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Amartya Sen's Contribution to a Theory of Social Justice

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*History says, don't hope on this side of the grave,
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme*

Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy: A Version
of Sophocles' Philoctetes*, p. 77

1. INTRODUCTION

World renowned economist and Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, has not only contributed immensely to the field of economics, but his work has reshaped the discourse on poverty, development and social justice. His capability approach offers a unique and transformational perspective to pertinent issues addressing our current world. This paper seeks to discuss his contribution to a theory of social justice.

The paper begins by providing an overview of the dominant theories of social justice, namely the utilitarianism approach and John Rawls's theory. Thereafter the paper discusses Sen's critique of each of these theories before discussing his capability approach. The paper identifies the main concepts of the capability approach and discusses the dominant criticisms thereof. In conclusion, the paper argues that although Sen's contribution is not a theory *per se*, his concepts render a global framework for the discourse of social justice.

2. THEORIES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

In the mid nineteenth century, Italian philosopher Luigi Taparelli first coined the term 'social justice'¹. For Taparelli, the term 'social justice' referred to the values inherent in a just society, as well as the distribution of benefits and burdens in that society. By the twentieth-century, the notion of 'social justice' had gained prominence in the theoretical discourse of political philosophy. Consequently, numerous theories and approaches regarding the just allocation of resources, rights and opportunities emerged which sought to define and conceptualise social justice.

Each of the theories and approaches that have developed adopt a unique 'informational base of judgement'² which involves including (and excluding) relevant information in making judgements about the justice and appropriateness of different social situations. In proposing an alternative approach to social justice, Amartya Sen places great emphasis and importance on first examining and evaluating the merits and limitations of the informational bases of existing theories before putting forth his own approach. Therefore, in order to contextualise and understand Sen's contribution to social justice, it is important to first highlight the merits and limitations of the informational bases of some of the dominant theories of social justice, namely the influential utilitarian perspective and the dominant theory of John Rawls.

2.1 The utilitarian perspective

The utilitarian perspective, which was the most influential theory of justice for over a century, placed central emphasis on the sum 'utility'³ of a person. The term 'utility' refers to the measure or function of happiness or pleasure of an individual⁴. The fundamental doctrine underlying the utilitarian perspective is that because happiness is the only desirable thing, it is in itself an end; whilst all other things are a means to that end⁵. The informational base of this approach therefore emphasises the critical need to judge the consequences of all choices. Thus, every institution, law or action must be judged by the respective utilities – or the amount of pleasure and happiness - it generates. As Mill describes, choices and actions are 'right' if they promote happiness and 'wrong' if they produce the inverse effect of happiness⁶. Consequently, due to the exclusive emphasis on utility, little to no direct attention is given to other matters of import, such as the fulfilment or violation of human rights and duties⁷.

Another characteristic of the informational base of this perspective is the importance of maximising the aggregate utility in a society. That is, every decision or choice is judged by the sum total of utilities that is created. Hence, injustice in a society would consist of an 'aggregate loss of utilities compared with what could have been achieved'⁸ resulting in people of a society being considerably less happy, taken together, than they need be.

¹ T. Behr 'Luigi Taparelli and Social Justice: Rediscovering the Origins of a "Hollowed" Concept' in W. D. Harrison (ed) *Social Justice in Context* vol 1 (2005) at 3.

² A. Sen *Development as Freedom* (2000) at 55-58.

³ J. S. Mill 'Utilitarianism' *Fraser's Magazine* (1879) at 8-9 available at: <http://philosophy-index.com/mill/utilitarianism>, accessed on 10 March 2010.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid* at 38.

⁶ *Ibid* at 8-9.

⁷ Sen *op cit* note 2 at 59.

⁸ *Ibid.*

2.1.1 *Sen's critique of the utilitarian perspective*

Sen endorses some of the ideas and arguments of the utilitarian approach. One of the main concepts that he upholds is the importance of taking into account the consequences or 'results'⁹ of social arrangements when judging them. He further upholds the need to take heed of the 'well-being'¹⁰ of each individual when judging social arrangements. For Sen, these two aspects of the utilitarian perspective offer insights which he considers in his own approach. Nonetheless, there are certain aspects of the perspective which Sen critiques and fundamentally disagrees with. Moreover, he claims that these 'handicaps' or 'demerits'¹¹ of the perspective are due to the narrowness of the informational base.

