

BOOK REVIEWS

Inequality Reexamined. AMARTYA SEN. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992. vix + 207 p. Cloth \$29.95.

Does a commitment to equality blind us to human differences? Consider some dimensions on which equality may seem attractive: rights, resources, achievements, and happiness. And consider some of the facts of human diversity: people differ in social circumstances, abilities and skills, tastes and preferences, and ultimate values. Diversity appears to cause troubles for equality because differences along the latter dimensions preclude simultaneous equalization on all the former: different skills and the differences of reward they typically command imply that equal rights will likely translate into unequal material resources; differences of preference and value imply that equal material resources will translate into unequal proportional achievements (measured in terms of those values). A blanket embrace of equality, then, implies blindness to diversity.

Suppose, then, we accept the importance of equality as a political value, and acknowledge “the fundamental diversity of human beings” (8). What sort of equality ought we to favor?¹ “Equality of What?”²

One natural interpretation of equality would require that people be assured equal means for pursuing their disparate aims; a second would require that the distribution of resources ensure everyone equally good results, equally good lives. Amartya Sen’s *Inequality Reexamined* rejects both, arguing instead that people ought to face equally desirable³ life prospects—*equal capability for functioning*, to use his official terminology. Given the diversity of abilities, equally desirable life prospects will require unequal means; given differences in what people make of their prospects, it will yield unequal results.

¹To focus discussion on the right “space” for assessments of inequality, Sen puts a variety of questions about equality to the side in this book (4). For example: Should the units of analysis be whole lives of individuals, or parts of those lives? How are we to measure distance from equality (for example, how sensitive should measures be to intermediate values)? On this latter question, see Sen’s *On Economic Inequality* (New York: Oxford, 1973).

²The title of Sen’s 1979 Tanner Lecture, reprinted in *Choice, Welfare, and Measurement* (Cambridge: MIT, 1982).

³‘Equally desirable’ needs to be qualified in light of the diversity of values. See the first qualification below, pp. 277–78.

But, according to Sen, it promises *equality of effective freedom to achieve well-being*.⁴

Sen has presented this view in numerous earlier articles and monographs⁵ and readers of those earlier pieces will find few surprises in *Inequality Reexamined*. Indeed, this short monograph itself is somewhat repetitive. Still, the central ideas are sufficiently important to bear repetition.

To explain Sen's proposal, we need some terminology. A person's *well-being* is principally a matter of the functionings—"beings and doings" (39)—the person actually achieves.⁶ This *functioning* is represented by a *n*-tuple (for very large *n*) of beings and doings—including life expectancy and morbidity, friendship and satisfying work, happiness and self-respect (39). According to this attractively pluralistic view, a person's well-being does not depend exclusively on her pleasure, preference satisfaction, or the extent to which she achieves what she values, but on her attaining states and activities that a person "has reason to value" (5). There are many such states and activities, and competing views about their relative importance, which is why serious studies of the welfare effects of large-scale social change are so rare.

Whereas well-being is a matter of attained states and activities, *freedom to achieve well-being* is a matter of the combinations of beings and doings within a person's reach. This is a person's real or effective freedom to achieve well-being, as distinct from her legal or formal freedom. Sen calls it a person's *capability for functioning*, representing that by a person's *capability set*—the set of *n*-tuples of beings and doings that specifies the different combinations of functionings open to a person.

People count as equally advantaged according to Sen's capability conception of equality, then, just in case they are equal with respect to capabilities for functioning. And people who care about equality—whether they care a little or a lot—ought to care about ensuring

⁴ Effective freedom to achieve well-being (*well-being freedom*) is not the same as effective freedom as such (*agency freedom*). The latter includes freedom to pursue aspirations, ideals, and obligations that have no connection with the agent's own well-being. For example, two people with the same effective freedom to pursue well-being may be unequally situated when it comes to fulfilling their religious obligations. Sen suggests (in ch. 4) that for the purposes of a theory of justice, we ought to be concerned principally with well-being freedom.

