

The Violence of Aggregation: Amartya Sen's Possibility of Social Choice

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This article is about how Amartya Sen seeks to reconcile the individual-collective problem of social choice through an aggregation, not an individuation, of preferences. Sen seeks an optimistic way out of Kenneth Arrow's social choice "pessimism," yet he is in a logical paradox, for truly broadening the informational basis of social choice will only serve to affirm Arrow's theorem. The problem is that a restriction of information, that is, the dividing of universal from particular information results in higher overall costs in the social order. Authors discuss how this process implicates the individual and his freedom.

The Problem of Rationality and Liberty

It would be a remarkable achievement if the human mind could establish on unshakable foundations a scheme of compatibility between the claims of the individual and those of society; between the principles of individual liberty and social concepts of justice. However, as theologian Colin Gunton argues in his *The One, the Three and the Many* (1993), modernity and post-modernity have not been able to cope with the individual-collective problem of social choice. They have failed to provide safe harbor to particularity, aggregating human identity almost exclusively to the collective, thus compounding the problems of rationality and freedom within social institutions.

Indeed, it is one of the characteristics of the contemporary world that rationality and individual liberty may now be seen as incompatible. Rationality is found today arrested to virtues arising from expanding markets and politics; in the code and

measures of globalization; and in the collective ordering of social goods, such as efficiency, social cooperation, reduction of risk, greater certainty of information and its direction, less friction (cost) in trade, standardization of rules, flattened communication, and more secure property rights. This is all seemingly true: It is rational to be on the side of institutional expansion (economic growth). Work and development on behalf of nation-states, cosmopolitan political bodies, and trading organizations proceed on this assumption. However, a more thorough philosophic analysis reveals that political expansion, as with market expansion, inflicts a heavy ontological price relative to the individual and his or her libertarian agency. Such agency entails the property of uncoerced choices in the set of life's potential realities. Constriction of choice and the thinning of potential realities imposed by collectives over individuals are meant by contract theorists and elites to avoid the chaotic condition (Sen 1970).

A popular statement of the problem of constricting choice and the thinning of potential realities can be found in the work of the Nobel economist Amartya Sen. Inasmuch as it expresses an impersonal vision of human life and suggests a nondeclining liberty under growth, Sen has become crucial at this point for addressing the perennial question of how to accommodate liberty and rights in social-welfare decisions. In answering this question, he has challenged the pessimism of Kenneth Arrow's (1963) impossibility results of social choice and replaced it with the optimism of a social-choice possibility. Briefly, Arrow's impossibility theorem states that if there are at least three distinct social states and the set of individuals is finite, there is no social-welfare function satisfying conditions U ("unrestricted domain"), P ("Pareto principle"), I ("independence of irrelevant alternatives"), and D ("nondictatorship").

As Sen (2002, 329) has noted, Arrow started the modern discipline of social choice. As Arrow (1999, 172, 163) has noted, Sen's contributions to the study of social welfare are significant, "truly unique is his extraordinary synthesis of economic and philosophical reasoning on the bases for social policy," and motivated by a "concern for the welfare of the individuals in an economy, with special interest in the lower part of the income spectrum." We, too, appreciate Sen's important work in the field of social choice and owe good language to anyone who has dedicated his life to the relief of famine and the amelioration of suffering. Yet, we also owe a responsibility to freedom in its various dimensions, which is why we hope to carefully examine Sen's notion of liberty with a temperate set of philosophical-economic lenses.

Our examination pivots on understanding the dynamic mechanism called the division of information. The division of information is the act of trading off particular information for universal information. It is a dynamic process trace-

able through institutional rules, regulations, customs, values, ideas, language, symbols, and so forth. It is the cumulative experience of millions of interacting individuals who make production and consumption decisions under conditions of uncertainty regarding future scarcities. In other words, the division of information is an aggregative consequence of individual-choice orderings under expansion—the countless decisions to trade-off some preferred values and ends for other preferred values and ends. With cost (in money or other terms) as a guide, the trade-offs decided upon induce change in the provision of rules and maximizing opportunities, the direction of learning and trials, and the discourse and logic—all the existing formal and informal constraints of the institution. Indeed what is going on inside all of this activity, at a level much harder to observe, is the perpetual yielding of higher cost (particular) information to lower cost (universal) information. In terms of increasing scale, the same pattern of trading off one kind of information for another applies to complexity in all institutional settings; it persists in the face of various disturbances and continues through time on its low cost (universal) trajectory. The example of Sen points to the division of information as the specific mechanism by which institutional expansion gets priced below its social cost; it is the article upon which liberty stands or falls. Before proceeding directly to Sen's views, let us briefly sketch the two general types of information we will be referring to during the division of information process.

