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# **The Capability Approach to Development: Amartya Sen's Understanding of Freedom**

*Ginish Cheruparambil*

*Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune 411037*

**Abstract:** As regards freedom, Amartya Sen's thesis is simple. Freedom is both the primary end and the principal means of development. Insofar as many have been critical of approaches to development that emphasize growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), rising personal incomes, industrialization, technological advance, or social modernization, we should be glad that such a distinguished economist is apparently tooting our own horn. Yet there are some issues in Sen's basic assumptions about the nature of people and his lack of a feasible prescription for reaching his stated goals that make Development as Freedom in need of some modifications and nuances.

The center of Sen's vision is what he calls a 'capability approach', where the basic concern of human development is 'our capability to lead the kind of lives we have reason to value,' rather than the usual concentration on rising GDP, technical progress, or industrialization. His approach 'inescapably focuses on the agency and judgment of individuals' including their capability, responsibility, and opportunity. Raising human capability is good because it improves the choices, wellbeing, and freedom of people. Further, human capability plays a significant role in influencing social change and in influencing economic production. In this context, the author proposes a creative interpretation and criticism of Sen's approach to freedom.

**Keywords:** Amartya Sen, freedom, development, freedom as means and end of development, capability approach, democracy.

## **1. Introduction**

Amartya Sen argues that the overarching goal of development is expanding people's choices. Yet, freedom as a goal is ambiguous as the notion is clouded by idioms of freedom dating as far back as Ancient Greece. Thus Amartya Sen claims to have Universalist presumptions, this dissertation discusses and analyzes Amartya Sen's notion of freedom. For this purpose the conceptual meaning of freedom is treated as both autonomous and mutable as it allows for a historically and philosophically sounded approach to its study. The method applied to trace the different notions of freedom is the one of conceptual history. "The findings indicate that Amartya Sen's notion of freedom is formulated under Mac Callum's widely accepted meta-theory of one concept of freedom, for Amartya Sen seeks universal validation of his democratic values based on individual agency." Since freedom is the principle of democracy, Amartya Sen's thought is rooted in a democratic tradition that advocates universal standards drawn from the classics.

## **2. Relevance of the Study**

During his inaugural speech in 1949, President Truman made explicit the dream of creating a world of prosperity brought about by technology and economic growth. At the beginning the task seemed simple enough, but over the decades, the level of complexities encountered by the developers has made them rethink their strategies over and over again. It has been more than sixty years since different projects were put in motion. Yet the gap between the wealthy and the poor has gradually widened. Consequentially over the past three decades, there has been a critical awakening regarding the idea of development in all its shapes and forms. Criticism has often been directed to mainstream development – the one in line with modernization theory, which usually measures development through levels of industrialization and GNP.

In response to the criticism, the UNDP redirected its approach under the advice of the Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq and the Indian economist Amartya Sen. In 1990 the UNDP published the first Human Development Report and introduced the Human Development Index. For the first time, development was described as providing choices and freedoms expected to have widespread outcomes. This new approach to development practices was based on Amartya Sen's academic work on capabilities and functionings. In recognition of his enormous input, Amartya Sen was awarded the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for reintroducing an ethical dimension to the field of development. A year later, Amartya Sen's interest in the problems of society's most deprived members led him to publish *Development as Freedom*, a book in which he summarizes – in a language accessible to all – his studies on welfare economics and social choice theory. There, Amartya Sen explains why freedom ought to be the overarching goal of development.

The concept of freedom is a much disputed subject. What freedom really is, is in actual fact an ancient debate dating as far back as the Ancient Greeks. Hence, although Amartya Sen elaborates on his definition of freedom – and hence development –, it seems to me that a historical and philosophical explanation is deemed necessary to make intelligible Amartya Sen's notion of freedom. A historical analysis is mainly due because the notion of freedom had evolved along other concepts and there is more than one notion of freedom. Therefore, in order to elucidate Amartya Sen's conceptualization, it is necessary to trace the different concepts of freedom and place Amartya Sen in this debate. Furthermore, it may be noted that Amartya Sen is seeking a philosophical explanation and so it is my assumption and belief that Amartya Sen is, besides being an economist, a philosopher also. Through all his studies, Amartya Sen makes normative claims by alluding to the value thoughts of classical, medieval, modern, and contemporary philosophers. Thus, in the many ways one could analyze his academic works and if one really desires to grasp his ethical

stand and basis, Amartya Sen ought to be read foremost as a philosopher. As a matter of fact, his concerns are rooted in the intrinsic value of notions such as democracy, freedom, equality, and justice with “a strong universalist presumption”<sup>1</sup>. In other words, the primary question with which Amartya Sen approaches his academic studies is “what is politically, socially, and economically right?” His endeavor is then the concern of the philosopher. For these reasons, it seems to me that both historical and philosophical explanations are rendered indispensable to make intelligible not only Amartya Sen’s conceptualization, but the concept of freedom itself.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

