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Xuanzang [Hsüan-Tsang] returns to China with Sanskrit manuscripts from India in A.D. 645.

What's the Point of Democracy?

Amartya Sen

Introduction by Thomas Scanlon

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Amartya Sen is Lamont University Professor at Harvard University. He has been a Fellow of the American Academy since 1981.

Thomas Scanlon, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1993, is Alford Professor of Natural Religion, Moral Philosophy, and Civil Polity at Harvard University.

Thomas Scanlon

The size of the audience here tonight bears out the fact that Amartya Sen is a distinguished economist and philosopher, Nobel Prize laureate, recent Master of Trinity College in the other Cambridge, and a friend to all of us. We welcome him back to this Cambridge as the Lamont University Professor at Harvard University.

I imagine – indeed more than imagine – that all economists are, at heart, deeply concerned with human welfare. After all, they have devoted their lives to the perfection of the institutions on which our welfare depends. But, to the uninitiated anyway, it seems that, perhaps out of shyness or embarrassment, economists' concern with welfare is sometimes humbly concealed behind a certain amount of mathematical formulae, which obscure their heartfelt motivation. Something of the same can be said of moral and political philosophy, which I am

guilty of practicing myself: we who go into this field are supposed to be deeply concerned with the right and the good, but out of a desire to appear professional we cover our papers with technical terminology and analytical distinctions, the human significance of which may not always be apparent.

But Amartya's analyses, and Amartya himself, have none of this shyness or indirection. A concern for human welfare is the guiding and evident first principle of all of his work in economics, in philosophy, as a social scientist, and as an effective advocate for justice and advancement in the world. It is also, no doubt, responsible for his being more of a consequentialist in moral philosophy than some of the rest of us.

Economics is not always seen to be entirely friendly to democracy. To many, Kenneth Arrow's famous "impossibility theorem" questions the very possibility of adequate democratic decision-making procedures. Some of Amartya's early work was devoted to the interpretation and generalization of this theorem, putting its results in context so that its import could be properly understood.

Another criticism, coming from a different direction, maintains that if people have full democratic rights, they're likely, under many circumstances, to exercise them in a way that will be inimical to their own good: in a demo-

cratic state, citizens may use their rights to block measures that are necessary for real development and prosperity because they are painful in the short term. Those of us who are firm believers in rights may say, "If people are unwise, and exercise their rights unwisely, things won't go as well as they might have otherwise. But nonetheless, they have those rights." We accept that the exercise of democratic rights may lead to worse outcomes, but we refuse to take this as a reason to qualify our commitment to democracy. In some of his most exciting work in recent years, Amartya goes farther, and challenges the view that democracy is at odds with the goals of development and well-being. He argues that, in fact, democratic institutions have an important positive role to play in warding off the worst things that can happen to us, such as serious famines, and in promoting our welfare in varied ways. This is an important theme of his lecture this evening.

Amartya Sen

Many notable things have happened over the twentieth century. In the domain of political ideas perhaps the most important change to occur has been the recognition of democracy as an acceptable form of government that can serve any nation – whether in Europe or America, or in Asia or Africa. Only sixty years

ago, Winston Churchill, the prime minister of Britain, while fighting valiantly for democracy in Europe, insisted that Britain's vast non-European empire, over which the sun was unable to set, was altogether unready for democracy. However, within a few years from then, that view was quite obsolete, and rightly so.

It would be tragic indeed if this hard-earned understanding were now lost in the intense dialectics surrounding the current events in Iraq. Questions can and should be raised about whether democracy (to adapt an old Maoist phrase) can come out of the barrel of a gun, especially when the aim of the gun seems so confused. But it is extremely worrying to see that the understandable opposition to global unilateralism and to underinformed military action sometimes takes the drastic form of disputing the very possibility of having a democratic Iraq or, for that matter, a democratic Middle East.

This is one immediate reason for returning to the old question: What's the point of democracy? There are, of course, others. Let me mention two. First, despite the normative acceptance of democracy as the appropriate form of government, there remains practical skepticism about the effectiveness of democracy in the poorer countries. Democracy, it has been alleged by many, does far worse than authoritarian rule, especially in fostering economic growth and development. The contrasting of India with China is only one of many empirical arguments that are presented in support of this castigation of democracy.

