

“Capability Approach: A Philosophical Investigation of Amartya Sen's Idea of Justice”

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Abstract:

This article, attempts a philosophical inspection of Amartya Sen's '*capability approach*' as the unique outline for comprehending justice. Sen's '*capability approach*' is a departure or shift from traditional paradigms that prioritise resources or utility, as it underscores the actual freedoms that individuals possess to accomplish the lives they value. This paper critically evaluates the philosophical underpinnings of Sen's concept of justice, investigating its approach to the challenges of human development, poverty, and inequality. It will also evaluate the significance of the '*capability approach*' in comparison to other mainstream theories of justice, particularly those proposed by John Rawls, by examining its fundamental principles, including its emphasis on individual capabilities and its rejection of a fixed metric of justice. Furthermore, this inquiry explores the implications of Sen's methodology for contemporary discussions regarding public policy and global justice. The paper endeavours to promote a more profound comprehension of justice that is more in accordance with human diversity and real-world circumstances by means of this investigation, thereby providing a more pragmatic and ethically sensitive framework for assessing social arrangements.

Keywords: John Rawls, Justice, Inequality, Poverty, Public Policy.

Introduction:

I was experiencing stomach discomfort; consequently, I sought medical attention from a physician. He administered medications that alleviated my symptoms, and I am currently experiencing no discomfort. However, I fell ill again a few days later. This time, the same medications were ineffective in my body, and the doctor changed the medication. I am now in good health. It is evident that the same body necessitates distinct

treatments to maintain its equilibrium. Similarly, the concept of 'Justice' is fluid and subject to change across different periods and locations, lacking a singular, precise, and unchanging definition. Justice has been a central and enduring theme in human thought, with a deep foundation in philosophical, legal, political, and social traditions. The pursuit of justice has influenced the evolution of governance structures, ethical systems, and laws from ancient civilisations to modern societies. Justice is fundamentally concerned with the moral principles that dictate the conduct of individuals and communities towards one another, as well as fairness and equality. It endeavours to establish a harmonious equilibrium between collective obligations and individual rights, guaranteeing that each individual is treated with dignity, respect, and equity. Philosophical debates on justice span millennia, beginning with the ancient Greeks, particularly Plato and Aristotle. Plato, in his famous work *The Republic*, envisioned justice as harmony within the soul and the state, where each part functions in accordance with its nature. Aristotle, in contrast, saw justice as a matter of proportionate distribution, emphasizing equality based on merit and the equitable distribution of goods (Hamedi 1-5).

In the modern era, theories of justice have evolved to include broader concerns of rights, freedom, and equality. Philosophers like Locke and Kant emphasised individual autonomy and natural rights as foundations of justice. In contrast, utilitarians like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill argued that justice should be measured by “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” (Neral 6).

In the contemporary world, justice is mean not only in legal and distributive terms but also in social or political contexts too. Social justice has emerged as a key concern, emphasizing the need to address structural inequalities, discrimination, and systemic disadvantages. The concept of justice now encompasses a wide array of issues, including economic disparities, racial and gender inequalities, and access to resources and opportunities.

Amartya Sen, a key contemporary thinker, revolutionized our understanding of justice by introducing the *capability approach*. Unlike traditional theories that focus solely on distribution or institutional fairness, Sen's approach emphasizes individuals' capabilities the real opportunities they have to lead lives they value. This idea shifts the focus from formal equality to substantive freedom, recognizing that justice is about ensuring people have the means to develop their potential and flourish.

Justice, thus, remains a dynamic and evolving concept, one that reflects the changing needs and aspirations of societies across time and space. As we delve into its philosophical foundations, we find that justice not only serves as a moral compass but also as a powerful tool for creating a more equitable and humane world.

Prior to delving into Amartya Sen's “capability approach”, it is necessary to comprehend John Rawls concept of 'Justice'. This understanding will enable us to identify the central theme of Amartya Sen's theory of capability approach.

John Rawls' Idea of Justice:

John Rawls (1921-2002) was an American political philosopher who belonged to the liberal tradition. Rawls' theory of "justice as fairness" (Rawls 3) posits the social order where free individuals possess identical fundamental rights and work together within an egalitarian economic structure. This section will firstly examine Rawls' concept of "Justice as Fairness" followed by an analysis of his two principles of justice, and finally, a discussion of his theory on the "original position", which will enhance our understanding of Sen's notion of justice.

