

## Introduction

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Amartya Sen was awarded the 1998 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics “for his contributions to welfare economics.” Although his primary academic appointments have been mostly in economics, Sen is an important and influential social theorist. His work on social choice theory is seminal, as well as the first introduction many political philosophers have to the field. His books on poverty, famine, and development are well-known and influential. The primacy he places on liberty and its expansion is attractive to many. And, he has made many other contributions to moral and political philosophy.

One of the aims of this collection is to present some of Sen’s work to a wider audience than that of scholars already familiar with it. To this end, the chapters devote a certain amount of space to presenting and summarizing Sen’s writings on particular topics. There is some overlap between the chapters, as Sen’s work on different topics is continuous and reflects concerns that underlie what otherwise may seem like different fields. There are some omissions, including some of Sen’s most recent work, mainly because of constraints of space. This introduction is meant principally to highlight some of Sen’s most important ideas and achievements, especially for those who are either unfamiliar with his work or familiar with only parts of it.

Amartya Sen was born in 1933 in Santiniketan in West Bengal, India. He spent much of his childhood in Dhaka in what is now Bangladesh. Following partition in 1947, his family moved to India. Sen studied in the school established by the Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore in Santiniketan and at Presidency College in Calcutta, where he earned a BA in economics. He moved to Cambridge University, where he obtained a second BA and a PhD. Winning a competitive Prize Fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge, gave Sen “four years of freedom to do anything I liked (no questions asked), and I took the radical decision of studying philosophy in that period. I had always been interested in logic and in epistemology, but soon got involved in moral and political philosophy as well” (Sen 1998a). Sen’s main academic appointments have been at Jadavpur University (Calcutta), Trinity College

(Cambridge), the University of Delhi, the London School of Economics, Oxford University, and Harvard University.

Sen's life has been an academic one, lived mostly in university settings. As he says in his autobiographical essay, "I was born in a University campus and seem to have lived all my life in one campus or another. . . . I have not had any serious non-academic job" (Sen 1998a). But, his life's work, even when mathematical and abstract, has been devoted to recognizably practical questions and interests.

Sen's Nobel Prize was, as we noted, awarded "for his contributions to welfare economics." Sen's writings range over many domains not normally grouped under welfare economics, but the term may serve as an umbrella for his work. He chose to devote his Nobel lecture to social choice theory, the study of the decisions or choices of groups of people, from small committees to large societies. There he says that

if there is a central question that can be seen as the motivating issue that inspires social choice theory, it is this: how can it be possible to arrive at cogent aggregative judgments about the society (for example, about "social welfare," or "the public interest," or "aggregate poverty"), given the diversity of preferences, concerns, and predicaments of the different individuals *within* the society? How can we find any rational basis for making such aggregative judgements as "the society prefers this to that," or "the society should choose this over that," or "this is socially right?" Is reasonable social choice at all possible . . . ? (Sen 1998b)

Social choice theory in its contemporary form was established by Kenneth Arrow. Sen is known for his development of Arrow's seminal work as well as for his appreciation of the breadth of the field or domain. As he says in his Nobel lecture,

Social choice theory is a very broad discipline, covering a variety of distinct questions, and it may be useful to mention a few of the problems as illustrations of its subject matter (on many of which I have been privileged to work). When would *majority rule* yield unambiguous and consistent decisions? How can we judge how well a *society as a whole* is doing in the light of the disparate interests of its different members? How do we measure *aggregate poverty* in view of the varying predicaments and miseries of the diverse people that make up the society? How can we accommodate *rights and liberties* of persons while giving adequate recognition to their preferences? How do we appraise social valuations of public goods such as the *natural environment, or epidemiological security*? Also, some investigations, while not directly a part of social choice theory, have been helped by the

understanding generated by the study of group decisions (such as the causation and prevention of *famines and hunger*, or the forms and consequences of *gender inequality*, or the demands of *individual freedom* seen as a “social commitment”). The reach and relevance of social choice theory can be very extensive indeed. (Sen 1998b)