Particular information refers to data that is mostly qualitative in nature; it consists of properties that are inherently variable, irregular, uncertain, and hard to measure. In general, it is the kind of information that cannot yield precise definitions, that has no exact boundaries to measure, and is unpredictable. Particular information pertains mainly to the nonlinear types of behavior, to the unique, dynamic elements of living or physical systems. It is perhaps most applicable to complex social phenomena and the field of human relations where extensive variation tends to dominate the component parts of the data. This information finds expression in personal distinctions, independence, emotion, feelings, improvisation, value judgments, moral principles, acts of will—all the essential aspects and distinct individualities that make up human personality and the intricacies of human interaction. In this article, the term *particular information* also applies to its social construction, which finds expression in the institutional rules of the smaller market; for example, policies designed for local or smaller numbers, communities, cultures, states, countries, or nation-states, as opposed to universal rule sets that are organized around the wider collective or the global, that is, the larger market and sphere of trade.

Universal information refers to data that is mostly quantitative in nature; it consists of properties that tend to be constant, common, linear, and measurable. In the realm of universal information, we can expect to find categories that correspond to standardization, consolidation, and integration; it is fundamentally compatible with a capacity for generating order and stability, prediction, fixed patterns of logical structures, and precise planning and control. In rules, laws, norms, customs, language, values, ideas, and so forth, universal information tends to deal with instances of the type (i.e., abstract and general forms) not the particular or individual. When we speak of the universalizing trend that parallels expanding markets, we also mean the social construction of this information. That is to say, as trade grows outside the purview of the existing rule structure, the arena of institutional rules must enlarge and embrace the new circle of trade. This requires a reformulation of the rules—substituting more universal information for particular information. In other words, the rules must become more universal—conform to collective interests—before they can animate plans for further expansion. As the new set of rules organize around the larger market, the old rule set, which once was seen as universal information, now becomes seen as particular information.

Social Choice and the Special Case of Amartya Sen

Sen considers his formal analysis to be part of a wider intellectual effort “that has helped dispel some of the gloom that was associated with earlier social choice and welfare economics” (Sen 2002, 86). In essence, he claims to have found a way of satisfying the priority of freedom while developing an adequate framework for welfare judgments for society as a whole. Another way to say this is that he has conceived of a system that moves from individual preferences to satisfactory social preferences without compromising freedom. Essentially, this is an effort to overcome the conflicts of the Liberal (Sen’s) Paradox, also known as the Impossibility of the Paretian Liberal, which basically argues that no social decisions that function with unrestricted domain can satisfy both the principle of minimal liberty and Pareto optimality or efficiency (see Sen 1979).

In *Rationality and Freedom* (2002), Sen seeks to establish the notion that this workable social system arises from the principle of information broadening. He is sure that the resolution of the problem of social aggregation lies in broadening the information base available to social choice. Sen makes his position on this quite clear. “In general, informational broadening, in one form or another, is an

effective way of overcoming social choice pessimism and of avoiding impossibilities, and it leads directly to constructive approaches with viability and reach” (2002, 96). In an earlier work, he said, “Indeed, through informational broadening, it is possible to have a coherent and consistent criteria for social and economic assessment” (Sen 1999, 253). When Sen speaks of information broadening (also information widening or enrichment), he is using it as a premise for a process of taking account of people’s differences in well being—in their opportunities, capabilities, freedoms, real incomes, education, health care, employment, and so on for the purpose of social and economic evaluation. This choice process, which he and others call “interpersonal comparisons of utilities or overall advantage,” relies on the give and take of open discussion, on finding points of solidarity, on the exercise of reasoned public dialogue, and on the scrutiny of the capability to achieve a certain kind of lifestyle. According to Sen, “once interpersonal comparisons are introduced, the impossibility problem, in the appropriately redefined framework, vanishes” (2002, 273). This happens, as he said, because “the additional informational availability allows sufficient discrimination to escape impossibilities of this type” (2002, 80). The main point to understand is that his rational solution construct is purchased at the price of individualized forms of information. Consensus building, the full public airing and weighing of the issues, seems to be the center point of his entire thesis; it functions to bring forth an adequate information base for the provision of social opportunity, the social ordering of preferences, and sustained improvements in human liberty.