In order to challenge conventional theories of justice such as intuitionism and utilitarianism, John Rawls developed a theory he called "Justice as Fairness" (Rawls 10). He had an influence on utilitarianism, especially utilitarianism, as demonstrates in his book *A Theory of Justice*. He introduced, in his own concept of justice, which is comparable to the contractarian theory, and criticised utilitarianism. "Fairness" is central to Rawls' theory of justice. Rawls says that:

"My aim is to present a conception of justice which generalizes and carries to a higher level of abstraction the familiar theory of the social contract as found, say, in Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. In order to do this, we are not to think of the original contract as one to enter a particular society or to set up a particular form of government" (Rawls 10)

His theory can be regarded as a modified version of the contractualist theory of justice, differing in several significant respects. He has appropriated significant elements such as the autonomy of rational individuals from the contract theories of Rousseau and Kant. He owes a significant debt to Kant for regarding justice as the "first virtue of social institutions" (Rawls 513). "Justice as fairness" combines a clear problem with widely accepted conditions for moral principles, making it more convincing than older contract doctrine presentations. The "original position" clarity and ethical constraints are important, and the "original position" should be expressed simply and compellingly. If the parties are moral, ethical variations of the initial situation can be defined. Men must respect each other and have a sense of justice to apply Rawls' principles. Avoiding complications requires systematically presenting respect and the natural basis of equality. Respect and human dignity are not suitable bases for these principles. "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions" and can be understood through a theory that aims to assess these opinions. "Justice as fairness" states these views and supports their general trend. This theory challenges utilitarianism in ethical philosophy, allowing for a more discriminating interpretation of moral sensibilities (Rawls 510-13). By recognizing our individual circumstances and recognizing our position in society, we can be impartial and objective, leading to a more compassionate and just society.

Rawls' objective is not to develop a theory that elucidates the origins of society, but rather to clarify a hypothetical scenario in which all individuals would consent to a set of principles of justice that would render

life for everyone peaceful and beneficial. The goal is to demonstrate a social framework that fairly protects everyone's rights and liberties, especially the most vulnerable in the society. His objective is not to establish a legal or ethical benchmark by which actions and social institutions may be evaluated. He says that:

“The force of justice as fairness would appear to arise from two things: the requirement that all inequalities be justified to the least advantaged, and the priority of liberty. This pair of constraints distinguishes it from intuitionism and teleological theories. Taking the preceding discussion into account, we can reformulate the first principle of justice and conjoin to it the appropriate priority rule. The changes and additions are, I believe, self-explanatory” (Rawls 220).

Rawls' two principles of justice are-

1. “Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all”.
2. “The principles of justice are to be ranked in lexical order and therefore liberty can be restricted only for the sake of liberty. There are two cases: (a) a less extensive liberty must strengthen the total system of liberty shared by all, and (b) a less than equal liberty must be acceptable to those citizens with the lesser liberty”.

Rawls aims to advance a concept of justice that is not contingent upon the historical context of situations. The purported historical scenario he delineates is entirely hypothetical. Individuals did not consent to a contract governing their lives, rights, liberties, and social institutions such as property, power, and status in an equitable initial circumstance. Rawls aims to demonstrate “the primary goods and the principle of justice” that would emerge if individuals had consented in an initial state of equality. His theory is predicated on numerous assumptions. Although his theoretical explanation is deductive, the notion of justice arises intuitively from the inherent nature of initial rational humans (Chapter vi: 127-28).

Rawls' "original position" (Rawls 259) is a hypothetical situation that ensures fair principles are chosen in social contract negotiations. This position describes parties differently from classical social contract theories and does not represent a general assembly or gathering of all actual or possible people. No one is favoured or disadvantaged by natural chance or social circumstances because justice is chosen in the original position out of the “veil of ignorance”. The original parties don't know their social status, class, fortune, abilities, intelligence, strength, conception of the good, rational plan of life, or psychology. They know that justice, general facts about human society, political affairs, economic theory, social organisations, and human psychology affect their society. Rawls claims that the “veil of ignorance” ensures a unanimous choice of justice because no one can design principles to favour their own “interest”. The principles chosen were reached through a fair bargain. Rawls states that the original position is limited by justice being general, universal, subject to publicity, ordering conflicting claims, and having finality. (Chapter 2: 58-60). These constraints help ensure that the principles of justice are fair and just, allowing for a fair and equitable process of decision-making. However, Rawls' theory of justice has had an enormous influence on liberal political thought as a whole.

