

# Everyday Autonomy: Applying the Capability Approach to the Case of People with Disabilities

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the topic of everyday autonomy for people with disabilities. Autonomy, freedom, and choice are fundamental factors for any human in modern society. I argue that the capability approach provides the best method for ensuring that an individual lives in a free, equal, and just society. People with disabilities are often left out in theories analyzing the just society because they do not represent an idealized version of human reality. I primarily use the concept of capabilities provided by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum because they respect the diversity of human life, individual choice, and autonomy. They reflect on the vulnerable groups in society and define a theory that includes specific needs, including those of people with disabilities. Everyday autonomy reflects the fact that many people are vulnerable and dependent on others, and the capability approach reflects the notion that choice and freedom to choose is a fundamental aspect for every human being.

*Keywords:* people with disabilities, capability approach, autonomy, freedom, justice, equality

## *Introduction*

The idea of people having autonomy is deeply rooted in the understanding of human beings. Every human being desires to make autonomous decisions and to be independent. Whether external or other forces influence our thinking and decisions is an entirely different question.

The problem with the current, primarily academic, description of autonomy is that it often fails to pay attention to an everyday element of choice. When an individual thinks of autonomy, he often thinks of a simplified version. He does not reflect concepts such as free will, determinism, or similar philosophical ideas. Sometimes, the concept can best be understood through

applying it in practice to day-to-day situations. In order to maximize the options of people with disabilities, there needs to be a focus on real opportunities and an everyday understanding of autonomy.

The idea of people having choices and opportunities is deeply rooted in the capability approach, formulated and developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. The individual approach, respect for human rights, dignity, and equality are the foundation stones within the capability approach. We argue that having a simpler and more cohesive version of autonomy is crucial for people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups in general. We refer to this description as everyday autonomy and chose people with disabilities because they are a vulnerable group and depend on various forms of support to achieve the same quality of life as other groups in society. Many people can feel socially excluded<sup>1</sup> by not having the same opportunities as others without several support mechanisms. For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, many people experienced a difference in access to proper health, education, or social services. The result was that many felt they were losing control over their lives and had their freedom and everyday autonomy reduced. The contemporary problems demonstrate how vulnerable our society is, and that we must always prepare to mitigate various negative impacts to ensure the highest quality of life for all citizens. For instance, our autonomy also depends on the organization of the state and the structure of its institutions. If the institution is corrupt, poorly structured, and dysfunctional, we can expect that it will severely impact our quality of life and even the autonomy of our decisions.

### *The Impact of Vulnerability on Everyday Autonomy*

One of the many reasons authors tend to ignore people with disabilities is that they represent the vulnerability of human life. Vulnerability is often associated with negative connotations of dependency, uselessness, and weakness. People with disabilities often require support, services, and resources that are very specific and targeted toward their needs on the basis of their diagnosis. Vulnerability is often perceived as something specific to this group. However, that is not the case because every human being is vulnerable, was vulnerable, or can become vulnerable in the future. We were all dependent

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<sup>1</sup> Some experts define social exclusion as follows: “an individual is socially excluded if he or she does not participate in key activities of the society in which he or she lives” (Burchardt et al., 2002, pp. 30–31). They also conclude that social exclusion is not restricted to a place; it is relative: “relative, that is, to the time and place in question. It is not restricted to citizens of a particular state” (Burchardt et al., 2002, p. 31). Similarly, in a report about social exclusion by Ruth Levitas and colleagues, it is said that: “social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole.” (Levitas et al., 2007, p. 9).

on someone when we were children (parents or state), and we are all dependent on the state when we grow old or when we get sick or have a serious diagnosis. Dependency on others and being vulnerable are not conditions specific only to people with disabilities. The fact that all human beings are vulnerable to different external and internal factors improves our capacity to form ideas and arguments about the organizational structure of society. Eva Feder Kittay argues that we cannot label dependency as something special because it is a natural part of our existence. We all are dependent at some point in our lives (Kittay, 1999, p. 29).

