

Capability Approach to Freedom: A Philosophical Compendium

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Abstract

As a normative approach, capability approach has been developed as a new multidisciplinary framework for pondering about well-being, development and justice. Freedom has been regarded by the capability approach thinkers as the most important element of human well-being. And the attainment of the well-being is to be measured in terms of the actualization of the capabilities of people. By capabilities they mean the freedom or opportunities to achieve the various states of 'beings and doings' that a person can engage in. In traditional philosophy freedom has been perceived as a state of being unconstrained by the erratic will of other individuals or authority. In this article, a very brief attempt will be made to understand the extent to which the capability approach could enrich our general understanding of freedom; what are its philosophical underpinnings and also the normative implications--- questions like these will be addressed briefly. While doing so I shall also try to discuss the key concepts and principles of capability approach and the role they have played in development policy and reasoning. The contribution of capability approach in understanding human development discourses is immense. This approach has urged that the idea of human development must include people's freedom of choice.

Keywords:

Capability approach;
Freedom;
Capabilities;
Human development;
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1. Introduction:

'Freedom' is one of the most contentious terms in the philosophical literature as well as that of the social sciences. In order to view freedom from its divergent plausible dimensions plenty of theoretic approaches with explicit social, political, ethical or metaphysical focus and orientations have been formulated in different traditions of thought

and ideas. Of the major approaches the one that could adequately gain the centrality of attention in the contemporary discourses of freedom is none other than the capability approach. Right from the end part of the previous century to the present date, the visible improvement brought upon in the comparative assessment of the general well-being, agency and freedom status of the individuals in respect of the concerned nations by (the adoption/application of) this approach has proved its practical relevance in numerous ways. However, starting from the period of 1970s, the development thinkers have committed themselves to broaden the connotation of the term 'development' through their several discussions and writings. As a result of this, a new field of enquiry has been emerged called 'development ethics' whose main emphasis is that material well-being is not the sole measure of development process. It is rather the qualitative embellishment of people in all human life expressions which is the real indicator of development. As such, development experts such as Paul Streeten and Amartya Sen extend their genuine interest in investigating the ethical aspects of development studies. Sen has immensely contributed in the field of development analysis by promoting the study of economic and social issues from the perspective of humanistic approach and demanding the ethical justifications of such studies. Again, he is of the opinion that the question of development has to be addressed in connection with that of freedom as he sees freedom as the ultimate medium to measure development. It has been pointed out by Séverine Deneulin, "... there is no genuine development without respecting people's freedom to make decisions about their lives."¹

2. Capability Approach

Capability approach is said to be "a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies and proposals about social change in society".² As a normative approach, it has been developed as a new multidisciplinary framework for pondering about well-being, development and justice, most prominently by Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum from 1980s onwards. 'Functionings' and 'capabilities' are the two key terms in capability approach. According to Sen, functionings are "the various things a person may value doing or being."³ And freedom to have the benefits of those functionings, are termed as capabilities. While defining Capabilities Sen writes, capabilities are "the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve. Capability is, thus, a set of

vectors of functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another...to choose from possible livings.”⁴

Capability approach contends that enrichment of human choices or freedom should be the major aim of policy making. Development, in true sense, occurs only when there is a larger possibility of people's freedom of choices. Development does not merely suggest the material prosperity of individual and nation. According to capability approach, development coextensively runs with the greater freedoms.

Capability approach is in the limelight for addressing the issues of human development from philosophical premises. Sen criticizes traditional economists for integrating human welfare with wealth, utility or happiness etc. though he did not deny the fact that these factors are essential for human development. Well-being of people cannot be measured by any single object. He claims that economic growth is not the sole goal we are pursuing as it is only instrumentally valuable. The quality of life should be determined by the degree of people's ability to achieve the objects of their desire. The upliftment of human capabilities in all domains of life- social, political, economic and cultural- should be the true indicator of successful development. Thus both capability approach and human development approach is multidimensional, since at the same moment many things weight. In this connection we can assume that the idea of human development relies on Sen's core concept of capabilities and agency. People must be the agent of their own lives. While making development policies, Sen argues, “the people have to be seen ... as being actively involved – given the opportunity – in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs.”⁵ People must be given the opportunity to participate in development activities by granting them an opportunity to decide the type of development they desire for themselves. When people as agents are given this opportunity then they will pick the best way to meet their respective preferences and choices.