Amartya Sen: Capability Approach:

Amartya Sen (1933) is a renowned Indian economist, philosopher and winner of a noble-prize (economics) 1998 contributions to “welfare economics”, social justice, development economics, and the philosophy of justice. Sen has influenced diverse fields, particularly focusing on poverty, inequality, and human development. This section will examine Sen's understanding of justice. The comprehensive discourse on justice by Rawls indicates that justice is a subject of contention at both individual and global scales, aimed at enhancing welfare in hypothetical contexts, particularly through his two principles and the Justice as fairness. Sen adopts an alternative perspective on justice, perceiving it as an action-oriented and pragmatic concept in reality. Rawls' theory of justice emphasises fairness and equal fundamental liberties, while Sen's approach focusses more on the actual capabilities and freedoms individuals possess in reality.

The “capability approach” serves as an assessing outline for evaluating individual welfare. The fundamental concepts are functionings and capabilities. Sen characterises functioning as an individual's accomplishment, specifically what one is able to achieve or become. Functionings encompass an individual's activities and conditions, such as maintaining good health, having adequate shelter, moving freely, or possessing an education. Capability is a derived concept that signifies the various functions an individual can potentially realise, encompassing the person's autonomy to select among diverse modes of existence (Kuklys 10). The “capability approach” is not a concept that elucidates poverty, well-being, or inequality; rather, it serves as a tool and structure for conceptualising and evaluating these phenomena. Implementing the “capability approach” in policy making or social change frequently necessitates the incorporation of explanatory theories (Robeyns 94). The “capability approach” posits that “well-being”, justice, and development should be defined by individuals' capabilities to function, specifically their genuine opportunities to pursue desired actions and become their preferred selves. These entities and actions, referred by Sen as “functionings” collectively define what renders a life valuable. “Functionings” encompass employment, relaxation, literacy, health, community involvement, and respect, among others. The differentiation between achieved “functionings” and “capabilities” lies in the contrast between what has been realised and what is effectively possible; specifically, it distinguishes between achievements and the freedoms or valuable options available for choice.

The paramount importance lies in individuals possessing the freedoms or valuable opportunities (capabilities) to pursue the lives they desire, engage in their chosen activities, and become the individuals they aspire to be. Upon acquiring these substantial opportunities, they can select the options they value most. “Every person should have the opportunity to be part of a community and to practice a religion” (Robeyns 95) however, if one chooses to be a hermit or an atheist, that option should also be available.

According to a narration of Amartya Sen is that:

“A personal recollection from my own childhood. I was playing one afternoon- I must have been around ten or so-in the garden in our family home in the city of Dhaka, now the capital of Bangladesh, when a man came through the gate screaming pitifully and bleeding profusely; he had been knifed in the back. Those were the days of communal riots (with Hindus and Muslims killing each other), which preceded the independence and partitioning of India and Pakistan. The knifed man, called Kader Mia, was a Muslim daily laborer who had come for work in a neighboring house-for a tiny reward-and had been knifed on the street by some communal thugs in our largely Hindu area. As I gave him water while also crying for help from adults in the house, and moments later, as he was rushed to the hospital by my father, Kader Mia went on telling us that his wife had told him not to go into a hostile area in such troubled times. But Kader Mia had to go out in search of work and a bit of earning because his family had nothing to eat. The penalty of his economic unfreedom turned out to be death, which occurred later on in the hospital” (Sen 8) The experience was devastating for me”.

Further he says that:

“It made me reflect, later on, on the terrible burden of narrowly defined identities, including those firmly based on communities and groups. But more immediately, it also pointed to the remarkable fact that economic unfreedom, in the form of extreme poverty, can make a person a helpless prey in the violation of other kinds of freedom. Kader Mia need not have come to a hostile area in search of a little income in those terrible times had his family been able to survive without it. Economic unfreedom can breed social unfreedom, just as social or political unfreedom can also foster economic unfreedom” (8).

