

Amartya Sen's 'Justice'

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The Idea of Justice is a very different book : Amartya Sen offers a theoretical argument so richly and lovingly detailed that its central objective has to be teased out of a tangle of specialist debates and engrossing digressions. A major feature of Sen's approach is his introduction of what he calls "global perspectives" into discussions of justice. He blends an expansion of geographical scope with a theory that insists on a more realist brand of reform, in which political theory is not about drafting blueprints for castles in the air but comparing feasible next steps for improving the world as it stands.

Sen, was born in 1933 in the town of Santiniketan in West Bengal, the home of the educational Utopia founded by the Indian poet and humanist Rabindranath Tagore. (Sen's mother was a disciple of Tagore.) In a career spanning nearly half a century, Sen has scaled the peaks of Anglo-American academia, enjoying long spells at Oxford and Harvard, where he teaches today after a recent interlude as a Cambridge don. A Nobel laureate in economics, Sen confesses that philosophy is his "love affair." Even as he has thrown himself into criticizing the assumptions of his home discipline, he has profoundly shaped the field of development at the United Nations, where he has campaigned against the inadequacy of a narrow GDP measurement of well-being. And all along, Sen has pursued the more abstract problems of academic political thought at a very high level. Though *The Idea of Justice* is much more a synthesis of his disparate contributions to the field than a fundamentally new theory, it is clearly the place to start for ascertaining how his views fit together into a unique and inspiring position on justice.

Sen sees in the diversity of cultures not challenges for universalism but historical sources of its precepts, and he likes to cite Indian traditions as authority for his moves within Anglo-American liberalism. (Akbar, a Mughal emperor in the sixteenth century, has Sen's special admiration for his commitment to pluralistic toleration.) Still, *The Idea of Justice* is essentially an analysis and criticism of John Rawls's political thought. And in retrospect, it seems clear that after successive utilitarian, libertarian and communitarian waves of assault on Rawlsian liberalism, it is the demand for global justice that has proved to be the most serious undoing of Rawls's system. Even Rawls's faithful disciples, like Thomas Pogge of Yale, were appalled when, late in life, the great Harvard philosopher confirmed that he thought about the nation-state as the natural forum for justice, with international justice a secondary consideration and mostly reduced to a minimalist humanitarianism. In response, Pogge and others have maintained the essentials of Rawls's thought-most of all, his social contract-but altered its scope. In a cosmopolitan age, they argue, everyone in the world must be seen as parties to the bargain over the principles of justice. National boundaries are merely the legacies of an arbitrary history rather than the bright lines of any fundamental moral map. Sen does not dispute the limitations of Rawls's complacency in an era of globalization. But, like his onetime associate Martha Nussbaum, he thinks the

problem of global justice requires a very different fix to Rawls's system-in some ways, a more profound one.

Of the many arguments Sen offers, his weightiest is a defense of "comparativism" against Rawls's "transcendentalism"-the reckoning of next steps as superior to the perfection of blueprints. Indeed, Sen contends that the wishful desire to promote a principle of global justice surpassing nations reflects too much allegiance to Rawls's commitment to ideal schemes. Sen impishly wishes Pogge "good luck" in simply transferring Rawls's social contract to the global forum, in the absence of the robust coordinating authority of a world government. Recommending a different course of thought, Sen argues that if a theory of justice is concerned not with outlining distant Utopias but with deciding among proximate alternatives (especially when they rule out manifest wrongs), the persistence of national politics need not be a fatal objection to the pursuit of cosmopolitan improvement. Political constraints that rule out global equality in a world of nation-states fade in their theoretical significance if justice itself is understood not as a system built from scratch but as a choice among options available in the world as it exists now.

The most fascinating passages in *The Idea of Justice*, therefore, are ones in which Sen methodically makes the case that "transcendent" Utopias of the Rawlsian sort are neither possible nor necessary. One set of arguments says that theoretical agreement over first principles is not available-certainly not of the kind Rawls famously promised with his "original position," which imagined an ideal situation of choice (which Pogge and others transfer upward to the global scene). "A diagnosis of perfectly just social arrangements is incurably problematic," Sen insists. Anyway, he then argues, even if such a diagnosis were available, it is unclear how it would help, since policy choice is always between two or more proximate alternatives, and a revolutionary Utopia would provide no guidance about which foot to put forward first. More specifically, neither theoretical agreement nor any particularly grand scheme is needed to identify egregious wrongdoing. Finally, people's behavior is inescapably relevant to the reformer, making theories that fail to reckon with it useless.

Such arguments have an obvious appeal as a recipe for drafting a step-by-step agenda for the pursuit of justice, and Sen goes further in recommending his discipline of social choice (distinct from the very different academic enterprises known as rational choice and public choice) as a tool kit for analyzing different political options comparatively. As brilliantly carried off as it is, however, Sen's refutation of "transcendence" is unconvincing on a number of grounds. Most of all, it fails to acknowledge the diverse roles that theoretical options, beyond proximate, realizable ones, play in theory and practice.

In a somewhat technocratic mode, Sen treats the options presented in public debate as given in advance, as if coming up with a menu of options did not require inspiration. But even if Sen is right that transcendent schemes can play no direct role in adjudicating between local alternatives, it seems obvious that they have an important effect in helping to precipitate those alternatives. Much more important, Utopias have always galvanized people to advocate even piecemeal reform in the unjust circumstances of the world as it is. Sen wants to reach the conclusion that the "hiatus" between his "relational approach" to justice and the "transcendental approach" is "quite comprehensive," but he completely ignores the value of the transcendent as providing a fund of ideas

and motivation. It is key to both the theoretical elaboration of and the practical quest for even proximate reforms.

For all their legitimate striving for participation in the eternal concerns of Plato and the Bible (and Akbar), Sen is writing for a world in which academic philosophy has clearly taken on board the liberal victory over communism in the cold war and allowed it to shape the terms of the debate. (If there are figures in academic political philosophy who are exceptions, like the recently deceased G A Cohen, they are ones that prove the rule.) Whether or not the margin-alization of justice as collective freedom is defensible, the striking fact is that for Sen it just goes without saying.

If liberalism deserved to win its battle to the death with communism, the resulting constraints on liberal political thought are nevertheless not easily justifiable.

[Source : The Nation] □□□

***THE IDEA OF JUSTICE**

by **Amartya Sen**

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