

The other economics essay competition: why no Amartya Sen?

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Abstract. Amartya Sen has recently told us how he feels he has not yet made his mark as an economist. I notice that he is strangely not named in the background information to an essay competition. It concerns why some nations are wealthy and others poor, names other economists, and even discusses freedom and capabilities. Here I address the question of why Sen is absent and, more generally, at risk of devaluation.

Recently I came upon a website advertising a student essay competition, but the deadline is more than a decade past. I have written on it before and feel I am circling around the closed competition like a body trapped in a powerful gravitation field.¹ The question set was “Why are some nations rich and others poor?” Background information is provided and the entrant is expected to go beyond this information. In the course of providing information, notable economists are named. Adam Smith appears in the introduction, where we are told that this is an old and central question.² In a section which should perhaps be titled “An economics essay please,” we are encouraged to make use of economic concepts and told that economists both agree and disagree, with some more recent economists named to illustrate disagreement:

While economists agree on these points, they approach the issue of the wealth of nations in different ways. For example, Robert Solow and others focus on technology as the key factor in economic growth and

¹ A parallel case? “I don’t want a life peerage; if “Mr” was good enough for my father it’s good enough for me. The only honour I still want is that George Long prize.” (Parris 2022:26)

² It is natural for someone with another academic background to compare the conventions in different disciplines, e.g. an essay on whether time exists which opens with “The question has been discussed by philosophers for centuries: does time exist?”

may consider most of the differences in national incomes to be accounted for by differences in productivity. Economists like Jeffrey Sachs and Paul Krugman, however, may focus more on geography and trade in accounting for these differences. (2004)

What about Amartya Sen?

The information goes on to identify various factors causing differences in the wealth of nations. These include freedom, and a definition is even introduced of freedom as capability, but still no Sen. (How is the competition entrant to get beyond the background information? Just add Sen!) I have actually seen a list on an economics discussion board of most overrated Nobel-prize-winning economists and Sen is number 2, which surprised me. Furthermore, Sen has recently flagged the issue of how he feels he has still not made his mark on the discipline (2021). This all gives rise to another essay competition. For various outsiders looking in, the name Amartya Sen will appear in their mind when considering the economics essay question of why some countries are rich and others poor, especially with the information on freedom and capability. *So why, unlike some other economists, is Sen not mentioned?* Surely this is the real examination question! There are a number of answers to it, of which I shall identify three.

1. “We could not mention Sen when discussing freedom and capability without also mentioning Martha Nussbaum, who is not an economist and we do not wish to mention her.” That is plausibly a reason.

2. A second answer is that Sen is a hybrid case – he is part economist, part philosopher – and with hybrid cases, researchers who more squarely belong in one category can always say, “He is actually this,” pushing him into the other category. If the named economists provided this easy option of exclusion, they too would be

excluded.

Sen has made some well-known contributions to political philosophy, understood as philosophy of what the government should do. (There is a difficult question of how to interpret that “should” so that it excludes the research of a lot of economists – morally?) A conjecture is that impressions of him in economics parallel impressions of him in political philosophy. In political philosophy, there are contemporary philosophers with largish systems and you might teach these systems. For example, you teach a certain philosopher, let us call him J.R. There is J.Rs theory of what a reason is. From that theory flows his theory of rights, his theory of promises, and his more expansive vision of what it is permissible for the liberal state to do. “A proper philosopher with a system!” you might well think. Next week you cover another systematic philosopher. Sen has some important contributions to political philosophy, especially regarding equality of what – we are interested in more equal distributions, or fairer ones, but more equal or fairer distributions of what exactly? – but he seems a few components short of one of these largish systems. He is difficult to rank. Perhaps Sen is also perceived in economics as difficult to rank, despite his acceptance within elite institutions, prizes, fame, and publications in the most esteemed journals in the field. This feeling of difficult-to-rank is not unlikely with hybrid cases. “Probably his real talent is for research in the department next door,” economist and political philosopher alike speculate.³

3. If we turn to other parts of philosophy, which are less preoccupied with large and emotionally powerful systems, what we find, or at least what I find, is that Sen has some very rare achievements. Consider the following “axiom”: if you prefer option A over option B and B over C, then it is irrational for you to prefer C over A.

³ I suppose some political philosophers will say, “Sen is really great,” but I have heard very modest evaluations and these seem to fit with the usual way of assessing. Apologies for any misrepresentation.

There are counterexamples to it: cases in which intuitively a person is rational despite not having transitive preferences. Going beyond the standard ones, Sen has a more complicated example (Nozick 1974: 165). If you try to come up with another counterexample, which cannot be assimilated to standard ones, you might well be working on this for years without any reward.

Also Sen has a counterexample to the is-ought gap, or a counterexample given a widespread further commitment. I shall provide some background information. Consider someone who makes the following argument: “You promised to meet me at 8. Therefore you ought to meet me at 8.” The premise describes what is the case: it is the case that you made this promise. The conclusion describes what ought to be the case: you ought to meet me at 8. But can you validly move from that premise to that conclusion? Do you not also need this other premise “If you promised to meet me at 8, then you ought to meet me at 8”? This other premise features the concept of ought. The basic idea of the is-ought gap is that you cannot validly infer a conclusion regarding what ought to be the case purely from premises about what is the case. The is-ought gap is of foundational significance, including in economics. Sen’s counterexample, which I shall not detail here, impresses me very much (1966).

I suspect people without some background experiences cannot see what is so good about Sen, despite appearing to be well-situated for the task of evaluation. Meanwhile, some individuals with other background experiences can. They have some background experiences which lead them to a higher valuation, for example my experiences of trying to come up with counterexamples in the areas mentioned: “I think I’m good at devising counterexamples yet I’m struggling here!” We have thus arrived at a third answer: strange omissions of Sen and devaluations are by people who do not have the relevant background experiences, peculiar and painful ones even.

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