The first of these 'handicaps' is the use of utility as a metric way of judging well-being. Sen argues that utility is not a solid enough guide to disadvantage and deprivation, and fails to capture other important non-utility attributes, such as claims to rights and freedoms, which play a vital role in giving individuals the opportunity to approach the world with freedom and choose the lives they have reason to value¹². Furthermore, Sen argues that the 'utilitarian calculus'¹³ fails to point out the inequalities in the distribution of well-being and happiness in a society. Because the focus is on the aggregate utility in a society, the distribution of that utility over individuals is left unnoticed. This shortfall of the perspective is critical, as it is essential that a theory of social justice be able to determine the distributional inequalities within a society. Finally, Sen argues that the exclusive focus on the mental characteristics of individuals, such as happiness, is a poor and restrictive base, especially when making inter-personal comparisons of well-being. He claims that it is restrictive because of the processes of 'adaptation' and 'mental conditioning'¹⁴ whereby individuals adjust their desires and wants in order to make life bearable under such difficult circumstances.

Having identified the limitations of the utilitarian approach to social justice, this paper will now examine John Rawls' theory of justice, identifying its strengths and its shortcomings.

2.2 John Rawls's Theory of Justice

John Rawls's book *A Theory of Justice*¹⁵ has been described as being the most important and influential work in the field of political philosophy in the twentieth century¹⁶. Consequently, since the 1960's, almost all theories regarding justice have operated within the framework devised by Rawls¹⁷. This framework for justice developed in response to Rawls's dissatisfaction with the utilitarian perspective which according to Rawls failed "to accommodate the claims of justice"¹⁸

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid at 60.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid at 60-63.

¹³ Ibid at 62.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ J. Rawls *A Theory of Justice* (1971).

¹⁶ D. D. Raphael *Concepts of Justice* (2001) at 196.

¹⁷ H. Brighouse *Justice* (2004) at 8.

¹⁸ Raphael op cit note 16 at 197.

The informational base of Rawls's theory of justice centres round the notion that "the fundamental idea in the concept of justice is fairness"¹⁹. He consequently rejected the notion of desert or merit as a basis of a theory of justice and instead upheld the ancient tradition, in political philosophy, of a social contract. The social contract is defined as a tradition that,

...represents justice in social arrangements as a matter of agreement between the individuals who participate in them. ...The point of the contract is to represent a moral idea about the relationship between the members of a society...all [of whom] are sovereign individuals bound to share their sovereignty by their obligations to one another²⁰.

This social contract, Rawls argued, is established hypothetically by a group of self-interested and rational contractors who sit in an 'original position' and behind a 'veil of ignorance'. The veil of ignorance "masks" each contractor's knowledge of his/her "generational membership," "natural endowments," and "social class background," such that one does not know what burdens and benefits will might fall on him/her once the veil is removed²¹. Consequently, these contractors would agree on the principles and rules for the distribution of benefits and responsibilities in that given society. By being in the 'original position' moreover, the principles of justice agreed upon would be impartial, thereby ensuring fairness for all.

Rawls claimed that the contractors in the original position would agree on two principles. The 'first principle' of justice, which is to be given priority over all other principles, is the claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties²². The 'second principle' of justice has two parts: the first is the equal distribution of social primary goods, and the second concerns the 'Difference Principle', which stipulates that any deviation from equality should be to the benefit of the least advantaged²³. Hence, in contrast to the notion of distribution according to merit, Rawls argues that the principle of distribution should be based on equality and need.

Whereas the utilitarians placed priority only on utilities, Rawls emphasised the importance of social primary goods. He defined primary goods as those means that "every rational man is presumed to want," in order to promote his ends, which *inter alia* include "income and wealth," "basic liberties," "freedom of movement," and "self-respect"²⁴. Rawls went on to further argue that instead of focusing solely on one principle, such as utility, the social goods should be ranked in lexical order. The first principle of justice that should be given priority over all other principles, Rawls argued, should be the claim of equal liberty, which is followed, in a lexical order, by need and then by utility²⁵.

2.2.1 *Sen's critique of Rawlsian justice*

One of Sen's central critiques of Rawls's theory of justice is his exclusive focus on, and lexical order of, primary social goods. Starting with liberty, Rawls's priority principle of justice, Sen questions the absolute precedence of liberty over other rights and needs. He argues that in some

¹⁹ J. Rawls 'Justice as fairness' (1958) 67 *The Philosophical Review* 2 at 164.