⁵ See, for example, "Equality of What?"; *Commodities and Capabilities* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1985); and "Well-being, Agency, and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984," this JOURNAL, LXXXII, 4 (April 1985): 169-221.

⁶ I say 'principally' because Sen argues that a wider choice of functionings is itself an improvement in well-being (41).

that equally desirable possibilities for functioning lie equally within everyone's grasp, not about ensuring equal means or equal achievements. If food is scarce, we should not worry about everyone's getting the same amount of food, but, *ceteris paribus*, about everyone's having equal access to nourishment. Given differences in talent, we ought to ensure that satisfying and engaging work is equally accessible, not simply a formal equality in access to jobs or an equal distribution of self-realization.⁷

To complete the sketch of the capability view, two qualifications—concerning *content* and *scope*—are essential.

As to content: the requirement of equal capabilities for functioning does not require identity of capability sets. Distinct capability sets may be equally good. What is more important, Sen's "intersection approach" to the foundations of interpersonal comparisons emphasizes that pairs of capability sets may be incommensurable (46-49). Incommensurability arises from the diversity of conceptions of the good. Because of that diversity, people endorse conflicting rankings of capability sets.⁸ To make interpersonal comparisons of capabilities in the face of such conflicts, the intersection approach constructs an (incomplete) ordering of capability sets based on points of agreement among different conceptions. Capability sets *A* and *B* are equally good, then, if and only if the different rankings of capability sets in a society converge on this judgment; *A* is better than *B* if and only if the different rankings converge on this judgment (perhaps because *A* includes *B* as a proper subset). But if different views of human well-being offer conflicting rankings of *A* and *B*, then those sets are incommensurable, even if each of the views proposes a complete ordering. Incommensurability, and associated limits on interpersonal comparisons of advantage, emerge straightforwardly as a product of the pluralism of conceptions of the good and the undesirability of resting comparisons on a single conception; those limits do not depend on epistemological or metaphysical claims, or on intrinsic features of comprehensive evaluative conceptions themselves. Suppose we have full information and a set of conflicting conceptions of the good, each of which provides a complete ordering of capability sets. Then, if we wish to find support within the different

⁷ These examples are slightly misleading because they consider functionings one at a time. But Sen's proposal is about whole capability sets.

⁸ Sen's discussion of conflicting orderings takes these assessments as given. But his account of functioning focuses on what people have "reason to value" (5). A natural extension of his view—which has an advantage that I shall note later on (see footnote 10)—would be to confine the intersection approach to rankings that people have reason to adopt.

conceptions of the good for interpersonal comparisons made for the purposes of an account of justice, we shall face incommensurability. But the wish to find such support is itself one expression of the concern to accommodate diversity.

Sen's requirement, then, is not equally good capability sets, but that no one face a better capability set than anyone else. Incommensurable sets satisfy that requirement. If, for example, Jones thinks that Smith's set is better and Smith thinks that Jones's is better, the intersection approach says that they are incommensurable, and so the capability approach says they are acceptable.⁹ In the face of diversity of values, such indeterminacy may be quite pervasive, limiting the critical leverage of the capability approach.

As to scope: equal capabilities for functioning is an account of equality, not of the balance of political values. Although Sen does not describe the full range of political values, or their relative weight, he does note that equality of capabilities is not a full account of justice. Consider two people who face the same limited capability set. In one case, however, the limits reflect coercively imposed legal restrictions, in the other they reflect "internal debilitation" (87). Although this distinction will go unrepresented in the space of capabilities, a plausible account of justice cannot ignore it. For that reason, "the capability perspective, central as it is for a theory of justice, cannot be entirely adequate for it. There is a real need to bring in the demands of liberty as an additional principle..." (87). Efficiency is another additional principle, and Sen allows inequalities in capability for functioning—say, differences of effective occupational opportunity—on efficiency grounds (7-8, 145-46). Because his principal aim is to present an interpretation of the value of equality, he does not explore in any detail the relative weight of liberty, equality, and efficiency. But in conjunction with the points about incommensurability, these qualifications leave the precise implications of his account of equality uncertain.

