An Alternative for Normative Economics in Amartya Sen’s Egalitarianism

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Abstract

This work is a wholly theoretical effort that seeks to explore the consequences of Amartya Sen's (1979, 1987, 1992, 1996) contributions to normative economics. His position is based on an understanding of equality as a subjacent demand in most parts of modernity’s ethical theorizations. This implies that many aspects of social inequality can be deemed morally relevant. Through comparative analysis, these propositions are found to be aligned with other theoretical and empirical works regarding ethics and inequality; we argue they represent a powerful alternative for normative economics. As our contribution to this debate, we offer an original schematic framework.

Keywords: Equality; Amartya Sen; Normative Economics; Ethics; Social Economics.

Resumen

Este trabajo es un esfuerzo totalmente teórico que busca explorar las consecuencias de las contribuciones de Amartya Sen (1979, 1987, 1992, 1996) a la economía normativa. Su posición se basa en una comprensión de la igualdad como una demanda subyacente en la mayor parte de las teorizaciones éticas de la modernidad. Esto implica que muchos aspectos de la desigualdad social son válidos como objetos de reflexión normativa. A través del análisis comparativo, se encuentra que estas proposiciones están alineadas con otros trabajos teóricos y empíricos sobre ética y desigualdad; argumentamos que representan una poderosa alternativa para la economía normativa. Como nuestra contribución a este debate, ofrecemos un *framework* esquemático original.

Palabras clave: Igualdad; Amartya Sen; Economía normativa; Ética; Economía Social.

1. INTRODUCTION

The defense of social equality and critique of social inequalities are recurring topics in debates concerning ethics, society and policy. In the economic sciences, Amartya Sen stands as a prominent authority on the subject. The author is famous for bridging philosophy with economic theory, we attempt to follow this strategy.

Through "On Ethics and Economics" (SEN, 1987), he points out that economics had strayed away from its initial spirit, which emphasized the political dimension of society and how it relates to economic phenomena, and instead focused on a "logistic" approach, which tries to answer through which processes resources are more efficiently allocated.

This shift implied a narrowing of normative methods of analysis and of normative language, as they are employed in the discipline. The concepts of maximization of social utility and Pareto efficiency have coexisted well with "logistic" economics, but Sen (1979, 1987, 1992) sees them as insufficient and often weak standpoints that cannot provide adequate answers to ethical questions that plague economic thought. Questions such as "how the product of an economy should be distributed?" or "how does economic arrangements contribute to good human lives?"

Although the author recognizes some merit in the mainstream paretian approach, he believes it is not a sufficient formulation and it has to be supplemented or supplanted by some alternative. Sen (1992, 1996) has put forward an egalitarian framework for normative economics, the capability approach, in which different principles of equality are applied to different human capabilities[1]. He does not propose a necessary set of capabilities to be pursued, or the adequate egalitarian principle of distribution coupled with each of them, because he argues the political processes of democratic open societies should determine such selection; instead, he specifies different kinds of capabilities and egalitarian principles that could be deemed adequate by the autonomous political process of such societies (SEN, 1992; 1996).

Our paper consists of a fully theoretical discussion and contribution, based on Sen's egalitarian alternative for normative economics. We seek to strengthen his points, by relating them to findings and/or arguments of other authors, and to offer a contribution to the debate by proposing an original framework of egalitarian normative thinking, that adapts and mixes categories found in Sen (1992), Frankfurt (1987) and Moss (2014), while adding concepts of our own.

Attempting a synthetic formulation, we argue that his normative alternative is grounded on the recognition of the multidimensional character of equality/inequality, both as normative concepts and as relevant social facts. These propositions, taken as premises, enabled him to formulate a normative framework with a complex understanding of equality at its center.

[1] Capability is the ableness to achieve functionings, that is, the ability to be or to have something

The word "multidimensional", as we use it here, means two things. It means the referred object is multiple, appears in many forms, and it also means its causes (in case the object is empirical) or justifications (in case the object is theoretical) are multiple.

Sen's propositions, as we synthesize them, are (1) the normative concepts of equality/inequality are quasi-universal in modern ethical philosophy, assume many forms in ethical discourse and are justified in many ways and (2) observed social equalities/inequalities have many potentially relevant forms with many possible causes, and further in, these causes are non-reducible to income or wealth.

In this paper we attempt to substantiate these propositions, arguing for their correctness and their relevance to normative analysis in the economic sciences, while also providing interpretations of our own. Section 2 is composed of subsections 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3, all of them regarding Sen's proposition 1. Section 3 deals with proposition 2 through subsections 3.1 and 3.2. Section 4 expounds our contribution to egalitarian normative analysis, an original conceptual framework. Section 5 is our final remarks.

Subsection 2.1 introduces the argument behind proposition 1. Sen (1992) affirms that a theory defending social equality might be referring to a number of things, such as the distribution of primary goods, the holding of libertarian rights, the equal political and legal treatment of citizens, equal rewards for equal merits, among others. The justifications for these equalities are also manifold, for instance, they might be the ethical value of human well-being, human freedom or social justice. As he puts it, "every normative theory about social arrangements that has survived the test of time seems to demand equality of something - this something is conceived as particularly important in this theory". (SEN, 1992, p.12)

We defend this idea in subsection 2.2, revising a series of ethical and political theories (ARISTOTLE, 2011; BRANDT, 1979; DWORKIN, 2002; ENGELS, 2015; LOCKE, 2003; LUND, 1993, MACINTYRE, 2007; NOZICK, 1974; NUSSBAUM, 1992, 2003; PEREIRA, 2013 RAWLS, 1999; WOOD, 2014), seeking to identify egalitarian demands of strict equality, proximity or sufficiency. These theories are all part of the western philosophical tradition, they are articulated through different kinds of arguments (consequentialist, contractualist, essentialist, etc.) and are politically diverse, ranging from the conservative and libertarian right to the revolutionary left.

These three types of egalitarian demand, that we will be calling egalitarian principles, are concepts we adapted from the works of Frankfurt (1987), Moss (2014) and Sen (1992) – they are manners of distribution applied to the objects of social reality.