Arrow founded contemporary social choice theory in 1951 with a remarkable “impossibility theorem.” He showed that no social choice procedure could satisfy all of a small number of conditions. The significance of the result is in no small part because of the fact that all of these conditions, at least at first glance, are reasonable to impose on most of the social choice mechanisms we know. Assuming that a social choice procedure<sup>1</sup> has to produce an ordering of alternatives,<sup>2</sup> it should also apply to any domain, that is, to any set of individual preferences (unrestricted domain). Next, it has to satisfy a technical but seemingly compelling condition requiring that social choice over any set of alternatives has to depend on preferences *only* over those alternatives (independence). Arrow showed that none could also satisfy two very weak and reasonable conditions, the Pareto principle and nondictatorship. The first of these requires that if everyone in a society prefers one alternative to another, the social choice procedure must as well; the nondictatorship condition rules out the possibility of a “dictator,” someone whose preference for one alternative over another would dictate social choice regardless of how everyone else ranked the alternatives.<sup>3</sup>

Arrow’s surprising result was initially viewed as destroying the possibility of social choice. The conditions seemed eminently reasonable, and the theorem so simple and robust, that it was hard not to be impressed. Considerable work was done attempting to avoid the impossibility result, but much of it merely deepened the pessimistic conclusions that were drawn from the initial theorem. Only abandoning or weakening one of the conditions would undermine the result. But, all of the conditions seemed plausible. One certainly would not want social choice mechanisms to allow for a “dictator.” Our democratic political constitutions, for instance, are meant to prevent just that. And, it seems unacceptable to reject the weak Pareto principle. What are we to do?

Arrow’s theorem spawned a body of research on voting systems of different kinds. Much of this has shown how voting procedures are subject

<sup>1</sup> Technically, a social welfare function.

<sup>2</sup> An ordering here is a set of binary relations that are reflexive, transitive, and complete.

<sup>3</sup> Additional conditions are that there are at least two individuals (and not infinitely many) and at least three alternatives. For further details and more formal statements, see Chapter 5.

to intransitivities of preference familiar to scholars (and politicians) at least since Condorcet's voting paradox.<sup>4</sup> Actual voting mechanisms respond to transitivity by relaxing one or more of Arrow's conditions. (For instance, in most elections and athletic contests, candidates or contestants may win without competing against and beating all others.)

Sen focused our attention especially on the so-called independence condition and on the ways in which it and other conditions effectively restrict the kinds of information that social choice mechanisms can use. Voting systems typically register information about how many voters prefer one alternative to another. Other information – for example, the intensity or urgency of their preferences, the identity of participants, ownership patterns, and other rights – is not to be taken into account. This makes sense for the formal study of many electoral systems. But, it makes less sense for the formal study of a variety of questions about the condition of a group or society, about poverty, about opportunities, and the like. A study of certain kinds of evaluative and distributive questions requires taking into account more information.

Some of the Arrowian conditions, then, rule out choice mechanisms that use more or different information than voting rules do. This is not accidental. Economists early in the last century became skeptical of the possibility of comparing the preference satisfaction or well-being of one person to another. Preference satisfaction, welfare, and the like are often measured by utility functions, and the manner in which the latter are normally defined does not allow for comparisons between persons. Economists boldly declared interpersonal comparisons of utility to be “impossible.” Certainly, if utility functions are understood to measure choices or preferences (understood in certain ways), then it is hard to see how they can be compared. However, it is hard to believe that all interpersonal comparisons are impossible. For instance, when one helps someone in a difficult spot, it is often with the thought that one's trouble benefits the other more than it burdens one. Similarly, Sen notes that Nero's gain in burning Rome surely was less than the loss of the other inhabitants of the city (Sen 1970a: 99). Some interpersonal comparisons surely can be made.<sup>5</sup>

Much of Sen's work in social choice theory has been in exploring mechanisms for judgment and choice that make use of more information than

<sup>4</sup> Condorcet (1785) showed how a preference cycle could occur with three voters and three alternatives – for instance, in a contest between three candidates, a majority of voters might prefer A to B, another majority B to C, and yet another majority C to A, suggesting that no outcome is stable.

