

Amartya Sen: A Personal Appreciation¹

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It is a pleasure to record a personal appreciation for Amartya Sen, at this dinner in his honor at Oxford. My claim to fame is that I am a student of Amartya's. This is not of course a unique claim to fame. There are many, many, of us. If I said I am an Oxford student of Amartya's, that would narrow it down, but there would still be quite a few of us. Narrowing it further to say that Amartya supervised my Oxford D.Phil thesis between 1978 and 1980 helps a little more, I suppose.

I will speak in a moment about Amartya as a D.Phil supervisor, but I want to start by saying that supervising my D.Phil was only the second most important thing he did for me. The first most important thing that Amartya did for me was to introduce my future wife to my father. Let me explain. Margaret Grieco and I met at Nuffield College, Oxford, the year that Amartya came to Nuffield. When we decided to get married, concerns were expressed by both sets of parents (I suppose the linking of names like Margaret and names like Ravi in matrimony is more common now than it was three decades ago.) My father, who is an economist and who knows Amartya, came from Birmingham to Oxford to meet Maggie. Amartya, who had an inkling of what was going on, was sitting with us in the Nuffield Common Room when my father arrived. As he came towards us, Amartya stepped forward and said to my father, "I don't believe you've met Maggie as yet, have you?" That broke the ice. The rest, as they say, is history.

Now for Amartya as a D.Phil supervisor. In fact, Amartya was my third D.Phil supervisor at Oxford. In those days graduate students didn't have much choice about their supervisor—they were simply allocated to someone chosen by the Graduate Committee. After Nick Stern as my B.Phil supervisor, my first D.Phil supervisor was Joe Stiglitz. But Joe left Oxford for Princeton after a couple of years. I was thus orphaned and handed over to Jim Mirrlees. But after a year Jim took leave to go to MIT. Orphaned for a second time, I was allocated to Amartya, who saw my thesis to its completion. I was lucky indeed to have had such brilliant economists guide me at this formative time.

My D.Phil thesis was entitled "Risk Taking, Entrepreneurship and Income Distribution: An Essay in Economic Theory." There are (at least) three things Amartya did for me in the development of the thesis, and in doing so he framed the nature of the economics I now do. First, he suggested a proof for a particularly tricky theorem on Lorenz curves pre-and post-risk taking. I had been struggling with the proposition, but he saw the transformation that was needed to deliver the result. I thus owe one of the key technical results in my thesis to Amartya. Second, he asked me to look at the history of thought on entrepreneurship; he suggested that I look at Schumpeter and, most particularly, the work of the Classical economist Richard Cantillon. I did, it became a chapter of my thesis, and the basis of my

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subsequent interest in the history of economic thought as an underpinning to current debates. Third, since in my model individuals were ex ante identical, and inequality was only ex post after the consequences of risk taking had been revealed, Sen posed the question: In what precise sense is there inequality in this society? Thirty years on, I now recognize the question to have been a natural one for him to have posed at that time, coming as it did in the middle of his highly fruitful engagement with, and critique of, Utilitarianism. For me, it marked the start of my own engagement with the interactions between economics and philosophy.

Thus my thesis already bore the hallmarks of Sen the technical economist, Sen the historian of economic thought, and Sen the philosopher. But then when I began work on development economics, everywhere I turned, every topic I worked on, I saw the influence of Sen: growth theory, measurement of inequality and poverty, gender and intrahousehold distribution, human development, and on and on. On poverty measurement, Sen set down the basic Axioms that framed the literature for the next three decades. Even when some of the axioms are questioned and relaxed (sometimes by Sen himself), it is these “Sen Axioms” that structure our substantive and technical discourse. More recently, as I have turned to questions of history and development, and as I have engaged in public discourse and debate on development, Sen’s large footprints are again leading the way.

In human development, Sen worked with another great economist, the late Mahbub ul Haq, in the formulation of the Human Development Index (HDI). I recall a story that Amartya tells about that development, when he was offering a critique of various technical aspects of the HDI to Mahbub. Paraphrasing Amartya’s retelling, Mahbub said something like—I understand the technical issues (which he undoubtedly did—Mahbub was no mean technical economist himself), but my objective is not so much to have the perfect index but rather to have something that can change the terms of the political debate by putting education and health on an equal footing with income. Amartya concludes the story by noting the obvious success of Mahbub’s project, a project in which Amartya has of course played a central role.