3. **Freedom**

The question of freedom is central in the history of both philosophy and social sciences. Freedom is extremely important for an individual to lead a good life. In normal parlance freedom is viewed as a capability of a person to function freely (both physically and mentally) without hindrance. In its normative sense, freedom can be linked with several aspects of which the most prominent are: a) the issue of political liberty i.e. as a right of

individuals or groups in their socio-political framework; b) moral responsibility a person has towards others, and c) inner autonomy of individual persons in her thought and action. In traditional philosophy freedom has been perceived as a state of being unconstrained by the erratic will of other individuals or authority. Aristotle has famously contrasted freedom with the state of slavery. A slave is one who constantly work in accordance with the will of another, whereas a free person is not controlled by others, rather she works and leads a life in a way which pleases herself as long as she does not harm the freedom of other fellow human persons. Freedom presupposes responsibility. A person can lead a moral life only if she is responsible towards the actions of her free choice.

Commonly it is believed that the concept of individual freedom has gained its centrality of attention only in modern period. Famous classical philosophers like Plato and Socrates have failed to recognize any individual liberty apart from that of society or state. And after this, in medieval era, the dimension of freedom is shifted to that of the metaphysical beliefs. During this period freedom is signified by the service to God, that freedom means living in accordance with the directions of God.

Resurgence in religious beliefs started in 17th century which marked the beginning of modern period. People started to crave for freedom in the realm of religious beliefs. And gradually people started to question the prevailing supremacy of power exerted by the authorities existed at that time. This started with the demand of freedom in the field of trade and industries which were then controlled by the state. In this way thinkers like Hobbes and Locke started to sight freedom as the absence of external interferences. According to Hobbes, freedom means the ability to think or act in a way which someone chooses with as limited external obstacles as possible. A person is free to the extent that her actions are not hindered by external impediments. Hobbes is the systematic founder of the concept of freedom as non-interference.

Kant later criticized Hobbesian idea of freedom by claiming that freedom as non-interference posits only one of the features of freedom. Freedom does not merely require a person's unhindered ability to do what she chooses. Moral agents must be provided with free will, so that they can take the responsibilities for their own actions. A free will is that faculty of rational beings which is not controlled by the external forces. To quote Will Dudley, "Freedom must be understood as the will's ability to determine autonomously what the person chooses to do."⁶

Kant has also advanced the concept of freedom as autonomy mainly in his famous work *Foundations of Metaphysics of Morals*. By autonomy he aims to mean two different things:

a) freedom from being controlled by one's own desires, and b) freedom from external domination. As he writes in the *Foundations of Metaphysics of Morals*, "as a rational being and thus as belonging to the intelligible world, man cannot think of causality of his own will except under the idea of freedom, for independence from the determining causes of the world of senses (an independence which reason must always ascribe to itself) is freedom."⁷ The whole idea leads to the conviction that this contentious term of freedom can at least be categorized into two aspects: positive and negative. The 'positive' aspect of freedom concentrates on the ability of a person to act accordingly her will. On the other hand 'negative' freedom means that freedom which is attained by the absence of external barriers. To put simply, positive freedom signifies the internal aspects of individual agents which regulate them to act autonomously, whereas negative freedom counts the degree of interferences an agent faces from outside world. This distinction has particularly been discussed by Isaiah Berlin in his famous essay "Two concepts of Liberty". This essay has enormously influenced the thoughts of several theoreticians and has initiated serious debates in the study of freedom in socio-political philosophy.

4. **Capability Approach to Freedom:**

The Capability approach thinkers have taken into account both the positive and negative aspects of freedom. Freedom from interference and freedom of 'being and doing' according to one's choice are equally important in freedom discourses. Freedom is regarded by the capability approach thinkers as the most important element of human well-being and sees individual freedom as the "constitutive of the goodness of the society."⁸ By individual freedom they mean the freedom of an individual to select an appropriate option from all the available set of options which can be realized by her in different contexts.