In subsection 2.3 we argue that if proposition 1 is correct then Sen's do-it-yourself[2] egalitarian approach to normative economics is specially in tune with the content and variety of what has actually been produced in modern ethical philosophy, by specialists of the

[2] Do-it-yourself in the sense that he provides a conceptual structure for normative thinking and expects people to formulate their own ethical and political projects through it.

subject. In his understanding, that is not the case for popular normative approaches in mainstream economics. (SEN, 1987)

Another implication of accepting proposition 1 is that the debate over the validity of equality as a normative concept becomes barren, for it exists, implicitly or explicitly, in virtually all modern ethical stances; therefore, the contention should shift from "why equality?" to "equality of what?". (SEN, 1992)

In subsection 3.1 we present the reasoning behind Sen's proposition 2. Its first half depends on the acceptance of proposition 1: many relevant concepts of equality in normative thinking imply many forms of social inequality that could also be deemed relevant, be measured and countered. These should include not only differences of income and wealth, but of institutional and cultural treatment, exposure to harm and disease, and special human needs. (NUSSBAUM, 1992, 2003; SEN, 1992)

Subsection 3.2, concerning the many causes of relevant social equality/inequality, is comprised of a revision of empirical results (FIGUEIREDO; NOGUEIRA; SANTANA, 2014; NEY; SOUZA; CARVALHO, 2008; PEREIRA, 2011; RIBEIRO, 2011; SILVA; HASENBALG, 2000) First, we selected a specific form of equality/inequality that is potentially relevant to ethical thought - due to its broad presence in econometric empirical studies, educational equality/inequality was chosen. Then we will describe studies concerning the Brazilian population and check if their findings align with the latter half of proposition 2, that is, if they indicate many determinants to educational inequality, some of them being non-reducible to income/wealth.

Section 4 contains our proposed conceptual framework, we adapt concepts already present in the literature (FRANKFURT, 1987; MOSS, 2014; SEN, 1992) with our own interpretations and add original concepts. We attempt to solve what we believe are the limitations of Sen's normative approach by reinterpreting ambiguous categories and mixing them with other suitable ideas.

2. PROPOSITION 1: EQUALITY/INEQUALITY AS MULTIDIMENSIONAL NORMATIVE CONCEPTS

2.1 The argument

For Amartya Sen (1992), the debate which aims to answer "why equality?" is a fruitless one, after all normative theories almost always include, implicitly or explicitly, demands for equality in some form. This extends to theories commonly considered to be anti-egalitarian (NOZICK, 1974). He urges that contenders turn to the question "equality of what?", while assuming the subjacent equality of their normative positions.

The need to point this out is due to the fact that these diverse conceptualizations of the same term are not always explicit in discourse, nor are they usually recognized as a general element of modern moral thinking, and that results in misguided debate.

Another author who made a similar argument is Ronald Dworkin (1985). Analyzing American politics, he distinguishes conservative and liberal positions not by the tension between freedom and equality, but in terms of how "broad" their answer is to the question of what it means to treat citizens as morally equal.

Sen (1992) believes this theoretical commitment to a form of equality comes from the need to create ethical doctrines that are able to penetrate culture and social institutions. Dworkin (2002) hints that it happens because modern political morality accepts the moral equality of individuals as a fundamental premise, but disagrees extensively on its practical consequences.

In Frankfurt (1987), Moss (2014) and Sen (1992) one finds concepts like strict and partial equality or prioritarian and sufficitarian principles of distribution. We adapted the framework from these authors to build our own categories, what we are calling the three egalitarian principles: strict equality, proximity and sufficiency. These aim to describe how normative theories articulate and demand the equality of a given thing, be it a resource (DWORKIN, 2002; RAWLS, 1999) or a capability (NUSSBAUM, 1992, 2003; SEN, 1992).

Frankfurt (1987) works with the concepts of (1) egalitarian distribution, resources are distributed in a strictly equal fashion, (2) prioritarian distribution, allocation of resources prioritizes those who have less of them and (3) sufficitarian distribution, resources are distributed in order to ensure people have what is considered enough in a given society. He believes the sufficitarian principle of distribution is superior to the others. Equality, in his perspective, is a misguided moral value, for what really bothers people is seeing how some do not have enough for a dignified life. (FRANKFURT, 1987)

A critique of this approach is already found in Sen (1992), as he argues Frankfurt's scheme takes very wide terms (equality and egalitarianism) and ascribes to them a specific interpretation: strict economic equality.

We rely on Frankfurt's (1987) ideas, but reformulate them critically, since we believe it is impossible to dissociate demands for sufficient or prioritized distribution from some logical operation that implies affirming equality.

If a sufficient distribution happens effectively, then it must be admitted that the desirable capabilities, those ensured by resource distribution, are held in an equal manner. For example, it does not matter how modest your house is, if you have a house or access to one, then you and someone else who sleeps in a mansion are equally capable of not sleeping on the streets - as long as these capability-guaranteeing circumstances still apply.

The same logic applies to the prioritarian principle, if it defends a constant distribution of resources to those worse off in society, then there is a constant demand for a less disparate resource distribution, a demand for approximation which is a demand for more equality. In this sense we consider the prioritarian distribution to be a special case of a proximity principle. Thinking through this discussion we arrived at three principles of distribution which we consider egalitarian.

A demand of "strict equality" calls for strictly equal share of a capability or resource (e.g. the exact same legal rights and obligations, the exact same educational opportunity, the exact same amount of wealth, among others), a demand of "proximity" calls for the approximation of the magnitude of access to a given capability or resource (e.g less disparate incomes, less disparate job opportunities, among others) and, finally, a demand for "sufficiency" calls for all having capabilities or resources deemed enough for a given purpose (e.g. sufficient income for subsistence, sufficient income for dignity, sufficient food for adequate nutrition, sufficient medical care not to suffer with preventable diseases, among others).

We ought to find at least one of those principles applied to a "focal space" (SEN, 1992) in the following ethical theories, in order to consider they have a subjacent demand for a form of equality and that Sen's proposition 1 has plausibility.

2.2 Analyzing some notable ethical theories

In this section we go through some well-established ethical and political doctrines in modern western philosophy, trying to identify if they are propounding a form of equality, that is, proposing that a human capability or a resource (the chosen "space") be attained by people in accordance to an egalitarian principle - strict equality, proximity or sufficiency.

Some theories find a form of equality desirable by principle, others by its usefulness in achieving other ends, as Moss (2014) puts it, some value equality intrinsically, others instrumentally.

Being that the point of this investigation is to further consolidate Sen's proposition 1, we attempt to analyze a wide scope of theories, passing through diverse points of the political spectrum and through diverse philosophical approaches.

