

# Philosophical Aspects of Vulnerability

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**Philosophical aspects of vulnerability**  
**(Master's thesis)**

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**Philosophical aspects of vulnerability**

Master's thesis

Graduate study in Philosophy and English language and literature

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### Statement of authorship

I, the undersigned Monika Zeba hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or non-degree program.

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## Abstract

The Capabilities Approach proposed by Martha C. Nussbaum throughout several of her works rests upon the idea of equal respect for human dignity, which stems both from our rational and animalistic nature. It recognizes humans as vulnerable and social beings whose welfare, to an extent, depends on external forces we cannot fully control. In this thesis, I shall analyze the concept of vulnerability by looking at two approaches, proposing that both offer significant insights into its different causes. I will also discuss how being vulnerable relates to our autonomous agency and functioning within a society whose influences help shape our identities. After exploring the claims of a relational view on autonomy and the ways in which the self can be socially determined, motivated, and constituted, I will turn to the theory behind the Capabilities Approach. My aim in this thesis is to demonstrate its connection to other relevant concepts that shall be discussed and propose its theoretical framework successfully combines, as well as complements them. Therefore, I will attempt to defend Nussbaum's version of the Capabilities Approach as a theory with promising recommendations for the creation of a decent society that is respectful of fundamental constituents of human dignity.

Keywords: vulnerability, dependency, relational autonomy, the social self, Capabilities Approach

## 1. Introduction

Ever since ancient Greek philosophers began pondering the question of the good human life, many of whom tried to find ways to escape the chances of luck and external forces that are not under our command, they have started the conversation with generations of philosophers who are, to this day, still searching for an answer. Indeed, despite numerous moral, ethical, and political theories offering their stance on what it means to lead a good life, we still do not have a universal definition. But, of course, this does not mean that all of them are just failed attempts at providing us with the key to a meaningful life. On the contrary, the diversity between philosophical approaches to finding the essence of human existence proves that we are complex beings capable of pursuing multiple goods and purposes. However, there are certain characteristics of the human condition that should be taken into consideration when discussing the opportunities necessary for self-realization. One such characteristic, which has generally been overlooked, is our vulnerability. This neglect of the fact that we are beings who are vulnerable rests primarily on conventional presuppositions that succumbing to vulnerability is something negative that should be avoided at all costs. The notion of vulnerability is usually associated with weakness, passivity, deficiency, dependency, or incapacity, which leads to it being perceived as an unwanted quality (Gilson 2014, p. 5).

As opposed to this negative conception and by embracing the thought that “part of the peculiar beauty of *human* excellence... *is* its vulnerability”, this thesis takes on a task to explore two prevailing views on vulnerability and present how they can be combined (Nussbaum 2001, p. 2). Namely, I shall look at the ontological approach, which focuses on our embodiment as the primary source of vulnerability, and the non-ontological approach, which draws attention to unpredictable environmental factors. As both provide valuable insights into what causes us to be vulnerable, I will continue by proposing Mackenzie’s (2014) taxonomy of different sources of vulnerability, which joins the two approaches. Highlighting the importance of both inherent and context-dependent vulnerabilities will help to identify further notions that this thesis will aim to discuss. Primarily, it will turn our focus to the role of others and our dependency, both as a special and an inevitable state of vulnerability. This will open questions about the concept of individual autonomy and its relationship with socially determined traits of self-conception. Starting from an individualistic ideal of an autonomous agent, which rests on the assumption that autonomy equals almost complete independence, I will move towards an alternative approach, which incorporates

the interrelatedness between people's attachments and their autonomous agency. Then, in the fifth section, I aim to describe three different senses in which the self is influenced by social and environmental forces, further supporting the relational approach to autonomy, which I believe offers a more appropriate understanding of human functioning.

Finally, I shall propose a theory that encompasses and complements the distinction between different sources and states of vulnerability, the relational character of autonomous agency, and the self as determined, motivated, and constituted by extrinsic and societal circumstances. More precisely, this thesis will attempt to defend Martha C. Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, which centers on human dignity as the basis for equal respect for each person. It asks questions about the quality of life and basic social entitlements that would guarantee it, taking into account our neediness and vulnerabilities, but also our ability of practical reasoning and critical reflection. Thus, it focuses on what opportunities should be made available to individuals, so that every person can pursue a meaningful life, and provides a list of ten Central Capabilities as "substantial freedoms" people should be able to choose from. Hence, my goal will be to closely look at the fundamental aspects of Nussbaum's approach and explain why I consider it to be a promising proposal towards creating decent societies that aim to respect the dignity of each of their members.

