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To cite this article: Matthias Kramm (2019) Capability and habit, Journal of Global Ethics, 15:2, 183-192, DOI: [10.1080/17449626.2019.1636114](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2019.1636114)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2019.1636114>



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Published online: 30 Jul 2019.



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## Capability and habit

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### ABSTRACT

In his action theory, John Dewey makes use of the concept of capability to highlight the way human capacities depend on the environment and the character of an agent. In his capability approach, Amartya Sen likewise refers to the environment by discussing the role of conversion factors. Yet, he abstains from a discussion of character development, presumably in order to allow for a variety of conceptions of the good and ways in which characters can develop. In this paper, I develop the outlines of a pragmatist capability theory by enriching the core concepts of Sen's capability approach with the Deweyan notions of habit and character. In this way, the role of the environment in the capability approach can be reaffirmed and supplemented by a notion of character development. Subsequently, I explore the implications of this framework for Sen's notions of impartiality and freedom. The result is a pragmatist capability theory which builds on Sen's conceptual framework and puts additional emphasis on character development and sensitivity to one's environment.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 December 2018  
Accepted 21 June 2019

### KEYWORDS

Capability approach;  
pragmatism; John Dewey;  
habit; character

Some scholars of philosophy, sociology, and economics have discovered the philosophical legacy of John Dewey as a source of ideas with which they can supplement Amartya Sen's work on the capability approach. David Crocker (2008, 203) refers to 'Dewey's ideal of democracy and Sen's ideal of citizen agency' to describe how social choice procedures can be organized. Jean de Munck and Bénédicte Zimmermann (2015, 123) explore Dewey's distinction between prizing and appraising in order to combine Sen's concept of evaluation with 'Dewey's sense of practical judgment'. Ortrud Leßmann (2009, 454) makes use of Dewey's theory of learning to outline the process by which 'human beings learn to choose' capabilities. And a paper by Michael Glassmann and Rikki Patton (2014) deals with Dewey and Sen in the context of educational philosophy. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it may give a first impression of the various possibilities that exist for connecting the influential pragmatist philosopher with the founder of the capability approach.

In this paper, I would like to make two suggestions for how Sen's capability approach can be supplemented by Dewey's concepts of habit and character. In the course of my

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analysis, I will explore the hitherto neglected connections between the concept of capability and the concept of habit. And I will suggest a pragmatist framework which is particularly suitable for applications of the capability approach in contexts where researchers or development practitioners have to be aware of the socio-cultural environment and the character of the affected individuals.

My paper will start with a brief comment on Sen's capability approach and how an action theory might enrich it. After delineating the core concepts of Sen's capability approach and Dewey's action theory, I will make two proposals for how Dewey's action theory might strengthen Sen's theoretical treatment of the environment and supplement his capability framework with a notion of character development. Subsequently, I will show how one could develop a pragmatist capability theory which builds on Sen's capability approach while drawing from Dewey's action theory. Finally, I will draw the consequences of this framework for the conceptualization of impartiality and freedom, before concluding the paper.

## 1. Sen's capability approach and Dewey's action theory

In Sen's writings on the capability approach, one can distinguish between his construction of the capability approach as a 'general, open, underspecified' framework concerning the freedom to achieve wellbeing and his attempt to embed this approach in a broader framework by connecting it to questions of – among other things – development, social choice theory, and democratic deliberation (Robeyns 2017, 29). However, Sen does not commit to a specific action theory (i.e. a theoretical framework which conceptualizes an agent's action within a given situation or environment).<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, adding an action theory to the capability framework results in an extended capability theory, capability account, or capability application which builds on the core of the capability approach and supplements it with a specific theory that connects the agent's action to her environment.

Note that, in this paper, I am not attempting to criticize or correct Sen's capability approach but rather to provide the outlines of a pragmatist capability theory, based on a pragmatist notion of habit. Developing such a theory is interesting, since it can shed a particular light on Sen's notions of impartiality and freedom and provide pragmatist alternatives to them.<sup>2</sup> When comparing the conceptual framework of Sen's capability approach with Dewey's action theory, I identified one area in which a consensus exists between the two thinkers and a second area in which their thinking diverges from each other.