One of the first philosophers of the modern age to emphasize relations of social equality in his theories is John Locke (2003). His political thought is marked by a contractualist argument, where the legitimacy of the State and of its coercive authority rests on the potential for populational consent in the "state of nature". That would be a situation preceding civil society, where people live in relations of equality, abiding to a natural law.

A critic of the absolute monarchism of his time, he believes this consent can only happen when a set of natural rights, derived from the acknowledgment of natural law by human reason, are enforced in favor of all citizens, independently of social class: the negative[3] rights of property, life and freedom. (LOCKE, 2003)

There is great historical significance to this argument. Locke (2003) proposes something uncommon in his time, a wide relation of equality since he claims the life, liberty and property of any person, rich or poor, are his inviolable rights. We can classify this particular demand for equality as strict equality of natural rights, that is, negative rights to life, freedom and property.

This proposition of equal rights or legal isonomy takes part in numerous moral philosophies of modern age Europe, mainly those which are a part of Liberalism and Iluminism. Marxist theory stood critical of these formulations, of that which was considered a false equality. In this tradition, more efforts are spent describing the deep social inequalities hidden behind a merely formal equality, bourgeois equality. (ENGELS, 2015; WOOD, 2014)

One of the few clear-cut critiques of this idealistic conception of equality is found on Engels (2015) systematic rebuttals of Eugen Dühring's philosophy, and as far as Marx's partner is concerned the attempt to construe a humanity which is entirely equal *a priori* is foolish, the broad concrete inequalities between people (e.g will, strength, intelligence) actually tend to result in social structures which include domination.

Wood (2014) argues that in classical marxism equality is understood as a merely political value, existing in the superstructure of society as a means of justifying and reproducing a system of production, and it only makes sense in the context of this very system.

Nonetheless, Pereira (2013) wants to show an implicit egalitarian objective in the writings of Marx and Engels. She calls it "substantive social equality", a reality derived from the conditions of a classless society, where this absence of social classes brings about the equal opportunity (strictly equal, to be precise) to develop one's own work and enjoy the full product of it.

Contractualism as an argumentative method in political philosophy returns in the 20th century with the works of Robert Nozick (1974) and John Rawls (1999).

The first author's beliefs are closely tied with that of Locke's, though he wants to add new reflections on the implications of the state of nature. He argues that the first question of political philosophy should regard the legitimacy of the State, and that state of nature arguments are a proper way of addressing it, since they attempt to explain the political through the non-political, through the core of human behavior, independent of contingent social circumstances. (NOZICK, 1974)

[3] Negative rights deal with the right to non-interference, but do not guarantee their content, that depends on the individual

He believes Locke's description of the state of nature does just that, highlighting humanity's natural tendency for self-preservation which coexists with a proclivity for violence motivated by self-interest. But is a civil government needed to solve this tension? The author attempts to formulate a private institution that would provide the solution, to see if it could provide an alternative. (NOZICK, 1974)

He concludes that associations of state-like characteristics would inevitably emerge and it would be contradictory with the preeminence of natural right to deny a universal guarantee (i.e. equal to everyone), of lockean rights (life, property and liberty), even if it happens through redistributive action of the State. (NOZICK, 1974)

We can classify this particular demand for equality in the same way we did Locke's, as strict equality of natural rights, adding that this would require a progressive taxation system in order to provide legal service to those who cannot afford it, so it also carries a principle of approximation.

The second author, John Rawls, has a more left-leaning position. He inaugurates a tradition of liberalism with wider egalitarian demands by rethinking the scenario of the social contract. Starting from behind a "veil of ignorance", a deliberative process happens between individuals that do not know their life's unelected circumstances: their natural endowments, their family's social class, their particular set of social relations, among others. In this scenario, the chances of living any potential life circumstances existing in the society at question are equally distributed. That would guarantee a contractual decision in favor of egalitarian institutions, personally concerned with those in the worst conditions of chance. (RAWLS, 1999)

Rawls believes two institutional principles would arise from this contractual deliberation, what he calls the "initial position". The first principle states that people should be equal in terms of their basic freedoms and rights. The second one delineates fair equality of opportunities, with open and meritocratic job posts and a compensation to birth endowments ("natural lottery") called the difference principle, a redistributive benefit consistently paid to those in society's worst positions. (RAWLS, 1999)

We can classify this particular demand for equality as strict equality of basic freedoms and rights, coupled with proximity of income and wealth.

Ronald Dworkin (2002) follows in the tradition of a more egalitarian liberalism that started with Rawlsian philosophy. For him inequalities created through unelected circumstances (e.g the family one's born in, accidents one suffers, unpredictable negative consequences of some decisions) are relevant as problems in political morality, and those that arise as consequence of different choices (deliberated ones, he stresses) are not.

His system differs from Rawlsian egalitarianism because it is not a social contract (does not require a necessary consensus) and it tries to give a more central role to individual responsibility. Equal consideration for all is necessary as a consequence of affirming the equal moral value of individuals, and it must be achieved politically. He answers how it should be done through an auction metaphor. (DWORKIN, 2002)

At an initial point of social life people should receive equal purchasing power to spend on an auction for the different resources available in this particular society, in order to achieve their conception of a good life. That, coupled with basic liberties and rights (negative ones), satisfies the equal concern principle. After these choices have been made, people are responsible for their consequences, but the author mentions the possibility of social insurance, financed through taxes, to aid the worst off. (DWORKIN, 2002)

We can classify this particular demand for equality as strict equality of basic rights and liberties coupled with proximity of resources through equal initial endowment. Sufficiency tendencies also appear, considering the concept of a social insurance for those in dire situations.

Utilitarian ethics tends to be seen as a theory insensible to distributive justice. Brandt (1979) defends the particular developments of utilitarianism which harmonizes maximization of utility with egalitarian restrictions. They do so, mainly, because they recognize the decreasing marginal utility of material resources, after all the more resources we gather the more we spend on things that are not needs and are less desirable.

According to Brandt (1979), utilitarians usually refrain from trying to design modes of distribution which guarantee more resources to those more capable of converting them into utility. After all, some believe it is not plausible to compare individual utility functions, others believe it is impossible. And that happens because "People's tastes and needs differ, and the correlation between income and happiness-level also varies from one person to another, depending on personality" (BRANDT, 1979, p.312)

The author's utility-maximizing strategy includes institutions that treat people without discrimination, whose design begins with the concept of a perfectly egalitarian distribution, motivated by the marginal decline of utility, and on top of this distribution resource inequality can only be generated "(a) for supplements to meet special needs (b) supplements recompensing services to the extent needed to provide desirable incentive and allocate resources efficiently, and (c) variations to achieve other socially desirable ends such as population control" (BRANDT, 1979, p.310)

We can classify this particular demand for equality as strict equality of institutional treatment, coupled with proximity of resources through the correction of non-desirable inequality formation.

