

Amartya Sen

encyclopedia of social theory

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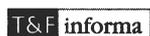
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SEN, AMARTYA K. (1933–)

Indian economist and philosopher, Nobel Prize Winner in Economics 1998. Sen's principal concerns are the nature and distribution of welfare. He starts out from the classical theory of social choice that puts individual **preferences** centre-stage. Preferences, Sen argues, may fail to be transitive, reflexive, and complete, but they come in different intensities. Any attempt to do justice to this fact will face the problem of interpersonal comparability. Sen shares and expands on the view that the problem can be solved by extended sympathy. However, a fundamental doubt remains: if individual preferences themselves can be shaped by unfair conditions (for instance, by a culture of oppression), how can they serve as our guides to what is fair and right? Sen therefore submits an alternative proposal, focusing on capabilities to achieve valuable functionings. Functionings are beings and doings, such as avoiding premature **death** or taking part in communal life; capabilities are the **freedom** to choose among various functionings.

While both functionings and capabilities constitute individual welfare, only capabilities determine social welfare: a good **society** is a society of freedom. Using social choice theory and, in his later writings, welding it to the capability approach, Sen also discusses a variety of more applied questions: how to address economic **inequality, deprivation and relative deprivation, poverty** (including famines), **class** and **gender** disparities, and the violation of basic **rights**.

Major works

- (1970) *Collective Choice and Social Welfare*. Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- (1973) *On Economic Inequality*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- (1981) *Poverty and Famines*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- (1982) *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- (1987) *On Ethics and Economics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- (1992) *Inequality Reexamined*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Further reading

- Basu, K. (ed.) (1995) *Choice, Welfare and Development*. Oxford: Clarendon.

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