Sen's argument for the capability approach proceeds in part by connecting equality of capabilities to the intuitively attractive idea of equal effective freedom. I agree with Sen's emphasis on the value of effective freedom. Reasons for being concerned with formal freedom are typically also good reasons for being concerned with effective freedom: if we are concerned to ensure formal freedom because

⁹ As the example indicates, an acceptable allocation on the intersection approach need not be envy-free. On the theory of envy-free allocations and its connections to issues of fairness, see William Baumol, *Superfairness* (Cambridge: MIT, 1986).

of its connection with the dignity of human beings, or the possibility of a meaningful life, or the importance of a public affirmation of equal worth, then we ought also to be concerned about effective freedom—with what people are able to do with their liberties. But Sen does not present a compelling case for the claim that capability for functioning explicates the intuitive notion of effective freedom. And surely capability is a wider notion.

Any improvement in an agent's environment—cleaner water, for example—counts as an improvement in capability for functioning: an improvement in water quality constitutes an improvement in the set of beings and doings that lie within an agent's reach. But why does this change, apart from any further effects it might have, constitute an increase in effective freedom? Improved water quality will likely reduce the amount of time that people need to spend ensuring clean water, and that means greater freedom. But Sen goes further, insisting that the improvement itself constitutes an expansion of freedom, and not simply a welfare gain. His reason is that the agent would have chosen the improvement, and “the idea of *counterfactual choice*—what one would have chosen if one had the choice—is relevant to one's freedom” (67).

The relevance of counterfactual choice to freedom is not so clear. Counterfactual choice is commonly—and plausibly—pressed into service in explications of an agent's good: one set of circumstances is better for an agent than another set just in case the agent would (under suitably idealized circumstances) have chosen the former over the latter. But if freedom is one particular value, not identical with a person's good, then counterfactual choice cannot serve as the basis for an account of freedom as well. Put more simply: everything that makes my life better is something I would have chosen if I had the choice. But not all the good things in life make me more free.

The temptation to think that the cleaner water constitutes an improvement in freedom is understandable: when the water is cleaned we do say that the agent has been “freed from” the bads associated with dirty water. But this linguistic observation will not bear much conceptual weight. The locution ‘freed from’ does not indicate the presence of a further good in the situation—an improvement in freedom—beyond the welfare improvement. Rather, it signals the etiology of the welfare improvement—that the improvement consists in the elimination of a bad rather than an improvement on a good. Thus, suppose we replace clean, indifferent-tasting water with clean, tasty water. We have an improvement in capability sets that would

have been chosen. But despite the facts about counterfactual choice, we have no improvement in freedom, and because the etiology is good-to-better rather than bad-to-good, no temptation to say that people have been "freed from" indifferent-tasting water or to think that freedom is now greater.

A more promising line of argument for the capability view proceeds via criticism of leading alternative accounts of equality. Sen argues in particular that the functioning view provides a better interpretation of equality than *equality of achievements* or *equality of means*.

One variant of equality of achievement requires equality of "subjective welfare"—welfare understood either hedonistically, or as the satisfaction of *de facto* preferences, or as the achievement of aspirations. This proposal faces troubles because preferences and aspirations may adapt to circumstances (6, 9-10, 55, 149). Accustomed to little, people may demand little, and so be easily satisfied. But no one committed to treating people as equals could think that those who have become accustomed to little are, for that very reason, entitled to less.¹⁰

To handle this objection within the framework of equality of achievement, we might consider replacing subjective welfare with a preference- and aspiration-independent conception of achievement—an objective view of human flourishing. But diversity of conceptions of the good vex this proposal, and considerations of responsibility defeat it.