How to study concepts is still a current controversial debate. Different approaches to the study of conceptual meaning will differ according to the views of the relationship between language and the world. Nonetheless, I tried to approach the issue from a historically sound philosophical stand. However, from this point on, I was not only dealing with a linguistic debate about the nature of concepts, but I also had to confront a heated debate that took place a few decades ago between historians of political thought and political philosophers regarding methodology in the study of the history of ideas. Since the mid twentieth century, many scholars studying the history of political thought took a “linguistic turn,” which was primarily a response against the semantic interpretation of texts. The traditional semantic approach, roughly described, regards words and concepts as signifiers referring to an object of thought. Hence, concepts do not exist independently of that object. The objectivity of concepts is placed in the fact that concepts “put us in touch with things, and this referential capacity is in turn a condition of their possible meaning”.<sup>2</sup>

Due to these properties, conceptual meaning is universal and timeless. This further implies that the study of the history of ideas of Amartya Sen is essentially the study of “superficial variations in semantic content of no fundamental importance to the study of

political thought”.<sup>3</sup> This approach gave thinkers and philosophers strong foundations to theorize and philosophize while undermining the historical change in contextual meaning. This approach also made possible definitive ideas about Amartya Sen’s “nature,” “truth,” “reason” and other such concepts that have served to promote ideological thinking and dogmatic beliefs.

The traditional semantic approach did not only have implications in the interpretation of texts, but it went much further concerning more generally epistemological and methodological approaches. Thus, academics from a variety of different disciplines stood up against this approach and came up with methodological alternatives to the study of history and the history of ideas. Among the most prominent historians and philosophers are Michel Foucault, Reinhart Koselleck, Gilles Deleuze, Richard Rorty, Heyden White, and Dominick La Capra. Concerning specifically the interpretation of texts, we can distinguish Isaiah Berlin, Gerald Cohen, John Pocock, Quentin Skinner, Leo Strauss, and Charles Taylor. These scholars developed different methods of interpretation based on assumptions of conceptual meaning and language. Some scholars like Skinner regard conceptual meaning as deriving from their actual usage in a given context. Other academics such as Taylor regard conceptual meaning as deriving from an expression of human experience. Scholars such as Koselleck and Foucault argues “against the view that conceptual meaning derives from the consciousness of the subjects,”<sup>4</sup> which basically challenges the possibility to trace conceptual meanings altogether.

In the light of all this and following my preliminary assumptions, I will follow Bartelson’s steps and attempt to overcome the debate of conceptual meaning and language in the study of the history of political thought for the sake of political philosophy. Currently, political philosophy is in decadence mainly because of a successful revolution against the tendency of classical semantics and hermeneutics to locate meaning in objects and subjects respectively, a revolution which was propelled by the notion that

meaning resides inside language and nowhere else. Yet this was a revolution in favour of history which left us with few resources with which to philosophize, lest we wanted to backslide. For this reason, my aim is to recover a view of political philosophy that will elucidate Amartya Sen's philosophical stand as well as call attention to the importance this disciple deserves.

#### **4. The Notion of Freedom in Modernity**

We are often told that the Modern age represents Amartya Sen's thought as an abrupt change in political thought. To a great extent, this is true. This is not to say that these notions were not there before, but the belief of bringing about ideal societies is strictly modern. Before modernity, most thinkers understood the human condition as limited. One could have only limited control and was only able to manipulate nature, society, and people to a certain degree. In other words, any notion of freedom in absolute terms was a condition that could only be achieved by a god. What took place at the eve of modernity in the West was the "demythologization" of the world. "The planning and rationalization of nature and society became the norm. Gradually, most political philosophers started to believe that the world was conceivable through reason alone. Reason, science, and technology would enable man to achieve what before seemed impossible. This is what was on the air at time political philosophers wrote about freedom. Of course, some of them did not see reason at odds with God, but one should rely on science and empirical observation rather than the Bible or the Ancient thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle."<sup>5</sup> Among the earliest empiricists, we find, most notably, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and David Hume. Their most distinguished successors are, William Godwin, Jeremy Bentham, James Mill and his son, John Stuart Mill. They are also known as thinkers of the utilitarian tradition.