The first area is the connection between the agent and her environment. Sen takes personal, environmental, social, and relational factors that 'govern the *conversion* of primary goods into the person's ability to promote her ends' into account (2001, 74, emphasis in original). In addition, he entrusts the selection of capabilities or functionings to local communities rather than prescribing a ready-made list. Likewise, Dewey focuses on the mutual relations between the agent and her environment. In his action theory, he characterizes all conduct as '*interaction* between elements of human nature and the environment, natural and social' ([1922] 2007, 10, emphasis in original). According to the pragmatist philosopher, this interaction between the agent and her environment occurs primarily via habits. I will provide an account of this interaction in the next section.

The second area identified is the role of character development. In his writings on the capability approach, Sen abstains from developing a concept of freedom from the point of view of the agent and her character. Because of his commitment to liberalism, he prefers to leave character development out of the picture, in order to allow for a plurality of conceptions regarding the good and a variety of ways in which characters can develop. Dewey, however, puts character development centre stage. In his conception of positive freedom, the ‘varied and flexible growth’ of one’s character is crucial for the exercise of one’s freedom ([1928] 1998, 313).

By enriching Sen’s capability approach with the Deweyan notion of habit, I can strengthen Sen’s emphasis on the role of the environment. And by supplementing his approach with the Deweyan concept of character, I can highlight the role of character development for possible applications of his capability framework. The result will be a pragmatist capability theory that focuses on character development and sensitivity to one’s environment.

## 2. A preliminary outline of the core concepts of Sen’s capability approach and Dewey’s action theory

I will now delineate a first sketch of the core concepts of Sen’s capability approach and Dewey’s action theory in order to provide the necessary conceptual framework for the discussion that will follow.

Martha Nussbaum characterizes the Aristotelian approach as a picture of human life which focuses on ‘needs and possibilities’ (1993, 259). On this background, Sen has repeatedly pointed to the roots of the capability approach in the ‘Aristotelian ideas on “capacity” and “flourishing”’ (2009, xxiv). Functionings are defined by him as the beings and doings of a person – being considered as her actual achievements – while capabilities represent ‘the *freedom* to achieve’ (Sen 2009, 75). Although both capabilities and functionings mark an evaluative space, it is important to bear in mind that Sen defines them in a ‘morally neutral’ (Robeyns 2013, 413) fashion, such that discussions of ethical value can proceed separately from the characterization of capabilities and functionings. Choice marks the transition between capability and functioning as that between what I *can* choose and what I *have* chosen. The concept of choice becomes decisive for Sen’s notion of rationality, as he defends an account of rational choice ‘as choice based on sustainable reasoning’ (2009, 181). He readdresses the issue of choice when he comes to speak about freedom and the ‘freedom to choose’ (2009, 18). Because Sen distinguishes between a ‘process aspect’ and an ‘opportunity aspect’ of freedom (2004a, 585), it becomes clear that his concept of freedom of choice is broader than just the selection between two or more options. It also takes account of the freedom of the choosing person – for example, that she is not forced by others or external constraints to act the way she does. Sen, ultimately, argues for a broad definition of opportunity, which includes the process of choice involved. At the same time, he also concedes that there are limits to this inclusion relating to the ‘fairness or equity of the processes involved’ (2009, 296) or the political and institutional framework that would have to support them. Being an advocate of social choice procedures in order to come to a collective decision, Sen takes these questions up later, when he defines his ideal of impartiality.

Dewey's action theory focuses on the mutual relations between the agent's character and her environment. In this way, he manages to provide a picture of how the agent is both affected by her environment and, in turn, changes the environment through her choices. An agent is therefore always engaged with the specific environment that surrounds her. The alteration of her environment can have repercussions on her character. Central to Dewey's approach is the concept of habit. Habits mediate between character and environment insofar as 'character is the interpenetration of habits' ([1922] 2007, 38), and habits 'incorporate an environment within themselves' ([1922] 2007, 52). If a person receives education, or commits to a number of personal values, or is challenged by her socio-cultural environment, her habits are modified and her character is formed and changed. Habits are therefore neither merely subjective nor merely objective. Dewey suggests the habit of breathing as an example: 'Breathing is an affair of the air as truly as of the lungs' ([1922] 2007, 14). While we have some control over our respiratory system, the act of breathing is always dependent on physiological processes and environmental conditions.

