Rationality and Freedom is the first of two volumes of essays by Amartya Sen on rationality, freedom, and justice. As with most exciting collections, the pieces in this volume, having been brought together, bring new things into view. Emerging particularly clearly from this collection are (i) the main contours of the interdisciplinary debate among ethicists, political philosophers, and economists concerning rationality and freedom, and (ii) the ties between Sen's own various influential insights concerning rationality and freedom.

In exploring the nature of rationality, Sen challenges several prominent views concerning rational choice. According to one such view, an agent's choices are rational if and only if they are consistent with one another. This view is based on the presupposition that choices can, like statements, directly conflict with one another. Sen argues convincingly, however, that 'there is no way of determining whether a choice function is consistent or not without referring to something external to choice behavior (such as objectives, values, or norms)' (121-2).

Sen also challenges the 'self-interest maximization' view, according to which rational choice involves the un failing pursuit of options that will maximally promote one's own self-interest. Sen reasons as follows: If, on the one
hand, the view is interpreted as committed to the assumption that the promotion of one's own self-interest is the only goal that reason endorses, it can be dismissed as arbitrary, since the assumption on which it is founded is arbitrary. Sen also suggests, in relation to this interpretation, that 'the insistence on the pursuit of self-interest as an inescapable necessity for rationality subverts the "self" as a free, reasoning being, by overlooking the freedom to reason about what one should pursue' (46). If, on the other hand, the self-interest maximization view rests on the assumption that the promotion of self-interest is the only (ultimate) goal that individuals do in fact have, the view can be dismissed, according to Sen, as an implausible oversimplification.

More radical than Sen's rejection of the self-interest maximization view is his rejection of the view that rational choice involves the unfailing pursuit of one's own goals. Sen's rejection of this latter view is built on his distinction between an agent's goals and an agent's values. According to Sen, one's values can include priorities other than the maximum fulfillment of one's own goals, and, when they do, these other concerns cannot just be ruled out as irrelevant to the rationality of one's choices.

While Sen rejects the self-interest maximization view and the view that being rational involves seeking the maximum fulfillment of one's goals, Sen does not dismiss the idea that rational choice can be interpreted as maximizing choice. Sen does, however, insist that 'maximizing behavior is at most a necessary condition for rationality' (39). He also argues that rational choice can be interpreted as maximizing choice only if maximization is interpreted as compatible with incomplete preferences, with menu-dependent preferences, and with process sensitive preferences.

In exploring the connection between rationality and social choice, Sen argues that while Arrow's impossibility theorem identifies 'a profound difficulty in combining individual preference orderings into aggregative social welfare judgments' (289), the difficulty can be resolved via the introduction of interpersonal comparisons of individual advantages. Sen does not deny that comparisons may have to be rough; but he sensibly maintains that sometimes all we need to arrive at a solid social welfare judgment are approximations that are good enough, and sometimes imperfect methods for arriving at interpersonal comparisons (such as comparing real income or the holding of primary goods) yield such approximations. This last move by Sen relates to something that is particularly inspiring about this collection, namely that it reflects not only Sen's commitment to subtle and rigorous conceptual and theoretical analysis, but also his commitment to putting such analysis to good use. The latter commitment becomes apparent every time Sen focuses on a specific practical issue in order to explore the possibility of fruitfully applying theoretical results via a creative interpretation of these results or via the careful search for approximations that, relative to the practical issue in question, simplify things without being simple-minded.

In exploring the connection between social choice and liberty, Sen argues, on the one hand, that consideration of some minimal demands of liberty
reveals 'the need to go beyond the utility-based foundations of traditional welfare economics (including the Pareto principle)' (432). On the other hand, Sen resists the idea that taking liberty seriously requires putting preferences aside and arriving at aggregative evaluations via the consideration of processes only. For Sen, it must be acknowledged that 'freedom is valuable for at least two distinct reasons. First, more freedom gives us more opportunity to achieve those things that we value ... Second, the process through which things happen may also be of importance in assessing freedom' (585). Sen then argues that social choice theory cannot only comfortably accommodate these two aspects of freedom, it can be used to enhance our understanding of both aspects.

Having focused on a selection of ideas and arguments that figure prominently in the volume, I will now turn to a possible worry concerning an idea that frames Sen's work, namely the idea that 'reason has its use not only in the pursuit of a given set of objectives and values, but also in scrutinizing the objectives and values themselves,' which must be 'supportable through careful assessment' (39, 41). On the basis of this idea, Sen rejects instrumental conceptions of reason, which do not 'have any condition of critical scrutiny of the objectives themselves,' and thus fail to fully capture the demands of reason (286). Yet there seems to be a tension between this stance and Sen’s view that reason does not identify certain objectives and values as 'proper' (6). If reason does not endorse or reject objectives and values considered in and of themselves, then it seems like either (i) reason only endorses or rejects objectives and values considered in relation to other objectives and values, or (ii) reason does not endorse or reject objectives and values at all. If (i) is true, then it seems like an instrumental conception of reason may be able to fully capture the demands of reason, since, while it is true that instrumental conceptions of reason do not have any condition of critical scrutiny of objectives and values considered in and of themselves, they do have room for critical scrutiny of objectives and values considered in relation to other objectives and values. (Presumably considerations of the form 'If I X, then that will rule out Y-ing' will figure in the reasoning of an instrumentally rational agent.) If, on the other hand, (ii) is true, then it is not clear how reasoned scrutiny can supply assessments of objectives and values. Perhaps Sen thinks that while reason itself does not endorse or reject objectives and values, reasoned scrutiny is a creative reflective process in which the agent embraces, abandons, or ranks objectives and values without relying on any external test(s). This is an interesting possibility, though more would need to be said about this creative reflective process and about why it should count as reasoned scrutiny. (It cannot be assumed that every creative reflective process is a case of reasoned scrutiny. For example, I may abandon my objective to eat the fresh cup of yogurt in my fridge after vividly reflecting on the live cultures it contains. Does my process of reflection, which results in my abandoning my objective, count as a bit of reasoned scrutiny? It doesn't seem like it.)
Though I would have welcomed more discussion concerning Sen’s view of the nature of reasoned scrutiny, there is no scarcity of enlightening discussion in Sen’s impressive and thought-provoking book.

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