

# Capability as a Virtue of Virtues

Rajesh Kumar

Centre for Philosophy, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi  
E-mail: krajesh.jnu@gmail.com

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**Abstract**—This paper focuses on understanding the concept of capability in Amartya Sen's philosophy. The capability approach is a broad normative framework for the evaluation of individual well-being and social and political arrangements. The main characteristic of the capability approach is its focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be. According to the capability approach, the core focus of evaluations and policies should focus on what people are able to do and be, on the quality of their life, and on removing obstacles in their lives so that they have more freedom to live the kind of life that they have reason to value. The basic idea is that it is concerned with people's capabilities. It focuses on a person's substantive freedoms to be whom they want to be and do what they want to do. Under Sen's approach, capability is understood as practical opportunity. Functioning is the actual achievement of the individual, what he or she actually achieves through being or doing. The ends of well-being should be conceptualized in terms of people's capabilities to function; their effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities that they want to engage in, and become whom they want to be. It helps in the design of policies and proposals about social change in society. The notion of capability combines both functioning and freedom. Functionings are 'beings and doings', such as being nourished well, being confident, being able to travel freely, or taking part in political decisions. The core characteristic of the capability approach is its focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be, that is, on their capabilities. My intention in this paper is to introduce some of the main elements of Sen's capability approach and establish capability as virtue of virtues.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on understanding the concept of capability in Amartya Sen's philosophy. The capability approach is a broad normative framework for the evaluation of individual well-being and social and political arrangements. The main characteristic of the capability approach is its focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be. According to the capability approach, the core focus of evaluations and policies should focus on what people are able to do and be, on the quality of their life, and on removing obstacles in their lives so that they have more freedom to live the kind of life that they have reason to value. The basic idea is that it is concerned with people's capabilities. It focuses on a person's substantive freedoms to be whom they want to be and do what they want to do. Under Sen's approach, capability is understood as practical opportunity. Functioning is the actual achievement of the individual, what he or she actually achieves through being or doing. The ends of well-being should be conceptualized in

terms of people's capabilities to function; their effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities that they want to engage in, and become whom they want to be. It helps in the design of policies and proposals about social change in society. The notion of capability combines both functioning and freedom. The functionings are the constitutive elements of living. The capability approach is a proposition in which social arrangements should be evaluated according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve functionings they value. Functionings are 'beings and doings', such as being nourished well, being confident, being able to travel freely, or taking part in political decisions. The core characteristic of the capability approach is its focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be, that is, on their capabilities. My intention in this paper is to introduce some of the main elements of Sen's capability approach and establish capability as virtue of virtues.

In *Development as Freedom*, Sen focuses on the type of life that people are able to live, that is, on their capability to achieve or accomplish, on what they succeed in being or doing. Sen classifies a capability as a type of freedom that enables one to choose a lifestyle one wants to live. The core theme of Capability approach is to how am I to make myself capable of doing things to fair-well in life? According to Sen, "The capability approach purports that expanding freedom is both the primary end and principle means of public policy; consequently, public policy should focus on removing barriers to freedom that leave people with little choice or opportunity to exercise their reasoned agency. Freedom entails both processes of action and decision and actual opportunities available to people, given their personal and social circumstances".<sup>1</sup> Both the process and opportunity aspects of freedom are essential to developing a just society. This theory is rooted in a particular view of the good life, i.e., human flourishing, which values education and health intrinsically and more highly than non-intrinsic or solely instrumental social goods, such as income and wealth. Sen also suggests that "freedom is both the end and the means to development".<sup>2</sup> It also suggests that certain aspects of health are prerequisites for other types of functioning, including one's agency, or the

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<sup>1</sup> Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*, (New Delhi: OUP, 2000), p.17

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p.75

ability to lead a life one has reason to value. Capability describes what individuals are able to do and be, offering a realistic sense of their real freedom to pursue the lives they have reason to value. Thus, the objective in global development, for Sen, is to expand the freedom of people, and the way to obtain this freedom is to remove restrictions on freedoms that limit one's ability to make free choices. Treating people as agents means giving them a chance to be heard, and to be involved in collective evaluations and decisions. The challenge for social evaluation of policy alternatives is to take seriously women's evaluations as situated agents, and to identify ways of enhancing their participation in policy discourse. This would also strengthen the role of freedom in social evaluation.