²⁰ Brighouse op cit note 17 at 38.

²¹ J. Rawls *A Theory of Justice* (1971) at 118-23.

²² Raphael op cit note 16 at 198.

²³ Brighouse op cit note 17 at 46-52.

²⁴ J. Rawls 'Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good' (1988) 17 *Philosophy and Public Affairs* at 257.

²⁵ Raphael op cit note 16 at 202.

instances this serial order needs to be qualified, especially in cases of poverty where the prioritising of economic needs can lead to “matters of life and death”²⁶.

Although Sen agrees with Rawls that primary goods are a means to pursuing the different individuals’ ideas of the good, he argues that like income, primary goods are often “concerned with good things rather than with what those good things *do* to human beings”²⁷. Sen clarifies this difference as indicated below.

Sen explains that because of the diversity of humanity, the transformation of primary goods to individuals’ desired ends are varied in two ways. The first variation relates to the differences in desired objectives. That is, the same bundle of goods may be used entirely differently by two different individuals, depending on their wants and needs²⁸. The second variation relates to the variations in people’s *ability* to convert primary goods and incomes into desired objectives, or ‘freedoms’²⁹. Some of these variations and differences in ability, he argues, can be controlled. Other differences however are either beyond our control or are very difficult to alter. Sen lists these differences as including “personal heterogeneities” which include age, gender, disability and illness; “environmental diversities” which consist of climatic circumstances, presence of disease and pollution; “variations in social climate” which include the prevalence of crime and violence, the nature of community dynamics and social capital; “differences in relational perspectives” which refers to the variations of norms and customs between and within communities; and lastly, “distribution within the family” which may be characterised by equality or bias³⁰.

Hence, Sen argues that because Rawls focuses solely on the equal distribution of the *means*, and because he does not take into account the inter-personal variations in people’s ability to convert those means, his theory fails to consider the *extent* to which these freedoms can be realised³¹. An analogy that Sen uses to illustrate this point is that of a disabled person and an able-bodied person. He describes how although a disabled person may have an equal basket of goods as an able-bodied person, he or she may have less of a chance of pursuing all of his or her objectives, than an able-bodied person. Furthermore, even if the disabled person’s goods were increased, he or she may still not be able to live a life equal to that of the able-bodied person who has less goods³². Hence a focus exclusively on primary goods is insufficient and calls for a wider informational base, as offered by Sen.

Having identified the dominant discourses in social justice, as well as Sen’s critique to the various theories, let us now turn to Sen’s contribution to social justice discourse.

3. SEN’S CAPABILITY APPROACH

As previously discussed, Sen’s main critique of the utilitarian perspective and Rawls’s theory of social justice is the restricted use of either utility or primary goods as measures of well-

²⁶ Sen op cit note 2 at 64.

²⁷ A. Sen ‘Equality of What?’ (1979) *The Tanner Lecture on Human Values* delivered at Stanford University available at <http://grad.berkeley.edu/tanner/0809.shtml>, accessed on 10 March 2010.

²⁸ A. Sen *Inequality Re-examined* (1992) at 82-83.

²⁹ Ibid at 82.

³⁰ Sen op cit note 2 at 70-71.

³¹ Sen op cit note 28 at 86-87.

³² Sen op cit note 2 at 74.

being for the purposes of justice. As an alternative to these limited measures, Sen puts forth the 'capability approach' which focuses on the relationship between people's resources and what they can do with those resources. As Sen argues,

[A]ccount would have to be taken not only of the primary goods the person respectively holds, but also of the relevant personal characteristics that govern the conversion of primary goods into the person's ability to promote her ends³³.

Hence, Sen argues for a measure which not only identifies a person's 'functionings', that is what he or she has actually managed to do or achieve, but also identifies the person's freedom to achieve the functioning. Hence he introduces the notion of 'capabilities' which refers to "the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for [a person] to achieve."³⁴ He further asserts that capabilities are in essence 'substantive freedoms' as they enable or capacitate an individual to achieve various lifestyles³⁵.