Ethics of care provides an alternative to traditional thinking about intervention and support for various socially excluded groups. For instance, Eva Feder Kittay interprets care ethics as a critique of modern liberal theories of justice<sup>2</sup> that often rely on idealized definitions of human beings. Ethics of care provides a different perspective on human life, justice, rights, and diversity, and reflects the harsh realities that many theories ignore or miss. Vulnerability and dependency, Kittay reminds us, start from the very beginning of our lives, and continue through different stages as we grow older (Kittay, 1999, p. 29).

Kittay focuses on a new element in her analysis: the relationship between the caregiver and care receiver, as she understands care work as a form of employment (Kittay, 1999, p. 30). The importance of the relationship between the caregiver and the care receiver is often underestimated. Some experts argue that we cannot ignore the relationships between individuals as they shape our identity and perception of self. We are always in relationships; we are always connected to other human beings, and we cannot ignore the fact that this influences our perceptions (Davy, 2019, p. 111). Dependency is a normal part of human existence. It is not a unique condition specific to a few individuals (Davy, 2019, p. 107). Everyone, at some point, relies on the state, family, institutions, environment, and other factors. Many philosophers throughout history have recognized the importance of having relations with other people and of how we define ourselves in relation to others. All human beings are self-determining and autonomous actors. They need to be recognized as such to ensure their well-being (Mackenzie, 2014, pp. 41). However, the fact that we are autonomous humans does not diminish the fact that we are inherently vulnerable and dependent. All individuals need shelter, clothes, nutrition, good quality of life, access to services, social interaction, recognition, and much more (Mackenzie, 2014, p. 54).

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<sup>2</sup> The most problematic issue for many liberal theories of justice is that they focus on idealized conditions and glorify reason/rationality as the only way to approach the decision-making process. For instance, John Rawls relies on the idea that human beings will make rational choices while deciding their conditions for a just and equal society (Rawls, 1999). Some experts criticize Rawls for approaching the conditions of society in a utopistic and idealized scenario, and argue that he is excluding groups with specific needs as he deems topics like disability to be a medical issue, not a social one (Simplican, 2016, pp. 83-90).

People with disabilities are in a sensitive position as they face more discrimination and prejudices and are vulnerable to many external factors while trying to live an autonomous life. This chapter aims to demonstrate that, despite various external or internal forces, they can still be autonomous and make their life choices freely. They act on their autonomy and decide how to use their freedom without additional restrictions from society. Autonomy, in our understanding, refers to a person's everyday experience and is ascribed to the intuitive/subjective sphere of any individual. The fact that somebody makes a personal choice based on their decision and reflection is essential for everyday autonomy.

### *Capability as a Means of Improving Everyday Autonomy*

The capability approach presents an excellent tool for approaching a diverse society with various needs, characteristics, desires, and destinies. Dignity in life is a crucial element for authors utilizing the capability approach. Sen presents two key concepts in his theory: capabilities and functionings.<sup>3</sup> Sen claims that functionings as a concept have “distinctly Aristotelian roots, reflect the various things a person may value doing or being. The valued functionings may vary from elementary ones, such as being adequately nourished and being free from avoidable disease, to very complex activities or personal states, such as being able to take part in the life of the community and have self-respect” (Sen, 2000, p. 75). Capabilities are defined by Sen as an “alternative combination of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve. Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles). For example, an affluent person who fasts may have the same functioning achievement in terms of eating or nourishment as a destitute person who is forced to starve, but the first person does have a different ‘capability set’ than the second (the first can choose to eat well and be well nourished in a way the second cannot)” (Sen, 2000, p. 75). The choice, in our understanding, reflects the everyday autonomy of a human being. Freedom is deciding what one wants without having to be forced to choose otherwise. However, having options is a crucial element in the capability approach. Capabilities represent our freedom to determine the various actions, lifestyles, and opportunities a person can have. Freedom, in the context of everyday life, is understood as acting on our intuitive autonomy.

