

GROUNDING AMARTYA SEN'S NOTION OF DEMOCRACY IN THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

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Abstract

The experience of people of the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the importance of democracy in the enhancement of people's lives and in the defence of their political and civil rights. Despite the many criticisms against democracy, still it is arguable that given the current situation it is the better form of government to adopt. This paper is an analytic reflection on Amartya Sen's notion of democracy as explicated in his major works *Development as Freedom*¹ and *The Idea of Justice*.² Though Sen has other great works such as *Identity and Violence*, this exposition, for practical reasons, would generally focus on how he explains democracy in the said works. Another objective of this paper is to put forward a critical reflection on Sen's perspective. For although his moral philosophy has been acknowledged as one that offers a valuable contribution, even in the evolving field of Catholic social ethics, it has an apparent lacuna and that is the notion of the human person. Building on this premise, this paper proposes to ground Sen's notion of democracy on what Catholic social tradition has to say on the dignity of the human person.

Keywords: Catholic Social Teachings; Democracy; Development; Dignity of the Human Person; Human Rights; Justice

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¹Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, New York: Oxford, 1999.

²Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, New York: Penguin, 2010.

Development as Freedom

Citing Aristotle's statement in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that "wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else," Amartya Sen in his book *Development as Freedom* lays down his position that in itself economic growth cannot sensibly be treated as an end in itself.³ This means that in the greater scheme of things such a growth broadly understood as development has to be more concerned with enhancing the lives we lead and the freedoms we enjoy. Through this we will become persons more capable of not only engaging in various forms of economically gainful but also meaningful activities.

As a political philosopher, Sen believes that democracy is a significant agency for the enhancement and protection of human capabilities. This is a position connected to his view as an economist that wealth, specifically incomes, must be seen as means to higher ends, that is capabilities. The significance of freedom in his discussions on development, justice and even social choice leads to another major theme in his moral philosophy, which is democracy. Sen is of the conviction that economic advancement or development should not be used as a reason to curtail civil, political, social, and economic rights which are the hallmarks of democracy. In this light, he has given us a different model of democracy to consider, one that has to be measured and performed with consideration to the latitude of our freedoms and capabilities.⁴ This is elaborated in the sixth chapter of *Development as Freedom*⁵ and is expressed in the question: "what should come first—removing poverty and misery or guaranteeing political liberty and civil rights, for which poor people have little use anyway?"⁶ The context of the question is the observation that many governments, and people themselves no less, tend to dichotomize the advancement of economic interests (both individual and collective) on the one hand, and political and civil rights on the other. In an earlier question posed in the same paragraph, Sen asks: "Why bother about the finesse of political freedoms given the overpowering grossness of intense economic needs?"⁷

In response to his own questions—and also as a clear presentation of his position, Sen argues that the intensity of economic needs adds

³Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 14.

⁴Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 141–152.

⁵Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 146–159.

⁶Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 147.

⁷Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 147.

to rather than subtracts from – the very urgency of political freedoms, and thus the promotion and defence of democracy. If indeed moving out from poverty is an imperative that must be accomplished by states and governments no matter how gradual, democracy cannot but be the very instrument that is necessary for the achievement of this.⁸ Governments, accordingly, act in response to the needs of the suffering often because of pressure, and this is where democratic spirit in general, and the exercise of political freedoms in particular, is of great importance and value. Precisely, Sen does not also agree to the contention that people in underdeveloped or developing states do not care about their political rights. In fact, human rights and specifically political freedoms must be asserted in countries where poverty incidence is high. No government can and should use poverty as a justification to suppress the exercise of human rights.

Democracy beyond Elections: Sen's Contribution to the Theorizing of Democracy

But why Sen's model or reading of democracy? To answer this, we turn to what one political theorist says: "The history of the idea of democracy is complex and is marked by conflicting conceptions."⁹ Today, we speak of democracy not just as one monolithic system but as a political system, ideal, and practice that has been evolving since the time of the Greeks. Thus, David Held speaks of "variants of democracy" from classical democracy to republicanism, liberal democracy, competitive elitist democracy, and deliberative democracy.¹⁰

In this discussion, we privilege Sen's notion that a good gauge of democracy is the extent to which individual capabilities allow people to find meaning in their lives. Basically, it is not enough to define and conceptualize democracy only in terms of the presence of a constitution and the people's participation in the electoral process. While these are essentially necessary, however they are in no way sufficient to sustain democratic life. In this light, it is not enough for elections to be the sole indicator of democracy. While the people's right to choose their leaders is important, nonetheless it is incomplete without the other rights such as speech, criticism, dissent and the provisions for the formation of a public sphere.¹¹ Ultimately, democracy is best measured in terms of how much value is given to

⁸Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 150–151.

