

Amartya Sen on Economics and Philosophy:

An Introduction

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I have learned from experience that the best way of introducing a great scholar such as Professor Amartya Sen is to say that his splendid intellectual accomplishments, both in Economics and Philosophy, are so well known that he needs no lengthy words of introduction.¹ Unfortunately, this may be much too terse, and I decided to comment on some backgrounds of his broad contributions to Economics and Philosophy.

1. I was given the honor to introduce Professor Sen at the Third Biennial Literature and Law Conference held at John Jay College of Criminal Justice on March 29th, 2012. What follows is a slightly revised and updated version of my Introduction of Professor Sen.

It was forty-five years ago that a conference was held in New York on the issue of Human Values and Economic Policy, which was organized by Philosophy Professor Sidney Hook of New York University.² Among the participants covering a wide range of academic disciplines were two Nobel Laureates in Economics, Professor Paul A. Samuelson and Professor Kenneth J. Arrow. Samuelson contributed an article called “Arrow’s Mathematical Politics,” where he commented on Arrow’s monumental edifice of Social Choice Theory in general, and the General Impossibility Theorem in particular. Samuelson spared no words in applauding the intellectual accomplishments of Arrow’s Social Choice Theory, but he flatly rejected the relevance of Social Choice Theory and the General Impossibility Theorem to Welfare Economics along the line of Arthur C. Pigou and his academic descendants.³ Indeed, Samuelson went as far as to assert that he exports Arrow from Economics to Politics, as it was Samuelson’s firm belief that Arrow’s Impossibility Theorem is not a contribution to Welfare Economics, which culminated in the Bergson-Samuelson social welfare function. Arrow’s Impossibility Theorem is rather an innovative step towards what he christened the infant doctrine of Mathematical Politics.

Professor Sen is the most innovative and constructive successor of Arrow’s Social Choice Theory. Contrary to Samuelson’s bold verdict, Professor Sen has explored many facets of the economic, as well as the philosophical implications of Social Choice Theory, and developed its political implications. It was he who made it clear that the informational basis of Arrow’s Social Choice Theory is that of Welfarist-Consequentialism, or Welfarism for short, and he showed unambiguously that this narrow informational basis should be held mainly responsible for the poverty of Welfare Economics, and it should be expanded not only beyond Welfarism as such, but also beyond Consequentialism, with rich economic and philosophical implications. It was also Sen who contributed not only to the sophisticated axiomatic structure of Social Choice Theory, but also to the exploration of the channels through which this intellectual discipline could lead to the bettering of human life by effectively coping with such acute problems in actual human life as Poverty and Famine, Inequity among People, Violation of Human Rights, and the Prevalence of Injustice. There is no wonder that the

2. The conference proceedings were subsequently published as Hook (1967).

3. In my own parlance, “[s]ocial choice theory is concerned with the evaluation of alternative methods of collective decision-making, as well as with the logical foundation of welfare economics. In turn, welfare economics is concerned with the critical scrutiny of the performance of actual and/or imaginary economic systems, as well as with the critique, design and implementation of alternative economic policies [Suzumura (2002), p.1].”

Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998 was conferred to Professor Sen for his contribution to the ethical aspects of economics. It should be clear that there is no need to export Professor Sen from economics to philosophy, as his path-breaking contributions to Welfare Economics and Social Choice Theory have always been closely intertwined with his perennial interest in Philosophy.

Let me now turn to Professor Sen's most recent book, *The Idea of Justice*, which is going to be under scrutiny in this conference. This book is explicitly addressed to philosophers. Let me emphasize that it also has many crucial implications for Welfare Economics and Social Choice Theory. Take, for example, his crucial distinction between Transcendental Institutionalism of the Immanuel Kant and John Rawls variety on the one hand, and the Comparative Evaluation Approach of Kenneth Arrow and Sen himself, on the other. This well-conceived distinction has a clear counterpart in Welfare Economics, which is nothing other than the conspicuous distinction between Radical Re-Design and Implementation of the First-Best Institutional Framework identified with figures such as Jeremy Bentham, Leonid Hurwicz and Eric Maskin, on the one hand, and Piecemeal Groping for the Bettering of Human Life approach of Arthur Pigou, on the other hand. Pigou's Preface to *The Economics of Welfare* reads as follows:

The complicated analysis which economists endeavor to carry through are not mere gymnastic. They are instruments for the bettering of human life. The misery and squalor that surround us, the injurious luxury of some wealthy families, the terrible uncertainty overshadowing many families of the poor – these are evils too plain to be ignored. By the knowledge that our science seeks it is possible that they may be restrained. Out of the darkness light!

I am confident that not only philosophers, but also economists in the area of Social Choice Theory and Welfare Economics will benefit from Professor Sen's contribution in *The Idea Justice* for many years to come. Without any further ado, let me turn to Professor Sen for his Keynote Lecture in this Conference, which must be of crucial relevance not only to Philosophy and Politics, but also to Economics in general, and Welfare Economics and Social Choice Theory in particular.

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About the Author

Kotaro Suzumura (1944 - 2020) was professor emeritus of economics at Hitotsubashi and Waseda Universities in Japan. Suzumura was the author of several books and numerous articles and his research interests spanned diverse areas including the theory of rational choice, the theory of social choice and welfare, competition and welfare, and economic policies in Japan. In 2004, he received the Medal with Purple Ribbon, a high honor conferred by the Government of Japan for academic and artistic achievements, and he received the Japan Academy Award in 2006 for his work on social choice and welfare economics.



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