A second line of criticism involves high theories of cultures and civilizations. It is argued that democracy is a peculiarly Western norm – not in tune with the foundational values of other societies. The thesis that democracy is a quintessentially Western idea has been championed in different ways by both non-Western cultural separatists and Western theorists who write about clashing cultures and clanging civilizations.

I have argued elsewhere against this cultural critique (in particular in my essay "Democracy and Its Global Roots," published in *The New Republic* in October 2003). I shall draw on some of the evidence I presented there, along with other data, but I will also try to interpret the overall picture in the perspective of the central theme of tonight's presentation: *What is the point of democracy?*

Democracy does not, of course, rely on just one singular point, but involves many inter-related ones. It is, however, worthwhile to ask

What is the *central* point of democracy? What (to borrow a phrase from T. S. Eliot) is "the still point of the turning world"? A good clue to the "still point" can be found, I believe, in the analysis of the foremost political philosopher of our time, John Rawls. Democracy, Rawls has taught us, has to be seen not just in terms of ballots and votes – important as they are – but primarily in terms of "public reasoning," including the opportunity for public discussion as well as interactive participation and reasoned encounter. Democracy must include, to invoke a Millian phrase, "government by discussion." Indeed, voting and balloting are part of that broader public process.

In the field of politics, Rawls has argued that *objectivity* demands "a public framework of thought" that provides "an account of agreement in judgement among reasonable agents." Reasonableness requires the political willingness of individuals to go beyond the limits of their specific self-interests. But it also makes social demands to help fair discernment, including access to relevant information, the opportunity to listen to varying points of view, and exposure to open public discussions and debates. In its pursuit of political objectivity, democracy has to take the form of constructive and efficacious public reasoning.

The belief that democracy is a quintessentially Western idea – a unique feature of the history of Western civilization – is often linked to the practice of voting and elections in ancient Greece, especially in Athens. There is certainly priority there. Indeed, by taking note of the broader tradition of public reasoning that flourished in different ways in ancient Greece, early Greek connections to the origin of democracy can be seen to be even larger. But the jump from there to the thesis of the quintessentially Western or European nature of democracy is a resolute leap into confusion. This is so for three distinct reasons.

The first difficulty is mainly classificatory and concerns the partitioning of the world into largely racial categories representing discrete civilizations, in which ancient Greece is seen as part and parcel of an identifiable "European" or "Western" tradition. In this classificatory perspective, no great difficulty is seen in considering the descendants of, say, Goths and Visigoths as proper inheritors of the Greek tradition ("they are all Europeans"), while there is great reluctance in taking note of the Greek intellectual links with ancient Egyptians, Iranians, and Indians, despite the greater interest that the ancient Greeks showed in talking to them, rather than in chatting up the ancient

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Goths. Being incurably mealy-mouthed, I will call this a taxonomic difficulty, but perhaps a stronger comment would have been possible.

Second, while Athens was unique enough in getting balloting started, there were many regional governments that went that way in the centuries to follow. There is nothing to indicate that the Greek experience in electoral governance had much immediate impact in the countries to the west of Greece and Rome, in, say, France or Germany or Britain. In contrast, some of the cities in Asia – in Iran, Bactria, and India – incorporated elements of democracy in municipal governance to a great extent under Greek influence. For example, for several centuries from the time of Alexander the Great, the city of Susa in southwest Iran had an elected council, a popular assembly, and magistrates who were proposed by the council and elected by the assembly. The battle for electoral freedom that is going on right now in Ayatollah Khamenei's Iran (with the reformists fighting with their back to the wall) is concerned with political rights that had some acknowledgment in Iran even two thousand years ago.

The third difficulty, which is particularly central to tonight's theme, concerns the important historical point that while public reasoning flourished in many ways in ancient Greece, it did that also in several other ancient civilizations – sometimes spectacularly so. For example, some of the earliest open general meetings aimed specifically at settling disputes between different points of view took place in India in the so-called Buddhist councils, where adherents of different points of view got together to argue out their differences. The first of these large councils was held in Rajagriha shortly after Gautama Buddha's death twenty-five hundred years ago. The grandest of these councils – the third – occurred under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka in the third century B.C.E. in Pataliputra, then the capital of India and what is now called Patna. Ashoka also tried to codify and propagate what must have been among the earliest formulations of rules for public dis-

cussion – a kind of ancient version of the nineteenth-century “Robert’s Rules of Order.” He demanded, for example, “restraint in regard to speech, so that there should be no extolment of one’s own sect or disparagement of other sects on inappropriate occasions, and it should be moderate even in appropriate occasions.” Even when engaged in arguing, “other sects should be duly honoured in every way on all occasions.”