<sup>5</sup> Some philosophers have argued that the very ascription of beliefs and desires to others presupposes such comparison (Davidson 1986).

permitted by the Arrovian framework (see Chapter 5 of this volume). His approach may be dubbed one of “informational enrichment.” Not only may we for some purposes use information about interpersonal comparisons of utility, we should also use some information that is not represented by ordinary utility measures, even if interpersonally comparable. Sen has argued that preference satisfaction and other attitudes are not all that is important for the evaluation of social states. He has long been a critic of what he calls “welfarism,” the view that evaluations of outcomes or alternatives are to consider only utility information. Sen argues that information about the satisfaction of needs and basic interests, opportunities and freedoms, and rights and duties must also be included for many purposes. His work in social choice theory and related fields is thus devoted to a broadening of the established framework for understanding social evaluation and choice.

Sen has long been interested in poverty and especially famine. His work here is very important. Not surprisingly, given his competencies in measurement theory and his sensitivities to questions about aggregation and distribution, Sen’s work has been pioneering. He may be best known for his work on famine. He discovered, for instance, that famines can occur without any significant decline in food production in a country or region. The phenomenon of famine, he argues, is better understood as one of entitlement. For reasons having to do with income and relative prices, a group of people may be unable to secure an adequate amount of food to survive, even if enough is available where they live. Specifically, he discovered that famines have never occurred in democracies, no matter how poor. The explanation is simply that democratic pressures on government will lead to measures to prevent famines.<sup>6</sup>

Sen’s interests in poverty and development have led him to be interested in the measurement of poverty. Difficult questions about measurement require thinking about the nature of poverty, and Sen is critical of influential characterizations of poverty. Levels of income are often used to measure poverty, understandably for many reasons, one of which being the relative availability of data about income. Some even say that poverty *is* lack of money. But, Sen argues that concentrating on income is inadequate in many contexts. Income is instrumentally significant, of course, but other factors may merit more attention than they are often given – for example, age, gender, health, location. Information about income may not tell the full story about the deprivations that many suffer. It also may not point in the

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<sup>6</sup> A short introduction to Sen’s views on famine is chapter 7 of Sen 1999. See also Chapter 7 of this volume. For Sen’s work on development generally, see Chapter 8.

right directions for solutions. Sen has long urged that we concentrate our attentions on the substantive freedoms that people have to live their lives. In contrast to the influential utilitarian tradition in ethics, which would have us look at utility measures of well-being, and in contrast to the different proposals of some other theorists, such as John Rawls, Sen thinks we should be concerned with the real opportunities people have to pursue their objectives. This means that the concept of “functionings,” what a person can do or be, is central to the analysis of poverty or deprivation. Functionings such as being adequately nourished or healthy are important, but so is being able to take part in the life of the community. A person’s “capability set” is the different combinations of functionings that are feasible for him or her to achieve. “Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles)” (Sen 1999: 75). An example that Sen frequently uses contrasts two people who are not eating enough. One is starving because he is destitute, the other one fasting while affluent. The two are equally hungry but have different capability sets or substantive freedoms. The “capability approach” to judgments about the development of a society and associated questions about policy can focus on what people are able to do, their realized functionings, or on their real opportunities, the capability sets of alternatives available to them.

Sen’s focus on functionings and capabilities allows us to see what is wrong with understanding poverty solely in terms of low income. The latter is of course important and can be incorporated in his approach. But, the important insight lies in understanding that low income is but one deprivation of capability and that poverty generally is the deprivation of basic capabilities. (See especially Chapter 3 of this volume.)

Capabilities are a kind of freedom, the substantive freedom “to choose a life one has reason to value” (Sen 1999: 285). Sen is a liberal thinker in the broad, old-fashioned sense, that is, a political thinker for whom the value of liberty is primary. Sen thinks of the expansion of freedom as the primary end and means of development: “Development consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency” (1999: xii). Development, he argues, “requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states” (1999: 3).