Sen argues that what is relevant to a theory of justice is to be able to differentiate between functionings, and having the *freedom* to do as one pleases, or have as one chooses³⁶. Alexander points out that economists and social scientists who have tried to apply the capability approach empirically have found it much easier to look at people's achieved functionings, rather than their freedom to function³⁷. Sen however argues that the aim of the capability approach to social justice is not to merely identify people's functionings, but rather to take note of the extent of freedom individuals have, and to create conditions whereby all individuals are able to increase their freedoms and enjoy equal capabilities.

It is evident that Sen's argument to focus on capabilities, and not achieved functionings, is motivated by the fact that by focusing on capabilities, one would be able to gain more information about the choices and options available to the person, more so than if one focused solely on achieved functionings³⁸. Sen gives an example which helps makes this differentiation. He compares a man who has chosen to fast to a destitute person. Although both have the same functionings in terms of nourishment, in terms of capabilities, the man who is fasting has both the access to food and the freedom to chose whether he wants to eat or not, whereas the destitute person does not have this capability³⁹. Hence, as Sen would argue with Rawls's theory, it is not only about having the goods or rights, but rather about having the freedom to have and use those goods and rights in a way that is of value to the person

Another reason for not focusing solely on functionings could be to avoid adopting a 'paternalistic attitude', whereby individuals are coerced into doing or being something⁴⁰. By focusing on capabilities, however, individuals are given the space to choose for themselves the

³³ Ibid at 74.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid at 75.

³⁶ A. Sen 'Human Rights and Capabilities' (2005) 6 *Journal of Human Development* 2 at 155.

³⁷ J. M. Alexander 'Capabilities, Human Rights and Moral Pluralism'(2004) 8 *International Journal of Human Rights* 4 at 453.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Sen op cit note 2 at 75.

⁴⁰ An example of an approach that has been criticised as being patronising is the Basic Needs Approach as it allegedly does not allow individuals to choose for themselves what they consider to be a 'basic need' and are instead told what is important to have and be, S. Reader 'Does a Basic Needs Approach Need Capabilities?' (2006) 14 *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 3 at 338.

functioning they choose to value⁴¹. One could argue that this is an indicator of respect and consideration for the personal values of each person.

Although Sen is reluctant to endorse a list of capabilities which would serve as a minimum standard for every society, he does identify five instrumental freedoms which he feels contribute to the overall freedom people should have in order to live their lives as they wish. These freedoms include 'political freedoms', which includes civil and political rights; 'economic facilities', which includes opportunities to utilise economic resources for the intention of production or exchange; 'social opportunities', which includes both public services as well as private facilities; 'transparency guarantees', which prevents corruption and financial irresponsibility; and 'protective security', which provides social security⁴².

Many of these freedoms are reflected in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Although human rights and human capabilities appear to have a 'common motivation'⁴³, a close analysis reveals distinct differences between the two. While this is a topic beyond the scope of this essay, Sen's discussion on and contribution to human rights directly addresses the topic of social justice. Therefore it is seemly to briefly explore the relationship between the two.

The capability approach values both the 'intrinsic' and 'instrumental' aspects of human rights⁴⁴. Hence, each right is valued not only for its own sake, but also for the processes and opportunities it promotes. Moreover, Sen argues that human rights are rights or 'entitlements' to certain specific freedoms⁴⁵. That is, the human rights framework can be used to "protect and promote basic capabilities"⁴⁶. In ensuring the protection and promotion of basic capabilities, Sen argues that a society should aim at two essential goals. The first is that each individual right holder should be given the freedom to achieve certain conditions. The second is that with every right there should be a correlate duty on the part of others to assist in realising that freedom⁴⁷. Hence, for Sen, it is not sufficient to say that because all citizens have been given the right to private property, for example, that the society is socially just. It can only be considered so if efforts are being made in ensuring that the capability to realise that freedom is being promoted, such as through redistributive justice or the provision of social security⁴⁸. Hence, public policies and social institutions can only be evaluated as being just insofar as they are working to help people realise their rights so as to increase their capabilities and freedoms.

It has been argued that in some areas, the capability approach is more specific than the human rights approach, and as a result can have a greater impact in terms of investigating and analysing social justice in societies⁴⁹. For example, Sen's capability approach has contributed to the evolution of the "much-awaited"⁵⁰ Human Development Report, which is published annually by the United Nations Development Programme since 1990, to analyse development

⁴¹ Alexander op cit note 37 at 455.

⁴² Sen op cit note 2 at 38-40.

