

Review of Amartya Sen's Book "The Idea of Justice"

Georgios Kalaitzidis

Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague, Prague, Czech Republic

Email: georgekalaitz@hotmail.com

How to cite this paper: Kalaitzidis, G. (2024). Review of Amartya Sen's Book "The Idea of Justice". *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 14, 731-735.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2024.144050>

Received: August 6, 2024

Accepted: August 31, 2024

Published: September 3, 2024

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Abstract

Amartya Sen's "The Idea of Justice" is structured around the idea of a practical and realisation-focused approach to justice, contrasting it with Rawls' transcendental institutionalism. Sen introduces a pluralistic and comparative framework that emphasises the importance of public reasoning in achieving justice and its application to real-world injustices. He draws on Indian philosophy distinguishing between "niti" (organisational propriety) and "nyaya" (realised justice) to argue that justice should impact people's lives directly. Sen criticises the parochialism of traditional moral frameworks while advocating for open impartiality influenced by Adam Smith's "impartial spectator" to include diverse perspectives in the discourse on justice. Additionally, he challenges Rawls' abstract concepts like the "original position" and "veil of ignorance" as overly conceptual and disconnected from real-world conditions. Sen proposes a practical approach focusing on individuals' capabilities, meaningful freedoms and expansion of individuals' opportunities. Further, Sen highlights democracy and public participation, arguing for decision-making processes that include diverse perspectives and are influenced by the public voice. He explores the notions of impartiality and objectivity, differentiating between "closed" and "open" forms of impartiality. Sen argues that open impartiality is crucial for achieving justice in a globalised world emphasising the importance of global dialogue and the inclusion of marginalised voices. He contrasts this with closed impartiality which limits deliberation to specific groups, thereby neglecting broader concerns of global justice. Lastly, Sen critiques traditional justice theories particularly the Rawlsian model for their insularity and failure to incorporate cross-cultural understanding. Through his advocacy for public reasoning, open impartiality and the enhancement of individual capabilities, Sen offers a practical and inclusive framework for addressing real-world injustices.

Keywords

Amartya Sen, Justice, Political Philosophy, Practical Approach

1. Introduction

Amartya Sen, a distinguished economist and philosopher, has made significant contributions to the fields of welfare economics, social choice theory and development studies. Born in India, Sen's academic journey began at Presidency College in Kolkata followed by further studies at Trinity College, Cambridge. His dual exposure to both Indian and Western intellectual traditions profoundly shapes his thinking on justice, democracy and human capabilities. Over the years, Sen has been recognized with numerous accolades, including the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998 for his work on welfare economics, highlighting his influence in both theoretical and practical domains.

Sen's motivation for writing "The Idea of Justice" arises from his dissatisfaction with the dominant theories of justice, particularly the framework established by John Rawls. While acknowledging Rawls' contributions Sen found that Rawlsian theory focused on ideal institutions and hypothetical constructs fell short in addressing the real-world injustices that individuals face daily. Driven by his commitment to human development and his belief in the power of public reasoning, Sen sought to create a more actionable and inclusive theory of justice. His approach emphasises practical outcomes, the elimination of unfreedoms and the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives in justice discourse. "The Idea of Justice" represents Sen's effort to bridge the gap between abstract principles and tangible realities, making it a foundational work in contemporary political philosophy.

Key Aspects

Amartya Sen's "*The Idea of Justice*" introduces a pluralistic and comparative approach, placing emphasis on the high levels of importance of public reasoning. Sen also emphasizes the practical application of justice principles. Sen critiques Rawls' reliance on transcendental institutionalism, arguing instead for a realization-focused perspective that addresses the injustices people actually face.

Sen's critique is rooted in the distinction between "*niti*" (organizational propriety) and "*nyaya*" (realized justice), concepts he borrows from Indian philosophy. This distinction underpins his argument that justice should not only be about establishing just institutions but also about their impact on people's lives. He writes that the *niti-nyaya* distinction can make sense of some of the contrasts that are important in practical reasoning about justice (p. 20).

2. Public Reasoning and Open Impartiality

A main theme in Sen's work is the importance of reason and objectivity in the evaluation of justice. More analytically, Sen contends that public reasoning is essential for justice achievement. He justifies that this is happening because public reasoning involves open dialogue and consideration of diverse perspectives. Also, Sen criticizes the parochialism of traditional theories that limit the scope of rational discussion to within closed groups. He emphasizes the value of "*open*

impartiality". According to Sen, open impartiality requires considering viewpoints from outside one's immediate community. This concept is influenced by Adam Smith's "*impartial spectator*" (p. 123) and contrasts with Rawls' "*closed impartiality*" (p. 123).

Sen explains, "*With closed impartiality, the procedure of making impartial judgements invokes only the members of a given society or nation... In contrast, in the case of open impartiality, the procedure of making impartial assessments can... invoke judgements, among others, from outside the focal group*" (p. 123).