Sen’s development of the capability approach to social evaluation and policy is central to his liberalism. Capabilities are a kind of freedom. But,

Sen's analysis of liberty is also a significant contribution to political thought. In 1970, he published an impossibility result with multiple implications for liberalism (1970a: chapters 6 and 6\*; 1970b). The theorem, often dubbed the "paradox of the Paretian liberal," is very simple. Liberalism requires that people be allowed to make a number of choices undisturbed by others. Some of the least controversial would be "personal" choices, such as the decision to read *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Sen's original example, now quite dated!). Sen shows that no social decision rule or procedure<sup>7</sup> exists that would provide a complete ordering of alternatives, would apply to any set of individual preferences (unrestricted domain), and would also satisfy the weak Pareto principle and a liberalism condition saying that each person is decisive over at least one pair of alternatives.

The theorem is very interesting and has given rise to much discussion and a huge literature. Some critical discussions raised questions as to how the notion of "decisiveness" should be understood, an important concern for our understanding of liberty and of rights. Many also worried that the social choice theoretic representation of freedom is misleading. Two different conceptions of freedom, direct and indirect, need to be distinguished. The first would have someone be decisive insofar as his or her choices determine which of two alternatives is to prevail; the second requires either actual or hypothetical choice. The distinction needs to be developed with some care (see Chapter 4 of this volume). Sen understands indirect freedom as a kind of liberty, and this has important implications for democracy and, in general, for understanding how institutions can sustain our liberty.

The significance that Sen attributes to freedom also helps to explain his capabilities approach to evaluation and policy. Sen thinks that in a number of contexts, especially policy ones, we should care about people's capabilities and not merely their functionings: "quality of life is to be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings" (Sen 1993: 31). Capabilities may enhance one's prospects (of functioning), but the value of the former are not exhausted by their consequences. Capabilities are a kind of freedom that may also have intrinsic importance.<sup>8</sup>

Sen is by training an economist – he may prefer the classical label, a "political economist." Economics is associated with an account of humans conceived as rational agents of a certain kind. One of the large lessons

<sup>7</sup> Technically a social decision function.

<sup>8</sup> This is a quick summary of some very complex discussions, some initiated by G. A. Cohen's (1993) criticism of Sen and the latter's response, and some important clarifications made by Pettit. See Chapter 4 of this volume, as well as Pettit 2001 and Sen's reply (2001).

learned from classical economics is that much economic activity could be understood as motivated largely by the self-interested concerns of people. In neoclassical economics, the model of human action becomes that of utility maximization, permitting the development of more precise and mathematical economic models. More recently the (expected) utility-maximizing model has influenced much of social science as “rational choice theory.” Sen is suitably impressed by the explanatory power of economic models, but he has always been worried about the narrow interpretations many economists place on “rational choice.” For Sen, rationality generally is the “the discipline of subjecting one’s choices – of actions as well as of objectives, values and priorities – to reasoned scrutiny” (2002: 4). But, economists usually think of rationality more narrowly. And, Sen has long been a critic of many of the different ways in which rational choice has been understood, especially the emphasis on self-interested behavior. His concern here has been in part to leave room for the ways in which people are not always self-interested in their thought and action, especially when they cooperate with others. The rational agents of economic theory are often, in his words, “rational fools” (Sen 1977).<sup>9</sup>

Sen’s research is rarely divorced from his ethical and political concerns. From his abstract studies of social choice theory to his work on the measurement of poverty, his interests are broadly moral. Part of his extraordinary influence has been to restore “an ethical dimension to economics and related disciplines” (Nobel Committee 1998). ‘Restoration’ is the appropriate term, as Adam Smith and other classical economists did not accept the divorce between economics and ethics (and politics) influential in the twentieth century. Sen’s work has also contributed enormous clarity to different parts of moral philosophy, in particular the theory of justice. He has analyzed in very helpful ways the differences and relations between different kinds of principles of justice. (See Chapter 6 of this volume.)

Sen has been concerned with the ways in which certain understandings of rational choice are inimical to ethics. (See Chapter 2 of this volume.) For instance, if people are understood largely as self-interested in certain ways, it is hard to find much room for a number of moral concerns, especially values of justice. Sen has as well made a number of contributions to moral theory more narrowly understood. He has written extensively about human rights and has questioned attacks on their universality, especially from the standpoint of “Asian values.” He has written a number of papers

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 1 in this volume.



on the theory of justice and is now working on a statement of his views on justice.