According to Dewey, freedom is not a 'native or original endowment of rights, powers and wants' ([1928] 1998, 306) but has to be acquired and enlarged in the dialectical interplay between the agent and her environment. By making intelligent choices the agent can widen her range of action, which in turn enables her to distinguish between relevant features of her environment. This progress in insight and foresight empowers her to even more intelligent choices in her future. Freedom is a process of growth and is compared by Dewey to 'an enlarging circle, or [...] a widening spiral' ([1928] 1998, 309). In this process, the agent's habits can increase in flexibility and diversity as the range of available action expands. Consequently, the agent's character can gradually proceed to more freedom and intelligence. A consumer, for example, who always buys the same variety of cooking oil among an available selection may never realize that she is making an unhealthy choice. But if she acquires the habit of choosing between comestibles based on information about their ingredients, she will be able to compare their different effects on her health, which is the first step on the way to distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy food.

### 3. Two proposals for how Sen's capability approach could be supplemented by Dewey's action theory

In the first section, I mentioned the questions of environment and character development as two possible areas in which Sen's capability approach might be supplemented. Having laid out Sen's and Dewey's work in the previous section, I now have the necessary tools to return to these two areas.

Regarding the question of environment, Sen's account can be reaffirmed and extended. By introducing conversion factors like 'personal heterogeneities', 'diversities in the physical environment', 'variations in social climate', and 'differences in relational perspectives' (2009, 255), Sen incorporates the restraining effects of the socio-economic environment on the agent's choices into his capability approach. In order to assess the capability or functioning set of a person, we need information about both the person and the circumstances in which she is living (Crocker and Robeyns 2010, 68). In this paper, I argue that Sen's emphasis on the environment can be strengthened if the capability approach is

supplemented with a Deweyan conception of situated agency based on the notion of habit. The enabling and restraining effects of socio-economic circumstances can then be related to the constant interaction between the agent and her environment.

Regarding the question of character development, Sen's account can be supplemented. This is particularly the case for his conceptualization of freedom. In his *Arrow Lectures* (2004a, 581–712), Sen focuses on two aspects of social freedom: 'process' and 'opportunity'. As a result of these two aspects, freedom – as conceptualized by Sen – includes the 'opportunity to achieve', 'autonomy of decisions', and 'immunity from encroachment' (2004a, 510). Although Sen mentions Isaiah Berlin's concept of positive freedom as 'overcoming the barriers that come from "within" the person' (2004a, 509), this aspect does not receive much attention in his account. Therefore, I would like to suggest Dewey's concept of freedom as the 'power of varied and flexible growth' ([1928] 1998, 313) as a potential expansion to Sen's pluralist account of freedom. While Sen conceptualizes freedom primarily from a third-person perspective, Dewey additionally considers the perspective of the agent herself. In his account, the agent's character plays a significant role. While we can distinguish between agent and environment, they are interrelated. Thus, Dewey's concept of freedom relates the inner sphere of the person with the outer sphere of the person's environment. Freedom can only grow insofar as both spheres are interacting with each other.

Returning to the example of the consumer who wants to buy cooking oil, Sen would focus on the following freedoms: her opportunity to make the purchase, the autonomy of her decision, and her immunity from external forces. Dewey would add a further dimension: whether or not she has a character sufficiently flexible and free to distinguish among choices.

#### 4. Relating capability and habit – towards a pragmatist capability theory

Fortunately, Sen's capability approach and Dewey's action theory are not incompatible. By relating the core concepts of their respective accounts to each other, I will now develop the conceptual framework for a pragmatist capability theory. In this way, I will also be able to shed light on the hitherto neglected connections between the concept of capability and the concept of habit.