## 2. The notion of *vulnerability*

If someone were to ask us to define the meaning of the term vulnerability, many of us would probably think of all the negative connotations that this term usually has. Some of us might also recall a time when we felt vulnerable and describe that feeling as weakness or frailty. None of this would come as a surprise since the etymology of the noun "vulnerability" shows us that it was derived from the Latin word *vulnus*, which translates into English as "wound" (Drapalo 2021, p. 12; Mackenzie et al. 2014, p. 4). To be vulnerable, thus, means to be susceptible to wounding. One way to understand such susceptibility would be to refer to it as an "ontological condition of our humanity" (Mackenzie et al. 2014, p. 4). As corporeal beings, we are embedded in a world that can physically harm us in many ways and at different stages of life. Physical injuries, diseases, natural catastrophes, and the overall finiteness of human life are all threats to our fragile bodily existence. However, this ontological notion of our innate vulnerability encompasses more than pure human embodiment and can also refer to "our ability to suffer psychologically, morally, and spiritually" (Turner 2006, p. 28). What this then entails is that human vulnerability represents the



capacity to suffer from both physical and psychological wounds (Drapalo 2021, p. 12). Some authors highlight that “we are both vulnerable to the actions of others and dependent on the care and support of other people—to varying degrees at various points in our lives” (Mackenzie et al. 2014, p. 4). This puts special emphasis on the fact that we are social beings by nature and that our vulnerability is intertwined with dependency on other people (ibid.).

However, apart from the ontological explanation of vulnerability, there is another way in which it can be understood. This second explanation draws attention to the interrelatedness of vulnerability and dependency as well, but instead of claiming that we are ontologically predisposed to suffering, “it focuses on the contingent susceptibility of particular persons or groups to specific kinds of harm or threat by others” (Mackenzie et al. 2014, p. 6). So, even though all of us could potentially be physically or psychologically harmed by others, this view proposes that some persons or groups are more vulnerable because they lack or have insufficient ability to protect themselves (Drapalo 2021, p. 12; Mackenzie et al. 2014, p. 6). Hence, while the ontological understanding of vulnerability emphasizes the universal human capacity to suffer, the second, non-ontological view stresses the context-dependent sources of vulnerability, such as unequal distribution of power, resources, and possibilities (Drapalo 2021, pp. 12-13; Mackenzie et al. 2014, p. 6). The persons or groups that could be affected by this kind of vulnerability usually include, but are not limited to, people who suffer from mental illnesses, infants, the elderly, the poor, immigrants, citizens of developing countries, and women (Drapalo 2021, p. 12).

The distinction between these two views on the notion of vulnerability has led to different discussions, prompting criticism on both sides. The critics of the universalist conception of vulnerability point out that deeming all humans as equally susceptible to vulnerability could potentially disenable identifying context-specific needs of individuals and groups who are a part of populations at risk (Levine et al. 2004; Luna 2009 in Mackenzie et al. 2014, p. 6). On the other hand, the authors who criticize the non-ontological understanding of vulnerability caution about the dangers of singling out specific groups or populations as more vulnerable, since that kind of approach could “lead to discrimination, stereotyping, and unwarranted and unjust paternalistic responses” (Mackenzie et al. 2014, p. 6). As the critics of both views raise prominent issues about the practicality and pragmatic usage of the notion of vulnerability, Mackenzie et al. (2014) argue

that a solution lies in identifying valuable features of both approaches and incorporating them into an ethics of vulnerability (p. 7).

## 2.2. Rethinking the ontological approach

At the beginning of her chapter called “The Importance of Relational Autonomy and Capabilities for an Ethics of Vulnerability”, Mackenzie (2014) focuses her attention on the fact that certain authors have the tendency to separate the notion of vulnerability from the notions of victimhood, helplessness, neediness, and pathology (p. 33). They do this by endorsing the above-mentioned ontological view of vulnerability, which presupposes the existence of our innate capacity for suffering (Mackenzie 2014, p. 33). Yet, advocating this approach often results in theoretical works in which the notion of vulnerability stands in opposition to autonomy (ibid.). For example, Mackenzie (2014) discusses a vulnerability analysis of citizen-state relations proposed by legal theorist Martha Albertson Fineman which focuses solely on our human embodiment as a source of vulnerability (p. 35, 37). Throughout her analysis, Fineman opposes the concepts of vulnerability and autonomy, claiming that there is a tension between addressing the needs that stem from our vulnerability and promoting our autonomy (Mackenzie 2014, p. 34). For this reason, she holds that the liberal subject model of citizen-state relations is based on the “myth” of autonomy, which is the idea that all citizens are self-sufficient, independent, rational contractors (ibid.). As an alternative, Fineman proposes her vulnerable subject model, which she believes could prompt state institutions to address our needs as vulnerable subjects and thus promote democratic equality (ibid.).

