations undiluted self interest may appear feasible because it acknowledges a connection between a person and the objects of their market exchanges, with commodities of various sorts. In social relations, on the other hand, undiluted self interest is unfeasible as direct connections between different persons require compromises and other-directed considerations unless one is to over-rule all others in pursuance of her interests. We saw that the concept of sympathy, as outlined by Adam Smith, functions to moderate self interest in a manner essential for social relationships to occur.

A quite different critical approach to the concept of self interest than Smith’s classical account of sympathy has been developed by Amartya Sen. Sen’s concept of commitment, which he distinguishes from sympathy because he regards the latter as premised on self interest, was examined in the preceding discussion. It was shown that the concept of commitment is inadequately separated from sympathy by Sen and that it fails to serve as a critical alternative to self interest. A distinction referred to by Sen, between a person’s present interests and their future interests, is developed further in discussion above.

It was shown that the means through which a person knows or ascertains their present interests and their future interests are fundamentally distinct. The objects of the satisfaction of a person’s present interests are known to them through direct or sensory experience of those objects. The objects of the satisfaction of a person’s future interests, on the other hand, can only be known to them through the imagination. A person is aware of the objects of another’s interests similarly only through the imagination. On this basis, then, the distinction between self-interested action and other-interested action ceases to be as obvious and clear as the received and entrenched ideas concerning self interest assumes, not only in economics but also in sociology.

The nature of self interest, as an analytic concept and also as an experiential concept, has been outlined in the present paper. It has also been shown what relationships self interest bears with cognate concepts, including maximization, rationality, sympathy and commitment.
Some essential aspects of consideration of self interested action are also specified in the paper which leads to fundamental re-evaluation of established or received assumptions.

References