Sen's work on capability approach has only recently begun to receive attention from moral and political philosophers. Against the widely held current ideology that the best means of 'development' is to increase the rate of economic growth, in contrast, Amartya Sen argues that the main purpose of development is to spread freedom to the unfree. Sen understands human well-being as a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be captured by a single indicator such as income and wealth. He dismisses the undue importance that is placed on income in evaluating dispersions of inequality. To his mind there are several important factors in discussing inequality and deprivation that are frequently overlooked. First, too much importance is accorded to income; and this undue slant has to be corrected. Second, a wider variety of informational sources have to be considered, rather to restrict one's attention on income as the sole source of information. Third, it is not just a question of the deprivation of commodities or income that characterizes the lack of well-being. Rather, Sen has reiterated that opportunities, choices and freedom are no less important than the lack of income for the deprived, the poor and the socially excluded. Indeed, freedom is an important aspect of Sen's work and he has pressed the distinction between achievements and the freedom to achieve. Sen sees freedom both as a primary end and as the principal means of development.

.For Sen, the importance of wealth in determining various levels of (un)freedom and the capabilities it provides cannot be underestimated. According to Sen, "the great inequality in wealth among nations and peoples generates various levels of un-freedom, denying to millions the basic freedom to survive".<sup>3</sup> The thrust of the argument rests in both process and actual opportunity. Further, he says that "it is necessary to avoid confining attention only to appropriate procedures (as so-called libertarians sometimes do, without worrying at all about whether some disadvantaged people suffer from systematic deprivation of substantive opportunities), or, alternatively, only to adequate opportunities (as so-called consequentialists sometimes do, without worrying about the nature of the processes that bring the opportunities about or

the freedom of choice that people have). Both processes and opportunities have importance of their own, and each aspect relates to seeing development as freedom".<sup>4</sup> Capability is the relationship between freedom and development, the ways in which freedom is both a basic constituent of development in itself and an enabling key to other aspects.

On Sen's view, well-being should be discussed in terms of person's capabilities to function. The major constituents of the capability approach are functionings and capabilities. Functionings are the 'beings' and 'doings' of a person, whereas a person's capability is the various combinations of functionings that a person can achieve. Sen argues that the right focus for assessing people's well-being and standard of living in society is neither commodities, nor characteristics, nor utility, but their 'capacity to achieve valuable functionings'.<sup>5</sup> Sen defines functionings as a number of 'doings' and 'beings' that a person manages to achieve at a time or accumulates over time: "A functioning is an achievement of a person: what he or she manages to do or to be. It reflects, as it were, a part of the 'state' of that person. It has to be distinguished from the commodities which are used to achieve those functionings... It has to be distinguished also from the happiness generated by functioning...A functioning is thus different both from (1) having goods (and the corresponding characteristics), to which it is posterior and (2) having utility (in the form of happiness resulting from that functioning), to which it is, in an important way, prior".<sup>6</sup> Living may be seen as consisting of a set of interrelated 'functionings', consisting of beings and doings. Sen, nonetheless, insists that functionings should be the basis of assessment of a person's well-being. A functioning is, roughly, anything that a person succeeds in doing or being. For example, working as a rickshaw puller and being well-nourished; a capability is an opportunity to achieve a particular functioning, the opportunity to work as a rickshaw puller if one so chooses. According to Sen, a person must have effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities that s/he wants to engage in, and be whom s/he want to be. These beings and doings, which Sen calls achieved functionings, together constitute what makes a life valuable. Functionings include working, resting, being literate, being healthy, being part of a community, being respected, and so forth

Sen defines capabilities as the freedom that a person is actually able to do and to be or as a wide range of capacities and opportunities required for human well-being as a whole. As he puts it: "Closely related to the notion of functionings is that of the capability to function. It represents the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.17

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.78

<sup>6</sup> Sen, Amartya "Capability and Well-Being" in A. K. Sen, & M. Nussbaum, *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.31

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.15

functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another".<sup>7</sup>

Sen's concept of capability and functionings has two dimensions. The first, capabilities, represents a person's freedom to pursue well-being and incorporates the role of human agency. It is not possession of commodities or perceived satisfaction gives a measure of well-being, but our capability to make use of our possessions. To focus on capability means emphasizing what goods enable a person to do, and not the goods in themselves. The second, functionings, represents achieved well-being in terms of the valuable doings and beings which are basic to human life. Functioning and capability are what matters. What makes us value our asset is not the fact that we perhaps own it, but that we can use it to when we want to.