Even though Mackenzie (2014) supports certain aspects of Fineman’s proposal, namely her emphasis on the need for state institutions to respond to the issue of disadvantages, relieve the burden of vulnerabilities, and promote equality, she also notices and addresses several issues (pp. 36-37). However, I will discuss only one aspect of Fineman’s proposal that Mackenzie (2014) disagrees with, and that is Fineman’s analysis of vulnerability<sup>1</sup> (p. 37). I believe that Mackenzie’s arguments that she offered in response to this analysis will contribute to this thesis, namely because

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<sup>1</sup> To read more on this topic, see Mackenzie, C. (2014). The Importance of Relational Autonomy and Capabilities for an Ethics of Vulnerability. in Mackenzie, C., Rogers, W., & Dodds, S. (2014) *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*. (pp. 33–59). Oxford University Press.

of the taxonomy of vulnerabilities she presented as an alternative to Fineman's understanding of what causes people to become vulnerable. Therefore, I dedicate the following section to the introduction of Mackenzie's taxonomy, holding that it provides a much better understanding of sources of vulnerability than Fineman's purely ontological approach. Moreover, I believe that identifying different sources of vulnerability can help us understand that being vulnerable is not something inherently negative but rather a kind of truism characteristic to our existence. Addressing the causes of vulnerability and the circumstances that bring it about helps us shed light on our openness to the world as a way of experiencing it.

### 2.2.1. Sources of vulnerability

In her discussion of Fineman's vulnerability analysis, Mackenzie (2014) especially addresses the fact that Fineman puts too much emphasis on the vulnerabilities that result from natural human development, such as old age or illness, and physical woundedness and misfortunes, whether these are caused by a hostile environment or the behavior of others (p. 38). It is true, however, that Fineman recognizes that biological vulnerability can bring about or be accompanied by other social or economic harms. She also notes that these harms can be experienced differently by different individuals since vulnerability can indeed be context dependent as well (Mackenzie 2014, p. 38). The issue here is that, despite acknowledging other different factors that are relevant to our experience as vulnerable beings, Fineman still neglects interpersonal relationships or economic, legal, and political structures as sources of vulnerability that are as equally important as the biological processes (ibid.).

By holding onto the ontological approach to vulnerability, one could easily overlook the existing subtleties that come with the distinction between its sources. A woman who is a victim of domestic violence is susceptible to a variety of physical and psychological wounds, yet the primary source of her vulnerability is not human embodiment but the fact she is in a relationship with an abusive partner (ibid.). Therefore, Mackenzie (2014) offers a taxonomy of several sources of vulnerability that helps with a more detailed analysis in which vulnerability is understood in both ontological and non-ontological sense (p. 38).

Firstly, Mackenzie (2014) mentions inherent sources of vulnerability, which are, in a sense, synonymous with the universalist approach in that they both refer to vulnerabilities linked to our embodiment, unavoidable needs, and dependency on others (p. 38). Some of these vulnerabilities

are persistent, while others are influenced by different factors such as age, health, or gender. What this category implies is that certain vulnerabilities are so deeply rooted in our human existence that not even perfectly ordered social and political institutions could eradicate them (Mackenzie 2014, p. 38). That is why our expectations of a decent society should be aimed toward its institutions that would seek to reduce the effects of inherent vulnerabilities. One way in which social and political structures could alleviate the burden of those who are disadvantaged would be to provide, for example, “universal health care and robust social welfare support, such as adequate public housing, disability insurance, income support for single parents, and subsidized high-quality childcare” (Mackenzie 2014, p. 39).

The second category of Mackenzie’s (2014) taxonomy is situational vulnerability, which can be described as context-specific and related to external factors, such as social, political, economic, or environmental (p. 39). A case in which someone would experience situational vulnerability would be, for example, losing their job. The duration of this kind of vulnerability can vary, depending on other factors that play a role in such a situation. If a person lost their job but has skills and qualifications that can help them find another employment a short time after, then the situational vulnerability would not last for long (Mackenzie 2014, p. 39). However, if the loss of a job results in long-term unemployment, then that could lead to more devastating consequences which would prolong the duration of situational vulnerability. This also means that inherent and situational vulnerability can, in some cases, be entwined. For example, the situational vulnerability that is a result of losing a job can increase inherent vulnerability, which could be manifested as a decline in health (*ibid.*). Likewise, ill health can give rise to situational vulnerability in that it could limit employment opportunities. In addition, Mackenzie (2014) introduces another distinction between the states of vulnerability that applies both to inherent and situational vulnerabilities (p. 39). Namely, she distinguishes between them being dispositional or occurrent to identify whether they represent immediate or potential harm (*ibid.*).

The third and last category of this taxonomy is pathogenic vulnerability. It is a distinct set of situational vulnerabilities that can arise from social biases and injustices, abusive relationships, oppression, or political violence (*ibid.*). Once again, even though Mackenzie provided a systematization of different sources of vulnerabilities, all of them can be intertwined, and the person suffering from them should not bear that burden alone. That is why an ethics of vulnerability

should identify obligations involved in addressing different vulnerabilities, as well as name the agents and institutions responsible for fulfilling them (Mackenzie 2014, p. 40). These obligations usually constitute meeting one's needs, providing appropriate care, reducing the risk of harm, and evading exploitation (ibid.). The aim of identifying and understanding such obligations should be to promote and cultivate both one's autonomy and capabilities. Otherwise, attempts to protect the vulnerable could be inadequate or even produce new kinds of pathogenic vulnerability (Dodds 2014, p. 197; Mackenzie 2014, p. 40).