Nussbaum (1992, 2003) developed the capability framework with Amartya Sen. She argues for the reinstalment of an "essentialist aristotelian" approach and develops two lists of broad scope, one of them describes the necessary characteristics of a worthy human life and the other proposes a set of capabilities conducive to it, aiming to become an object of public policy.

Bringing about these capabilities would promote "human dignity", with people being treated as ends in themselves, which in her theory is the ethical objective of social life. Unlike Sen (1992), Nussbaum (1992, 2003) wants to directly deduce which human capabilities should be promoted by societies around the world, instead of leaving them open to be defined in democratic political process. She proposes capabilities for life, bodily integrity, the exercise of practical reasoning, manifesting significant emotions, leisure, among others, and mentions that some of these capabilities are to be promoted in observance of a principle of sufficiency, with people having enough to reach the capability, and others of a principle of proximity, with people having a close quantity of the same capability (NUSSBAUM, 2003)

Classical ethics, more precisely the virtue ethics of ancient Greek and medieval philosophy, still is an influential doctrine for western ethical thinking. Contemporary virtue ethics takes part in communitarian (LUND, 1993) and neo-aristotelian (MACINTYRE, 2007) philosophies. Aristotle (2011) was not the first to theorize the concept of virtues, but he is the most influential figure for this school of ethical thought; the cornerstone of his ethics is the existentially immanent purpose of the human person, a given function to be realized in the world that, when effectively pursued, would not only serve society but also provide a good individual life. Modern virtue ethics tends to work with a human-dependent purpose, relative to the social context one is born in and defined through. One is virtuous or vicious in terms of the purposes that are conceivable within a specific social context. (MACINTYRE, 2007)

Equality is not a common theme in virtue ethics. There is no clear consensus on the matter but, to some contemporary theorists, supposing an equal interest of all citizens in human flourishing could justify egalitarian public policy as a means to an end. (LUND, 1993)

2.3 Implications of proposition 1 to the economic sciences

We believe this review probed diverse ethical tendencies, sometimes articulated in opposition to each other, but nonetheless carrying one or more subjacent egalitarian principles. Virtue ethics is the only normative framework where none of the principles were found, but it does not appear necessarily rejective of egalitarian policy. Our analysis indicates that Sen (1992) posed a convincing argument for abandoning the contention on the normative validity of the concept and instead focusing on the question "equality of what?".

The implications of this discussion, closer to philosophy, can be interesting for the social sciences in general. We hope it is clear that a researcher does not need to have a direct interest in egalitarian politics to be a subject of Sen's argument. If he is willing to make recommendations for public policy then he has, as consequence, a normative intuition or position (what social results justify this policy?) and, at a higher level of analysis, that position or intuition most likely includes a subjacent egalitarian principle.

Perhaps Sen's proposition is especially relevant for economists, whose discipline sustains a singular relationship with ethics and equality. It is common to divide economics in two dimensions, descriptive and normative, but it would be hard to argue economists do not hold normative interpretations of the world, no matter how honest they are when seeking exclusively descriptive results.

As Sen (1987) sees it, even though historically there was a shift towards "logistical" economics, normative thinking in the discipline never ceased to exist, it just became a sideline topic. That is a mistake, as far as the author is concerned. Ethics allows us to further understand human motivation and assess the quality of social achievements, of what is realized in society. (SEN, 1987)

Today's mainstream normative economics was a transforming endeavor in the 19th and 20th centuries, with two notable phases. Firstly, there was the classical utilitarian approach with a normative purpose that is unidimensional, measurable in cardinal fashion and interpersonally comparable mental state, called utility. By the end of the 19th century there was a clear pretension to objectively and precisely measure this mental state through "psychophysics"[4], and its maximization was the normative purpose of the economic sciences. (BRUNI, 2010)

The empirical basis for this approach was never solidified, psychology could not deliver a clear and universal measure of human well-being, much less one that could be precisely quantified and compared between people. An alternative that would cast away unobservable introspective realities and focus on what is properly scientifical, objective facts independent of subjective perceptions, was built from the works of Vilfredo Pareto[5]. Paretian ordinalism contained interpersonally incomparable utility functions that exist as an ordering of preferences, the achievement of these preferences in accordance with principles of "optimality" became the normative criteria of welfare economics. (BRUNI, 2010; SEN, 1979, 1987)

Sen (1979) maintains that both methods have serious limits and flaws. The classical utilitarian approach with cardinal utility and interpersonal comparability suffers because it restricts itself to only describe the ethical value of social states in terms of utility. If utility can be acquired by action which conflicts with other moral principles (rights, virtues) - which seems plausible since utility is an often unclear measure of human satisfaction and people satisfy themselves in a myriad of ways - there is nothing to be said about it as long as maximization occurs. Sen (1979) exemplifies this problem supposing two distinct social states with the same distribution and total of utility, but only one of them was achieved with torture among other processes, after all some people are sadistic and satisfy themselves in this manner; through classical utilitarian lenses, nothing can be said about one state being better than the other.

Paretian ordinalism, in its turn, Sen (1979) criticizes because it not only severely limits analysis of conflicting interests (e.g no preference could be deemed more fruitful or

[4] A purported scientific endeavor to find a deterministic relation between stimuli and measurable mental states

[5] Prominent italian economist, member of the Lausanne School (1848-1929)

reasonable than other), which is at the center of sociopolitical life, but it rejects judging different levels of human need - all preference attainment of the same ordinal magnitude that does not imply any loss has the exact same value, it does not matter what are the circumstances of the attaining agent, if he is rich or poor, merely prudent or in dire need. Lastly, he argues that, at a technical level, social welfare functions are victim to impossibility results, that is, they cannot hold the properties of unrestricted domain, independence of irrelevant alternatives, non-dictatorship and weak Pareto principle. (SEN, 1979)

According to van Staveren (2007), as paretian analysis became popular in economics, proper ethical discussion was marginalized. After all, the former relegates the normative value of any social fact to absolute subjectivity, people can never be right or wrong in terms of what they value, there can be no shared reasons which trump the mere choice for a preference. This kind of moral conception seems to indicate the troubling paradigm described by MacIntyre (2007) as "emotivism", where true ethical concern inexists because even if people act in a purported ethical manner, at the core it is believed that everything boils down to arbitrary choices.