In *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*, Dewey makes use of the concept of capability to highlight the way human capacities are incorporating the environment: 'We call a capacity capability [...] as if for the very purpose of emphasizing the necessity of external supplementing. [...] That is to say, environment enters into individuality as a constituent factor, helping make it what it is' (1891, 98–99). While Dewey's concept of capacity denotes a person's skills and abilities, his concept of capability emphasizes the interaction between these skills and abilities and the person's environment. Although Dewey's notion gives an early hint as to how Sen's capability approach can be supplemented, it is not sophisticated enough to provide a starting point. Sen's elaborate discussion of the concepts of capability and functioning, which demonstrate their role in economic evaluation and their connections to questions of freedom and choice, is much more suitable. Because of this, I will presuppose Sen's conceptual framework and its philosophical achievements in the following remarks, while trying to show where Dewey's concepts of habit and character can help to enrich it.

The first question to ask is how one can link Dewey's concept of habit to Sen's concept of functioning. For example, in order to ride a bike, a person needs to receive training or education and acquire a certain number of habits. According to Dewey, habits 'involve skill of sensory and motor organs, cunning or craft, and objective materials' ([1922] 2007, 15). Thus, the exercise of a functioning is always accompanied by a number of underlying habits that incorporate the agent's environment. Although the functioning to 'ride a bike' can be defined across a variety of different environments, the underlying habits differ depending on the context: in a desert, the cyclist has to be able to get to grips with sandy terrain; in a mountain area she has to be able to climb rocky slopes. According to Dewey, habits are 'dynamic in quality' ([1922] 2007, 41) and can (to a limited extent) adapt to the environment. Habits also operate on a subconscious level and, therefore, guarantee that a functioning, once having been achieved, endures. This coincides with Crocker's observation that functionings do not necessarily require intentionality, purposiveness, or voluntariness (2008, 164).

In this way, we can link habits with functionings. But one can go further and extend this link to include the notion of capabilities. A capability denotes the 'freedom that a person actually has to do this or be that' (Sen 2009, 231). Correspondingly, a capability also includes the freedom to acquire the habits that underlie these beings and doings. As habits incorporate the environment, the same capability may require the acquisition of a different set of habits in a different environment. Thus, the capability to 'drive a car' demands the habits of following traffic regulations in, for example, the busy downtown of Berlin, where traffic is mainly rule-governed. But, in Mumbai – where the guiding principle is the mutual coordination of motorists and cyclists – it may instead require the habits of constant communication and circumspection. In *Creating Capabilities*, Nussbaum discusses the notion of internal capabilities, which 'are trained and developed [...] in interaction with the social, economic, familial, and political environment' (2011, 21). The way in which I connect the concepts of capability and habit can to some extent be seen as a further development of this notion. Unfortunately, Nussbaum does not elaborate on the dialectical relationship between agent and environment that her concept presupposes. Neither does she sufficiently distinguish between an internal capability and the different requirements for its development, which might change according to the environment.

Based on this connection between capabilities, functionings, and habits, I am able to demonstrate how the selection of capabilities and functionings involves both the agent's environment and her character. As has already been indicated, for Dewey, a character is constituted by the 'working interaction of habits' ([1922] 2007, 40).<sup>3</sup> If a person has to make a choice, she has to pause in her activities and try out various competing lines of action in her imagination – 'each habit, each impulse, involved in the temporary suspense of overt action takes its turn to be tried out' ([1922] 2007, 190). The selection of relevant capabilities and functionings proceeds thus by imagining the future history of one's habits. By means of a 'dramatic rehearsal' of habits ([1922] 2007, 191), which incorporate the environment, and weighing habits against each other in her character, the agent can come to appreciate potential or actual beings and doings. For example, a nursing mother who enters a restaurant will immediately think about a convenient spot to breast-feed her baby. A dramatic rehearsal of the available alternatives might lead her to value the little balcony at the back of the building or the corner of the dining hall.