As Mackenzie (2014) points out, responding to human vulnerability and fostering people's autonomy do not stand in opposition if we move away from the individualistic understanding of what it means to be autonomous and acknowledge that vulnerability is a universal human trait (pp. 40-41). In addition to recognizing humans as both innately and contextually vulnerable, we should also address the fact that there are different periods of our lives when we depend on others. Even though the duration and form of dependency can vary, it is an inescapable relationship of caring and being cared for that all of us experience. Therefore, just like vulnerability, dependency should also not be overlooked when trying to define what it means to be an autonomous person. That is why, in the forthcoming section, I explore the connection between dependency and vulnerability, its implications for social and legal arrangements that should be responsive to the vulnerable, as well as its impact on the conception of autonomy.

### 3. Depending on others

As has so far been presented, human vulnerability is an innate capacity shared amongst all of us and can stem both from our embodiment and environmental contingencies. This makes vulnerability an inescapable human trait that should thus be adequately attended to by state institutions and regulations. However, it seems that an "idealized conception of the liberal person as an independent, autonomous agent, capable of making and acting on contractual promises" fails to recognize this need by overlooking the dependent human nature as well as developmental, relational, and social factors which shape our existence (Dodds 2014, p. 181). Even though the critics of the liberal conception of the person offer different understandings of human embodiment, relationality, and social constitution, all of them believe that a theory that aims to describe a decent society must include these aspects and be responsive to human vulnerability (ibid.).

Furthermore, it is a fact that every human depends on the care of others throughout different stages of life, whether in infancy, older age, illness, or cases in which external circumstances somehow affect one's autonomy (Dodds 2014, p. 182). In order to meet our needs and develop our capabilities and autonomy, we depend on social interactions and close personal relationships. This dependence can be described as a form of vulnerability that entails the need to be cared for by another person or people (Dodds 2014, pp. 182-3). Therefore, being dependent on someone else means being in a situation in which "one must rely on the care of other individuals to access, provide or secure (one or more of) one's needs, and promote and support the development of one's autonomy or agency" (Dodds 2014, p. 183).

Here it is important to note that being vulnerable and being dependent does not mean the same thing. As human beings, we are, to some extent, always vulnerable, yet we are not always dependent (ibid.). One way in which this difference could be illustrated is by using the distinction between inherent and situational vulnerabilities mentioned earlier in this thesis. While vulnerability and dependency are natural human dispositions, inherent vulnerabilities become dependencies only when they require immediate care and assistance from another (ibid.). Similarly, situational vulnerability can turn into dependence if factors such as age, health, abilities, or the availability of support put us in a situation where our autonomy is somehow compromised. Hence, as Dodds (2014) argues, dependency represents a special kind of vulnerability (p. 183). The vulnerabilities of a dependent person "are such that they are best met or supported by a specific person (or small number of people) due to the intimacy, immediacy or subtlety of the needs, support, and protections that are involved" (Dodds 2014, pp. 183-4).

The basic form of innate human dependency is our infancy. As young children, we depend on our parents or caregivers to meet our needs, which can be related to five domains: physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and legal (Dodds 2014, p. 185). Since, during that time, we do not possess the capabilities or status necessary for fulfilling those needs, we also depend on others due to the lack of autonomy. This, in turn, creates another domain of dependency which includes developing our autonomy capacities so that we can, one day, become autonomous agents (ibid.).

However, if we want to get a clearer picture of the connectedness between vulnerability and dependency, we must look at those individuals who depend on others because of certain limitations in particular domains (ibid.). For example, a physically disabled person might experience

dependency differently due to social and legal arrangements related to the provision of care in the physical domain. If they use a wheelchair, their ability to live independently within society will be determined by their capabilities from other domains, such as cognitive or emotional, and external factors related to the social and legal domains, such as the availability of assistance or employment options (Dodds 2014, p. 186). This example illustrates how situational vulnerability can be connected to and shape one's dependency. Someone who experiences mobility impairment might depend on the care of others, depending on how much their environment limits their everyday functioning. If their environment is such that they can move independently because their home, workplace, and means of transportation have been altered to their needs, then they will not have to rely on the assistance of other people (ibid.)<sup>2</sup>.

As has already been mentioned in the earlier sections of this thesis, the relationship between vulnerability and dependency, if not understood properly, can be negatively influenced by social and legal arrangements that should aim to assist and protect those who are vulnerable. This can lead to the creation of pathogenic vulnerabilities. To avoid such an outcome, we should search for a theory that incorporates these facts about human nature and thus offers practical advice on how to establish institutions that would be responsible for the protection of (all) vulnerable individuals and the promotion of autonomous agency. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, I will claim that the Capabilities Approach, as developed by Martha C. Nussbaum, creates the theoretical framework that adequately responds to these issues. However, before getting to Nussbaum's theory, I will proceed by presenting different approaches to defining autonomy, from individualistic to relational, with the latter being the one I consider more plausible and compatible with the Capabilities Approach.