⁴³ Sen op cit note 36 at 152.

⁴⁴ Alexander op cit note 37 at 455.

⁴⁵ Sen op cit note 36 at 152.

⁴⁶ P. Vizzard 'The HDCA Approach and Human Rights' (2006) *Briefing Note, Human Development and Capability Association* at 1.

⁴⁷ Alexander op cit note 37 at 456.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid at 452.

⁵⁰ S. Fukuda-Parr 'The Human Development Paradigm: Operationalizing Sen's Ideas on Capabilities' (2003) 9 *Feminist Economics* 3 at 304-305.

problems in both poor and affluent countries. In addition to the annual reports, Sen has played a crucial role in helping to devise tools and indicators which measure specific elements in the field of development and justice. The *Human Development Index* (HDI)⁵¹ and the *Human Poverty Index* (HPI)⁵² are examples of indicators which offer a “practical way of appraising governments and societies of their performance in matters of social justice”⁵³. His approach to social justice therefore extends beyond issues related solely to matters of distribution and redistribution. Rather, it encompasses issues related to human rights, poverty and human development.

Another one of Sen's major contributions to a theory of social justice is the relationship he makes between the public and private spheres of society. Previously, social justice scholars ignored the implications of private inequalities, especially gender inequalities in the establishment of social justice. Rawls for example, failed to address distributional issues of importance to women, such as justice and distribution within the family⁵⁴. Sen however not only initiated a discussion on the implications of gender inequalities on social justice, but has done extensive research in the field. Moreover, his work has greatly contributed to raising awareness about gender inequalities and establishing indicators to measure gender inequality. The *Gender-Related Development Index* (GDI) and the *Gender Empowerment Measure* (GEM) are examples of indicators developed using Sen's framework, and which are used by the United National Development Programme in addressing gender issues in development⁵⁵.

4. CRITIQUES OF SEN'S CAPABILITY APPROACH

Despite Sen's invaluable contributions to the theory of social justice, his approach is not devoid of criticism. This section highlights and discusses some of the dominant critiques of Sen's approach. First, it considers the problem of operationalisation. Second, discusses Sen's reluctance to endorse a list of essential capabilities. Third, it questions whether freedom is in fact a “general all-purpose social good”, as Sen implies. Fourth, considers his conception of public discourse and reasoning in scrutinising capabilities. Fifth, assesses the relationship between group and individual needs, and finally, it asks whether Sen's approach can in fact be regarded as a theory.

Perhaps the most critiqued aspect of his approach is the difficulty in translating his theory into an operationalised measurement index. More specifically, a common question and critique is how his capabilities can be translated into something that is measurable. As discussed earlier, there is a tendency to measure functionings instead of capabilities. By reducing the focus and measurement on functionings, it has been argued that the capability approach can be likened to a replica of the Basic Needs approach – and as a result not reflect Sen's intentions⁵⁶.

⁵¹ The Human Development Index is a “composite index of achievements in human development”, *ibid* at 207.

⁵² The Human Poverty Index (HPI) looks at three elements of human life, namely longevity, knowledge and decent standard of living, as indicators of poverty, C. Laderchi, R. Saith & F. Stewart ‘Does it matter that we don't agree on the definition of poverty? A comparison of four approaches’ (2003) *Working Paper Number* 107 at 18.

⁵³ Alexander *op cit* note 37 at 452.

⁵⁴ S. Hassim ‘Social Justice, Care and Developmental Welfare in South Africa: A Capabilities Perspective’ (2008) 34 *Social Dynamics* 2 at 106.

⁵⁵ S. Fukuda-Parr *op cit* note 50 at 308-309.

⁵⁶ Laderchi et al *op cit* note 52 at 18.

Closely related to the issue of indexing is the issue related to Sen's reluctance to endorse a specific list of essential capabilities, with given priorities. Sen believes that a list would reduce the domain of public reasoning and democratic deliberation. Moreover, he questions how such a list would be chosen and weighed, and he expresses concerns that such a list would be perceived as being fixed, complete and timeless, and hence would not allow space for further deliberation⁵⁷. Martha Nussbaum on the other hand, strongly advocates for a list of priority capabilities. Consequently she has put forward a list of ten basic capabilities which she argues are universally essential contributions to human development and which should be considered as being the minimum account of social justice for any given society⁵⁸.