⁹David Held, *Models of Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity, 2006, 1.

¹⁰Held, *Models of Democracy*, 5.

¹¹Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 153.

freedom in the various dimensions of a people's life: political and civil. But one more characteristic must be added to this and that is the connection of freedom to the quality of life that people deserve to live—that life that people would like to live according to the manner they find it most meaningful.

Democracy then is not just a political system but also a value. It speaks of what people give importance to. To speak therefore of democracy presupposes democratic values and by this we mean people's recognition of the importance of liberty. It is not just their individual liberty that must be defended but the liberty of the collectivity that is of the *demos* or the people. Precisely why Sen speaks of the constructive role of political freedom. If democracy is that system which should be defended and promoted both in the domestic and global scale, it is because we value freedom, because ultimately freedom is valuable in itself. Freedom is both a means and an end in itself.

According to Sen there are three inseparable virtues (in a democracy): first, the intrinsic importance of political participation and freedom in human life; second, the instrumental importance of political incentives in keeping governments responsible and accountable; and third, the constructive role of democracy in the formation of values and in the understanding of needs, rights, and duties. Without these "even elections can be deeply defective if they occur without the different sides getting an adequate opportunity to present their respective cases, or without the electorate enjoying the freedom to obtain news and to consider the views of the competing protagonists. Democracy is a demanding system, and not just a mechanical condition (like majority rule) taken in isolation."¹² The regular conduct of elections must further translate to the optimal achievement of the essentials of politics and governance. The political system must facilitate transformation of people's lives according to the collectively desired goals enshrined in the state's constitution.¹³

¹²Amartya Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value" in *Journal of Democracy* 10, 3 (1999) 9.

¹³See Jose V. Abueva, "Philippine Democratization and the Consolidation of Democracy Since 1986 Revolution: An Overview on the Main Issues, Trends and Prospects," in Felipe Miranda, ed. *Democratization: Philippine Perspectives*, Quezon City: UP Press, 1997, 2. The minimal-procedural definition is from Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. Precisely why the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) adopted a 14-point democratic indicator in which free and fair elections is only one among others. See Edna A. Co et al, *Philippine Democracy Assessment: Free and Fair Elections*, xviii-xix. See further: Edna A.

David Held's explanation is relevant to elaborate this point. According to him, regardless of whatever model of democracy one has in mind (e.g. legal or participatory), in essence the meaning of democracy cannot do away with a general set of political vision which among others includes: the involvement of citizens in the determination of the conditions of their association and the expansion of economic opportunity to maximize the availability of resources.¹⁴

As an economist, Sen would use disasters (especially famines) as a main support to his argument that democracy is still a preferable system, compared, for example, to an authoritarian or military government. At the risk of oversimplification, the matter can be explained this way: whether there is truth in the claim that democratic systems are better than those non-democratic (or less democratic) systems in promoting welfare, the best evidence would be the situation and conditions of peoples in a period or moment of crisis.¹⁵ Serious economic problems which at the same time are also social and political problems serve as a litmus test of the state's readiness to serve the people. It must be highlighted however that a system's ability and capability to stand up in a time of disaster is something not made overnight but a product—a cumulative effect if we may call it—of the people's demand for good governance. Democracy, in his words, "does not serve as an automatic remedy of ailments as quinine works to remedy malaria."¹⁶ Much would really depend on how freedom is used and the extent to which it is exercised in order to push for the people's agenda.

But still, we have to wrap up this potion with the question why privilege Sen's notion of democracy. A less subjective answer should point to the fact that he has made a connection between democracy as a theory and as a practice. When we speak of democracy as a practice, he simply does not mean the conduct of the process that would allow people participation but the actual effect that should be expected from the participation itself. A number of theorists have

Co et al., *Philippine Democracy Assessment: Economic and Social Rights*, Pasig: Anvil, 2007, 1.