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<sup>3</sup> Sen also worked on economics and the standard of living. For instance, in his work *On Ethics and Economics* (1999), he describes the connection between ethics and the economy and how economics impact the freedom and autonomy of the individual. The economy, capital, and wealth greatly impact the quality of life and the choices one can make in life. Freedom and autonomy are directly influenced by the number of resources one has at one's disposal. Later, he developed these ideas and expanded them in his works on the capability approach and justice.

We stray from the idealized version of autonomy, which always describes a human being as reasonable and rational. As already mentioned, we cannot ignore the fact that, although we are influenced by external forces, we can be autonomous in our lives. Sen points out that, despite all the improvements in our society, it is still disturbing to see how many people do not have the basic freedom to determine their lives (Sen, 2010, p. 226). Sen points out that the ability to choose, to determine one's life, and to be autonomous and different from others is crucial for a good quality of life (Sen, 2010). We have a diverse society; people have different preferences, characteristics, and predispositions. Sen's approach is very distinct from others because he values one's preferences and believes that one's autonomy should always be respected without discriminating against people with specific needs.

The fundamental question is whether a person can be truly autonomous in everyday actions if their choice is limited by external factors such as lack of resources or opportunities. We must then ask what it means to have everyday autonomy. For Sen, it is crucial to allow people to decide with little interference and leave them to make choices they deem valuable in life or want to make themselves (Sen, 2010, p. 230). We cannot decide for other people how to perceive life and what choices might lead to a good life. For Sen, there is a plurality of good lives (Sen, 2000, pp. 76–77). Diversity and plurality have to be reflected when it comes to everyday autonomy and making decisions related to one's individual preferences.

Naturally, people can make poor decisions and mistakes or regret their choices. When thinking about choices, autonomy, and freedom, many often identify rationality as a key aspect when being autonomous in decisions. But people do not need to make the right or best choices to be true to themselves. Sen, in his thinking about freedom, dignity, choices, justice, equality, and other phenomena, starts from a non-ideal perspective that reflects the "real world" and does not try to idealize the conditions of human existence. The difference in the capability approach is that it focuses on choices rather than on simple outcomes; people ought to have a choice to act (Robeyns & Pierik, 2007, p. 141). The moral thing to do is to let people make their choices.

There are other variants of the capability approach. Martha Nussbaum highlights the idea of flourishing and human dignity as something central for all human beings (Nussbaum, 2007, p. 182). Nussbaum, in her conceptual framework, particularly focuses on people with disabilities because they are often excluded from the theories of justice as they do not represent the majority of the population. The main difference between Sen and Nussbaum is that Sen does not believe the capabilities can be narrowed down to a specific universal list because society is very diverse, while Nussbaum identifies ten central human functional capabilities. Similarly to Sen, Nussbaum criticizes

the idealized<sup>4</sup> theories of justice that focus on describing a perfectly just society. For Nussbaum, capabilities are the best avenue for creating a just and equal society. Capabilities are understood as a form of freedom in which the individual can choose what to do. When we think of autonomy, we associate it with the diversity of human life and with flourishing. Nussbaum explains that human flourishing is related to Aristotelian thinking and that in flourishing, one can reach one's potential (Nussbaum, 2007). For Nussbaum, this is a crucial aspect because people with disabilities are equal citizens, who need to be treated in a way that does not discriminate against their otherness (Nussbaum, 2007, pp. 98-99). Nussbaum does not exclude from her understanding of just society even people with the most difficult diagnosis, because everyone deserves a life with dignity. Nussbaum argues, "relying on the intuitive idea of human dignity, that the capabilities in question should be pursued for each and every person, treating each as an end and none as a mere tool of the ends of others" (Nussbaum, 2007, p. 70). Nussbaum claims that her approach "uses the idea of a threshold level of each capability, beneath which it is held that truly human functioning is not available to citizens; the social goal should be understood in terms of getting citizens above this capability threshold" (Nussbaum, 2007, p. 71). For instance, this means that every person should have a certain level of capabilities that allows them to live in dignified conditions. A person with severe physical disabilities, who needs specific medical equipment, medications, and assistance in order to obtain the same quality of life as other citizens, should have the options and resources to have these at their disposal. Both Nussbaum and Sen agree that people should live dignified lives and that society should create just conditions for them to flourish. For our analysis, it is sufficient to say that the capability approach uses many of the same elements as ethics of care as it reflects on all human beings' vulnerability and dependency and considers it a natural characteristic of human existence.