If the procedure for selecting relevant capabilities and functionings is conceptualized in the way Dewey does, this has consequences for the corresponding concept of rationality. In *The Idea of Justice*, Sen develops a normative account of choosing according to which choices are rational if we base them on reasoning that ‘could survive a person’s critical scrutiny’ (2009, 183). As such, he situates rational choice mainly in the sphere of reason and criticism. His agent is open to the opinion of third parties and always ready to revise her judgments. This fits well with the virtue of ‘open-mindedness’ that Dewey assigns to the ideal moral agent (Pappas 2008, 187). However, Sen’s account lacks Dewey’s virtue of ‘sensitivity’ (Pappas 2008, 193) that complements the former. Although his agent is open to the reasoning of others, she is not necessarily sensitive to her environment. By enriching Sen’s capability approach with Dewey’s notions, the importance of the interplay between character and environment for the selection of capabilities and functionings can be emphasized. According to Dewey, rationality can only be the ‘offspring of intercourse with objective adaptations and relations’ ([1922] 2007, 77).

### 5. A pragmatist capability theory with an emphasis on character development and sensitivity for one’s environment

Once Sen’s capability approach has been supplemented with the notions of habit and character, the pragmatist capability theory that emerges can provide alternatives to Sen’s account of impartiality as well as to his account of freedom.

How does Sen construct his ideal of impartiality? He begins by criticizing John Rawls’s notion of impartiality as being confined ‘to a politically segregated group’ (2009, 127) and argues instead for an ideal of open impartiality. Following Adam Smith, he then defines open impartiality as an assessment which invokes the ‘disinterested judgements of “any fair and impartial spectator”’ (2009, 123) from within and from outside a community. In order to make a proper impartial judgment, we have to ‘remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station’ (Smith [1759] 2002, 128).<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Sen describes his ideal agent as being ‘disinterested’ (2009, 123, 125, 131, 404). Although Dewey emphasizes the need to be open to criticism from others (i.e. the virtue of open-mindedness), for him, inquiry is never disinterested. As a human being, the agent is ‘always biased’ ([1922] 2007, 193), because her perception of her environment is supplied by her habits. While she has to be open-minded to revising her judgments if necessary, she also has to be sensitive to her environment and her ‘direct and spontaneous response’ (Pappas 2008, 193) to it. Thus, impartiality does not necessarily include being disinterested or being distanced. The agent can engage herself with her environment and still be open to the judgments of others. While Sen adopts the Smithian concept of impartiality as disinterestedness, Dewey would characterize impartiality as involving both the virtue of open-mindedness and the virtue of sensitivity to one’s context.<sup>5</sup>

Now that I have supplemented Sen’s notion of impartiality with Dewey’s notion of an embedded and sensitive observer, we can enrich Sen’s notion of freedom in a similar way. Within his conception of freedom, Sen distinguishes between the agent’s opportunity to achieve a certain being or doing, the autonomy of her decisions, and her immunity from external forces. His conception of a process and an opportunity aspect of freedom presupposes a certain view of the relation between the agent and her environment – agency can be restricted or enabled by the environment. According to Dewey, there is a third aspect

which has to be considered: the agent's character. A significant part of an agent's life is predetermined by her habits. But, once in a while, her environment presents obstacles and resists her attempts to interact with it. These are the moments when choice becomes necessary and an opportunity for character development arises. As our choices modify our habits, they also affect our character as a whole. Our choices are thus opportunities to enlarge the freedom of our character. Dewey measures this freedom according to the degree to which it enables our character to make 'more diversified and flexible' choices that are 'more plastic and more cognizant of their own meaning' ([1928] 1998, 311). A counter-example would be making choices that result in an ever more rigid and inflexible character.

In order to extend Sen's capability approach and construct a pragmatist capability theory, his conception of freedom could be broadened to include the character development described by Dewey. This would also have consequences for the concept of capability as 'a kind of freedom' (2001, 75). If we want to provide a person with the freedom to acquire a set of habits which underlie a certain being or doing, we would have to take account of her character (e.g. by education), her liberty from force and constraints (e.g. by social policies), and her access to a variety of options including that being or doing itself (e.g. by the provision of certain tools, institutions, infrastructure). Character development would be important for both the selection of capabilities and functionings and the acquisition of habits which underlie a specific capability or functioning.