## 5. The Notion of Freedom in Amartya Sen

In order to discuss freedom, Amartya Sen argues that “it is very important to see freedom in a sufficiently broad way”.<sup>6</sup> This is because freedom is an innately diverse notion. Without hesitation, we can state that Amartya Sen regards freedom as a multi-layered notion or notions that has or have acquired meaning over time. However, Amartya Sen does not perceive this as an impediment to philosophize about the concept of freedom. In actual fact, Amartya Sen has Universalist presumptions, in which he calls for a coherent framework for reasoned social assessment regardless of high degrees of diversity. This way of reasoning is parallel to MacCallum’s call for one concept of freedom as it is necessary to have set conditions for intelligibly establishing a dialogue about the concept of freedom. Moreover, Amartya Sen’s thought is particularly aligned with Ancient thought – something highlighted by Strauss – as he sees how parts relate to a larger whole, which illustrates the principle of unity underlying diversity.

*Development as Freedom* is not a philosophical work as such. The audience Amartya Sen sought to reach was not a philosophical one. Rather, Amartya Sen sought to reach the common person, and hence the language and ideas are made accessible to all. For that reason, we can only speculate about Amartya Sen’s hermeneutics when drawing from this book. I would argue that Amartya Sen believes in a unifying principle as a given, but it can also be that he sees it as a necessary condition to elucidate social affairs, especially considering value-laden notions. It would seem that values are predominantly vulnerable when not advocating in a Universalist framework as seen from our context. This assumption would explain why, for Amartya Sen, enhancing individual freedom as a social commitment, is rooted in the unity of the individual as a whole.

### 5.1 Individual Freedom

For Amartya Sen, freedom comes to rest on the individual. Thus, our author states that “[t]he analysis of development as put for-

ward by Amartya Sen treats the freedoms of individuals as the basic building blocks”.<sup>7</sup> In Amartya Sen’s eyes, freedom is an ambiguous term that can only be fully grasped in terms of individual freedom, specifically looking at the real person, the material reality of it. According to Amartya Sen, freedom can be reflected in the person’s capability, which is provided by both processes and opportunities.

## ***5.2 Capabilities***

Capabilities are a central idea of Amartya Sen’s notion of freedom. Amartya Sen views capabilities as types of freedoms. In this Amartya Sense, Amartya Sen’s language – the way in which he introduces his ideas – is the language of freedom. Amartya Sen argues that capabilities refer to what a person can do, that is “the ability to do this or that” such as being able to nourish yourself or finding a job. Likewise, capabilities also refer to the ability to be, namely “the various ‘functionings’ he or she can achieve”. Therefore, functionings embody elements of a state of a person, especially what she or he can manage to be or do.

When we speak of capabilities, we refer to “the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve” and the choice the person desires to make. Then quality of life is evaluated according to the capability to accomplish a valuable function. “[O]r, less formally put, [capability is] the freedom to achieve various lifestyles”.<sup>8</sup>

## ***5.3 Individual Agency***

Amartya Sen understands individual freedom as a capability in which the person decides and takes responsibility of his or her own life. He calls this view of individual freedom, individual agency. An agent is “someone that acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well”.<sup>9</sup> Then, taking in account agency is regarding individuals as reasonable beings capable of evaluating



choices. However, this valuation process, according to Amartya Sen, goes beyond rational choice since individuals make decisions based not solely on preferences, but based on intrinsic values. From this perspective, agents are seen as responsible adults with the right to decision making and action to impact their own lives. For Amartya Sen, fostering responsibility encourages individuals not only to watch their own behavior, but it also makes people relate to “the miseries that we see around us and that lie within our power to help remedy” that is to bring out one’s own responsibility.

#### ***5.4 Development as Freedom***

From what is described above, we now can be sure that “development as freedom” is not mainly concerned with economic growth, but with individual agency. As Amartya Sen quotes from the very beginning of the Nicomachean Ethics, “wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else”. What we seek with the use of wealth is, according to Amartya Sen, to live the lives we have reason to value and this is where the importance of wealth rests. Therefore, when measuring development, we do not do it in terms of GNP or levels of industrialization; we do it in terms of individual agency. Poverty is accordingly a deprivation of basic capabilities, rather than merely low income. From this perspective, measuring development becomes an extremely complex task since not all individuals enjoy the same freedom within a society.

Furthermore, this understanding of freedom has two major implications. First, the difference between developed and developing countries based on levels of industrialization or GNP – as useful as it may be for other purposes or levels of analysis – does not reflect the degree of individual agency in any society. It can of course reflect economic circumstances such as a strong middle class in terms of purchasing power, but it tells us nothing about the absolute purchasing power of the poorest in a given society, let alone individual agency. Poverty then cannot be intelligibly

identified in terms of GNP. As such, Amartya Sen argues that poverty can be sensibly identified in terms of capability deprivation and highlights that this approach concentrates on deprivations that are intrinsically important.