Treating people with respect requires respecting differences in conceptions of the good. And that condemns the use of any determinate conception of flourishing as a basis for assessing the level of flourishing. Moreover, what I actually attain—and therefore my well-being—depends on my choices. If Smith's unwise decisions produce a less flourishing life than Jones's smart choices, and if they are to be assigned some responsibility for how their lives go, then we cannot simply equalize their well-being (148-50), even if we understand well-being as a matter of functioning. But treating people as responsible is one aspect of treating them with respect as

¹⁰ This objection to welfarism causes troubles for Sen's intersection approach. Recall the idea: one capability set is better than another just in case the former is judged better by the different rankings in a society. But if preferences are adaptive, so, too, are values. As a result, the intersection approach builds adaptive values into the basis of interpersonal comparisons. The capability sets of poor peasants would be no worse than the capability sets of lords if the peasants (or the lords) judged peasant capabilities to be as good (for peasants) as lord capabilities are for lords. This argues for restricting the intersection approach to a subset of all possible orderings (see above, footnote 8).

equals. So equality of respect is incompatible with equality of achievement.

We might address these difficulties by shifting to the idea of equality of means for formulating and pursuing aims: this way of treating people as equals is not undone by adaptive preferences, diversity of conceptions of the good, or considerations of responsibility. One variant of equality of means requires equality of rights or formal equality of opportunity. Others focus on income, wealth, resources, or, still more generically, circumstances.¹¹ The diversity of human capacities raises problems for all of them. People have different capacities to transform means into desired ends. The blind and the sighted are not equally advantaged by the same levels of income and wealth; people with and without phenylketonuria are not equally nourished by the same food. Given human diversity, people with equal rights, incomes, or resources will not be equally advantaged because they will be unequal with respect to the real alternatives they face in life. Of course, defenders of some versions of equality of means—say, equality of basic liberties—will reply that Sen's point raises no problems for them because they do not aim to equalize real alternatives. For present purposes, I propose to put this response to the side. I note only that those who make it need to show that the best justification for their more formal conception of equality does not itself imply a broader equalization of circumstances.¹²

Sen's principal target in his discussion of equality of means is John Rawls. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls argues that justice commands the protection of equal basic liberties and the maximization of the minimum level of income and wealth. And he urges that the satisfaction of these commands will achieve the "end of social justice," which is "to maximize the worth to the least advantaged of the complete scheme of equal liberty shared by all" (*ibid.*, p. 205). The "worth of liberty" is, intuitively, a matter of what persons can do with their rights—how useful the equal liberties are to them. As Rawls's emphasis on the worth of liberties indicates, then, he agrees with Sen that what matters for social justice is substantive or effective freedom.

Where they disagree is that Rawls supposes that the worth of a person's liberty is determined by the level of the primary goods of

¹¹ Of course, these conditions are not all simply *means* for formulating and pursuing aims or determinants of a person's capability set: ensuring equal rights is, for example, a way of publicly expressing respect for persons.

¹² For a statement of the case that the rationale for equal formal liberty leads us to a substantively egalitarian view, see John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1971), pp. 65-83.

income, wealth, powers, and authority at the person's disposal. That is why he thinks that protecting basic liberties and satisfying the difference principle—maximizing the minimum level of income and wealth—suffices to maximize the minimum worth of liberty. Sen, in effect, denies that primary goods are an adequate index of the worth of liberty: “[e]quality of freedom to pursue our ends cannot be generated by equality in the distribution of primary goods” (87).

Sen provides three illustrations of the difficulty with using primary goods as such an index (81-82):

- (1) A person with a disability will have a lesser worth of liberty (capability) than a person with the same (or perhaps smaller) share of primary goods and no disability.
- (2) “[B]ecause of a higher basal metabolic rate, greater vulnerability to parasitic diseases, larger body size, or simply because of pregnancy,” a person may have lesser access to a “well-nourished existence” than a person with the same primary goods who does not face any of these conditions.
- (3) Because of age, or infirmity, or susceptibility to disease, a person may have trouble using primary goods and so lack certain “basic capabilities”—that is, access to a decent minimum level of functionings of an especially fundamental importance, such as mobility or shelter or health or community participation.¹³

A simplification will help to clarify the structure of these proposed counterexamples. Case 3 refers to basic capabilities—that is, access to “certain elementary and crucially important functionings” (45, note 19). Access to a well-nourished existence is such a basic capability. So having trouble leading a well-nourished existence—the trouble in case 2—is itself a matter of having trouble converting primary goods into basic functionings—a case of type 3. The cases, then, reduce to two types. In the first type, primary goods fail as an index of the worth of liberty because of a *disability*, a departure from a norm of functioning: here a paradigm would be limited occupational choices for a person with a disability. In the second type—cases of *destitution*¹⁴—primary goods fail as an index of the worth of liberty when people are below a *minimal threshold* of functioning. If a person is starving, then increases in primary goods that do not cure the

¹³ On basic capabilities, see 44-5, 109-112.