Sen argues for a focus on the functioning space rather than on the space of basic needs since, "the adequacy of the economic means cannot be judged independently of the actual possibilities of 'converting' incomes and resources into capability to function".<sup>8</sup> Sen takes us away from a narrow material and market definition of human need. It considers the relationship between means and ends in achieving well-being. Thus, he puts us on the table for discussion those factors that shape the possibilities for converting resources into well-being. These factors would include the structural exercise of power in the form of gender, race or class discrimination and the power of institutions to control access to resources.

The capability approach purports that "expanding freedom is both the primary end and principle means of public policy; consequently, public policy should focus on removing barriers to freedom that leave people with little choice or opportunity to exercise their reasoned agency. Freedom entails both processes of action and decision and actual opportunities available to people, given their personal and social circumstances."<sup>9</sup> Capability describes what individuals are able to do and be, offering a realistic sense of their real freedom to pursue the lives they have reason to value. From a capability perspective, exercising personal freedom and participating in social choice should shape and influence policy and institutions. It is reasonable to think that greater freedoms do in fact enhance people's ability to be effective and influential. After all, the more freedom one has to explore a multitude of options, the more opportunities one can create for oneself. For example, those who have the financial freedom to obtain a university degree have increased their opportunity to qualify for higher paying job, and, as a result, increase their potential for a more influential career than those who do not obtain a university degree.

<sup>7</sup>Sen, Amartya. *Inequality Reexamined*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.40

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.109

<sup>9</sup> Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*, p.17

Sen emphasizes that the main function of capability is to reflect on a person's freedom – the substantial freedom – to achieve valuable functionings than to reflect a person's capacity or powers as a human being, and the importance of evaluating a person's freedom by referring to the outcomes and processes that he has reasons to value and seek. "Capability is primarily a reflection of the freedom to achieve valuable functionings. It concentrates directly on freedom as such rather than on the means to achieve freedom, and it identifies the real alternatives we have...it can be read as a reflection of substantive freedom".<sup>10</sup>

Sen asserts that people can freely either choose to realize basic functionings or not when basic capabilities are available to them in a context of social justice. For example, a person with capability of being nourished might choose to fast for the religious ritual or political purposes. As Sen puts it: "With reference to responsible adults it is more appropriate to see the claims of individuals on the society (or the demands of equality or justice) in terms of freedom to achieve rather than actual achievement. If the social arrangements are such that a responsible adult is given no less freedom (in terms of set comparisons) than others, but he still wastes the opportunities and ends up worse off than others, it is possible to argue that no unjust inequality is necessarily involved. If that view is taken, then the direct relevance of capability (as opposed to achieved functionings) will be easy to assert".<sup>11</sup> Freedom can be understood in terms of a person's well-being and agency freedom on one hand, and its role of development on the other.

Capability is mainly a reflection of a person's freedom to achieve various beings and doings that he/she has reasons to value. However, a person's freedom to do and to be is not confined to his/her own well-beings. A person's freedom of doing and being can also be understood in terms of his/her agency aspect, which refers to a person's broader freedom to bring about the achievements he/she values and which are associated with the well-being of others. In other words, the goals or the reasons that motivate a person to act are not always derived from his own self-interests. A person can also be motivated by altruistic goals for the sake of which he may sacrifice his fortune, friends, and even life itself. For example, in Indian society we see many doctors give up their jobs and voluntarily go to the tribal areas to give the local tribals medical treatment

Sen offers a rich conception of development that goes well beyond considerations of material wealth. Sen presents development as a process of expanding freedoms people have reason to value. Some of the freedoms people have reason to value include economic freedom, access to education and healthcare, and access to political and civil rights. In Sen's view, these are the best indicators of development. Involved in the expansion of freedoms is a limiting of the sources of

<sup>10</sup> Sen, Amartya. *Inequality Reexamined*, p.49

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.148

unfreedoms. Sources of unfreedoms include lack of access to healthcare, clean water, sanitation, political and civil rights, and lack of gender equality and adequate income. According to Sen, these are the primary factors that limit freedom. Hence, we see that the capabilities approach is very broad in scope and measure, and takes into consideration a variety of factors necessary for development.