¹⁴Held, *Models of Democracy*, 263.

¹⁵See for example Sen's explanation on the connection between good governance and proper handling of a disaster, that is, COVID-19: Amartya Sen, "A Better Society Can Emerge from the Lockdowns," *Financial Times*, 15 April 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/5b41ffc2-7e5e-11ea-b0fb-13524ae1056b>, accessed: 24 November 2020.

¹⁶ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 155. See Amartya Sen, "Hunger in the Contemporary World," in *Discussion Paper DEDPS/8* (November 1997) 2-24; *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, New York: Oxford, 1981.

proposed attractive explanations on what democracy is, but not many have highlighted in a more extensive way as Sen has—the importance of valuing freedom because by doing so we can expand our lives economically and by further doing so we can live our lives in the way we find it most meaningful. Here it can be argued that in light of Sen’s theoretic reading it would not be enough to just say that democracy is about the people. This must be qualified to mean as people who have been capacitated in a system that allows them to be both free and economically developed.

Democracy and Justice

In *The Idea of Justice*, Sen explains the idea of democracy as public reason. Accordingly, there is a connection between the practice of democracy and the idea of justice. A requisite to understanding Sen’s notion of justice is that of Rawls, the former being a critic of the latter. Thus, it would help if a brief discussion on the gist of Rawls’ theory of justice be provided as a bridge to that of Sen’s.

A Theory of Justice by Rawls provides a definition of justice as fairness.¹⁷ The Rawlsian definition of fairness is far from the common notion of fairness as equality in distribution in terms of the actual economic and physical conditions of humanity. Rawls, coming from his liberal tradition, thinks of justice in terms of “equality in opportunity” rather than equality in outcome. A Rawlsian postulate in the analysis of justice is the original position. It is comparable to the state of nature in a pre-State condition postulated by the main proponents of the social contract theory: Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau.¹⁸ Simply put, for Rawls, behind a veil of ignorance, human beings established society coming from the basic principles of justice. Society for Rawls, in other words, was never thought of nor created with injustice as a goal. In his words,

[T]he guiding idea is that the principles of justice for the basic structure of society are the object of the original agreement. They are the principles that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association. These principles are to regulate all further agreements; they specify the kinds of social cooperation that can be entered into and the forms of government that can be established.¹⁹

The so-called veil of ignorance is another postulation of Rawls in order to provide theoretical sense to his contention of justice as

¹⁷John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge: Harvard, 1971, 10.

¹⁸Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 11.

¹⁹Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 10.

fairness. This means that no one knows his or her place in society, his class, his position or status.²⁰ Furthermore, the contract is not based on fortune, not even abilities, intelligence, strength and other sources of socio-economic disparity. In Rawls' words:

This [veiled ignorance] ensures that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged in the choice of principles by the outcome of nature chance or contingency of social circumstances. Since all are similarly situated and no one is able to design principles to favor his particular condition, the principles of justice are the result of a fair agreement or bargain.²¹

It is in the light of their being a product of a fair initial situation that institutions may be fair even though and despite the presence of inequality among peoples; an inequality evidenced by the sizes of their houses, the levels of their education, and their stations in life among others. Society may be fair and can be fair not really because it equalizes persons in all if not most aspects of their lives, rather because there are institutions in place that allow them to achieve fairly what they (still) can. The mere acknowledgement of the universality of peoples' liberties in order to achieve their aspirations, evidence further of the attainability of fairness provided that the major social institutions come from the basic principles of justice.

Rawls, as a moral philosopher, makes sense out of the reality of injustices vis-à-vis the realities of social institutions. His answer is: there may be some inequalities in structures but justice should not be sought in these structures but in what is given or provided to persons as far as participation and access to these structures are concerned. This brings back the focus to "equality in opportunity" rather than outcomes.²² In another work, *Political Liberalism*, Rawls argues that,

- a) Each person has an equal right to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties which is compatible with similar scheme of liberties for all.
- b) Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions. First, they must be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they must be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society.²³

For Sen, Rawls' analysis of justice is inadequate because it focuses on institutions rather than capabilities. This means that a definition of justice has been given but nothing or not much has been said on how injustice may be avoided or minimized. In the words of Sen:

²⁰Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 11.