¹⁴ I take the term from Partha Dasgupta, *An Inquiry Into Well-Being and Destitution* (New York: Oxford, 1993).

problem of starvation will not improve the worth of that person's freedom.

Sen's point is not confined to primary goods. Human diversity implies pervasive differences in the capacity of people to transform objective conditions (resources, primary goods, circumstances) into functionings. And that means we shall not find anything such that equalizing it ensures an interpersonal equalization of capability sets (anything other than capability sets themselves). Or—accepting that those sets represent the extent of freedom—nothing such that equalizing it equalizes the extent of freedom (nothing other than the extent of freedom). So, in principle at least, social assessments—of equality, poverty, and justice—ought to proceed directly in terms of the extent of freedom as represented by capability sets and not in terms of a subset of the factors that determine the extent of freedom.¹⁵

Put otherwise, a concern with the distribution of means ought to reflect a deeper concern with the distribution of effective freedom. But human diversity implies that the distribution of means is an imperfect proxy for the distribution of effective freedom. So the reasons for preferring means to achievements are—given the facts of diversity—also reasons for preferring equal capability for functioning to equal means.

Sen's criticisms of equality of achievement underscore its limited force. And his objections to equality of means—in particular, primary goods—point to real limits in that idea, too. But the latter criticisms are in the end less compelling. Sen is right in urging that justice requires a concern with the worth of liberty; and, as cases of disability and destitution show, primary goods are at best an imperfect proxy for that worth. So there are bound to be cases in which the concern for effective freedom rooted in a commitment to equality requires that we look beyond the distribution of primary goods. What is less clear is how best to respond to those limits.

Consider two lines of response to Sen's cases. The first seeks to cabin them, arguing that they do not indicate a *general* deficiency in the use of primary goods, but instead highlight certain background assumptions required for using primary goods as an index of the worth of liberty and as a basis for interpersonal comparisons of that worth. They highlight that the use of primary goods assumes a population of equal citizens, who are assumed to have certain basic capacities: to cooperate on fair terms, to formulate and pursue a

¹⁵ Putting to the side limits on information, to which I return below.

conception of the good, regulating their conduct in light of that conception, and to adjust their conception to their circumstances. Primary goods provide an adequate basis of interpersonal comparison only within a population in which these assumptions are satisfied.¹⁶ The presence of destitution and disability imply that they are not satisfied. And when they are not, the fundamental ideas of the primary goods approach itself imply that primary goods are inadequate as a basis for comparison and that we need perhaps to make comparisons in terms of the basic capacities themselves.

The second response is that the two sorts of case present especially acute versions of a more pervasive problem with primary goods. Take the problem raised by disabilities: a person with a disability may have a smaller capability set than a person with the same primary goods and no disability. But according to the second line of response, the case of disabilities simply highlights the more general fact that people who are equal in primary goods but *differently abled*—different in talents and abilities—are likely to face unequal capability sets.¹⁷ We cannot cure this more general problem simply by making a special provision for disabilities—bringing people to some norm of functioning—or by guaranteeing a minimally decent level of basic functioning. Such special provision may leave the pretty able with smaller capability sets than the highly able, and require arbitrary distinctions between the differently abled and the disabled, or the relatively poor and the absolutely destitute. Equality instead requires a focus throughout on capabilities for functioning.

Sen favors the second line of response. But as my earlier sketch of his three examples indicates, his argument for it relies crucially (indeed exclusively) on examples of the inadequacy of primary goods in cases of disabilities or of destitution—that is, on examples that can perhaps be accommodated along the first line of response. Are primary goods, then, an adequate basis of interpersonal comparison, once we have addressed issues of disability and destitution? Or do we need to work throughout in the high-dimensional capability space?