It could be argued, however, that presenting character development as a part of a capability theory might interfere with freedom of opinion or result in paternalist imposition. In other words: would the additional emphasis on character development still be compatible with the liberalism that Sen's subscribes to; in particular, a pluralism of values and world views? Dewey's conception of character development certainly goes beyond Sen's liberal notion of freedom, which remains neutral with regard to individual conceptions of the good.

On the other hand, Sen takes a normative stance regarding the 'intrinsic relevance, the protective role and the constructive importance' (2001, 154) of democracy. He consequently argues that 'developing and strengthening a democratic system is an essential component of the process of development' (2001, 157). According to Crocker, the capability approach requires 'democracy conceived as public discussion' (2008, 297). If it could be shown that character development aimed towards the 'cultivation of power to join freely and fully in shared or common activities' (Sen 2001, 123) is a prerequisite of democratic participation – as Dewey would have it – then Dewey and Sen could find some common ground here. They might be able to agree on a minimum threshold of character development that is necessary for the selection of capabilities or functionings and for democratic participation. But this would have to be the topic of further research.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show how Sen's capability approach can be supplemented with Dewey's notions of habit and character. In relating the notion of habit to the concepts of capability and functioning, the close link between certain beings and doings, and the environment that the corresponding habits incorporate have been highlighted. Sen's normative account of choosing, with its emphasis on openness for revision, could be

complemented with the virtue of sensitivity (i.e. the agent's attentiveness to her environment). Consequently, I have suggested a pragmatist alternative to Sen's definition of open impartiality: agents should be open-minded to external criticism, but also sensitive to the socio-cultural context. Eventually, I suggested extending Sen's conception of freedom to include character development in order to improve the agent's ability to select capabilities or functionings or acquire underlying habits. The result is the outline of a pragmatist capability theory which builds on Sen's conceptual framework and puts an additional emphasis on character development and sensitivity to one's environment. Such a pragmatist capability theory is particularly suitable for applications of the capability approach in contexts where researchers or development practitioners have to be aware of the socio-cultural environment and the character of the affected individuals. As the focus of this paper has been on Sen's capability approach and Dewey's action theory, other important areas could only be touched upon. This includes the consequences of a pragmatist capability theory for the role of local knowledge and education which remain open to further investigation.<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

1. In this paper, I will use the term 'action theory' in a broad philosophical sense. Action theory, in this broad sense, deals with moral psychology, the nature of intentionality, practical reasoning, mental causation, and the free will debate and conceptualizes the relationships between beliefs, desires, preferences, and resulting acts.
2. According to Mozaffar Quizilbash, Sen's discussion of impartiality goes beyond the 'thin view' (Quizilbash 2012, 11) of the capability approach, which is limited to a critique of modern welfare economics, utilitarian calculus, and an exclusive focus on primary goods and the recommendation to measure wellbeing in terms of capabilities and functionings. Ingrid Robeyns agrees with Quizilbash that the concept of impartiality is not essential to the core of the capability approach (Robeyns 2017, 38).
3. At first glance, this account may seem like the result of reductionist naturalism and rather implausible. However, later, Dewey adds an account of personal responsibility and identity ([1922] 2007, 314).
4. According to Smith, such disinterestedness does not result in self-interested behaviour. Some epistemic distance is necessary to survey and question one's sentiments and motives but is not incompatible with benevolence towards others ([1759] 2002, 276).
5. A pragmatist capability theory provides merely an alternative to Sen's conceptualization of impartiality, not a critique. In order to criticize Sen, I would have to discuss his reasons for opting for disinterested impartiality – for example, his strong support for feminist economics and its criticism of 'fixed and time-honored family roles' (2005, 337) or his concerns about the potential of cultural affiliation to be oppressive and resist being questioned or challenged (Sen 2004b, 23; Sen 2006, 114). There might be good reasons to prefer Sen's conceptualization of impartiality over a pragmatist one – one of them being its critical acuity.
6. Leßmann (2009), for example, provides valuable insights about Dewey's philosophy of education.

## Acknowledgement

For very helpful comments on earlier versions, I am grateful to Ingrid Robeyns, Morten Fibieger Byskov, and three anonymous members of the jury for the 2018 Denis Goulet Memorial Prize (IDEA).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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