Deontological alternatives do exist in economics although, van Staveren (2007) argues, more commonly in heterodox schools of thought (e.g old institutional, post-keynesian, political economy) than in orthodox approaches (e.g new institutional, public choice theory). She also points that the general deontological tendency of affirming strict rule-following serves the improvement of markets in the orthodox traditions and the promotion of positive freedom[6] in heterodox ones.

Both Sen (1987) and van Staveren (2007) argue that incorporating ideas of rights is useful for the economics sciences, since they are a necessary part of the workings of any modern society and are a common aspect of human behavior (e.g rule-based decisions in formal and informal contexts). The latter author believes rights do not relate only to social cohesion, well-being and freedom, but can actually improve economic efficiency through human capital accumulation and aggregate demand expansion. (VAN STAVEREN, 2007)

We saw that deontological analysis (DWORKIN, 2002; LOCKE, 2003; NOZICK, 1974; RAWLS, 1999) tends to carry a subjacent egalitarian principle and that utilitarian frameworks can also include it. (BRAND, 1979)

Overall, it seems that Sen's (1992, 1996) egalitarian framework represents a solid alternative for normative economics. Being a generalist framework that is compatible with many ethical approaches it not only could be developed in ways that overcome the difficulties of classical utilitarianism and paretian ordinalism, but it could include simultaneously consequentialist and deontological thinking, benefitting from their respective strengths. Also, if one believes taking as basis the doctrines considered stronger and more consensual by ethicists is a good strategy for normative works in the social sciences, then the senian approach is apt for it.

[6] Ableness to do and be relevant things, perhaps a close concept to Sen's capability (1992, 1996)

Inequality was a neglected topic between economists, at least until recent decades where it gained more notability. Some economists believe it is an irrelevant or even harmful debate, and that proper answers to the problem of maximization (economic growth) could better solve social problems. (ATKINSON, 2015)

Milanovic (2007) tells us how, when introducing himself as a researcher of inequality, often heard from his economist colleagues: "Why should we care?". He believes this attitude is, firstly, misaligned with empirical analysis of the topic, there is no clear evidence that growth is a trade-off to equality and it might be that they are actually complementary. Secondly, people's sensibilities to distributive questions are relevant since "income [...] is not only a means to acquire more goods and services, it is also a tangible recognition of how society values them [people in general]. It is a social expression of their own worth. Hence a large difference in income (and particularly if unjustified or unclear) will be viewed as a slight to their own worth". (MILANOVIC, p. 112, 2007)

In these last two paragraphs we were referencing an opposition to specific forms of equality/inequality, a critical stance on strict equality or approximation of income and wealth. But, so far, we have been defending Sen's broader take on egalitarianism, that points to the potential relevance of many forms of equality/inequality, dealt with through the promotion of capabilities. In fact, in the framework we are delineating, which mixes Sen's core argument and concepts (1992) with other categories, the "anti-equality" economists mentioned by Atkinson (2014) and Milanovic (2007) might be considered in favor of some form of social equality. If they oppose resource distribution because a sole focus on economic growth works best to solve poverty and unfulfilled basic needs, then that is their strategy to bring about sufficiency in material life. If they oppose it because it interferes with the right of property accumulation of some, then most likely they take the latter to be a universal negative right and are defending strict equality of it.

If these are their underlying positions, some new questions arise. Is there any urgency in promoting resource sufficiency, guaranteeing enough to put people above a specific metric of poverty? If there is, even if we assume a growth-distribution trade-off, the question of growth configuration becomes opportune: more or less efficient, more or less distributed, how quickly it generates resource sufficiency? Also, can we guarantee universal rights, equal legal treatment, without any resource distribution? So that people have access to legal services of the same quality? If the debate shifts its basic contention from "why equality?" to "equality of what?" (SEN, 1992), coupled with "how to promote it?", then it could ask more fruitful questions.

3. PROPOSITION 2: EQUALITY/INEQUALITY AS MULTIDIMENSIONAL AND MORALLY RELEVANT SOCIAL FACTS

3.1 The argument

So far, we brought forth an exploratory analysis that reaffirms proposition 1, the multidimensional and quasi-universal character of equality/inequality as normative concepts, meaning that they're terms with many conceptualizations in normative theories, almost always present in these, and their relevance is justified in many ways.

If that is true and we care to be motivated by ethical thinking, then a variety of equalities/inequalities, existing as social facts, can be deemed relevant. Accepting proposition 1 logically implies accepting the first part of proposition 2: "observed social equalities/inequalities have many potentially relevant forms…".

But what comes next is independent of proposition 1 and will require additional examination: "...with many possible causes, and further in, these causes are non-reducible to income or wealth.". Essentially, what Sen (1992) argues is that once one establishes the ethical pursuit for a form of equality, he or she will, most likely, have to attack the many causes of the corresponding inequality, and those causes could be more than simply consequences of material scarcity.

Sen (1992) describes some concrete examples of these relevant social facts that depend on more things than income and wealth. In the ninety's countries like China, Sri Lanka e Costa Rica had inferior per capita income to countries such as Brazil, South Africa, Gabon and Oman, still the first three countries had greater life expectancy - notably Costa Rica had a life expectancy very close to the american one.

Furthering the argument, the state of Kerala in India was, by the time, one the country's poorest, yet levels of literacy and life expectancy were widely superior to the country's mean. Sen (1992) believes institutional differences are the cause of both his examples, in Kerala's case public programs of alphabetization and beneficial legislation on property and heritage for women are his proposed causes.

In this next section we will be reviewing empirical studies concerning education inequality in Brazil. (FIGUEIREDO; NOGUEIRA; SANTANA, 2014; NEY; SOUZA; CARVALHO, 2008; PEREIRA, 2011; RIBEIRO, 2011; SILVA; HASENBALG, 2000)

Education is one of the relevant spaces of equality appearing on our revision of ethical theories, usually understood as an "opportunity" (DWORKIN, 2002; NUSSBAUM, 1992, 2003; RAWLS, 1999), and it is also relevant in economic theory and econometric studies. The point of this exercise is to see if results across different studies are matching with Sen's conception of multiple causes of inequalities and of causes non-reducible to income and wealth, i.e., causes that are not simply consequences of scarce income and wealth.

