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Review of *The Idea of Justice*. Amartia Sen. Reviewed by David G. Gil

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Book Reviews

Amartia Sen, *The Idea of Justice*. Harvard University Press, 2009. 468 pages, \$29.95 hardcover.

Amartia Sen's latest book, *The Idea of Justice*, continues the philosophical discourse on this important concept, begun by European enlightenment thinkers, including Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Smith, Condorcet, Wollstonecraft, Bentham, Marx, and Mill, and continued by 20th century U.S. philosophers, including Rawls, Nozick, and Arrow, as well as many Asian, Latin-American, and African philosophers.

Before sketching major themes of this work, I should note that it is a difficult text, requiring familiarity with philosophical concepts and with major philosophical writings beginning with early Greek authors. However, if one works one's way through Sen's discourse, one ends up intellectually enriched.

Sen begins with appreciation, as well as critique, of John Rawls' major work, *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls, like many

enlightenment philosophers, worked within the “social contract” paradigm, developing a comprehensive model of principles and institutions for a just society. Sen considers the social contract paradigm as unrealistic, in view of the realized context of life of most human populations. He suggests to replace this paradigm, as others have done before him, with an alternative one, focused on systematic pursuit of significant reductions of blatant injustices such as famines, massive poverty, illiteracy, lack of health care, gender inequality and other forms of discrimination, etc. Sen thus emphasizes concrete, realistic processes of movement toward justice, instead of advocating unattainable ideal end-states. Related to Sen’s focus on progressive reductions of blatantly unjust conditions of realized life is his emphasis on comparing different ways and outcomes of reducing acknowledged conditions of injustice, in order to identify more effective approaches.

Sen criticizes Rawls’ model also because of the parochial nature of social contracts developed by one particular society without regard to consequences for people elsewhere. Models of justice, according to Sen, must have a universal, global focus.

Equal liberty and fair distribution of “primary goods,” i.e., income, wealth, and other life-sustaining resources, are, according to Rawls, key principles of just societies. While Sen agrees with Rawls concerning equal liberty as a priority aspect of justice, he considers distribution of primary goods not a goal, but a necessary means toward the real goal of justice, which is freedom of opportunities conducive to the unfolding of everyone’s capabilities. ‘Capabilities’ is a major concept developed by Sen in an earlier book, *Development as Freedom* (1999).

According to Sen, comprehensive democracy is an essential dimension without which justice seems unattainable. Democracy, in his view, involves exercise of public reason. It means participatory governance by discussion, rather than the mere practice of elections. Related to Sen’s view of democracy as “exercise of public reason” is his emphasis on the importance of unbiased reason in dealing with every aspect of justice and human affairs. Accordingly, long sections of the text serve to clarify the meanings and processes of ‘closed and open’ impartiality and objectivity.

Human rights, as formulated in 1948 by the United Nations in the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” should serve, according to Sen, as important elements of the pursuit of global justice, regardless of whether or not these rights have been formally enacted into the laws of different nations.

In summary, Sen’s work provides a realistic road map for movements toward social justice from local to global levels. It clearly assigns priority to progressive reductions of symptoms of injustice, but it also contributes insights into root causes of injustice, and thus, by implication, into strategies to confront and overcome these causes.

David G. Gil, Brandeis University

Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Freefall: America, Markets and the Sinking of the World Economy*. New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton, 2010. \$27.95 hardcover.

In 2008, the U.S. economy seemed to be in an endless financial freefall that spread rapidly from Wall Street to Main Street and soon turned global, spawning the Great Recession, the worst economic downturn since the 1930s. Millions of ordinary people have lost homes, jobs, retirement incomes and their children’s futures, while many Wall Streeters walked off with fat bonuses! As economist Joseph E. Stiglitz notes, we have pulled back (with government help) from the precipice of late 2008, but the end of a freefall is not a return to normalcy.

Stiglitz, a Columbia University professor, is a Nobel Laureate in economics. He once headed President Clinton’s Council of Economic Advisers and later was chief economist at the World Bank, whose policies he sharply critiqued in *Globalization and Its Discontents*.

Freefall is jargon-free; concepts unfamiliar to non-economists are carefully explained. It packs a lot in about 300 pages of text and 60 pages of notes—many well worth reading. The absence of an index, however, poses some problems. The book first covers the complex origins of the crisis and the author’s perspectives on what was and what should have been done. “The only surprise about the economic crisis of 2008 was that it came as a surprise to so many” says Stiglitz, one of the few