²¹Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 11.

²²Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 57-59.

²³John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia, 1993, 291 as cited in Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 59.

The exercise of fairness through the approach of social contract is geared, in the Rawlsian case, to identifying only 'just institutions', through arriving at an agreement on the principles that are to regulate the institutions of the basic structure itself from the present to the future. In the Rawlsian system of justice and fairness, direct attention is bestowed almost exclusively on 'just institutions' rather than focusing on just societies that may try to rely on both effective institutions and on actual behavioral features.²⁴

It is not enough when theorizing about justice to just ask questions and think about institutions as just instrumentalities and agencies. "What really happens to people cannot but be a central concern to a theory of justice."²⁵ Justice must also be measured, more realistically and more concretely, in the optimization of people's capabilities. Therefore, a just society does not just provide or create opportunities for people to have equality in access and chances. It must also have the mechanisms that would allow people to find ways to lessen the possibilities of not being able to have the chance or opportunity to make their lives better. It is not enough, for example, that there is an equal opportunity for children to go to school. The system must also allow people to overcome those barriers that would prevent children from going to school such as diseases, famine and starvation, domestic violence, and absence of transportation among others.

The significance of enhancing people's capabilities to justice is where democracy is an important political agency. People cannot achieve their desire for just society if they are not allowed to participate in the determination of how this just society can be achieved. A just society where people enjoy their freedoms cannot be a political system that would merely arise from the mental blueprint of a benevolent monarch or emperor. In the real world a system or institution that truly serves the people must allow people to participate reasonably in the decision making process. Precisely why persons must be allowed to exercise their rights towards the achievement of a fair social condition that nurtures economic well-being. In Sen's words, "democratic freedom can certainly be used to enhance social justice and a better and fairer politics."²⁶

The Significance of Human Rights in a Democracy

There can be no democracy without human rights. The underlying premise is that human rights are moral imperatives for the formation

²⁴Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 67.

²⁵Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 68.

²⁶Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 351.

and advancement of public reason which is an essential component of democracy. Without human rights people would not have any opportunity for a reasonable realization of functioning democratic institutions.²⁷ The measure of human rights according to Sen is the extent to which people can lead a life they find reason to value. The higher the level of capabilities a people have—the more it is indicative of democracy. The incidence of poverty therefore is not just an economic indicator of lowness in income but also of the unrecognized deficits in a democratizing society. After all, the poor are poor not just because they don't have money but also because their capabilities are limited as they are caught up in a web of social-political-economic complexity of difficulty that paralyzes them, and thus prevent them from achieving their highest potentials.

But Sen is very much aware that there are those who question the very essence of human rights. In the very first place, do human rights exist? Isn't it that rights exist because they are creations of the law? Sen identifies Jeremy Bentham as one of the proponents of this. For Bentham, "right" that is "substantive right" is the "child of the law."²⁸ The question concerning human rights is not different from the question on the universality of democracy as a value. Is it not the case that democracy and human rights are Western social or political constructs and are of little or no concern to those who are in Asia or Africa?

In response to those who do not agree that there is a basis in saying that human rights are universal, Sen explains that one has to review the history of human rights which is much older than its articulations (e.g. the American Declaration of Independence). Human rights, after all, are ethical pronouncements on what should be done. He would in fact argue that an assertion of human rights is comparable to other ethical proclamations such as "happiness is important."²⁹ To ask whether human rights are important is as impertinent as the question does liberty or freedom really matter.³⁰

From Sen's explication, it can be elaborated that any institution or State that seeks to suppress human rights or circumvent the law in order to limit the same is guilty of a grave ethical misconduct. The curtailment of human rights is a serious offense against human persons. This is the case with totalitarian systems and authoritarian regimes and even those countries that masquerade themselves as

²⁷Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 354.

²⁸Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 361.

²⁹Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 357 and 360.