#### 4. Understanding autonomy

In their respective chapters, both Mackenzie and Dodds highlight the importance of establishing social and legal institutions that would be responsible for reducing people's situational vulnerability or for helping them develop resilience to lessen their dependency, especially if that dependency could result in creating forms of pathogenic vulnerabilities (*The Importance of*

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<sup>2</sup> Similar examples could also apply to individuals who suffer from mental illnesses or cognitive impairments. For detailed discussion on this and related topics, see Mackenzie, C., Rogers, W., & Dodds, S. (2014). *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.

*Relational Autonomy and Capabilities for an Ethics of Vulnerability; Dependence, Care, and Vulnerability*, 2014). For this to be achieved, we need to examine the concept of autonomy and how it can impact the creation of policies related to the care and protection of the dependent and vulnerable.

One of the liberal society's core duties is to secure its citizens' autonomy, followed by the commitment to protect the vulnerable (Anderson & Honneth 2005, p. 127). What this then implies is that such a society should also address the vulnerabilities that could harm the development and preservation of one's autonomy (ibid.). However, this is not always the case, and the reason might be that autonomy is still mainly understood in individualistic terms. As Anderson and Honneth (2005) rightly point out, the individualistic understanding of autonomy emerged from historical development, which helped people gain their freedoms by letting go of their assigned roles and social ties to find their own "place in the world" (p. 128). With time, the idea that autonomy is synonymous with the life of an independent, self-sufficient, and self-determining individual became widely accepted as the standard meaning of an autonomous agent (Anderson & Honneth 2005, p. 128-9). Taken that this meaning is still dominant in modern theories of social justice, some authors with whom I agree have expressed their concerns regarding the practical implications of it<sup>3</sup>.

The most prominent issue with this traditional conception of autonomy is the ingrained idea that a person realizes their autonomy when they become independent from their consociates (Anderson & Honneth 2005, p. 128). However, this does not mean that an autonomous person becomes completely isolated from others, but rather suggests that people should depend on others as little as possible because any constraint might jeopardize their autonomy (ibid.). What follows is that this individualistic approach focuses on those "who have no need for the benefits of social cooperation or other forms of support" (Anderson & Honneth 2005, p. 129). Consequently, the demands of social justice become distorted by adopting misconceptions about people's inherent neediness, vulnerability, and dependency. But, as Anderson and Honneth (2005) said:

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of such authors include Anderson & Honneth (2005), Dodds (2014), and Mackenzie (2014).



If, by contrast, we recognize that individuals – including *autonomous* individuals – are much more vulnerable and needy than the liberal model has traditionally represented them as being, a very different picture of the demands of social justice emerges (p. 129).

Usually, the first thing many theorists<sup>4</sup> point out is the resources and circumstances necessary for a person to be autonomous and pursue the life that they want to live (Anderson & Honneth 2005, p. 129). This puts the focus of liberal rights on socio-economic factors, such as access to education, food, shelter, or the ability to participate in one's cultural practices, all of which represent social conditions for the realization of autonomy (ibid.). Moreover, we can again mention the example of an individual with a physical disability and how their autonomy is connected to making specific accommodations to their environment so that they can use other capabilities.

Overall, focusing on socio-economic factors highlights that the interconnectedness between obligations to foster one's autonomy and secure the material and institutional circumstances of autonomy is a matter of social justice (ibid.). However, some conceptions of social justice, even though they fulfill these obligations, disregard vulnerabilities that can threaten a person's autonomy. In the following section, I will present an account of what is known as the notion of relational autonomy. There are several ways in which relational autonomy could be defined, but its central idea is nicely captured by the claim that “Autonomy is a capacity that exists only in the context of social relations that support it and only in conjunction with the internal sense of being autonomous” (Nedelsky 1989 in Anderson & Honneth 2005, p. 129).

#### 4.1. What is relational autonomy?

In contrast to the individualistic account of autonomy, relational approaches move away from the idea that our independence from others constitutes our freedom and, thus, autonomy (Dodds 2014, p. 197). To endorse the view that people are *intrinsically* self-sufficient, self-reliant, and self-determined is to ignore the fact that we are inescapably immersed in a society within which we

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<sup>4</sup> Here Anderson & Honneth (2005) refer to the following authors: Habermas, J., & Habermas, J. (1998). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Mit Press., Oshana, M. (1998). Personal autonomy and society. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 29(1), 81–102. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9833.1998.tb00098.x>, Pogge, T. (1989). *Realizing Rawls*. Cornell University Press., Rawls, J. (1971b). A theory of justice. In *Harvard University Press eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674042605>, Raz, J. (1986). *The morality of freedom*. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA00319935>, Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA43059927>, and Young, R. L. (1986). *Personal autonomy: beyond negative and positive liberty*. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA0074190X>.