Nevertheless, everything leads us to think that this account of social choice, in which reasoned public discourse and welfare assessments work to bridge the gulf between the one and the many, is not merely untenable but conceptually incoherent. The model that Sen unfolds is inadequate in the following three ways. First, it is nonconserving of information; rather than broadening the information base available to social choice, it reduces the number of variables that must be taken into account. Second, it sets up a conflict between the conditions for the formation of a rational framework of social choice and the requirements of human nature. Third, it destroys freedom through the violence of aggregation. Rodriguez, Loomis, and Weeres (2007) suggest that social aggregation takes place not through a broadening of the information base, as Sen has argued, but through a narrowing (or dividing) of it. However, this narrowing of information appears to result in higher overall costs in that it leads to a reduction in the range of individual choice.

The first thing to notice is that for Sen the natural unit is the social whole. In speaking of the individual, he does not refer to the order of being separate from the

group. His system deals with the class, with the chosen sample, not the individual. Although he couches his argument in the persuasive terminology of individualism (it is apparent that much of Sen's analysis of freedom rests on an equivocation of language—that is, the terms employed in argument undergo a change in meaning), he seems determined to exorcise the illusion of the independent self, the solitary will, the individual as separate from the impulse and continuum of the social nexus. Sen rejects the entire notion that the person exists for his own sake, that he is an end in himself, and that he exists in an individuate state. The individual and the collective are not just joined together; they are one.

Now, however, the main problem appears. By arguing that the parts do not exist independent of the whole, that is, by subsuming the individual into the group,¹ Sen reduces the individual to an abstract element and engages in nothing less than the division of information. The real objection to Sen's model is that it has the effect of reducing the human species to the level of raw material, to functioning, manipulatable parts in the social machinery. It is here that his model falls and never regains balance, for it restricts the informational content to a specified social or aggregated context over which individuals exist and have preferences. This is a system in which the social alone has genuine significance and reality; in which the claims of society are supreme. It is everybody except the individual. Thus, on the one hand, it increases the environment's capacity to carry universal (collective) information, and, on the other, it marginalizes and rules out the use of particular information (the actual human being and the variety of human desires) in production and exchange. From this very move, the priority of individual liberty becomes implausible, and the attempt to resolve the social-choice dilemma cannot but end in failure.

It is well to realize that starting from this kind of distortion, with systemwide substitution in the universal direction, Sen gives expression to his vision of perpetual improvement. The vision he sets forth is one of progressively solving problems, of a world marching forward toward unity, stability, better technology, the rational arbitration of conflicting values, and getting smarter about making rules. It is a view of moving toward one organized union of reason, the association of wills that in the course of time all bend in the same direction. Growth in right proportions—the reasoned concentration of (human and material) resources toward intelligible and progressive purposes—is the objective good and goal. The suggestion implicit in Sen's theory is that growth (i.e., development) is a manifestation of rationality because it is the act of projecting ourselves together in a certain direction; because it breaks down barriers between people and brings into unison and association. In both *Rationality and Freedom* (2002)

and *Development as Freedom* (1999), Sen seems to suggest that what this process resolves is necessarily rational and therefore proves that it is just.

The remarkable thing about Sen's argument is not that he sees all this within the limits of human possibility but that he sees society ascending to this level by means of enlightened public discussion. He seems driven by an unreserved confidence in naked human reason to bring about a unified structure of institutions—laws, habits, language, and standards—by which to comparatively judge all matters of welfare, to pile up facts, to equalize the distribution of benefits, to even out the respective capacities to live well, and to provide the maximum number of opportunities for satisfying human needs and desires. Sen's conclusions stem from his belief that out of this discourse will emerge informed convictions of right and wrong, of good and bad, of true and false and of reality and appearance; out of this will come correct social adjustments and interventions in terms of the provision of various social safety nets, such as housing, health care, education, employment, income supplements and so forth, which offer the best hope and basis for creating a more perfect concept of freedom, justice, and a life worth living (Sen 1999, 40).