³⁰Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 360.

democracies merely on the basis of elections but which in no way translates to the substantive participation of peoples in the deliberative and collective process of public reasoning and decision making. Where there are no human rights, there is no genuine justice, and where there is no justice, it would be impossible to expect substantive freedoms.³¹

Justice and the Human Person

In his work *The Idea of Justice*, Sen highlights the connection between justice and being human. Using Thomas Nagel's paper "What is it Like to be a Bat?"³² Sen argues that the question (or any theory) about justice has something to do with a similar question "what is it like to be a human being?"³³ It is argued that the consciousness of the question cannot merely be reduced to bodily operations. To be a human being relates to the "feelings, concerns, and mental abilities that we share as human beings."³⁴ Appropriating this framework, it can be said that democracy is also linked if not anchored on humanity. Democracy is a universal value which is at the same time an ethical concern only and insofar as it relates to the human persons who are the concerns and ends of democracy.

One area, however, that Sen has explicitly warned his readers of not touching is the question concerning human nature:

In arguing that the pursuit of a theory of justice has something to do with the kind of creatures we human beings are, it is not at all my contention that debates between theories of justice can be plausibly settled by going back to features of human nature, rather to note the fact that a number of different theories of justice share some common presumptions about what it is like to be a human being.³⁵

As mentioned, his solution to the need to ground justice in the humanity of human being is the conviction that we share "common presumptions" about what it is like to be human being.³⁶ Thus and as he adds in the latter part of the discussion, the "general pursuit of justice might be hard to eradicate in human society even though we

³¹ See Amartya Sen, "Books and Freedom," <https://www.friedenspreis-des-deutschen-buchhandels.de/en/alle-preistraeger-seit-1950/2020-2029/amartya-sen>, accessed: 20 November 2020.

³² See Thomas Nagel, "What is it Like to be a Bat?" in *Philosophical Review* 34, 4 (1974) 435-450.

³³ Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 414.

³⁴ Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 414.

³⁵ Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 414.

³⁶ Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 414.

can go about the pursuit in different ways.”³⁷ This, however, is quite evasive on the part of someone who would philosophically advocate for the universality of human rights without grounding such a claim on a clear concept of the human. This is understandable given the kind of philosophy that frames Sen's views, one that is not concerned with metaphysics or any system of thought that can provide a foundational support for his political and moral philosophy. Apparently, Sen has left us hanging though when he relates justice to the human person and yet avoids any definition or description of the human person. Justice is a political question because it is an anthropological and a philosophical question. There can be no discussion on justice without any discussion on the human person. If justice is not about the human person, then to whom does the question belong? If justice is not about the human person, then who is the questioner of the question?³⁸

There is a need to emphasize this because across human history, it is often forgotten that what people fight for, such as justice, is meaningful only and insofar as it is a struggle for the human person. Appropriating this argument that we apply to the relationship between justice and the human person, we can say of the same with democracy. Democracy is a political concern because it is also an anthropological and thus a philosophical question. Interrogatively put, can we conceive of democracy without the human person? Will any discourse on democracy and how it relates to development, freedom, and justice—in this case as explicated by Sen—stand without any grounding on the human person?

Sen and Catholic Social Teachings (CST)

Before proceeding to any further discussion on the human person based on what CST says of the matter, a question needs to be asked if only to establish fairness in the process of reading Sen in light of a religious teaching. The question is understandable given the difference in the discursive genres of Sen's philosophy and CST. Philosophy by nature is an open inquiry that should not be dictated except by soundness in thinking. CST on the other hand, which is basically doctrinal, cannot but be anchored on revealed truths and a body of traditionally held teachings that are considered authoritative.

³⁷Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 415.

³⁸This is to some extent similar to what Martin Heidegger says about the question concerning being as something meaningful only because the questioner is capable of asking the question.

There is a reason though for the choice because among others, CST has developed a corpus of discourse on the topic. It can be said that although the Church's teaching cannot be compared to that of a philosophical position, that is, that of any specific philosopher (in this case Sen), one would be enriching to the other. We shall then see to it that only those elements in CST which may have a certain degree of symmetry to that of Sen's philosophical position will be highlighted for the purpose of this discussion. This means that we shall see to it that Sen's position will not be dismissed or judged as partial on the basis that a revealed truth is presumed to be the fullness of truth in itself. This further means that we shall try instead to supplement Sen's notion of democracy and thus ground on the notion of the human dignity based on CST, but only and insofar as said teachings are rationally admissible and arguable even for those who do not profess any faith tradition.