Even though income and wealth are perhaps the most central topics in the economic sciences, it seems adequate to affirm that economists are interested in analyzing social institutions and recommending policy concerning other areas (e.g education, health, crime). For example, if a researcher cares for equal institutional treatment (e.g liberties, rights, due process of law) then his obstacles also include things like culture, institutional behavior and incentives, historical vices and quarrels of a society. (NUSSBAUM, 2003)

If the next section successfully indicates that Sen's proposition 2 is to be taken seriously, then the implications involve the need of researchers to conceive of policy strategies designed to solve complex problems non-reducible to income and wealth, not only by allocating resources and authority but by doing so in an intelligent manner capable of bringing about the desirable capabilities.

3.2 Reviewing educational inequality in empirical literature

Silva and Hasenbalg (2000), working with concepts such as cultural and social capital, do not limit their research to economic advantages. At the economic level they analyze variables relative to the household, such as five or more rooms, refrigerator and piped water, they include social capital variables such as working mother, number of children up to 14 years old, mother as head of the house (single parent household), the cultural capital variable of mother's education, region of the country and area of residency (metropolitan or non-metropolitan).

The authors explain social capital as the family structure that dictates the potential for cultural capital transferring, and this capital as being relative to the "educational environment", the level of education between adult members of a household (SILVA; HASENBALG, 2000)

All chosen variables are found to be impactful to some level. Feeding a regression model with data from 1976, 1986 and 1998, the authors point to some social capital variables as being increasingly more impactful through time, that includes single parent households and the number of children up to 14 years old, but does not include a working mother. (SILVA; HASENBALG, 2000)

If virtually all of twelve variables are relevant for predicting education attainment then it is likely this work indicates multiple causes for educational inequality. Social capital variables, which we mentioned directly, are identifiable as variables non-reducible to income and wealth; numbers of young children per household and of single parent households are both potentially influenced by income/wealth, but might also depend on cultural, religious or institutional matters. Area of residency might be interpreted as an impactful variable that could be non-reducible to income and wealth, the logic being that even controlling for income levels rural populations might not have access to educational institutions of the same quality. It could be because public administration gives asymmetric means of success for schools in different areas of the country or because metropolitan areas have higher division of labor and therefore have more specialized professionals.

Ney, Souza and Carvalho (2008) propose a solely descriptive work regarding the behavior of rural and urban students in different segments of national income. What they observe agrees with our aforementioned argument about area of residency as a variable non-reducible to income and wealth. When he compares students from the same segments of national income but residing on different areas (rural or urban), broad advantages for the urban population are shown, for example the rural low class has high rates of dropout early in the educational trajectory and the percentage of the urban low class that finishes middle school is about 30 percentage points higher. (NEY; SOUZA; CARVALHO, 2008)

Ribeiro (2011), also analyzing the attainment of school years, addresses the economic situation of the household in terms of the variable's family wealth and occupational status of the parents. Furthermore, he analyzes demographic characteristics such as race and sex, family's cultural capital in terms of parent's education, region of the country and area of residency (urban and rural), family structure (single parent or two parent's household), number of siblings, working mother and type of school (private, federal public, other public schools). The author finds relevant positive or negative impacts for all those independent variables. (RIBEIRO, 2011)

The same argument stands that social capital variables such as working mother, family structure and number of siblings are, relative to other variables, most likely non-reducible to income and wealth. Perhaps the same can be said of school type, although in Brazil private schools are of much higher quality and tend to be attended almost exclusively by the wealthier classes. That is an institutional particularity of the country, an advantage that might not be available for the upper classes of other similar countries, and in this sense, it could be considered a variable non-reducible to income and wealth, dependent on wholly institutional matters.

Another variable we must note is race. If racism or racist institutions are prevalent enough that they impact a student's self-worth and learning performance, then the problem goes beyond the historical economic disadvantages of certain races, becoming non-reducible to income and wealth.

Pereira (2010) is an exception on our review, studying determinants of human capital attainment in Portugal, knowledge secured from schooling measured through PISA[7] results, with interesting variables pertaining to the characteristics of the school system and its infrastructure; he works with sex, age, school year, literary abilities, parents profession, immigrant condition and related indicators, wealth indicators, educational resources at home, student/teacher ratio, class sizes, size and localization of schools, school type (public or private) and indicators of school autonomy. (PEREIRA, 2010)

Variables the author deems notably impactful include school year, sex, which seems to influence observed results in math tests (masculine bias) and in reading tests (feminine bias), educational resources at home and parent's profession, if it's a specialized one. (PEREIRA, 2010)

[7] Programme for International Student Assessment

Different attained knowledge between the sexes is unlikely to be influenced by income and wealth, potentially it depends on cultural and biological factors. Educational resources at home and parents at a specialized profession seem both non-reducible to income and wealth, most likely they also depend on culture and on individual personality.

Figueiredo, Nogueira and Santana (2014) also deal with educational attainment measured through test results, in this case the brazilian ENEM[8] test. The authors approach their problem with a regression model containing independent variables such as family income, parent's education, type of school, race, sex, area of residency and school quality. The study found parent's education and school quality to be the most impactful variables. (FIGUEIREDO; NOGUEIRA; SANTANA, 2014)

The last variable is the only one we haven't mentioned so far. It's hard to contend that the quality of a school does not come down virtually to the wealth it has and the incomes it pays, for that ensures the best infrastructure and the best working professionals. But we could argue that applied methodology and organic developments in organizational behavior are characteristics that also influence a school's quality, beyond the material resources at its disposal.

4. Our proposed conceptual framework

In order to contribute to the clarity of this debate, bringing about a broader analytical understanding of it, we created an original framework that adapts categories already present in Frankfurt (1987), Moss (2014) and Sen (1992) and adds new concepts, some of them already discussed thus far. We have no intention to make this schematism a fixed guide that classifies better than anything else the nuances of such a broad debate, but instead propose it as another contribution to egalitarian and ethical discussions.

We take inspiration, firstly, from Sen's (1992) ideas of "forms" of equality and "spaces" of equality, secondly, from Jeremy Moss (2014) concept of "metrics" of equality (resource, capabilities and welfare) and the idea he shares with Frankfurt (1987) of "distributive principles" (sufficitarian, prioritarian, etc.).

We replaced distributive principles with egalitarian principles (or demands), a complete justification is found back on section 2.1 but essentially it was done because priority and sufficiency can be interpreted as equality demands. Priority became a special case of the proximity principle and the metric of welfare (MOSS, 2014) was rejected due to it being unsuitable to characterize relevant equality spaces found in the literature.