I doubt that these good rules of verbal engagement were actually followed most of the time in popular debates, but public discussion certainly received considerable championing in Indian traditions. Even the all-conquering Alexander was treated to a good example of what today’s diplomats would call a full and frank discussion, as he roamed around in northwest India around 325 B.C.E. When Alexander asked a group of Jain philosophers why they were neglecting to pay any attention to the great conqueror, he received the following forceful reply:

King Alexander, every man can possess only so much of the earth’s surface as this we are standing on. You are but human like the rest of us, save that you are always busy and up to no good, travelling so many miles from your home, a nuisance to yourself and to others! . . . You will soon be dead, and then you will own just as much of the earth as will suffice to bury you.

We are told by Arrian that Alexander responded to this egalitarian reproach with the same kind of admiration as he had shown in his encounter with Diogenes, even though his actual conduct remained completely unchanged (“the exact opposite of what he then professed to admire”).

Indeed, the importance of public discussion is a recurrent theme in the history of many countries in the non-Western world. To choose another historical example, in Japan in A.D. 604, the Buddhist Prince Shotoku, who was regent to his mother, Empress Suiko, produced the so-called constitution of seventeen articles. The constitution insisted, much in the spirit of the Magna Carta to be signed six centuries later in A.D. 1215: “Decisions on important matters should not be made by one person alone. They should be discussed with many.”

To take another example from a much later period, when in the 1590s the great Moghul Emperor Akbar was making his pronouncements in India on the need for tolerance, and was busy arranging organized dialogues between holders of different faiths (including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsees, Jains,

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Jews, and even – it must be noted – atheists), the Inquisitions were still flourishing in Europe. Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake in Rome, in Campo dei Fiori, for heresy in 1600, even as Akbar was lecturing on tolerance and holding interfaith dialogues in Agra.

Public reasoning, in various forms, has had a long history across the world, and these traditions in diverse cultures make it hard to see democracy as an essentially Western idea. This recognition does not reduce, in any way, the far-reaching relevance of the fact that the contemporary concepts of democracy and of public reasoning have been very deeply influenced by European and American experiences and ideas over the last few centuries. But to extrapolate that experience backward to construct a long dichotomy running through the past is no more than potted history – indeed it is somewhat more pot than history.

In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela describes how influenced he was, as a young boy, by observing the democratic nature of the local meetings that were held in the regent’s house in Mqhekezweni:

Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard, chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and laborer . . . The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and equal in their value as citizens.

Mandela’s “long walk to freedom,” his search for “the still point of the turning world,” began distinctly at home.

I move now to the effectiveness critique, based on the claim that authoritarian regimes do better than democratic ones in economic development. There are two points to be made in response. The first is the basic valuational point that democratic rights are among the *constitutive components* of development, and they do

not have to be justified by their indirect contribution to economic growth. Politically unfree citizens – whether rich or poor – are deprived of a basic liberty and of a fundamental constituent of good living.

Second, the empirical claim of a negative relation between democracy and economic growth has not been confirmed by the extensive inter-country comparisons that have been undertaken. The often repeated claim is based on selective empiricism. Also, even in interpreting the success of South Korea or Singapore, empirical analysis has to distinguish between *post hoc* and *propter hoc*. It is increasingly clear – even from India’s recent experience – that economic success depends on a friendly economic climate, rather than a fierce political one.

Furthermore, aside from economic growth, there is also the issue of human security. Democracy gives political power to the vulnerable by making the rulers accountable for their mistakes. The fact that no major famine has ever occurred in a democratic country with a relatively free media merely illustrates the most elementary aspect of this protective power. Indeed, democracy’s contribution to human security extends far beyond famine prevention. The poor in booming South Korea or Indonesia may not have given much thought to democracy when the economic fortunes of all seemed to go up and up together in the 1980s and early 1990s, but when the economic crises came in 1997 (and divided they fell), democracy and political and civil rights were desperately missed by those whose economic means and lives were unusually battered. Democracy has become a central issue in these countries now, as it also has in many other countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