Without the Human Person there is No Human Dignity

The introduction of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (CSDC) begins with some paragraphs on integral and solidary humanism and speaks of human persons as the Church's travelling companions for which the body of social teachings is offered.³⁹ This is an amplification of what John Paul II says in *Centesimus Annus*: "Authentic democracy is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person."⁴⁰

A fundamental position but at the same time a contribution of CST in the ongoing discussions and debates in philosophical anthropology is on the nature of the human person. Again, this is explained in the CSDC: the Church intends to offer a contribution of truth to the question of human's place in nature and in human society, a question faced by civilizations and cultures in which expressions of human wisdom are found.⁴¹ The assertion that the human person has a nature, even without yet answering or explaining as to what this nature is, is in itself debatable given the attitude of many philosophers to the term nature. But precisely it is a question here raised: can we even speak about democracy without human dignity and how can we conceptualize human dignity without a clear and grounded concept of the human person? In 2005 the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences focused its discussion on the theme Conceptualization of the Person in Social Sciences.

³⁹*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 3.

⁴⁰*Centesimus Annus*, 46.

⁴¹CSDC, 14.

Philosophers and social scientists who participated in the said event were in agreement that the human person and a grounded understanding of his nature and dignity were necessary preconditions towards a more authentic understanding and a more humanized practice of the law, liberty and democracy. This is clear in the positions of reliable academicians such as Mary Ann Glendon, Enrico Berti, Vittorio Possenti, Margaret Archer, and Joseph Stiglitz.⁴²

These points are clear in the Church's major documents on social doctrine across different papacies as well as in the commentaries of those who have studied the said field. It may be correct to say that CST is a dynamic or progressive body of teachings, evolving if we may call it. However, there is an enduring essential element in it and that is on the very notion of the human person. For example, *Gaudium et Spes* (nos. 12–22) discusses the dignity of the human person. Like Sen, the said document upholds human dignity as integral in the human person and not merely a legal creation, in fact:

Human institutions, both private and public, must labor to minister to the dignity and purpose of man. At the same time let them put up a stubborn fight against any kind of slavery, whether social or political, and safeguard the basic rights of man under every political system. Indeed human institutions themselves must be accommodated by degrees to the highest of all realities, spiritual ones, even though meanwhile, a long enough time will be required before they arrive at the desired goal.⁴³

The same dignity of the human person is emphasized in Vatican II's *Declaration on Religious Freedom*. The first paragraph of the said documents says it clearly:

A sense of the dignity of the human person has been impressing itself more and more deeply on the consciousness of contemporary man, and the demand is increasingly made that men should act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty. The demand is likewise made that constitutional limits should be set to the powers of government, in order that there may be no encroachment on the rightful freedom of the person and of associations.⁴⁴

⁴²Edmond Malinvaud and Mary Ann Glendon, eds., *Conceptualization of the Person in Social Sciences* (Acta 11), Vatican City: Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, 2005. See the following essays for details: Mary Ann Glendon, "Conceptualization of the Person in American Law"; Enrico Berti, "The Classical Notion of the Person in Today's Philosophical Debate"; and, Margaret Archer, "Persons as Ultimate Concerns: Who We are is What We Care about."

⁴³See *Gaudium et Spes*, 29. Also see GS 76.

⁴⁴*Dignitatis Humanae*, 1.

What is clear in this continuum of teachings is that human dignity is inherent and not political bestowed by any social or political agency. Human dignity does not also depend on economic status. The worth of the human person is not derived from the market. Political authorities exist for the purpose of advancing and protecting human dignity and thus human rights.

The foregoing discussion leads us back to a more fundamental question: What is the source of this human dignity? For lack of space we need not dig into the deepest source in CST that could comprehensively explain the matter. What must be sufficient and clear is that human dignity is understood and identified to be not from the human person himself/herself.⁴⁵ The human person cannot be a self-grounding being. This proposition opens the question concerning the nature of the human person which is what Sen would not want to discuss. But any serious philosophical discussion cannot avoid the question concerning the nature of human being (is he/she plainly material or otherwise). Vittorio Possenti's statement aptly puts it: "[p]olitical thinkers of all kind deem that they know at the best the real human nature." He adds citing Carl Schmitt "[y]ou could analyze all the state theories and political ideas on the ground of their anthropology, subdividing them according to their presupposition of a man 'bad by nature' or 'good by nature.'"⁴⁶ Thus the problem is further raised: whether a political or moral philosophy (such as Sen's), no matter how well explained, need not treat or touch questions of philosophical anthropology (e.g. on the nature of human being) merely on the argument that it cannot but be silent on such a matter. More so, is it a serious thing to ask: Is a political or moral philosophy that merely sees things as plainly materially conditioned or socially constructed stable in its claims of defence for the human person?