form meaningful relationships that shape our perceptions of selves, our wants, needs, desires, and aspirations (Anderson & Honneth 2005, p. 130; Barclay 2000, p. 52). Therefore, autonomy – “understood as both the *capacity* to lead a self-determining life and the *status* of being recognized as an autonomous agent by others” – can only be achieved in a supportive social context (Mackenzie 2014, p. 41). Indeed, we go from helpless infants to mature adults who learn to navigate their lives by relying on our feelings, intuition, and complex belief systems, all while following our ambitions to build a good life (Anderson & Honneth 2005, p. 130). We would not be able to do this by ourselves and without ever depending on other people’s help and support. However, this does not mean that such an intersubjectivity approach to the development of autonomy overlooks the fact that, aside from having a positive influence, social relations can sometimes make us vulnerable. The question is whether this vulnerability can seriously harm our autonomy or whether there are cases in which autonomy and vulnerability are compatible.

By drawing on the theory of recognition, which falls under the scope of relational theories of autonomy, Anderson (2014) claims that vulnerability and autonomy can be seen as entwined based on the idea that mutual recognition is a constituent of autonomous agency (p. 140). The underlying thought of the recognition theory is that others' perceptions of who we are can either uphold or undermine our sense of self, which can then have a serious impact on our autonomous agency (Anderson 2014, p. 140). Even though our need to be recognized by others makes us vulnerable to change in their attitudes towards us, this vulnerability is connected to the relations of recognition that partly constitute autonomy (ibid.). Based on this, we could say that vulnerability and autonomy are entwined.

There is one recognitionist claim that Anderson (2014) especially highlights, which says that we depend on relations of mutual recognition because they help us evaluate the appropriateness of our sense of self (p. 140). The leading idea here is that autonomous agents possess competencies that allow them to develop certain attitudes toward themselves, namely self-trust, self-respect, and self-esteem, which affectively laden one’s self-conception (Anderson & Honneth 2005, pp. 130-131). These attitudes are not just beliefs or feelings we have about ourselves but rather properties that emerge from a continuous intersubjective experience. Thus, the relationship one has with oneself is not just a product of self-reflection but is also shaped by our encounters with others and their attitudes toward us (Anderson & Honneth 2005, p. 131). Anderson (2014) argues that if we want

to capture the interdependence between autonomy and vulnerability, we should focus on the normative aspect of affirming one's self-trust, self-respect, and self-esteem (p. 144).

Although we can passively receive someone's love, respect, and admiration, that is not the same as being recognized based on our assertion that we deserve to be recognized (Anderson 2014, p. 144). According to recognition theory, this assertion is what matters for autonomy because, by asserting ourselves, we not only vouch for the appropriateness of our actions but also our dignity and worth (ibid.). Our actions and choices are a way in which we claim authority and appeal to others to recognize us. By doing so, we open up space for normativity because the respect we only passively receive from others, despite having potentially positive psychological effects, will not lead to authentic feelings of self-trust, self-respect, and self-esteem if we don't vouch for them as deserved (ibid.).

However, vouching for ourselves in this fashion leaves our demand for esteem and respect out in the open and subjective to the judgments of others. This is where normativity and intersubjectivity come together since there is no guarantee that our assertion for recognition will be fruitful (ibid.). We might rightly believe that we deserve to be recognized and enjoy the psychological benefits of it even if it is unwarranted, but whether we will succeed in vouching for ourselves as autonomous will depend on a normative and an intersubjective dimension (Anderson 2014, p. 145). Consequently, we become vulnerable to others' assessment and the possibility of rejection. So, because our autonomous agency depends on others' recognition, it becomes vulnerable if that recognition is withheld, yet trying to avoid such vulnerability puts our autonomy in jeopardy (ibid.). Thus, as Anderson (2014) observes, there is an undeniable interconnection between vulnerability and autonomy (p. 145).

But, some nuances to this approach need to be laid out. Namely, we must distinguish between the vulnerability that stems from asserting ourselves as deserving of recognition and concrete instances in which we expose ourselves to unfounded misrecognition (Anderson 2014, p. 145). Minimizing the latter kind of vulnerability helps to promote autonomy, so the claim about interconnectedness is applicable only in the case of reciprocal granting or withholding of recognition, given that both parties engage in an open and ongoing process of mutual exchange of reasons for why they grant or withhold their recognition (Brandom 1994; Habermas 2001 in Anderson 2014, p. 145). Thus, if a community in which we assert ourselves as deserving of

recognition is unresponsive to our claims to appropriateness, then it limits our opportunities for an authentic and complete autonomy (Anderson 2014, p. 145).

Furthermore, this approach combines empirical psychological and normative phenomena of self-trust, self-respect, and self-esteem. In an empirical psychological sense, these attitudes are a phenomenon that prove essential for developing autonomous agency, and persons or groups who obstruct their development are a threat to the autonomy of individuals (ibid.). What follows is that there are circumstances in which promoting one's autonomy means that it is necessary to correct such influences and find support within a more private community to reduce the vulnerability that stems from misrecognition (ibid.). However, if we view self-trust, self-respect, and self-esteem as normative phenomena, then we must accept that they are formed through an intersubjective process in which we are vulnerable to the judgment of others. Nevertheless, if this process includes agents who are equally susceptible to critique and can both give and receive valid reasons for or against recognition, then the interconnectedness between vulnerability and autonomy can be considered positive (Anderson 2014, pp. 145-6).