Another expert on capabilities, Ingrid Robeyns, demonstrates that the capability approach can increase human well-being and quality of life for many vulnerable groups. She argues that we can measure specific improvements in quality of life and take different steps to ensure that we distribute resources to consider the particular needs of individuals (Robeyns, 2006, p. 366). Respecting the plurality of our world is one of the most crucial aspects inherently contained in the capability approach (Robeyns, 2006, p. 371). Robeyns recognizes the limits of the philosophical approach and acknowledges that different external forces<sup>5</sup> influence the individual. She points out

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<sup>4</sup> There is an ongoing debate about the difference between ideal and non-ideal theories of justice. Many authors argue that such theories, as presented by John Rawls and his veil of ignorance, presuppose idealized conditions that do not reflect real-life conditions in society. Rawls is also guilty of creating an idealized version of an always rational and reasonable human. For more on this debate, see (Levy 2016; Simplican, 2016; Farrelly 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Robeyns, in her later works, also recognizes the impact of the environment on human beings, as it is undeniable that this factor also shapes our self-perception and decisions (Robeyns, 2017, pp. 184-186).

that we must distinguish between philosophy and social theories because we must always distinguish between the types of question we are reflecting on, whether philosophical or following other scientific methods. (Robeyns, 2006, pp. 372). Robeyns represents those contemporary experts on the capability approach that consistently improve the theory and reflect on the new issues stemming from scientific development.

The capability approach presents an interesting take on the freedom, choice, and autonomy of people with specific needs as it reflects on knowledge from ethics of care and other fields dealing with vulnerability, dependency, and relationships with other human beings. Our analysis focuses on the analysis of the everyday autonomy of people with disabilities. The capability approach recognizes the need to make individual choices and to have individual preferences and autonomy: to be autonomous, to have values, ideas, and notions that differ from others, and to recognize the diversity and plurality of our world without diminishing other individual preferences and choices. The essence of the capability approach lies in its ability to allow people with unique characteristics to live independently and to be true to themselves.

### *Conclusion*

This paper concentrates on the analysis of everyday autonomy and people with disabilities. The capability approach is useful because it reflects society's diversity and plurality. This paper started with a description of vulnerability and dependency to demonstrate that disability and other health or mental issues are natural states in life. The capability approach shifts the focus away from an idealized interpretation of justice, freedom, autonomy, and equality and reflects on the capacity of every human being to achieve their potential and what they value in life. We often think of oppression and lack of freedom when dealing with autonomy because many groups lack resources, opportunities, or basic freedom to fully use their potential. The lack of autonomy stems from the fact that various internal dispositions (physical or mental disability, family background, immediate surroundings, etc.) and external forces (societal, political, environmental, etc.) prevent people with disabilities from having the same options as other groups in society. The capability approach provides a useful tool for ensuring that the autonomy of people with disabilities is recognized because respect for others, their choice, and the options to choose from must be considered while designing a just, free, and equal society. It is possible that not every theorist of justice will agree that the state should provide resources and support to people with specific needs. However, if we want to give people the same opportunities and chances in life, it is significant to devise a concept that allows a person

to use their potential to the fullest. Amartya Sen proposed a concept that embraces people with unique needs and preferences. The duty of the state, country, or global institutions is to ensure that we design an environment where people can be autonomous in their everyday life, to make choices based on their preferences and not on a predesigned set of options. That people still face many barriers could be observed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Limitations on choices, freedom, and autonomy are still present as many countries do not provide systems of support for vulnerable groups. Many still have prejudices and stigmatize people based on their predispositions or diversity. However, the capability approach significantly contributes to the debate on vulnerable groups as it includes unique needs, recognizes vulnerability, and focuses on individual preferences.

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