Human Dignity: Unifying Theme

One possible objection to what CST says of the human person is the idea that there are various cultural experiences of being human. Cultural diversity therefore may be argued as a justification for the different treatments of persons depending on how they are conceptualized or constructed in a given social condition or situation.

⁴⁵Some Church documents are more pronounced in their rejection of certain views on the human person. See also *Centesimus Annus*, 13, and CSDC, 125.

⁴⁶Vittorio Possenti, "The Classical Notion of Person in Today's Philosophical Debate: A Commentary on the Paper by Enrico Berti," Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, *Acta 11: Conceptualization of the Person in Social Sciences*, Vatican City, 2006, 82-83.

It must be pointed out that this is what Amartya Sen does not also agree to. He even finds violence, especially those that are either sparked or sustained by ethnic and cultural groupings, as due to that halved horizon of human beings—limited or naïve in their view of humanity and the larger global community.⁴⁷ In this sense, Sen's idea is largely in harmony with CST, which, though espousing respect for cultures, does not also ground its view of the human person on relativism. The same is true when we speak of social justice, a people's right to self-determination, and the importance of due process in the juridical or legal system. Despite cultural differences, for example, it cannot be said as justifiable for a country to impose penalty or imprisonment even without trial simply because ancient tradition allows it.

In many countries today democratic values and principles have become the converging points of various social movements and faith-based groups in their advocacy and struggle for humanity. The Church in fact has made use of democracy as a theme for dialogue with civil society. This has been the case in the Philippines since 1986 when some members of the clergy and the religious rallied with over a million people and toppled down the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos which was abusive of human rights. The same can be said in some Middle Eastern countries where the persecution of Christians continue. The struggle for democracy thus becomes a unified resistance against various forms of oppressive structures and manipulative regimes in our societies. However, all these will not hold for long and would die down like any other political trend if not grounded on a sustainable reason. From the viewpoint of CST, it is human dignity which is a universally shared value which allows us to understand our call to a greater participation in the human community which we may call solidarity. Without human dignity any discussion and struggle for human rights would end up either rhetorical or ideological. We may further end up using human persons as tools for our cause rather than the ends of our concerns. Philosophy's history attests that all philosophical inquiries on justice, equality, and freedom are relatively relevant and important only in relation to the human person. Apparently the said ethical themes (human rights, social justice, etc.) are of relative importance in relation to the human person.

No country or system can claim to be genuinely democratic nor advance a defence of human rights while disregarding the

⁴⁷See Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence*, New York: Norton, 2006, 16-17.

significance of human dignity. In the course of shaping its public reason, a democratic country has to ask whether it is really truthful, and not just politically beneficial, to speak about democracy and human rights without being concerned with the essential and fundamental questions in philosophical anthropology, in particular: Is the human person merely an impression or a social construction of society or does he/she have a much deeper source or origin as is the case with his/her dignity? Certainly, a highly probable objection to this would come from those who believe that a secular country or institution should ground its public reason in secular values, and that the question about the origin of the human or the source of his/her dignity reveals some religious slips. However, Jürgen Habermas who has been a key proponent of deliberative democracy has a reply to this with a question: "To what extent can peoples united in states live exclusively on the basis of the guarantee of freedom of the individual without a uniting bond that is antecedent to this freedom?" Habermas' question is but a sub-question of his main inquiry which is also the title of his essay: what are the pre-political foundations of a democratic-constitutional state? Apparent in the terminologies used such as 'antecedent to freedom,' 'pre-political,' and foundations, Habermas suggests that the legal system in itself is significant but not foundational. Applying this to democracy it can be said that we value democracy because we are convinced that freedom, and thus human rights are important. There is a reason why we value democracy – one that is rooted in the conviction that human rights are important because they are wired to our dignity as human persons which at its deepest core must be wired further to a more foundational source.⁴⁸ Thus, it may not be the case that a secular state should subscribe to the convictions of a religious or faith-based group, but neither should political biases prevent the state from opening up its public reasoning on the pretext of an absolutist view of secularization.