As noted, we do not propose to cover all of Sen's major areas of interest in this volume. He has many publications about India, and, aside from some of his studies of poverty, we have left this large topic to the side. We also have left out many topics of interest primarily to economists working in different subfields of the discipline. More recently, Sen has published *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2006), a work already translated into eight languages. Sen's lifelong interests in identity and commitment are treated only as part of other topics. In his autobiographical essay, he notes that he was impressed early on by the cultural diversity of India, as well as by the ease with which people's identities gave rise to murderous violence. One particular story is striking:

I had to observe, as a young child, some of that mindless violence. One afternoon in Dhaka, a man came through the gate screaming pitifully and bleeding profusely. The wounded person, who had been knifed in the back, was a Muslim daily labourer, called Kader Mia. He had come for some work in a neighbouring house – for a tiny reward – and had been knifed on the street by some communal thugs in our largely Hindu area. As he was being taken to the hospital by my father, he went on saying that his wife had told him not to go into a hostile area during the communal riots. But he had to go out in search of work and earning because his family had nothing to eat. The penalty of that economic unfreedom turned out to be death, which occurred later on in the hospital. The experience was devastating for me, and suddenly made me aware of the dangers of narrowly defined identities, and also of the divisiveness that can lie buried in communitarian politics. It also alerted me to the remarkable fact that economic unfreedom, in the form of extreme poverty, can make a person a helpless prey in the violation of other kinds of freedom: Kader Mia need not have come to a hostile area in search of income in those troubled times if his family could have managed without it. (Sen 1998a)

This incident also shows how Sen's experiences have fed his more abstract theoretical concerns.

A volume as slim as this one cannot cover all of Sen's work, but it should provide a good introduction. Readers who know little about Sen's work or who merely know something about one of his many areas of research might welcome further guidance. Someone interested in learning about Sen's work could read the chapters of this volume in order. But, some of the essays (especially Chapters 1, 5, and 6) may be difficult for readers who

are not accustomed to the abstract styles of philosophers and economists or who are unfamiliar with elementary formal logic or set theory. Much of Sen's work is more formal or mathematical than that of most of the other thinkers represented in the Contemporary Philosophy in Focus series. Some familiarity with economics or rational choice theory will be useful for parts of many of the chapters. So, depending on the particular interests of readers, the chapters may be read in different orders.

The first four chapters cover topics familiar to philosophers and social theorists: the nature of rational choice, the relation between ethics and rationality, well-being and agency, and freedom. The second group of four chapters focuses more on societies and institutions: social choice theory, principles of distributive justice, famine and poverty, and the theory of development. Readers most interested in Sen's "political" work might start with these chapters.

The theory of rational choice that dominates economics and Sen's important criticisms of it are the topic of the opening chapter by Shatakshee Dhongde and Prasanta K. Pattanaik. It may be difficult reading for the uninitiated, although the formalisms are not very complex. The dominant account of rationality in economics is also influential in the other social sciences as well as in philosophy. Sen's critical concerns are of great import to social theory in general. The second chapter, by Christopher W. Morris, focuses on the relation between economics and ethics, specifically the kinds of skepticism of ethics that have come from economics. This chapter follows naturally from the first, but may be read independently.

Although most economists and most social theorists know something about Sen's work, many others have come to it through his account of human well-being or, rather, his theory of capabilities and functionings. This is the topic of the chapter by David A. Crocker and Ingrid Robeyns. Readers interested especially in this part of Sen's work may start with this chapter and then turn to the next chapter on freedom and the last one on development. In Chapter 4, on freedom, Philip Pettit examines Sen's important analyses of human freedom and proposes some extensions of these.

As we have noted, Sen chose social choice theory as the topic for his Nobel Prize address. His distinctive approach to social choice theory is explained in Chapter 5 by Kevin Roberts. This is the work of Sen's that first attracted the attention of many economists and philosophers, and it is of great importance to social theory, as well as to moral theory. Chapter 6, by Peter Vallentyne, focuses on Sen's study of principles of justice, a topic closely related to his work on social choice theory. This chapter may be of special interest to political philosophers.