It must be realized that what makes such a far-reaching vision seem possible in the world is that it does not depend on maintaining contact with common human experience. Sen's model works in theory by sealing itself off from the constraints of reality; that is, it works by removing *a priori* the experience of wholly opposed ends and values, of constrained options, of moral failure, of the manipulator, of the corruptions and arrogance of power, and of the very complexity and fragility of civilized life. Implicit in this vision is the notion that deceit does not find its way into public policy, that individual and property rights are secure, that an institution can be neutral in its allocation of resources, that there is reason in the unified wills of the people, that human beings know what they want, that their modes of transmission and apprehension are equal, that everything is enforceable, and that all conflicts can be contracted away.

Hope and optimism we need, to be sure, but these assumptions should be abandoned as being too distant from reality. At this point, we ask: Who decides what constitutes a minimally acceptable life? Who is entitled to give orders? How do we determine who is happy and who is not? On what basis does the collective proceed so that their judgments will not be arbitrary? How do different people gain access to the same data? How do subjective data become objective data? How do we discover the cost-minimizing inputs? When must one depart from the standards of society? Where do we find the basis for a system of values?

Behind these questions lies the weakness of Sen's argument. A little reflection will show that his system of social choice leaves us with no sufficient base and

no ultimate standard or point of unity by which to know and be certain of the external world, to achieve consensus, and to judge the collective and its actions. It is a system that knows only relative entities and opinion. On every level, the good equals the pragmatic. The criterion of value seems to be nothing other than the presence of public satisfaction and the absence of its dissatisfaction. It is, in essence, a morality of public achievement and power, an ethic of sociological averages, a widely sensed impulse, a belief in the ability of human beings to rise to a sufficiently high level of virtue and knowledge needed to secure happiness, justice, equality, and freedom.

Sen does make an effort to point out the need for an ethical structure for a class of generally acceptable values (not determined formally) on which to base social choice (see *Rationality and Freedom* [2002, 626]). However, this is as far as he goes. His entire line of thought conveys the idea that truth and other values change with the evolution of our mental mechanisms, with our collective cognitive development. It is clear that Sen sees error elimination in social and political arrangements along with sweeping improvements in the evolution of preferences as the solution to the problem of social choice (2002, 454). The implicit premise is that all values, including freedom, are a matter of convention; are relative to time and place; and are almost wholly a matter of conditioning, custom, and law. In other words, values arise out of an evolving schema of interpretation (“the exercise of reasoned judgment,” as he says), reflective of the fashions of the day (Sen 2002, 290). In this respect as well, freedom is a product of human creation, a property of language, almost always subject to pragmatic adaptation and schemes of rhetoric and power; it is an open question, a potential, and can be described in terms of existence relative to other contingent objects and values (Sen 1999, 261).

To achieve what he wants—namely, a social choice possibility—Sen has devised a system geared to controllable forms of information, to chosen samples and similarities, and to the aims and interests of growth. Understanding this point is crucial to any effort to preserve freedom, for it involves a necessity in terms of expanding the public character of freedom to the diminution of its private character. In keeping with the logic of expansion, Sen has created an order that turns away from the notion of freedom in its individual sense, which in his view is devoid of true liberating effects, and attaches freedom to a collective conceptual base. According to Sen, “Freedom is an irreducibly plural concept” (2002, 585). He invites us to think of freedom as a collective achievement, as achieving preferred results for specific groups. We are set free by others shaping and guiding us, by the development of good government and right rules, by obeying the laws of reason, by being in step with the general pattern of development.

This kind of freedom fulfills the claims of reason because it coincides with the public project, with law and central authority, and because it responds effectively to society's material wants and needs. A fair statement about the logic of Sen's model is that it appears to extend the area of free choice by substituting other values for freedom, and by establishing equivalences between the concept of freedom and the conditions of its exercise. For instance, he equates freedom with harmonious activity, capability, welfare—with the expansion of opportunities and social services, and the emergence of the "right outcome." In Sen's system, all these distinctions break down. Liberty becomes identical to its accessibility, to power, to restraint, to participation in decision making, to the elimination of obstacles to human will, and to valuations of liberty itself (Sen 2002, 417).