Without grounding in the dignity of the human person, without any conviction that this is a universal proposition to which other propositions and claims to human rights must be or should be attached, democracy would end up either pretentious or ideological. On the one hand it could be pretentious in its claims to truly represent a people which does not have a collective vision of and for. On the other hand, it can be ideological to the extent that people are used as war bodies to validate political stances or positions. Even the

⁴⁸Jürgen Habermas, "Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?" Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005, 31.

boldest claim to radicalize democracy in the name of the masses and their salvation can be pretentious or ideological or both—in covering up itself as a system that aims at rescuing the people from the oppressions of the elite. It would in fact be a matter of time to eventually unmask that such a pretension or claim to radical democracy is nothing but a form of populism that uses the masses, that is, the people in order to advance a different kind of elitism that feeds on the misguided political emotions of those whose lives have been caught in various partisan interests and thus exploited by the system that vows to serve it. We see examples of this in many governments such as that of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines or outgoing US president Donald Trump. They are leaders of countries that are democratic but whose practice of human rights are questionable as they are devoid of any significant indication that human dignity has been upheld. Their populist leadership appeals to the masses that makes them appear as powerful representatives of democracy. But democracy is not populism. The goal of democracy is not mass appeal. Even the boldest of revolutions were not ends in themselves but means towards the establishment of an order that allows people to flourish in legitimate freedom. The idea or concept of *the masses* when radically used as the sole basis of democracy creates a serious danger of being exploited to justify even non-democratic practices. Whether a leader truly stands for democracy or not would be best measured in terms of how he/she allows people's capabilities to grow and expand and thus make them live a life that is meaningful and free.

The other side of the spectrum must also be avoided, however, and that is the conviction or position that democracy is merely about liberty or freedom that is either loosely or not connected to any collective vision. The other end of totalitarianism is individualism. Democracy cannot be without a *telos* (end). In this context, human rights cannot therefore be the mere expression and claim to individualism to the point of making each and every individual the centre of political gravity. To rephrase Jean Bethke Elstain on this, rights are not spoken of primarily as individual claims against other individuals or society because they are woven into a concept of a community that envisions the person as a distinctive part of interrelated communities. Thus, rights must be understood also in terms of the obligations which people have in a given historical context.⁴⁹

⁴⁹Jean Bethke Elstain, "Persons, Politics, and a Catholic Understanding," F.S. Adeney and A. Sharma, ed. *Christianity and Human Rights: Influences and Issues*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2007, 143.

Conclusion

Sen's views enrich our understanding that democracy is not just about the adherence to a constitution and the observance of elections. It should also be a process that allows and facilitates the translation of laws and people participation to economic development and enhancement of capabilities. This is a position fortified by Sen's emphasis of human rights as necessarily co-existent with the expansion of economic capabilities. This means that there cannot be any trade-off between human rights and development. The poor need all the more the rights that they should exercise in order for them to move out from their condition. The deeper layer of Sen's philosophy of democracy reveals his position on the human person as a significant agent and focus of the democratic process. Unfortunately, Sen evades the question concerning human nature, hence the exploration of CST and its notion of the human person with the hope to complement Sen.

In the end, this discussion has its limits and cannot be too pretentious to exhaust everything that can be discussed about democracy and the dignity of the human person. Much has to be discussed also with how democracy has been an evolving concept in the discourse of the Church. Hence, further exploration may have to be made on the evolution of ecclesiastical teaching on democracy. Michel Schooyans' essay "Democracy in the Teaching of the Popes" has presented a relatively comprehensive survey on the dynamic process on the papal teachings on democracy.⁵⁰ However, he is of the opinion that though in recent years the Church through its popes has been supportive of democracy, the Church has not been a democracy. This may serve as a point of departure for a discussion on the Church's observance of democratic principles in its internal structure. This, however, deserves another discussion.

⁵⁰ Michel Schooyans, "Democracy in the Teaching of the Popes (Preliminary Report)," Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, *Acta 11: Conceptualization of the Person in Social Sciences*, Vatican City, 2006.