

Sen and prejudice: a defence of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis?

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Abstract. The 2004-5 essay competition set by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis asks, “Why are some countries rich and some countries poor?” It has information which strangely does not feature the name Amartya Sen. But I have conceived of a defence against the charge that this is bad practice, which resembles appealing to the descriptivist theory of names.

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By now, I hope readers are acquainted with the 2004-5 essay competition set by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. In case not, here is some background. “Why are some countries rich and some countries poor?” is the question. Entrants are given information, which they are expected to go beyond. Regarding economists, we are told:

...they approach the issue of the wealth of nations in different ways.

For example, Robert Solow and others focus on technology as the key factor in economic growth and may consider most of the differences in national incomes to be accounted for by differences in productivity.

Economists like Jeffrey Sachs and Paul Krugman, however, may focus more on geography and trade in accounting for these differences.

(2004)

Soon we are told of some factors which affect the wealth of nations. Amongst other things, we learn that freer nations usually become wealthier nations. Even the definition of freedom is discussed:

Freedom also refers to the many political and civil liberties that are central in modern democracies, and these too have economic benefits. A free press, for example, helps spread information vital to economic decision making, and makes government activity transparent. Freedom can also be defined in terms of capabilities. (2004)

Poverty, freedom, capabilities: is this not Amartya Sen territory? But the name Amartya Sen is not used. Why not? Solow, Sachs, Krugman, with Adam Smith before and Kenneth Arrow after, but no Sen, in territory one associates with his famous name. This is very dubious practice, one might think.

But I have conceived a defence: “This stuff is synonymous with the name Amartya Sen and so there is no need to actually use the name.” The defence sounds similar to the descriptivist theory of how a name refers. The speaker associates a name they use with a description and the description picks out some individual. That is how their use of the name refers to that individual.

We can illustrate this theory, as applied to Sen, by starting with a quotation from an encyclopedia entry:

The capability approach is a theoretical framework that entails two normative claims: first, the claim that the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary importance and, second, that well-being should be understood in terms of people’s capabilities and functionings. (Robeyns and Byskov 2021)

The encyclopedia goes on to say:

...it is economist-philosopher Amartya Sen who pioneered the approach and philosopher Martha Nussbaum.

The name Amartya Sen might thus be associated with the description “Economist

who pioneered the capabilities approach.”

But rather than the descriptivist theory coming to the aid in situations like this, such situations merely give rise to an objection to the theory, or at least versions which hold that the associated description gives the meaning of the name. In some situations, the theory allows someone to dubiously avoid using a name, because they use the associated description instead. “That is what the name means, so there is no need to actually use the name.” Various others get named but not you!

Note. There are different ways of turning this into a full-fledged objection, one such way being that theories of name meaning should be evaluated by their moral consequences as well and surely there is a theory that does not allow for the excuse identified.

References

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