But what about the specific comparison of China and India? Certainly, China has outperformed India in many respects, not just in recent economic growth, but also through its commitment to basic education and health care for all, in which Maoist China made an early start. Even though China had the largest famine in history during 1958 to 1961 – a famine linked directly to the government’s refusal to correct its course for more than three years, a refusal that could not have persisted in any functioning multiparty democracy – it did eventually pull out of that terrible crisis. By the time the economic reforms were introduced in China in 1979, China had a lead of thirteen or fourteen years over India in longevity. The Chinese life expectancy – at least sixty-seven or sixty-eight years by 1979 – was almost a decade and a half longer than India’s puny figure of fifty-four years.

Then came the economic reforms of 1979, with the Chinese economy surging ahead and growing much faster than India's more modest performance. However, despite China's much faster economic growth, since 1979 the rate of expansion of life expectancy in India has been about three times as fast, on average, as that in China. China's life expectancy, which is now just about seventy years, compares with India's figure of sixty-three years, so that the life-expectancy gap in favor of China, which was thirteen or fourteen years in 1979 when the Chinese reforms were first implemented, has now been halved to only seven years.

Indeed, China's life expectancy of seventy years is lower than that in parts of India. It is particularly instructive to look at the Indian state of Kerala – home to thirty million people – which is particularly distinguished in combining Indian-style multiparty democracy with the kind of social intervention of which pre-reform China was perhaps the world leader. At the time of the economic reforms in 1979, when China had a life expectancy of about sixty-seven years or so, Kerala had a similar figure. By now, however, Kerala's life expectancy, estimated to be around seventy-five years, is substantially higher than China's seventy. Going further, if we look at specific points of vulnerability, the infant-mortality rate in China has declined extremely slowly since the economic reforms, whereas it has continued to fall very sharply in Kerala. While Kerala had roughly the same infant-mortality rate as China – thirty-seven per thousand – at the time of the Chinese reforms in 1979, Kerala's present rate of ten per thousand is a third of China's thirty per thousand (where it has stagnated over the last decade).

There is clearly some problem with the “reach” of the benefits of the Chinese economic reforms. First, the reforms led to the eschewal of free public health insurance, so now individuals had to pay for private health insurance (except when provided by the employer, which happens only in a small minority of cases). This retrograde movement in the coverage of health care received little public resistance – as it undoubtedly would have met in any multiparty democracy.

Second, democracy also makes a direct contribution to health care by bringing social failures into public scrutiny. India's health services are quite terrible – I have discussed elsewhere how defective they are, and only two months ago in December 2003 I had the dubious privilege of presenting in a news interview in Calcutta the depressing findings of the first health report of the Pratiche Trust (a trust I was privileged to set up with the help of the Nobel money that came my way some years ago).

But the possibility of such intense criticism is also a social opportunity to make amends. In fact, the persistent reporting of the deficiencies of Indian health services is, ultimately, a source of India's dynamic strength, reflected in the sharp reduction in the China-India gap in life expectancy and the broadening of the gap (in the opposite direction) between China and Kerala. Kerala has been helped by the combination of the benefits of a vigorous democracy with those of a social and political commitment rather similar to what had put China ahead of India in the first place.

I end with a final remark on the relevance of democracy at the global level. The point is of-

ten made, with evident justice, that it is impossible to have, in the foreseeable future, a democratic global state. This is indeed so, and yet if democracy is seen in terms of public reasoning, that need not put the issue of global democracy in indefinite cold storage. Many institutions have a role here, including of course the United Nations, but there is also the committed work of citizens' organizations, of many NGOs, and of independent parts of the news media.

There is also an important role for the initiative taken by a great many activist individuals. Washington and London may be irritated by the widely dispersed criticism of the Coalition strategy in Iraq, just as Paris or Tokyo or Chicago may be appalled by the spectacular vilification of global business in parts of the so-called anti-globalization protests (which is perhaps the most globalized movement in the world today). The points that the protesters make are not invariably sensible, but many of them ask very relevant questions and thus contribute constructively to public reasoning.

This is part of the way global democracy is already being pursued, without waiting for the global state. The challenge today is the strengthening of that participatory process. It is not a negligible cause. Nor is it culturally parochial. ■

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1. Amartya Sen and Thomas Scanlon
2. Daniel Bell and Zeph Stewart (both, Harvard University)