Review of Amartya Sen's *The Idea of Justice*
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The Idea of Justice is Amartya Sen's most sustained foray into political philosophy, drawing on and developing his earlier wide-ranging and influential work in political philosophy and social choice theory. It is a large book, but potential readers should not be intimidated by its size. Sen's writing style is easy and enjoyable, his philosophic arguments illustrated by a rich set of anecdotes drawn from history, literature, and current events. And the core ideas of the book are relatively few in number, and repeated often throughout the book. But though they may be few, the key ideas of this book are deeply important. Political philosophers should take heed, for the suggestions Sen makes have the potential to change their field for the better in a multitude of ways.

The book is divided into four parts. Part One, "The Demands of Justice," contains several of Sen's most important and novel contributions. One of these is his plea for a more comparativist theory of justice. Too much contemporary political philosophy, Sen argues, has taken the opposite 'transcendental' approach wherein the task of theory is seen as identifying the perfectly just society. Such an approach is unhelpful partly because of the immense difficulties involved in reaching reasoned agreement on such an ideal state (pp. 10-12), but moreover because perfection is almost never relevant to the actual choices we face. What we need from political philosophy is guidance on how to make the world *less* unjust, and knowing the nature of perfect justice is neither necessary nor particularly helpful in this task (pp. 95-102).

Many political philosophers have also gone wrong, says Sen, in thinking that justice is largely or exclusively a matter of getting the institutions or 'basic structure' of society right. Institutions matter, of course, and they matter deeply for how political philosophers should think about justice. But they matter only because and to the extent that they affect the sorts of lives people are able to lead. A 'realization focused' theory of justice will thus need to pay special attention to the way institutions actually work given the inevitable moral and other failings of those who will occupy their roles (pp. 20-22, 67-69).

In Part Two, "Forms of Reasoning," Sen discusses a number of themes related to rationality and objectivity. Sen recognizes the existence of deep and persistent disagreement regarding moral and political issues. But the existence of such disagreement does not mean that the quest for objective answers is hopeless. Rather, it means that the *kind* of objectivity we must hope for is what Sen calls "positional objectivity"– a kind of objectivity that is "person-invariant but position-relative" (pp. 157). It involves recognizingthat how the world looks can depend very much on where one is standing in it. Doing so reinforces the need to follow Adam Smith in taking up the position of the "impartial spectator" when thinking about moral problems, lest we mistake our own parochial view of the world for the universal truth.

Part Three, "The Materials of Justice," contains chapters on the capabilities approach and on the nature and moral significance of equality and liberty. On the subject of liberty (chapter 14), as on the subject of moral reasons (chapter 9), Sen is a pluralist. We do not have to make a choice between understanding liberty in a positive sense vs. understanding it in a negative sense, or understanding it in terms of capabilities vs. understanding it in terms of non-domination. Freedom is an "inescapably plural idea," and the correct approach to political philosophy will recognize value in freedoms of multiple types (p. 305). This means that we cannot determine the freedom-maximizing social policy by simply adding

up freedoms on a cardinal scale. But one would hope, with Sen, that the power of human reasoning and judgment extends beyond the ability to count (p. 240).

The fourth and final Part of the book, "Public Reasoning and Democracy," develops Sen's ideas regarding the nature of democracy and of human rights. Sen's approach to rights reflects and does credit to his realization-focused approach to justice. For while there is a tendency among political philosophers to suppose that something's being a human right entails that it ought to be provided or protected by the state, Sen rightly points out that this is not necessarily so. Whether the state, as opposed to individuals or voluntary organizations, is the best mechanism for realizing rights is an empirical question (p. 364). There is, Sen notes in another context, something of a "tyranny of ideas" as seeing states as of basic significance in moral and political philosophy (p. 143). But whatever significance states have must be earned by their contribution to human welfare, and not merely assumed.

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