The need to expand on what are already well-defined ideas in Sen (1992) is justified by what we believe are its limitations. Firstly, the concept of a form of equality is defined by the author as a manner of articulating equality applied to a chosen space; what kinds of articulating manners exist is not much clear. Secondly, he does not spend much effort on

[8] Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio, which can be translated to High School National Exam

categorizing the possible spaces in which some form of equality may apply. We attempt to fill these gaps by proposing the three egalitarian principles, the general spaces and the subforms as a conceptual expansion on his work, but first let's start with what is most basic.

The most general category here is the form of equality (equality in a chosen space promoted in accordance to a certain principle) and the first important aspect of our scheme is the definition of a qualitative and a quantitative dimension to a form of equality.

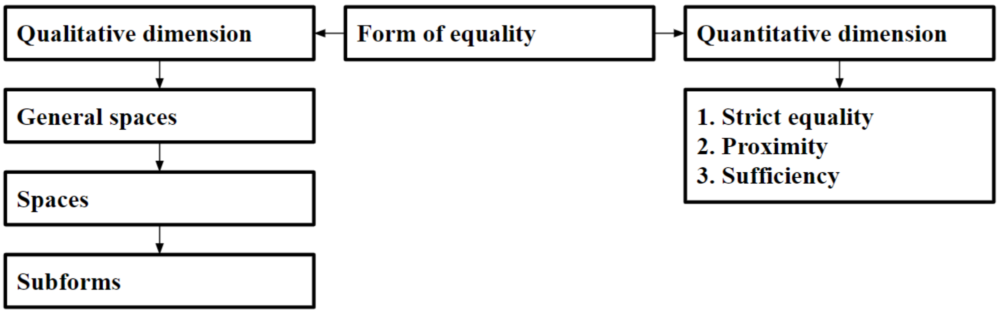

Figure 1 - Form of equality diagram 1

The quantitative aspect deals with the egalitarian principle applied, be it of strict equality, exactly equal quantities of a capability or resource, proximity, where the difference gap in the access to resources or capabilities between subjects is diminished, or sufficiency, representing equal capability to achieve a functioning regarding some relevant threshold (e.g not sleeping on the streets, consuming a certain daily calorie intake, among others).

Deontological ethical arguments (RAWLS, 1999; LOCKE, 2003; DWORKIN, 2002; NOZICK, 1974), tend to propose rights as necessary guarantees applicable to all individuals in a strictly equal manner, consequentialist arguments (NUSSBAUM, 2003, 1992; PEREIRA, 2013; BRANDT, 1979; MACINTYRE, 2007, LUND, 1993), in their turn, tend to be more oriented in terms of sufficiency and proximity.

The qualitative aspect deals with the choice of a relevant space, equality is demanded in terms of what fact of reality? We propose the idea of three "general spaces" that characterize generically all particular spaces we found in the literature: resources, opportunities and rights.

To affirm one's preference for one of these general spaces, "I am in favor of equality of opportunities" or "I am in favor of equality of rights", appears like a very insufficient formulation of one's position, since they can contain a lot of different concepts.

These three general spaces relate to each other at many levels. They can be understood as dependent on one another: "without equal rights there is no equal opportunities".

Complementary: "with equality of some resources there is greater equality of opportunity". And finally, internally (regarding the spaces contained in a general space) or externally (regarding different general spaces) incompatible: "the existence of negative rights nullifies claims of positive rights" or "given equality of negative rights, equality of resources becomes undesirable".

We provide some examples of more particular spaces. They can be described in terms of two metrics: capabilities or resources. We will not be engaging with the debate that seeks to determine which metric is more adequate (MOSS, 2014; SEN, 1992; DWORKIN, 2002)

These are the diagrams for the qualitative dimension of our framework:

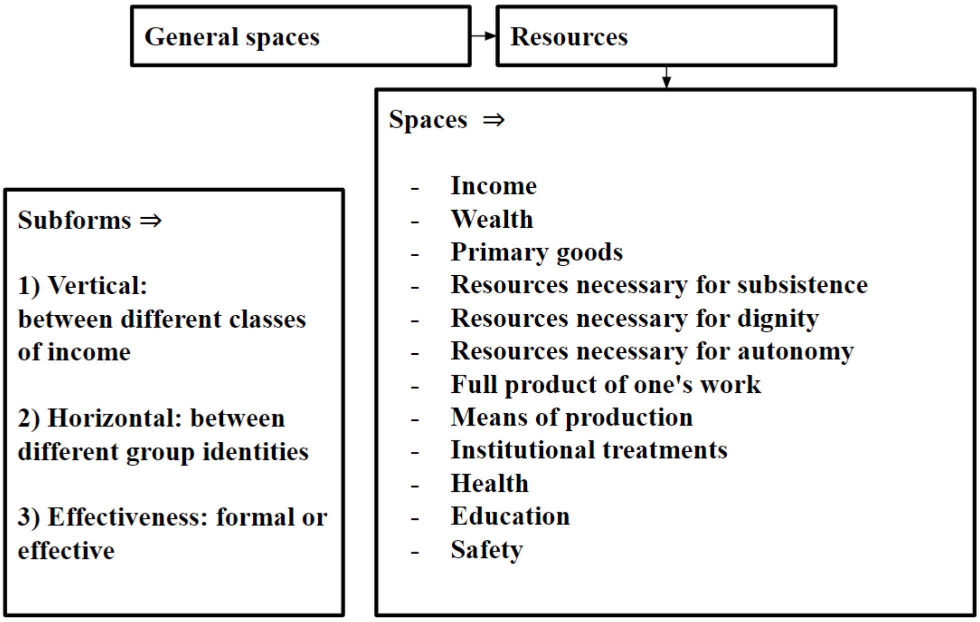

Figure 2 - Form of equality diagram 2

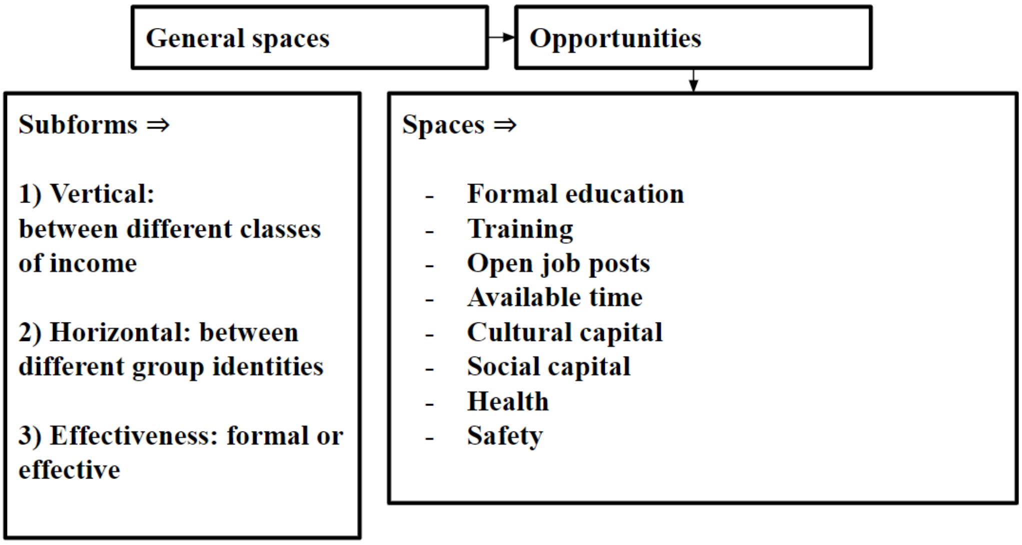

Figure 3 - Equality/inequality Diagrams

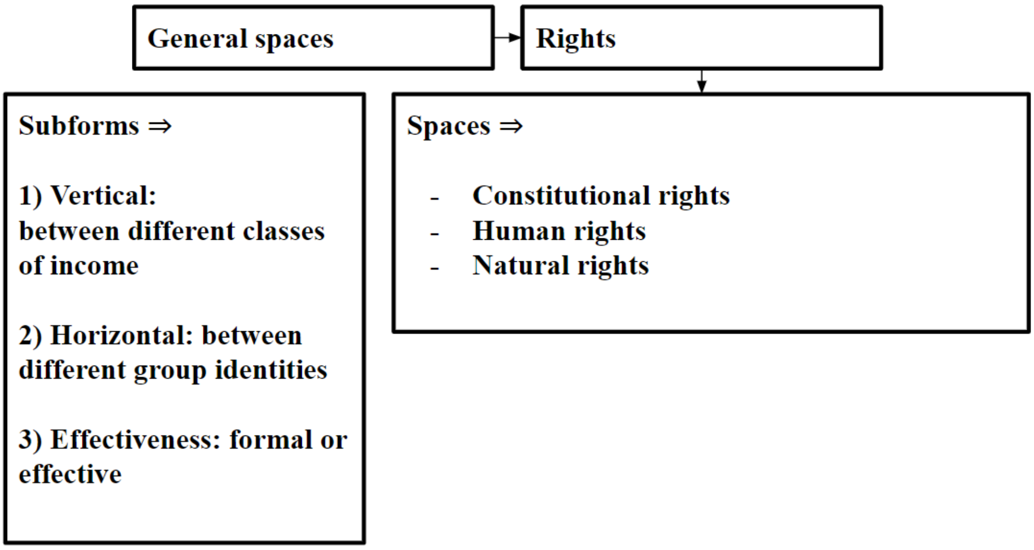

Figura 4 - Equality/inequality Diagrams

A particular space of equality might exist simultaneously in different general spaces. An example is equal access to health services, which can be understood as a resource (a service that is provided), an opportunity (of having a functional mind and body to pursue one's goals) and a right (a necessary guarantee brought about by society's political structure).

Here we must make an observation, the general space of resources does not include only tangible goods, but also institutional relations or personal life conditions. For example, John Rawls (1999), using this concept of resources, defends the promotion of "primary goods", and these include intangible goods, such as institutional treatment and "the social bases of self-respect".

Lastly, we propose a final classificatory instance, the "subform", which further describes a form of equality. Let's take equality of access to health services as an example again. It can be accompanied by the "vertical" subform, making reference to equality levels observed between and inside segments of income distribution. Questions could be asked such as "why the poorest of city A, with similar incomes to the poorest in city B, have less access to health services?"

The horizontal subform does the same but compares between and inside segments of personal identity, such as sex, race, gender, religion or ethnicity. The final subform, effectiveness, distinguishes between formal and effective forms of equality, those who are expressed in institutional norms and those that effectively exist in social life, respectively. All these subforms help bring attention to more specific, but still desirable, social goals and that justifies their inclusion in the framework.

5. Final remarks

Over the course of this article we described, analyzed and attempted to argue in favor of Amartya Sen's work on normative economics (1979, 1987, 1992, 1996), mainly by exploring the validity of some of his premises, relating them to the results and/or arguments presented in other works. These premises include the multidimensional character of equality/inequality as normative concepts and relevant social phenomena. As our contribution to this debate, we expanded on his ideas by proposing an original framework for egalitarian normative thinking, that adapts categories already present in the literature while suggesting new concepts and interpretations.

Through revision and comparative analysis of well-established ethical theories, diverse in their political leanings and in their argumentative strategies, we sought to substantiate Sen's idea of equality as a basic demand in modern moral thinking, which is the basis for his egalitarian alternative to normative economics. We found that most of these traditions do in fact demand a "form of equality", as Sen (1992) calls it, and that none of them appear incompatible with such a demand.

We argued that Sen's work not only gives a noteworthy critique of consolidated methods in mainstream normative economics (1979, 1987), but provides a proper alternative to them (1992, 1996), in the form of an open system of normative thinking that doesn't suffer from the same limitations as paretian ordinalism and classical utilitarianism, and is compatible with deontological, consequentialist and politically diverse points of view.

In the second section of the work, we dealt with Sen's (1992) account of the practical problems of inequality, concerning how relevant forms of inequality have many causes that sometimes cannot be reduced to a lack of income and/or wealth. Findings in empirical works of education economics, concerning brazilian realities, seem to be aligned with this account of inequality (in this particular case, of educational inequality).

Finally, in the third section, we brought together concepts from the works of Frankfurt (1987), Moss (2014) and Sen (1992) into a new framework, making adaptations and mixing then with original concepts in order to attempt solving what we thought to be the limitations of Sen's normative alternative, the lack of clarity in the manner which a "form of equality" relates to a "focal space" and the absence of a full account on what kinds of spaces are fit for an egalitarian moral argument.

We believe this work stands as a further affirmation of Amartya Sen's great contributions to normative thinking in the economic sciences, that invites the incorporation of his normative alternative on research and economic analysis.

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