In summary, I have outlined the basic principles of relational autonomy, with focus on recognition theories that belong within this umbrella term. The general idea is that our self-conception does not result solely from introspective reflection but also requires an intersubjective process of mutual evaluation of assertions of recognition. This process, even though crucial for the development of autonomous agency, can also make our autonomy vulnerable because we expose ourselves to others' assessment of our claim to recognition. Since these are contingent circumstances, they create a state of situational vulnerability that needs to be adequately addressed and mitigated. Thus, the community in which we seek to be recognized must be open to reciprocity when it comes to granting and denying recognition because that makes the relationship between vulnerability and autonomy beneficial. In the following section, I further explore the notion of a social self and how it is relevant and related to autonomous agency.

## 5. The social self

As we have seen, the individualistic account of autonomy has been heavily criticized for overlooking the intersubjective aspect of self-conceptualization. Aside from the general

understanding of the self as essentially social, feminist<sup>5</sup> and communitarian<sup>6</sup> authors have offered three distinct definitions of the social self, namely deterministic, motivational, and constitutive (Barclay 2000, p. 52). They argue that these definitions are incompatible with the idea of individual autonomy. However, I believe it would be beneficial to explore how Barclay (2000) developed these three notions of the social self since she attempted to show that they can be reconciled with a slightly different conception of autonomy (p. 53). In particular, her discussion on this topic further supports the idea of relational autonomy. She comments on each of these notions respectively, and I will present them in the same manner, discussing her arguments.

The first concept of the socially determined self is closely related to what has already been laid out in the previous sections. It points to the fact that none of us are self-made because we cannot simply transcend the influences of our environment, which help shape who we become (Barclay 2000, p. 54). Even though this claim might not seem that questionable or problematic, several concerns can be raised and need to be considered. The first one addresses the question of whether individual autonomy is at all possible if the identity of the self is determined socially (Barclay 2000, p. 54). It highlights the fact that our every undertaking, plan, or action is influenced by a variety of social factors that affect our decision-making. We might reflect on our motivations and critically assess the reasons behind our decisions, but we will probably find that they are as much of a product of the social context as the decisions they led to (ibid.). The problem expressed by this claim can be compared to the well-known debate between free will and determinism since it focuses on the external factors that shape our values and choices that we then make accordingly (ibid.). Hence, the question becomes how it is possible to be an autonomous agent when societal factors determine what we do and how we think.

As a response, Barclay (2000) argues that social determinism is only incompatible with autonomy insofar as autonomy as a notion is misunderstood (p. 54). She continues and says that “Determinism is only a global threat to the possibility of autonomy on the assumption that agency is only genuinely autonomous if it is uncaused, or determined by no reasons whatsoever” (Barclay 2000, p. 54). But, if we look even at our own experiences, we see that being autonomous does not entail making choices that are not caused or influenced by social factors. Instead, what it means is

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<sup>5</sup> Some of these authors are, for example, Code (1991), Nedelsky (1989), and Hoagland (1988).

<sup>6</sup> These authors include, for example, MacIntyre (1981) and Sandel (1982).

that we are capable of and have capacities for responding to our environment. Indeed, several authors<sup>7</sup> have emphasized that our autonomy partly consists of the ability to evaluate extrinsic influences and choose which ones to act upon and which ones to reject (ibid.). The authenticity that results from acting autonomously is not some kind of concealed inner self but rather refers to the process of exercising a range of capabilities, which include skills such as self-reflection and self-actualization (ibid.).

What follows is that mysteriously escaping the influences of society does not make a difference between an autonomous agent and one who is not (Barclay 2000, p. 55). Both of these persons are, in one way or another, socially determined selves. It is the fact that an autonomous person is not a passive recipient of societal forces but an active participant in the development of their life and autonomy that distinguishes them (ibid.). Therefore, I agree with Barclay's (2000) response that autonomy is possible despite us being socially determined (p. 55). The concern that was expressed regarding the potentially problematic relationship between autonomy and the social self seems to be based on an unrealistic conception of autonomous agency. In other words, if we begin to view autonomy as the ability to adequately respond to external circumstances and not as an escape from them, then we will see that social determinism *is* compatible with it (Barclay 2000, p. 55).

