
The Bondage of the Irrational

Amartya Sen's book on freedom and rationality is a very timely work that can help bring some sanity back into our lives.

Fascism today claims the very freedoms it denies to others. And organised entities like large corporations, and even fundamentalist groups, claim for themselves unfettered freedom in their accumulation of power and speculative acquisitions.

The bankruptcy of such unfettered freedom is gradually unfolding. Income disparities and concentration of power to the detriment of many are leading to widespread anxiety, fear and resentment. Environmental degradation and global warming only fuel these anxieties.

The seeming resurgence of religious identity is a reaction - not an assertion - in the face of this bankruptcy of modern conventional constructs or the modern paradigm of growth and development. This paradigm has reached its limits, it is the modern God triumph over nature, science and technology, rationalism and nationalism - that has failed.

So we go back to the old gods that served us so well. It is a cry of anguish, despair, and low self-esteem.

"If freedom and rationality be your preoccupations, there's no better guide than Sen" says Pratap Bhanu Mehta, who reviews this book.

Some Choice Adjectives

By Pratap Bhanu Mehta

Rationality and Freedom
by Amartya Sen
Oxford University Press
Rs. 795; pp. 736

We all value freedom and rationality. But neither freedom nor rationality are self-evidently simple concepts. When we aspire to freedom, what are we aspiring to? Suppose that in the course of acting you had three choices, all of which you dislike. You have considerable choice, but does the fact that all your choices are unpalatable make you unfree? Take another case. Suppose that there was one very important thing you wanted to do; in fact this is the only thing you care about.

But this is the only thing you're allowed to do. You have no other choice. You don't mind this state of affairs much, because it allows your desire to be fulfilled. But if you take freedom to mean the fulfilment of desire, aren't you free? Most of us would think not. But then what is freedom? The mere availability of choices? The fulfilment of desire? The availability only of choices we have reason to value? Or is it the ability to actually be able to realise one's choices rather than their mere availability? If you are interested in such questions, there are few better guides than Sen to take you through them. In this book he restates and elaborates his conception of freedom. He cogently argues that the only defensible conception of freedom is a pluralistic one, sensitive to different aspects of what it means to be free. This conception is sensitive to both what he calls the "process" aspect of freedom and its "opportunity" aspect.

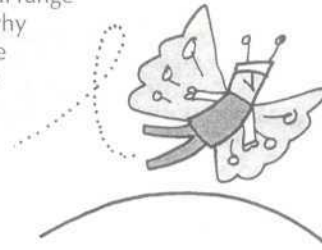
Rationality is even trickier. Is rationality simply internal consistency of choice? Obviously not, Sen replies. A person may very well be consistently moronic. Moreover, he argues, internal consistency is not even a necessary condition for rationality: when the reasoning involved in making choices is very complex, it is hard to even see what internal consistency would mean. Is rationality simply self-interest maximisation? No, for we can act on a variety of motives. It is question-begging to assume that self-interest is the only motive that is rational for us to have. Is rationality just pure and simple

maximisation? Again, Sen argues, it is foolish to think of maximisation independently of a discussion of what it is that we wish to maximise. Any attempt to derive a purely formal definition of rationality is doomed to failure. Like freedom, rationality, the discipline of subjecting one's choices to reasoned scrutiny, turns out to be a multi-faceted concept.

Rationality and freedom get even more complicated when you throw in the problem of social choice. How can the preferences each one of us has about how society should be run be reconciled with the preferences of others? Can we simply aggregate individual preferences to produce a social welfare function? Modern social choice theory, of which Sen is an undisputed master, labours under the shadow of Arrow's famous theorem that no social welfare function could simultaneously satisfy certain minimal conditions, each of which we might have an independent reason to value. One of its implications was taken to be that any aggregated social welfare function may be a violation of someone's freedom. To this, Sen adds that there might even be a tension between unlimited freedom of contract and the existence of a protected sphere of rights. How do you then reconcile freedom and social choice?

This volume has an astonishing range of arguments about freedom, rationality and social choice. Sen's critique of the narrowness of economics is characteristically thorough. But equally striking is his vast imaginative sympathy. While he never lets life's complexity be sacrificed to theoretical abstraction, he doesn't either make that complexity an excuse for not thinking rigorously.

This is very much an academic volume. The discussions are often dauntingly technical. But even for the technically-challenged, this volume might be a rewarding one. 'Rationality and Freedom' is a striking tribute to its author, eminently reasonable in its conclusions and driven by a passion for human freedom in its widest sense. The intellectual range and subtlety on display explains not only why Sen is the philosopher's favourite economist and the economist's favourite philosopher, but almost everyone's favourite intellectual. ▶



Although *Rationality and Freedom* is not bedside reading he would indeed be dull of soul if he could not find something interesting or challenging in its pages. Indeed anyone who claimed to agree with all of it or to take it as a social democratic bible, would show that he had gained little from it.

Unlike his earlier book, *Development as Freedom*, which I reviewed on January 31, 2000, this is a technical volume containing some of the papers for which he received his Nobel Prize. It is concerned with major issues of freedom, welfare and human achievements, but at the rarefied level where political and economic theory and formal philosophy all meet. **Yet unlike so many writers in this field**, who are mainly concerned with their reputation among academics, **Sen never forgets the more general reader looking over his shoulder.** It is not an accident that one can skip most of the equations. In many of the essays, they are deliberately segregated to smoothen the path of the reader more concerned with substance than technique.

The most intellectually radical aspect of Sen's multi-faceted book is his discussion of rationality. Logicians have concentrated mainly on deductive logic where statements are true or false by definition and have left the sphere of rationality in choice and action to economists and so-called "decision theorists". These have too often slipped into identifying rationality with the maximisation of self interest. When it is pointed out that many human actions, ranging from the activities of Mother Theresa to the individual act of voting which has a negligible effect on an election outcome, do not make sense on this basis, economists have tended to make their assertions true by definition: in which case it is difficult ever to say that a person has acted irrationally.

Samuel Brittan: Review of Rationality and Freedom by Amartya Sen, Harvard University Press, pp 752, £26.50, ISBN 0-674-009 in Blair's lack of "process", The Spectator, January 17, 2003
http://www.samuelbrittan.co.uk/text138_p.html