

Child Mortality & Amartya Sen's Discussion of the Standard of Living

A baby born in America today has a pretty good chance of making it to adulthood: only a bit more than 0.6% of US infants die (CIA World Factbook). It also has a pretty good chance of living a well-fed and care-for existence compared to most any time and place in history. Coincidence? Well, not exactly. In this paper, we will explore how child mortality affects the standard of living as discussed by economist Amartya Sen, particularly in the case of medieval Europe.

Let's first take a more careful look at what we mean by standard of living. In his published lectures on the subject (1987), Sen takes on the challenge of analyzing different methods of evaluating this very familiar and yet very elusively-defined concept. As he correctly notes, "the standard of living communicates... with apparent ease" (Sen 1), but pinning down exactly (or even inexactly) what we mean by it is a daunting task:

There are many fundamentally different ways of seeing the quality of living, and quite a few of them have some immediate plausibility. You could be *well off*, without being *well*. You could be *well*, without being able to lead the life you *wanted*. You could have got the life you *wanted*, without being *happy*. You could be *happy*, without having much *freedom*. You could have a good deal of *freedom*, without *achieving* much. We can go on (Sen 1).

Throughout his lectures, Sen is in a sense asking some of humanity's most fundamental questions: What's the meaning of life? What's the best way to live? (Quite frankly, it's something of a relief to hear an economist – particularly a Nobel Prize-winning one! – discussing matters of

meaning rather than mere money.) However, Sen does not stray too far from Course 14 into the lands of Course 24, wisely tempering his philosophical ponderings with a quest for a real and practical economic measure of living standard. "The approach must... be practical in the sense of being usable for actual assessments of the living standard," he insists. "This imposes restrictions on the kinds of information that can be required and the techniques of evaluation that may be used. These two considerations – relevance and usability – pull us, to some extent, in different directions" (Sen 20).

This is a decidedly difficult task (even in general and not just specifically for child mortality concerns), and Sen does not pretend otherwise. He urges caution, reminding that "we cannot just redefine it in some convenient but arbitrary way" (Sen 20), and "we must not sacrifice all the richness of the idea of the living standard to get something nicely neat and agreeable" (Sen 2).

For the impact of child mortality, the first consideration (relevance) is easily taken care of. Successfully raising children has consistently ranked as important to parents throughout history, whether due to warm-and-fuzzy paternal sentiments or to colder economic considerations like ensuring an heir to continue the family line, lining up potential care for parents in old age, or even just preventing family assets from falling into the hands of a disliked distant relative or greedy lord. (Economic systems that did *not* allow for generational wealth transfer, if they exist in sufficiently well-documented cases, would be a fascinating case to consider. Were children less likely to survive if their parents had less of a vested economic interest in them – for example, in set-ups with inheritance confiscated by the government or a superior, or low returns on child labor, or no social pressure for offspring to financially support their parents much past their own dependence? In a sort of chicken-or-egg argument, would such systems be more likely to arise in

areas where babies tend to die?)

Also, while certainly “it is easy to argue that it is more plausible to identify someone as having a low standard of living on the ground that he or she is deprived of decent housing, or adequate food, or basic medical care, than on the ground that he or she is simply unhappy or frustrated” (Sen 15), it is not an unreasonable assertion to claim that having a good number of your children die young – or, even if you're miraculously lucky, even having to constantly fear that very realistic possibility – simply can't be good for your standard of living. Indeed, “the value of the living standard lies in the living, and not in the possessing of commodities” (Sen 25), and life with high child mortality is less good by any measurement standard Sen and his pals can dream up.

Child mortality also is a perfect example of Sen's criticism of current attempts at standard of living quantifications:

When making empirical comparisons of living standard, the temptation to use such aggregate commodity-based measures as the GNP or the GDP is strong, partly because these measure seem nicely aggregated and conveniently complete. Everything, it may appear, counts in the GNP. The question, of course, is: everything in what space? Commodities, typically yes; functionings and living conditions, possibly not at all (Sen 33).

Forget *possibly*, even: dead youngsters often don't even show up in the census, much less the GDP. In fact, unless they're much-anticipated heirs to thrones or some-such, we don't seem to hear very much at all about the enormous numbers of medieval kids who die before age 2 – or 5 or 10 or 15, even, after which point they've expected to have survived the main onslaught of childhood diseases and are soon old enough to marry or inherit or, in the case of one precocious young lady of Arc, lead French armies, thereby securing a more steady foothold in history. Dead people don't do very much; it's live folks who make enough fuss to be recorded, and they

generally need a reasonable amount of alive time to do so. And, simply by dint of being likely to have time to experience the world, we can reasonably argue that the person who survives the Terrible Twos has a higher standard of living than one who does, particularly since the usual culprits for such failure are extremely unpleasant malnutrition or disease.

