

Amartya Sen

The Idea of Justice.

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Amartya Sen is a prolific writer who, throughout his remarkable career, has made significant contributions to political philosophy, economic theory and public discourse about development, democracy and freedom. This book draws together many themes of his previous work on justice, social choice, and moral reasoning. It thereby provides a valuable overview and accessible synthesis of many of the principal positions Sen has articulated and defended. Scholars of Sen's work will be familiar with most of the views presented here, and Sen frequently directs readers to his previous work for more detailed elaborations of his central claims. Although there is little that is strikingly novel in the book, it is useful for a theorist of Sen's stature to provide an overview of his conception of justice that tries to integrate the diverse ideas that he has pioneered elsewhere.

Like so many other contemporary theorists, Sen situates his approach to justice in relation to John Rawls' work. While displaying the utmost respect for Rawls and generously acknowledging Rawls' importance, Sen seeks to gently relax the grip of various Rawlsian doctrines on theorizing about justice. For Sen, contemporary theory wrongly embraces a 'transcendental institutional' approach to thinking about justice as is epitomized in Rawls's use of the hypothetical contractarian device of the 'original position' to identify ideal principles of justice for the regulation of the basic institutional structures of society. Sen characterizes Rawls' theory as 'transcendental' because Rawls aims to identify the principles of justice that regulate a *fully just* society. Sen argues that the focus on identifying and justifying *ideal* principles of justice obstructs the more important (and practically pressing) task of making comparative judgments between the less than perfect arrangements that can be feasibly pursued. He also expresses doubts about the Rawlsian tendency to characterize justice in terms of well functioning institutions. Sen thinks that judgments about justice should be more directly related to the quality of the lives people can actually lead under different forms of social and political organization.

In rejecting the 'transcendental institutional' approach, Sen hopes to move theorizing about justice more in the direction of social choice theory with its emphasis on devising rankings of social states of affairs. However, Sen warns against the distorting influence of broadly utilitarian conceptions of social choice that rely upon myopic forms of welfarism. He claims that a diverse array of values beyond happiness or preference satisfaction must inform our efforts to compare and rank social states. Yet for all its technical sophistication, mainstream rational choice theory handles value pluralism poorly. Sen acknowledges that admitting a plurality of competing values to social choice

theory both adds enormous complexity to an already difficult problem and exacerbates the worry that orderings of social states will be incomplete and inconsistent. Nonetheless, he is confident that even partial orderings of available social states that reflect sensitivity to a plurality of incommensurable values will allow us to identify important ways of advancing the cause of justice. Moreover, some of the tools from social choice theory can be productively employed in service of this goal.

Sen also has reservations about more specific features of Rawls' theory. He doubts the model of hypothetical agreement at the heart of Rawls' contractarianism can yield the clear consensus on the principles of justice identified by Rawls. Sen suggests that Adam Smith's device of the impartial spectator provides a more fruitful way of reasoning about justice, but he insists that Smith's device does not push us towards utilitarianism. As to what metric a justice theory should employ to measure the success of people's lives, Sen rejects both welfarism and Rawls' theory of primary goods in favor of the informationally richer capabilities approach. Without developing a detailed theory of global justice, Sen favors a broadly cosmopolitan understanding of justice to the narrower society-focused model adopted by Rawls. With Rawls, Sen defends a deliberative conception of democracy but, remaining sensitive to value pluralism, he adopts a broad and flexible view about the source and character of legitimate public reasons. Sen discusses these and other themes, especially those dealing with links between human rights, democracy and development, with both great erudition and unflagging sensitivity to the real injustices suffered by so many. There is, consequently, much to admire about this book. However, in presenting his overall idea of justice Sen does not always indicate how the various elements of his view fit together, and there is some imprecision about how his theory might resolve crucial issues such as the nature and scope of expressly egalitarian considerations of distributive justice. While one can agree that an understanding of justice must display an appreciation of a variety of values, Sen pitches this organizing idea at so abstract a level that it is difficult to determine how competing values are to be balanced or how we should respond to fundamental conflicts of values. His exposition tends to draw on safe, uncontroversial examples, and the reader is left wondering whether the contrast between the 'transcendental institutional' approach and his own is as great or as significant, in practice, as Sen suggests.

This is a stimulating, highly readable book. Sen sprinkles his discussion with engaging literary examples and nicely draws upon facets of Indian intellectual history in a way that complements the ideas and arguments drawn from Western sources. He thereby gives lie to the view that Eastern and Western conceptions of value are fundamentally different or irreconcilable. Instead, we learn that justice is a common human concern and that dialogue between different traditions can advance our understanding of justice. Even if it does not always persuade, Sen's voice in this dialogue is most welcome and valuable.

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