Although I agree with Nussbaum that it is important to identify certain basic capabilities, especially as it assists in holding governments accountable and ensuring a minimum standard of social justice, I question the appropriateness of endorsing one universal list, especially as such a list runs the risk of being culturally insensitive and time-bound. This concern is reflected in Laderchi et al's description of Nussbaum's list as representing a "Western, late-twentieth century conception of the good life".⁵⁹ Hence, I would agree with Sen that although there are some fundamental capabilities that should feature in every list, each list should consist of capabilities directly related to a specific time, purpose and context, such as the HDI which is purely intended to measure a minimum basic quality of life, and nothing more.

Nussbaum critiques Sen's perspective that freedom is a "general all-purpose social good"⁶⁰. This unrestricted perspective of freedom fails to take into account the fact that some freedoms limit the freedoms of others, whilst other freedoms are just positively bad. I would agree with Nussbaum that some freedoms have to be limited in order to protect the freedoms of others. For example, the time-honoured male prerogative, or 'freedom', of a man's right to have intercourse with his wife regardless of whether she consents or not, needs to be restricted as it is a 'freedom' which imposes direct harm on the freedoms of women⁶¹. Hence, I would argue in contrast to Sen that freedoms are not always good and that society needs to ensure that those freedoms which are *per se* bad are restricted.

This takes us to another point of criticism which concerns Sen's emphasis on the importance of public discourse and reasoning in scrutinising capabilities. Sen argues that in order for a society to decide on which freedoms and capabilities should be prioritised, there needs to be public discussion⁶². Although in principle I agree with this notion, especially as it promotes participation and cross-cultural dialogue, I can not help but question *how* this can actually be translated into action, and if it is operationalised, how effective it will be in giving a voice to the most vulnerable. Sen appears to assume that the state is a 'neutral actor' who seeks to realise the 'national interests'; however the reality is that states often seek to realise the interests of the 'dominant social classes'⁶³. Consequently, if the most vulnerable are not engaged in the discussion, it is unlikely that their needs will be heard, resulting in the perpetuation of the

⁵⁷ Sen op cit note 36 at 157-159.

⁵⁸ M. C. Nussbaum 'Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice' (2003) 9 *Feminist Economics* 2-3 at 40-44.

⁵⁹ Laderchi et al op cit note 52 at 17.

⁶⁰ Nussbaum op cit note 58 at 44.

⁶¹ Ibid at 44-46.

⁶² Ibid at 46-48.

⁶³ B. Chimni 'The Sen Conception of Development and Contemporary International Law Discourse: Some Parallels' (2008) 1 *The Law and Development Review* 1 at 15.

status quo. Thus, it is my opinion that in order for the approach to truly foster social justice in a community, it is essential that there is *active* participation from all strata of the community.

From a classical liberal and libertarian perspective, Sen is critiqued for being insufficiently individualistic, that is, his approach is criticised for paying too much attention to public discourse and discussion, and not enough to individual agency⁶⁴. On the other hand, group theorists argue that Sen's approach is too individualistic⁶⁵. Scholars such as Chimni argue that Sen does not place enough emphasis on group and societal capabilities and freedoms, nor does he pay attention to collective action or social movements. Personally, I think that although Sen focuses predominantly on the individual, and the realisation of his or her freedoms, he places ample attention on acknowledging the importance of society in deciding the priorities of capabilities, as well as creating the opportunities to realise those freedoms.

Finally, there are ongoing debates concerned with the question of whether or not Sen's capability approach can in fact be considered to be a full theory of justice. In response to this deliberation, Sen himself has stated that his approach is a *contribution* to the discourse of social justice, and not a complete theory⁶⁶.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is no doubt that Sen's approach has influenced the discourse on social justice tremendously. Despite the criticisms noted above, and although his perspective is not a theory *per se*, the depth and scope of the capability approach is evident in the vast amount of research Sen's work has inspired. Sen's contribution looks at issues of social justice from the perspective of both the individual and society. Moreover, his approach extends beyond the borders of social justice, to those of economics, development and human rights. I find it remarkable how he has been able to blur the boundaries between the various disciplines by asking questions which require attention from different fields. Finally, I believe that as a conceptual framework, the capability approach has produced an element of *hope* in the discourse of social justice; a requisite which enables the global discourse to develop and expand.

⁶⁴ Brighouse op cit note 17 at 9.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid at 68.

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