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### As Biko knew, powerlessness in actual lives is the hurdle justice must clear



By [Amartya Sen](#)

The state must ensure that individual freedoms not only exist, but that everyone has the ability to experience them

The ongoing theories of justice in mainstream political philosophy are very strongly dependent today on a way of thinking largely initiated by [Thomas Hobbes](#) in the 17th century, with an overwhelming concentration on a hypothetical "social contract" that the people of a sovereign state can be imagined to have endorsed. This presumed contract is supposed to identify the "just institutions" needed. This "contractarian" approach is the dominant influence in the contemporary political philosophy of justice, and its limited focus has narrowed the analysis of justice unduly, and in particular distancing the theories of justice from the actual lives of people.

In contrast with the contractarian tradition, a number of other Enlightenment theorists (Adam Smith, the Marquis de Condorcet, Mary Wollstonecraft, Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill, for example) took a variety of approaches that shared a common interest in the people's actual lives, rather than on institutional perfection. What happens to people depends not merely on the institutions that exist, but also on other influences, in particular people's behaviour and social interactions. This alternative approach has much to offer to contemporary political philosophy and also to our actual practices and policies.

If our concentration has to be on the actual lives of people, the question that immediately arises is how to understand the richness and poverty of human lives. The approach I have tried to pursue has largely focused on the freedoms, in various forms, that people enjoy. This differs sharply from many other approaches to assessing the demands of justice: for example, looking for the fulfilment of certain formal rights that people should have, and whether or not these rights can be actually exercised. Many of these rights can, of course, have an instrumental role in advancing more free social lives, but the pursuit of justice can hardly stop there. Individual freedoms can be seen to be a social commitment, and this requires the state to play an active role in advancing the substantive freedom of the people to do what they have reason to value, as well as to know what is feasible.

If it is important not to be restricted by the reading of freedom within institutional libertarianism, the need to go beyond the utilitarian concentration on the mental metrics of utilities in the form of pleasures or desire-fulfillments is no less strong. Even if chronically deprived persons – the hopelessly poor, or long-term unemployed – learn to come to terms with and accept cheerfully their deprived lifestyles, that cultivated cheerfulness will not eliminate the real deprivation of freedom from which they will continue to suffer.

Freedom has many aspects, and it is necessary both to distinguish between them and to choose the focus of analysis depending on the nature of the problem being addressed. For

example, in dealing with the issue of torture and its unacceptability as a means to other – allegedly more important – ends, what would be particularly important is to see the relevance here of the classical libertarian aspects of freedom, arguing for the immunity of every human being from forcible infliction of pain by others.

When, however, the focus is on issues of economic and social inequality in the lives that different people lead, the relevant aspects of freedom can be captured better by a fuller assessment of what is called, in the new literature, "capabilities", which reflect the actual opportunities of a person. It is easily checked that means such as incomes and other resources, while valuable in the pursuit of capabilities, are not themselves indicators of the capabilities and freedoms that people actually have. The real opportunities that different persons enjoy are very substantially influenced by variations of individual circumstances (eg age, disability, talents, gender, maternity) and also by disparities in the natural and the social environment (eg epidemiological conditions, pollution, prevalence of crime). An exclusive concentration on inequalities in income distribution cannot be adequate for an understanding of economic inequality.

Consider an example. Being disabled has a double effect, in reducing the person's ability to earn an income (the "earning handicap") and in making the conversion of income into good living that much harder, thanks to the costs of assistance, and the impossibility of fully correcting certain types of disadvantages caused by disability (the "conversion handicap"). A person who happens to be physically disabled may need to pay for assistance, and even then may not become able to move around freely. The conversion handicap is routinely missed in poverty relief programmes that concentrate only on the lowness of incomes.

As [Wiebke Kuklys](#), a brilliant young student at Cambridge, has recently shown (she died tragically shortly after completing her work), the conversion handicap for British families with disabled members is four or five times as important as the income handicap, in terms of their respective impacts on deprivation. A system of poverty removal that concentrates only on the lowness of income, in particular whether a person's – or family's – income is below the poverty line, will catch the earning handicap, but not the conversion handicap, and this could make the poverty relief programme fundamentally inadequate. Indeed, the nature of every serious economic and social problem may be significantly influenced by taking the importance of freedom and capabilities seriously.

What about power – a concept that closely relates to the idea of freedom? To say that a person is powerless in reversing the kind of neglect that they have been experiencing can also be expressed in the language of capability: they are not capable of reversing the neglect from which they suffer. And yet there is some evocative strength and rhetorical force in the language of power, particularly in dealing with powerlessness, that the word capability, which is really a term of art, cannot really match. Analysing power and powerlessness can help to generate a better understanding of the divided world in which we live. Mary Wollstonecraft's wrath and bitter irony about the subjugation of women complemented her cool reasoning against gender hierarchy in her 1792 classic, [A Vindication of the Rights of Woman](#).

Or take [Steve Biko](#)'s remarks on "powerlessness" in the apartheid-based South Africa in the 1970s. "Powerlessness breeds," Biko said, "a race of beggars who smile at the enemy and swear at him in the sanctity of his toilet; who shout 'Baas' willingly during the day and call the white man a dog in their buses as they go home." If capability failure of any kind is a matter of concern, those related to people's inability to act freely or speak openly because of the power of

others have special urgency. This is an important concern in the advancement of freedom and capability, since societies involve conflicts as well as togetherness and mutual support. The pursuit of justice in enhancing freedoms and capabilities in peoples' lives has to be alive to both.