From the above narration we can say that his theory of “capability approach” were a realistic and by this approach Sen assesses policies based on their effects on individuals' “capabilities”. The “capability approach” assesses human “well-being” by examining health, nutrition, education, political participation, and community activities. It considers the presence of purified water, accessibility to healthcare, and elementary knowledge on health problems. It also assesses well-being by ensuring sufficient food supplies and entitlements. The approach considers financial resources, economic production, and political practices and institutions. It covers all aspects of human “well-being”, including development and justice, and emphasizes the links between material, social well-being, mental, and, as well as the economic, political, social and cultural aspects of life (Robeyns 95-6).

Now what does Sen mean by “capability”? it means that different choice of every individual. Sen perceives capabilities as an individual's capacity to execute fundamental tasks, including fulfilling nutritional requirements and presenting oneself in public without embarrassment. The significance of an individual's capability stems from two interconnected factors: the attainment of functionings constitutes well-being, and the ability to achieve functionings signifies freedom and genuine opportunities. Capabilities must account for socio-cultural factors and the direct means of generating well-being, which is enhanced through authentic choice (Kuhumba 130).

“The capability set represents a person’s freedom to achieve various functioning combinations. If freedom is intrinsically important, then the alternative combinations available for choice are all relevant for judging a person’s advantage, even though he or she will eventually choose only an alternative. In this view, the choice itself is a valuable feature of a person’s life” (Sen 48).

Sen’s “capability approach” as a conceptual structure which studies on poverty, inequality and in governmental policies. “Functioning” (Sen 39) has a significant role in capability approach. According to Sen “functioning is an achievement of people, that is, what they manage or succeed to be or to do” (39). Definition clarifies that functionings refer to a person's achievement in achieving a task or identity. Therefore, functionings refer to physical or mental states and activities that enable individuals to participate in societal life. Functions encompass basic physical needs like nutrition, health, shelter, and literacy, as well as complex social achievements (Sen 110-11) like happiness, community involvement, self-respect, and political participation.

Another important conception in Sen’s “capability approach” is “agency” (Dang 464). By "agency," Sen denotes the capacity to attain objectives that an individual esteems, irrespective of their association with human welfare. Sen point out that:

“The space of functionings may be rather restrictive because the person’s goals may well include other types of objectives (going well beyond the person’s own state of being). And the assessment of agency success is a broader exercise than the evaluation of well-being” (Dang 465).

Robeyns 2003 suggests that evaluating social arrangements based on Sen's writings should consider not only choice but also the forces that convert capabilities into realized functionings. Wellbeing freedom focuses on objectives a person values, while agency is concerned with the individual's freedom to choose and bring about the things they value (Frediani 176). Agency in Sen's capability approach extends the concept of freedom with proper functioning of well-being and individual advantage. It emphasizes the importance of autonomy, choice, and the capacity to pursue one's values and commitments. This makes it a comprehensive framework for evaluating justice and development, as it accounts for the rich and complex nature of human aspirations and social engagement.

Conclusion:

John Rawls' Justice as Fairness theory emphasises the establishment of a just society by allowing individuals to select principles from an initial position of equality. Rawls suggests two principles: the “Liberty Principle” and the “Difference Principle”. Nevertheless, these principles have been criticised for their idealistic and abstract nature. In contrast, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach emphasises individual agency and freedom, contending that justice must take into account the actual freedoms individuals possess in order to achieve “valuable functionings” in their lives. Sen's method is more adaptable and responsive to a variety of contexts; however, it may not have a precise metric for justice. Rawls and Sen both offer complementary frameworks for

comprehending justice; however, each has its own constraints. Both methodologies make substantial contributions to discussions regarding justice; however, each has its own constraints.

Amartya Sen's capability approach presents a transformative perspective on justice that diverges from traditional theories, such as those proposed by John Rawls. While Rawls emphasizes fairness and equal rights within a structured framework, Sen shifts the focus to the actual “freedoms” and “capabilities” individuals possess to lead lives they value. This approach recognizes that justice is not merely about resource distribution or institutional fairness but about empowering individuals to achieve their potential and pursue their aspirations. By evaluating “well-being” through the lens of “capabilities” and “functionings”, Sen's framework addresses the complexities of human development, poverty, and inequality, offering a more nuanced understanding of justice that is sensitive to the diverse realities of individuals. Ultimately, the “capability approach” serves as a vital tool for shaping public policy and fostering “global justice”, advocating for a society where every individual has the opportunity to flourish and participate meaningfully in their communities.

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