While developing its theories, capability approach appears to give a major station to the individual agents. But they did never separate the individual beings from the social setting where they reside. As Sen claims that individuals are "quitessentially social creatures."⁹ Individuals are socially dependent with each other and thus their freedoms are necessarily linked and limited by political, social, cultural and economic scenario where they exist. Individuals cannot live in isolation from others. The individual capabilities can be actualized only when the agents act together. Moreover, since individual freedoms are inseparable from social surrounding, society plays a major role in stabilizing those freedoms. Thus, Sen thinks that the impression of social settings must be resolutely examined "in terms of their contribution to enhancing and guaranteeing the substantive

freedoms of individuals.”¹⁰ Society has to take the initiative of creating a platform in which people can truly realize their freedom of choices.

Expansion of freedom must be the prime concern of any development program. People must be put prior to economic welfare. Focusing in people’s lives does not necessarily mean devaluing economic importance. People in order to actualize their full aptitudes they would definitely require income and wealth. But wealth is considered to be merely a means for the attainment of higher values in life. Thus people must have the capacity of expanding what they are able to be and to do. While talking extensively about the role of freedom in development context Sen writes that “expanding the freedom that we have reason to value not only makes our life richer and more unfettered, but also allows us to be fuller social persons, exercising our own volitions and interacting with—and influencing—the world in which we live.”¹¹

Apart from Sen, Martha Nussbaum also acknowledged freedom as a major constituent of human flourishing. She enlisted following ten human capabilities¹², which she thinks would enable people to utilize the opportunities available to them and thus perform in beneficial manner.

1. Life: the ability to live a normal length of human life.
2. Bodily health: the ability to have a good and well nourished health.
3. Bodily integrity: the ability to roam freely with security against violence.
4. Sense, imagination and thought: the ability to use one’s own sense, imagination and reasoning power.
5. Emotion: the ability to freely express various kinds of emotions like, love, grief, anger, gratitude etc.
6. Practical reason: the ability to conceptualize what is best for one’s own life.
7. Affiliation: the ability to participate in social life and to be treated as dignified as others.
8. Other species: the ability to co-exist with other species and nature in the world.
9. Play: the ability to enjoy life.
10. Control over one’s environment: the ability to participate in political life, and also to enjoy a material life.

Thus by enlisting the central human capabilities, Nussbaum tried to bring into focus the contents and aptitudes in different aspects of human life. This list of human capabilities given by Nussbaum, however, plays an important role in identifying major capabilities,

this is not treated as absolute and fixed, since such treatment will threaten individual agency. Sen himself thinks that this will lead to the denial of “the possibility of fruitful participation of what should be included and why.”¹³ Regarding the difference in approach of the two thinkers Des Gasper claims that, “Sen’s version well suits a conversation with the powerful tribe of economists; Nussbaum’s better suits an engagement with the humanities and human sciences.”¹⁴ But there is no denial of the fact that both the thinkers have contributed immensely towards the study of a comprehensive and viable ethics of human development. Both of them have equally acknowledged the fact that the study of human development is not merely economical and philosophical concern, but is also a primary concern of social, political and legal debates. The association of the notion of human development with freedom will furnish a more impressive structure in future endeavors of planning the human development projects.

5. Conclusion:

Admissibly capability approach has brought a paradigmatic shift in the field of development studies by introducing ethics as a core to development. The proponents of the approach have undertaken efforts to establish that this approach minimizes most the gap between the entitlements and the actual attainments of individual freedom implicating in a better reconciliation of the individual and the societal interests. By now it has become obvious from the discussions and deliberations that the capability approach has added certain significant dimensions to the study of freedom. It has drawn attention to the role played by those factors which though may not directly fall within the bounds of the actual individual attainment or functioning but be crucial in shaping them. While an agent centric consideration remains at the core of any act of conceptualization of freedom, the manifest character of a pluralistic society, and/or that of a liberal democracy or public reasoning also can easily be figured out as indispensable elements influencing the formation and realization of the human capabilities. These features cause definitely an addition to our understanding and assessment of human situations since they tend to expand the limits of the freedom discourses by stretching them beyond the questions of the autonomy of will and the functioning of individual reasoning to that of public reasoning and democratic governance.

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