When Amartya won the Nobel Prize in 1998, there was much confusion in the popular press about what he won it for. Some said it was for development economics. Others said it was for his fundamental work on famines. Yet others thought it was the Peace prize given for his unceasing support of human rights causes. In fact, he won it for welfare economics. The breadth of Amartya’s interest and contributions is quite extraordinary. When my friend and colleague, and a fellow Sen student, Kaushik Basu and I began planning the Festschrift for Amartya’s 75th birthday, we were not surprised when we ended up with almost 60 papers in two volumes. The two volumes, “Ethics, Welfare and Measurement” and “Society, Institutions and Development,” together make up the Festschrift, *Arguments for a Better World: Essays in Honor of Amartya Sen* (published by Oxford University Press, 2008).

The different sections of the Festschrift volumes give an idea of the range of Sen’s contributions: “Ethics, Normative Economics and Welfare,” “Agency, Aggregation and Social Choice,” “Poverty, Capabilities and Measurement,” “Identity, Collective Action and Public Economics,” “Human Development and Capabilities,” “Gender and Household,” “Growth, Poverty and Policy,” and “Society,

Politics and History.” The papers include Joe Stiglitz on Inequality, Bob Solow on Trade and Environment, Tim Scanlon on Rights, Jonathan Glover on Identity, Bina Agarwal on Gender, Sunil Khilnani on Democracy in India, Montek Ahluwalia on Indian economic policy, Jane Humphries on mortality of women in Victorian England, Ayesha Jalal on Iqbal’s philosophy, and on it goes. What is amazing is that all of these authors saw themselves as engaging with some aspect of Sen’s writing!

And Amartya’s own recent papers continue to be amazing. My favorite is “Sraffa, Wittgenstein and Gramsci,” published in the *Journal of Economic Literature* (Vol, 91, No. 4, 2003, pp 1240-1255). This is a quite extraordinary exploration of Sraffa’s influence on the movement of Wittgenstein’s thinking from the “early Wittgenstein” of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to the “later Wittgenstein” of *Philosophical Investigations*, linked in turn to the influence on Sraffa of activist political circles in Italy around the journal *L’Ordine Nuovo*, to which Gramsci also belonged. In a subtle and deft argument, Sen traces the influence, through Sraffa, of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* and their emphasis on “ordinary language philosophy,” on the shift from language seen in isolation in the *Tractatus* to language in the context of conventions in *Philosophical Investigations*. Sen refers to the famous anecdote, whereby Sraffa is meant to have begun Wittgenstein’s shift from the picture theory of language to a richer account of how social conventions contribute to meaning: “Sraffa responded to Wittgenstein’s claim by brushing his chin with his fingertips, which is apparently readily understood as a Neapolitan gesture of skepticism, and then asked, “What is the logical form of *this*?” (p 1242). The paper shows Sraffa to have been pivotal in 20th century philosophy, but it takes Sen the economist, the historian and the philosopher to show us in what way.

Ultimately, it is Sen’s scope that is breathtaking. Excellence in each dimension, for sure, but it is the number of dimensions that stuns. One is reminded of Keynes’s characterization of the master economist. In a famous passage he writes:

“...the master-economist must possess a rare *combination* of gifts. He must reach a high standard in several different directions and must combine talents not often found together. He must be mathematician, historian, statesman, philosopher—in some degree. He must understand symbols and speak in words. He must contemplate the particular in terms of the general, and touch abstract and concrete in the same flight of thought. He must study the present in the light of the past for the purposes of the future. No part of man's nature or his institutions must lie entirely outside his regard. He must be purposeful and disinterested in a simultaneous mood; as aloof and incorruptible as an artist, yet sometimes as near the earth as a politician.”

Now, Keynes developed this standard to assess Marshall (“Alfred Marshall: 1842-1924” (1924). In *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Volume X, Essays in Biography*, 1972, Chapter 14, p 173). Keynes, however, goes on to say that “Much, but not all, of this ideal many-sidedness Marshall possessed.” In other words, according to Keynes, Marshall just missed the bar! One can’t help thinking that the person Keynes was describing was----Keynes himself.

Well, we may debate whether Marshall satisfies the Keynesian criteria or not. We may even debate whether Keynes satisfies the criteria. But on whether Sen satisfies the criteria, there can be no debate. He is indeed the master-economist of our time.

Ladies and gentlemen, please raise your glasses to my teacher, Amartya Sen.