A disadvantage of the capability approach is its severe informational requirements. Take a high-school science teacher who decided at age twenty-four to forgo a graduate degree and research

¹⁶ See the discussion of primary goods and citizen needs in Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia, 1993), pp. 182-84. Sen, in effect, notes the possibility of taking the first line of response, and agrees that it “would certainly reduce the force” of his criticisms of equality of means (82, n. 23).

¹⁷ This second line of response is strengthened by noting the substantial elements of social convention in the distinction between disability and different ability.

career in physics in order to devote more time to his family. Consider the information we would need to know his capability set. We would have to figure out what would have happened if he had stayed on the original path—and that is the easy part. We would also need an account of the paths that were not even contemplated. Maybe he has a fantastic though unimagined ability to act, or the intuitive intellect required of a great detective, or the keen powers of observation required of a botanist.¹⁸ The knowledge required for assessing his capability set requires information that is simply unavailable.

Nor is the problem merely epistemological. Why suppose that people face determinate capability sets, that there is a determinate answer to the question: What would have happened had the teacher decided to stick with physics, or tried his hand as an actor? (Is this even a determinate question?) Whatever the metaphysics, our evidence never reaches the full range of alternatives, but extends to actual functioning and a limited range of counterfactual variations.

Reflection on how the capability approach might address these informational problems suggests that the conflict between capabilities and primary goods may not be very great in practice. To handle the limits on information we need to abstract, at least for practical purposes, from some of the fullness of human diversity, and make interpersonal comparisons in a “low-dimensional” space. If we pursue this strategy of abstraction, we shall require some guidance in deciding which sorts of simplifications are appropriate. One way to make the required simplifications would be to specify certain *especially severe* and *informationally transparent* cases of limited capabilities, to focus on capability assessments in those cases, and to rely on primary goods for interpersonal comparisons elsewhere. Thus, we would rely on capabilities when we specify a minimally acceptable threshold of human functioning—basic needs in areas of nutrition and health, for example—and when we are concerned to characterize and remedy disabilities. Apart from these cases, however, we would confine interpersonal comparisons to the means required for functioning rather than capabilities themselves (keeping in mind that greater means will generally imply a more expansive capability set).

In practice, then, the primary-goods approach and capability approach might not be so far apart. How close they will come depends on how the notion of severity is interpreted. For reasons that are al-

¹⁸ Not that being an actor, a detective, or a botanist are themselves different functionings. But the lives are very different along dimensions that are aspects of functioning.

ready clear from the discussion of the intersection approach, severity cannot be interpreted using any particular account of good functioning—for example, an Aristotelian view of essential human powers and their proper exercise. But it might be interpreted by reference to the notion of conditions that require remedy if a person is to have the capacities associated with the role of equal citizen.¹⁹ That is, an account of severity, required for practical purposes by the capability view, might draw on the *same fundamental* idea as the theory of primary goods. And then the practical convergence would be very considerable. Both, for example, would recommend greater use of capability comparisons in destitute populations, of primary-goods comparisons in wealthier populations.

The incommensurability of capability sets²⁰ also supports this line of thought. Confining our attention to circumstances in which issues of disability and destitution are not at issue, we may find it hard—given the diversity of values—to rank capability sets except in the special case in which one set dominates another (that is, where one set of functionings is a proper subset of another). But in such cases, more expansive capabilities will typically be associated with greater means.

Informational considerations, then, favor the first response to Sen's cases: using primary goods except in certain special though highly important circumstances. That response may seem troubling, however, in cases in which people are not disabled or destitute, but simply have different talents and as a result of those differences face different possibilities for functioning.

Consider how this issue arises in connection with the good of occupational choice. Let us say, at first approximation, that occupational choice is equally distributed when people with equal talents have equal chances to attain desirable positions (this will turn out to need modification). Suppose Jones has abilities that Smith lacks, and as a result has a wider range of *de facto* opportunities than Smith—greater chances of attaining desirable positions. Suppose, too, that occupational choice is an important good because it answers to our concern with “experiencing the realization of self that comes from a skillful and devoted exercise of social duties.”²¹ If the distribution of talents gives Jones an effectively wider range of oppor-

¹⁹ This is suggested in Dasgupta, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45. See also Norman Daniels, “Equality of What: Welfare, Resources, or Capabilities?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, L, Supplement (Fall 1990): 273-96.

