

Connecting with the real

Title: *The Idea of Justice*

Author: Amartya Sen

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An academic of formidable excellence and achievement, Amartya Sen's preoccupations may well be described as concerns for "problems in the real world". His current work, *The Idea of Justice*, is a foray into the realm of philosophy, where he engages in academic interpretations of justice, and their application in real life. In this, Mr Sen remains true to his intellectual moorings, for all that his work may well be described as attempts to connect with the real.

For some, an engagement with philosophy is not something expected of an economist. Philosophy, however, is as intrinsic to Mr Sen's intellectual underpinnings as economics.

One of his collaborators, the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, says that Mr Sen's contribution to economics is "unique, because he is the only recent or living economist who takes philosophy seriously and whose thinking about the foundations of economics is informed by his own high-level work in philosophy".

This should not be surprising for in his early years, shortly after completing his PhD in economics from Trinity College, Cambridge, Mr Sen won a fellowship at the same college which allowed him four years of freedom to do anything he liked. He chose philosophy.

Academic viewpoints

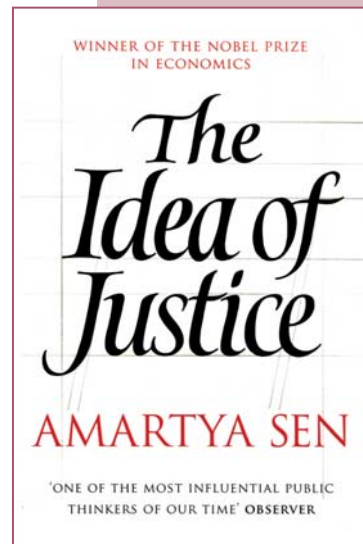
In *The Idea of Justice*, though Mr Sen engages the academia broadly, in particular he takes on what many consider to be the 20th century's most important work of political philosophy — American philosopher and fellow Harvard academician — John Rawls's *The Theory of Justice*.

Even as Mr Sen recognises the significance of Rawls's work as a further refinement and development of western thinking about justice, he also shows up the sterility of its prescriptions. Rawls's absolutism, Mr Sen points out, lacks the flexibility to take on the complexities of life.

Casting further afield, he looks at the line of thinking as represented by Adam Smith, Condorcet, Bentham, Mary Wollstonecraft, Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill. These thinkers, he points out, thought about justice in comparative rather than absolutist terms. Instead of pondering about a perfectly just society, they focused on particular injustices.

Mr Sen also looks at Indian philosophy, with its dual concepts of *niti* (policy) and *nyaya* (justice). While *niti* focuses on policies, principles and institutions, the formal aspects of justice, *nyaya* deals with the actual social realisation of justice — the comprehensive outcome — where preventing injustice is more crucial than pursuing perfect justice.

The application of justice, however, may present its own peculiar dilemmas. Through a hypothetical example of three children and a flute, Mr Sen shows how justice can be viewed differently by involved parties. Anna, Bob and Carla fight over a flute with Anna claiming that she ought to get the flute



because she knows how to play it. For Bob, a poor boy, the flute ought to be his as he has no toys of his own, while Carla claims the flute as hers because she made it.

As Mr Sen points out, theorists of diverging schools of justice would have different views. The social democrat, committed to reducing social gaps, would argue in favour of Bob, the poor boy. The libertarian would vote for Carla as she made the flute, while the down-to-earth utilitarian would opt for Anne for she would be able to utilise the flute the best as she can play it.

As for Mr Sen's own take on the dilemma, the argument is not about "...what constitutes individual advantage, but about the principles that should govern allocation of resources in general. They are about how social arrangements should be made and what social institutions must be chosen, and through that, what social realisations must come about."

Preventing injustice

For Mr Sen, life is not about the search for an 'ideal state' or the 'perfectly just society', but about preventing manifest problems of injustice. "What moves us, reasonably enough, is not the realisation that the world falls short of being completely just, which few of us expect, but that there are clearly remediable injustices around us which we want to eliminate," he writes.

Mr Sen argues that the path to justice around the world is inexplicably linked to the practise of democracy. "The crucial role of public reasoning in the practice of democracy makes the entire subject of democracy relate closely with the topic that is central to this work, namely justice. If the demands of justice can be assessed only with the help of public reasoning, and if public reasoning is constitutively related to the idea of democracy, then there is an intimate connection between justice and democracy, with shared discursive features."

In this regard, he points out that there would appear to be a mistaken notion that democracy is a product of western thinking and practice and that other regions of the planet have been bereft of this tradition. This, as his succinct analysis of ancient and contemporary histories and traditions around the world points out, is a facile assumption — one hardly suited to cater to the needs of a globalised world.

Mr Sen's argument for a 'flexible' relativist approach to justice, which takes onboard views and traditions from across cultures, is particularly important in today's trans-national world, as nation states are increasingly caught up in complex negotiations regarding matters as diverse as trade, finance, security, healthcare, food and climate.

As a discussion, *The Idea of Justice* may appear to be rooted in the world of academia but Mr Sen's intellectual rigour and inclinations ultimately connect the reader with "problems in the real world". ●

Rajiv Singh

Excerpt

It is hard to escape the general conclusion that economic performance, social opportunity, political voice and public reasoning are all deeply interrelated. In those fields in which there has recently been a more determined use of political and social voice, there are considerable signs of change. The issue of gender inequality has produced much more political engagement in recent years (often led by women's movements), and this has added to determined political efforts at reducing gender asymmetry in social and economic fields. There is a long history in India of women's prominence in particular areas, including in leadership positions in politics. While those achievements were certainly linked with the voice of women (helped by the opportunities of participatory politics in recent years), their reach has been largely confined to relatively small segments — mostly the more prosperous sections — of the population. An important feature of the strengthening of the voice of women in contemporary Indian public life is the gradual broadening of this social coverage. India still has a long way to go in removing inequalities in the position of women, but the increasing political involvement in the social role of women has been an important and constructive development in democratic practice in India.

In general, possibilities of public agitation on issues of social inequality and deprivation are now beginning to be more utilized than before, even though engagement on these issues was eclipsed for several years because of the sectarian politics that diverted attention from these concerns. There has been much more action recently in organized movements based broadly on demands for human rights, such as the right to school education, the right to food (and, in particular, to midday school meals), the entitlement to basic healthcare, guarantees of environmental preservation and the right of 'employment guarantee'. These movements serve to focus attention on particular societal failures, partly as a supplement to broad public discussions in the media, but they also provide a politically harder edge to socially important demands.

Democratic freedom can certainly be used to enhance social justice and a better and fairer politics. The process, however, is not automatic and requires activism on the part of politically engaged citizens. While the lessons of empirical experiences studied here have come mainly from Asia, particularly India and China, similar lessons can be drawn for other regions, including the United States and European countries.