Could it not be maintained that here freedom belies its name, that Sen stretches human freedom to the point of depriving it of its true meaning and significance? Could it not be maintained that he has created a world in which the notion of freedom is in sufficient harmony with the activist and interventionist state, a society in which public authority progressively assumes control of the context of freedom, in which the ruling powers decide which freedoms will be respected and denied, and in which individual actions will increasingly be by permission only?

By invoking an aggregative approach to social choice Sen provides freedom with what appears to be a fuller characterization. What actually occurs in this case is a drastic scaling back of individualized (particular) information. The truth is that Sen's maximizing model factors fewer differences into the meaning of freedom. It is a system that rests upon a deficiency of information and the elimination of too many necessary things to the constitution of the good life. Bear in mind that beginning with the impersonal, with the interrelated social whole, there is no rational basis for the individual person's freedom. In Sen's logic, the individual is nothing and cannot find significant identity and meaning without the group, the community, the state, the nation, the cosmopolitan entity, and so forth.

Sen and the Growth Solution

This is the context, then, in which we should understand Sen's impressive system. As mentioned before, he ties all this commentary to a growth solution. That is to say, his argument rests upon the view that human and material growth function to broaden the information base available to social choice, and that this will, in due course, enhance civic capacities and thus extend liberty in all directions. As we have said, the tendency of an expanding market is to divide the flow of information; that is to set a least-cost direction to production; thus shifting it to

an impersonal (collective) plane. Yet this is the very trend that leads to a higher balance of costs in the social system, in which the informational demands of freedom, in its true individual sense, cannot be met.

The main insight we must hold onto is that the increased tendency toward the acceptance of a false view of freedom is expressive of the alignment of the forces of expansion and the division of information. As paradoxical as it may seem, the trend here is such that the two forces in combination gradually produce a framework of institutions and traditions wherein human liberty coincides with compulsion and subservience to authority. The circumstances that contribute to these results are to be found in the evolving realm of the general outlook and behavior, which includes:

1. The tendency to advance a doctrine that does not recognize the status of the individual as independent from the group.
2. The tendency to increase the discretionary powers of government to regulate the rendering of services and make rules to determine what the people will get.
3. The tendency to believe that general rules of development possess the capacity for neutral objectivity.
4. The tendency to accept as true the notion that all rational interests can be brought into line and into final harmony.
5. The tendency for people to look for their liberation in the provision of public benefits and technical advances.
6. The tendency to assign individual freedom the status of a preference (or a normative value) with no necessary priority over other preferences.
7. The tendency to seek the kind of freedom that appears to effect reconciliation between the individual and organized existence.
8. The tendency to obscure the lines of distinction between universalism and individualism, between authority and autonomy, and between freedom and the means for the use of freedom.
9. The tendency to regard freedom as valuable not for being intrinsic to the nature of the human being, but for providing more opportunities to achieve the things we rationally value.
10. The tendency to dissolve the connection between true individual freedom and rational thought and action.

By dissolving the concrete individual into the abstraction of the class, by prescribing universal goals to all agents, and by emphasizing collective reason in the choice of ends, Sen extends the frontiers of the collective against the rightful ontological claims of the individual. In so doing, he forces the individual and

the individual's freedom into a model that is in conflict with our basic categories of thought and action and with our recognition of what it means to be a person. While he repeatedly stresses the importance of protecting the domain of individual liberty, the term has been reformulated and is never conceived as a starting point in the ontology of human relations. Human freedom is a formula of aggregation, and the correct means of its attainment is through united public action, political effectiveness, and the integrative force of the state and its institutions. However, if Sen is right about what the human being is—to seek freedom in private (libertarian) directions, to assert private principles, to create a private life and desire to stand apart from or resist the direction of society—then we abandon rationality and exist in a state of nonfreedom.

Note

1. See, for example, Sen's use of Adam Smith's observation of the relationship between the individual and society in *Development as Freedom* (1999, 271).

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