Of course, it isn't merely the innocent babies who've gone off early to Catholic heaven – or so hope their families fervently – whose standard of living we're concerned with. Their parents', siblings, and neighbors' lives are all impacted by their premature demise, usually negatively (we'll not concentrate for now on the poor second sons who happily suddenly find themselves first heirs).

Unpleasant as it may be to consider, however, medieval families may not have been quite as devastated as we might expect. It was only in the 18th century (ironically, at the very time infant mortality peaked (Wrigley 249)) that European culture started viewing childhood as a special stage of life, marked by much of anything more than shortness and clumsiness and an inability to work as hard as adults. Even parents who loved their children in ways we would identify with more had different ideas of "reasonable expectations" for their prospects. Consider Sen's discussion of relative poverty: "The level of *capabilities* that are accepted as 'minimum' may themselves be upwardly revise as the society becomes richer and more and more people achieve levels of capabilities not previously reached by many" (Sen 18). Indeed, in developed countries today it's taken as a pretty safe given that your children will die after you do (and that you won't die very soon yourself). But in the Middle Ages, as well as in some parts of the world today, the expectation could not have been for more than a few of the brood to survive into adulthood. Often parents would even hold off on naming their children until they had lived past the critical one-month period when half of infant deaths took place (Wrigley 283) so as not to

"waste" attractive names on offspring who wouldn't be around to bear it long.

Aside from the emotional downsides of a child's death, it's a pretty bad deal economically, too. Considerable resources are invested in offspring, even if they die young¹. They need food and clothing and cuddling and space by the fire. There's the extra food the mother consumes during pregnancy and nursing, lost productivity soon before and after – and certainly during – childbirth, high risk of dying during labor, and at least a few years of near-continual supervision (possibly provided by not-much-older siblings, who could still very well be put to other tasks) spent ensuring baby doesn't toddle over a cliff or eat poisonous mushrooms.

However, how do we go about substantiating our qualitative assertions that child mortality was rampant in the Middle Ages? Even today, measures are imperfect. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) describes its relatively uncomplicated methodology for backing up its alarming statistics about modern-day child mortality rates around the world:

The U5MR [Under-5 Mortality Rate, the probability of a child dying before age five] can be calculated using methodologies that depend on the type of data available. In practice, data can be obtained from registration of births and deaths via vital registration systems, data from national population census and/or data collected via household surveys. When data collected via vital registration systems is of good quality, the U5MR can be easily estimated by observing the survival status of different cohorts along time and to specific ages since the moment of birth. U5MR can be derived from household survey data using direct or indirect methods... Unfortunately, vital statistics are unreliable in most developing countries (UNICEF, "Methodology").

UNICEF may feel somewhat entitled to dismiss data woes with a mere mention of "when data collected... is of good quality," but medieval historians have no such luxury. Wrigley and Schofield's landmark medieval English population study based on parish records addresses the

¹ And this is all way before private four-year college tuition considerations!

issue somewhat: they constructed reconstitution tables (Wrigley 193) that matches up individuals' records of birth (baptism), marriage and death to estimate family histories. This method is fraught with problems: records are incomplete or unreliable, many people shared similar names, and of course many babies simply didn't live long enough to make it onto church records (Wrigley 128, 225). However, it's the best use of the available data, even though economic historian Robert Solow wasn't kidding when he noted that "A little cleverness and persistence can get you almost any result you want" (Solow 22).

Ultimately, the question of how high child mortality in the Middle Ages affected standard of living remains a somewhat fuzzy concept, much like the standard of living itself. One thing's for sure, though: philosopher Hobbes was at least one-third right when he called people's lives "nasty, brutish, and short."

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My all-time favorite Sen-provided quotations:

- "There is no great failure in the inability to babble." (Sen, p. 33)
- "Pleasure is nothing but the intermission of pain." (–John Seldon, quoted on p. 7)
- "Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures." (–Samuel Johnson, quoted on p. 7)
- "Why must we reject being vaguely right in favor of being precisely wrong?" (Sen, p. 34).
- "One of the greatest pains to human nature is the pain of a new idea." (–Walter Bagehot, quoted on p. 38)