3. Critique of Rawls' Framework

While Sen acknowledges Rawls' significant contributions to the theory of justice, he challenges the practical limitations of Rawls' framework. More analytically, Rawls' concept of the "*original position*" and the "*veil of ignorance*" are designed to ensure fairness by making individuals unaware of their own positions in society when choosing principles of justice. However, Sen argues that this model is too abstract and detached from real-world conditions. For example, he characteristically mentions, "*for John Rawls's assumption that there will be a unanimous choice of a unique set of two principles of justice in a hypothetical situation of primordial equality (...) where people's vested interests are not known to the people themselves. This presumes that there is basically only one kind of impartial argument, satisfying the demands of fairness, shorn of vested interests. This, I would argue, may be a mistake*" (p. 10), and that "*Even as the Rawlsian 'veil of ignorance' addresses effectively the need to remove the influence of the vested interests and personal slants of the diverse individuals within the focal group, it abstains from invoking the scrutiny of (in Smith's language) the eyes of the rest of mankind*" (p. 123).

Sen suggests that the Rawlsian approach, by focusing exclusively on ideal institutions, neglects the actual experiences and struggles of individuals. He proposes a more pragmatic approach that addresses injustices directly, rather than waiting for the perfect institutional setup. Sen writes, "*Despite his general universalist inclinations, the formal procedure of the original position proposed by Rawls seems to be geared to allowing little exposure to fresh wind from outside*" (p. 150).

4. Capabilities and Real Freedoms

Sen's approach places significant emphasis on the role of individuals and their capabilities, rather than solely on institutional arrangements. He argues that justice should be evaluated based on people's actual freedoms and opportunities. This capability approach shifts the focus from resources and primary goods to what individuals are able to do and be.

Even more, Sen's discussion of capabilities highlights the importance of removing unfreedoms and expanding people's real opportunities. He states, "*The capability approach focuses on human life, and not just on some detached objects of convenience. (...) Indeed, it proposes a serious departure from concentrating on*

the means of living to the actual opportunities of living" (p. 233). This perspective underscores the need for policies and institutions that enhance individual capabilities and promote substantive freedoms.

5. Democracy and Public Participation

In exploring the role of democracy and public participation, Sen emphasizes the importance of giving individuals a voice in decision-making processes. He critiques technocratic approaches that exclude public reasoning and argues for the inclusion of diverse perspectives in the evaluation of social arrangements.

Sen's concept of "*public reasoning*" involves dialogue and debate among citizens to arrive at just outcomes. He asserts, that the role of democracy goes well beyond the procedures for voting and elections, and must be seen as part of the exercise of public reasoning, as he mentions that "*There is, of course, the older – and more formal – view of democracy which characterizes it mainly in terms of elections and ballots, rather than in the broader perspective of government by discussion. And yet, in contemporary political philosophy, the understanding of democracy has broadened vastly, so that democracy is no longer seen just in terms of the demands for public balloting, but much more capaciously, in terms of what John Rawls calls the exercise of public reason*" (p. 324). This view aligns with his broader argument for open impartiality and the necessity of considering multiple viewpoints.

6. Closed vs. Open Impartiality

Sen delves into the concepts of impartiality and objectivity, distinguishing between "*closed*" and "*open*" impartiality. Closed impartiality, exemplified by Rawls' original position, relies on a fixed group of individuals making decisions based on ignorance of their personal circumstances. In contrast, open impartiality involves considering the perspectives of people outside the immediate group, thereby avoiding parochial biases.

Sen argues that open impartiality is essential for achieving justice in a globalized world. He explains, "*The cause of open impartiality is not entirely neglected in the contemporary world... global dialogue... is vitally important for global justice*" (p. 151). This approach encourages broader participation and the inclusion of marginalized voices in the discourse on justice.

7. Critique of Insularity in Traditional Theories

Sen's analysis of closed and open impartiality further elucidates the limitations of traditional theories of justice. He contends that closed impartiality, by restricting the scope of rational deliberation to a specific group, fails to address broader concerns of global justice. Open impartiality, on the other hand, recognizes the interconnectedness of human societies and the need for inclusive dialogue.

He critiques the Rawlsian model for its insularity, stating, "*The question that is begged here is whether considering ideas and experiences from elsewhere are*

matters of distracting details that are somehow to be shunned for the purity of the exercise of fairness” (p. 151). Sen’s argument emphasizes the importance of cross-cultural understanding. He also emphasizes the integration of diverse perspectives in the pursuit of justice.

8. Conclusion

Overall, Amartya Sen’s “The Idea of Justice” offers a profound rethinking of traditional theories of justice, placing specific emphasis on the need for a practical and inclusive approach. Through the advocacy of public reasoning, open impartiality, and the enhancement of individual capabilities, Amartya Sen builds a framework for addressing real-world injustices. Furthermore, Sen’s critique of Rawls and other foundational theories is balanced with constructive alternatives, from which human experiences and global interconnectedness are prioritized.

Sen’s work offers valuable perspectives on justice that can be of interest to scholars, policymakers, and those seeking to address practical challenges in the field of political philosophy as well as other disciplines such as economics, law and public policy. As Sen pointed out, the idea of justice demands scrutiny of what happens in the real world, rather than only speculation about what should happen in a world that is considered as ideal (p. 410). It is about a pragmatic and human-centered approach which makes “The Idea of Justice” a fundamental text in the field of contemporary political philosophy.