²⁰ See above, pp. 277-78.

²¹ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 84.

tunities, then Jones may have possibilities of self-realization that Smith lacks. Quite apart from differences in income, then, Jones would be better off than Smith, though equal in primary goods. Under such conditions, to say that Jones is really no better off from the standpoint of justice—and that Smith needs to adjust his aspirations to his circumstances—sounds like a polite equivalent of: “shut up and get your shoulder to the wheel.”

The objection, in short, is that a focus on equality of means for self-realization—in particular, of occupational choice—masks an inequality in prospects for self-realization. A focus on capabilities would, by contrast, highlight this inequality. I say ‘highlight’ rather than ‘criticize’ because the sensitivity of the capability approach to such inequality is not a matter of *condemning* inequality in the prospects for self-realization. As I indicated in my earlier remarks about the limited scope of Sen’s view, the capability approach is an account of equality, not a complete conception of justice. And the balance of political values—including the value of efficiency—may support inequalities in prospects for self-realization. The capability approach registers the inequalities, underscoring the need for justification (146); it does not imply that they lack justification.

These considerations give a certain surface plausibility to the claim that the capability approach must be right, that we cannot follow the first line of response and cabin Sen’s cases. But here I think the advantages of the capability approach are largely illusory. The criticism I have sketched does not point to a shortcoming in the idea of primary goods, and a corresponding need to conduct interpersonal comparisons in high-dimensional capability space; instead, it underscores the importance of being clear about the primary good of occupational choice.

Assume, again, that such choice is an important good because of its connection with the value of self-realization and the “skillful and devoted exercise of social duties”—in short, because of its contribution to certain desirable functionings, abstractly described. Our characterization of the good must be sensitive to this rationale. In particular, a system distributes the good of occupational choice equally only if it offers a *wide range of opportunities*, enabling different people to develop and exercise their distinctive skills.²² That is, it cannot simply ensure that people with equal abilities have equal chances for attaining a fixed set of positions, but must instead ensure a wide range of possibilities for meaningful work that realizes

²² Thus, Rawls describes the primary good as “free choice of occupation *against a background of diverse opportunities*”—*Political Liberalism*, p. 181.

basic human powers. Without such provision, there will not be genuine opportunities for anything that we can, with a straight face, call a "skillful and devoted exercise of public duties."²³

To be sure, different people, given their different talents and abilities, will have access to different parts of this range. But because of the pluralism of values, limited information, and the many forms of self-realizing work, we may well be unable to rank these different parts and to determine that someone's capability set is better than another's. Still, a person may prefer to face a different range of opportunities, or judge that another set would be better. But if his range is, according to the social ranking, no worse than anyone else's, then that dissatisfaction is not itself a legitimate source of criticism: both the primary-goods view and the capability theory assume a capacity for people to take responsibility for their aims, and that responsibility would require the person to adjust her aims to the available range of opportunities. If this is right, then given a background of wide-ranging opportunities, equal chances for people with equal abilities will substantially limit the range of inequalities by the lights of the capability approach. In view of the informational advantages of primary goods, we might as well use them.

To conclude, *Inequality Reexamined* makes two basic points: the facts of diversity complicate our understanding of equality; and a plausible conception of equality will have some connection to the idea of equal access to what people have reason to value. What is less clear is that an acknowledgement of human diversity requires us, as a general matter, to make comparisons in terms of capabilities. Considerations of incommensurability, limited information, responsibility, and the need—at least as a practical matter—for a notion of severity suggest that primary-goods comparisons will suffice in the cases—apart from disability and destitution—in which the capability approach is most controversial.

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²³ A suitable range of opportunities might be assured, for example, by a combination of workplace democracy and high levels of skill training (assuming that the latter results in pressures on the demand for skill).