Following this reasoning then, it would be a mistake to take economic growth as the end of development. For wealth is only a means to an end – the end being the things we have reason to value, which Amartya Sen calls them substantive freedoms. Consequently, as Amartya Sen speaks the language of freedom, wealth is regarded as an instrumental freedom. From this follows that the ends of development are substantive freedoms by the means of instrumental freedoms. “In this approach, expansion of freedom is viewed as both (1) the primary end and (2) the principal means of development”. Thus individual freedom becomes the means and the ends of development. Accordingly, “[t]he success of a society is to be evaluated, in this view, primarily by the substantive freedoms that members of a society enjoy”. From Amartya Sen’s perspective, instrumental freedoms contribute to the general capability of an individual. Thus, emphasis is made on the capability of individuals, and hence capabilities are substantive freedoms. Amartya Sen does not mention concretely what substantive freedoms are because that is for each individual in a specific society to decide. Substantive freedom can be enjoyed individually or collectively. In this way, Amartya Sen leaves open for each society the desirable combination of functionings they wish to pursue. Furthermore, there is not a clear cut destination between some instrumental freedoms and substantive freedoms. I would argue that substantive freedoms from Amartya Sen’s perspective are what the instrumental freedoms are supposed to bring about, in particularly justice and equality. I elaborate below on Amartya Sen’s idea of a just and equal society.

### ***5.5 Identity***

Amartya Sen warns that a world divided between haves and have nots has every possibility to experience retaliatory violence. Am-

artya Sen feels that West - Anti West solitarist contrast feeds bellicose identity. To prevent such conflicts global inequality needs to be addressed from different angle and the process of globalization must be made equitable through increased human contacts and institutional measures. The author recalls his first exposure to identity violence in 1944 when as a child he witnessed the death of a poor Muslim labourer Kader Mian killed in the Hindu Muslim riots. As a child he was perplexed and admits that he is still bewildered by the violence of identity. He realised that the poor were the worst victim of such violence as economic poverty meant comprehensive unfreedom.

Amartya Sen argues that the isolation of one identity at the cost of all others into stringent categories has impact on politics, society and thought. The intellectual theories of exclusiveness are often used to provide conceptual basis for conflict. Both the proponents of violence and their opponents suffer from the same conceptual myopia. Such a sense of solitarist illusion has implications for global identities as the difference between global and local becomes irreconcilable. To prevent such flawed understanding to distort our vision we need to question order and ethos, politics and thought. There must be intellectual fairness in dealing with global history. Only freedom of choice and reason can enable us to break this vicious circle of violence. Sen emphatically proclaims Democracy as Public Reasoning. The book is a splendid reading and opens up alternative paradigm to view the world. Sen emphasises on the plurality of identity but he does not address the issue of how identities are really created and their crucial inter relation with other real life processes. A person must have the right to choose his identity yet the choice of a person is limited by other socioeconomic factors which Sen deals rather cursorily. For example the caste system in India which is a hierarchy of identities is not merely a construction but also based on tangible assets, wealth, weapons and control over political power. Identity in this case is the culmination of a long social

process, even before it becomes an entity in itself and promotes violence.

## 6. Conclusion

By treating the conceptual meaning of the notion of freedom as both autonomous and mutual, I was able to apply conceptual history. This method was used by drawing from Strauss' hermeneutics since Amartya Sen claims to have universalist presumptions. Amartya Sen can be considered as a political philosopher as he sees to reveal the best political order. As earlier philosophers search for "fundamental principles", he also did a search for the underlying diversity of the world, namely they look at the "permanence and changes it undergoes". The pursuit of this knowledge is not only about understanding or fulfilling a curiosity, but it is also, of course, for practical reasons – in Amartya Sen's acquiring power. Whether the goal is to have power over nature, ourselves, or others, the aim is to influence – negatively or positively – the status quo. Amartya Sen's reasons are without a doubt unselfish. As a philosopher, he seeks to positively impact society towards a better life based on classical standards of justice, equality, and freedom. For Amartya Sen, the enhancement of freedoms is in the pursuit for the best social, political, and economic order. Thus, in this respect, "development as freedom" is not just the eradication of poverty, but the pursuit of the best order.

As the fundamental principle of a democracy is freedom, Amartya Sen's thought is "strictly" democratic or, put differently, Amartya Sen belongs to a democratic tradition. Democracy – as advocated by him – presupposes the cultivation of certain specific values, especially social values. The classics perceived the cultivation of values – individual and social – to be the aim of human life. Hence, for the Ancients, virtue was the goal of the individual and social life. Even so, the classics berate democracy. In effect, Plato's Republic is the indictment of democracy par excellence.

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## Notes

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