The second concern related to the notion of a socially determined self focuses on the extent to which a person must critically reflect on their goals to achieve autonomy (ibid.). Although we display autonomy when we choose how to respond to our environment, our goals and ambitions will always depend on the relationships that have the most impact on our lives, including those with our partners, children, parents, or even culture (ibid.). Even if we tried, we would never manage to critically assess each socially determined goal, ambition, or value that has had a role in shaping our identity. What it all comes down to is how much a person believes these external influences can threaten their autonomy. In turn, this belief will depend on "the degree to which one believes autonomy competency should be exercised before a threshold has been attained" (ibid.). If we were to try and determine such a degree, we might end up either overemphasizing or understating the extent to which it would be possible and desirable to engage in assessing these forces. As an example, Barclay mentions Kymlicka's criticism of the communitarian assumption

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<sup>7</sup> Here Barclay (2000) primarily refers to Frankfurt, H. G. (1971). Freedom of the will and the concept of a person. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 68(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2024717> and Meyers, D. T. (1989). *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*. New York: Columbia University Press.

that the liberal notion of a self-determining agent presumes only a pure rational will, deprived of any social markings (Kymlicka 1990 in Barclay 2000, p. 55). This critique is directed towards the fact that an autonomous person does not question their social roles and values all at the same time or rejects them all to begin anew by using just their rational will (ibid.). If people were using just their free rational will, we would not have to decide which way of life is more or less suitable. Yet, we exercise our autonomy by managing multiple goals and purposes all the while we critically reflect on other specific engagements, which suggests we are not led by a purely rational will (Barclay 2000, p. 55).

Another related concern is the relationship between autonomy and certain *kinds* of social determinism. In addition to the previous questions, which emphasized the influence of social determinism on the content of our goals and whether those goals are anything more apart from socially determined, this concern highlights its impact on the capacities needed for exercising our autonomous agency (Barclay 2000, p. 56). Without a doubt, particular kinds of socialization can hinder the development of autonomous competencies, and feminists frequently draw attention to gender subordination. More precisely, they criticize contemporary liberalism by claiming that:

its exclusive emphasis on formal equality and individual rights as a means to protect individual autonomy consistently fails to deliver substantial equality and individual freedom, precisely because of its failure to address those social forces, such as gender socialization, that radically delimit the actual choices available to some individuals (Barclay 2000, p. 56).

What follows is that we cannot assume that a person's ability to exercise their autonomy competency naturally results from the process of maturation (ibid.). Even though social determinism does not *generally* threaten autonomy, some kinds do, whether in a sense that they discourage the development of our skills or in a sense that some of those skills are actively chastised (ibid.). I believe that Anderson and Honneth (2005) make a similar point in their discussion on the importance of self-respect for autonomy (pp. 132-3). As previously mentioned, self-respect is one of the attitudes that affectively laden one's self-conception, especially the view of oneself as legitimately capable of acting upon valid reasons (Anderson & Honneth 2005, p. 132). The people whose self-respect is diminished lack a sense of personal authority and thus struggle to see themselves as fully autonomous agents.

In addition to gender subordination, marginalization and exclusion can be added to the list of negative social influences that harm peoples' self-respect and deny them the social position of legitimate co-legislators (ibid.). These detrimental social forces send the message to those struck by them that they are incompetent in co-authoring decisions, and unless these people are extremely resilient to such influences, it is unlikely they will consider themselves to be free and equal persons (ibid.). Consequently, their autonomy becomes vulnerable to these kinds of social determinism which can also be characterized as pathogenic vulnerabilities. Thus, as a response to it, a society that is respectful of people's autonomy should guarantee individual rights to protect people from these pathogenic forms of vulnerability (Anderson & Honneth 2005, p. 133). This claim is at the heart of the recognitional approach to autonomy because it expresses the need for legal institutions to recognize that an autonomous person is one whose individual rights have been secured, and that those rights implicate having the self-respect of a full person (ibid.). It then follows that an obligation to protect the autonomy of individuals within social and political life calls for an inquiry into specific kinds of pathogenic vulnerabilities that can harm the development of autonomy competency and requires readiness to make the necessary changes (Barclay 2000, p. 56).

However, if we shift our focus from the negative aspects of the socially determined self, we will find equally as many positive ones. Indeed, the underlying thought of the previous two sections has been the fact that we are part of a society in which we form a network of relationships and that that is the very prerequisite for the ability to develop and maintain our capacity for autonomy. Once again, both feminist and communitarian authors agree that our dependency on others, whether in the context of family or the broader community, is a condition for acquiring the capacity to become autonomous (Barclay 2000, p. 57). Furthermore, it is important to note that *interdependency* also has a significant role in maintaining our autonomy. While our capacity for autonomy is developed during a long period of dependency, that capacity is exercised and maintained through sharing our experiences, beliefs, and ideas in communication with others (ibid.). To be an autonomous agent means to be part of an ongoing process of dependency. In other words, we do not simply become fully independent after we acquire autonomy competency in the early stages of life (Barclay 2000, p. 58). Instead, we become participants in a community in which we experience different degrees and forms of dependency as persistent features of our lives (ibid.).



The next concern about the social self once again scrutinizes the idea behind the individualistic approach to autonomy. Primarily, it centers on the assumption that people have a certain individualistic nature which is, either directly or indirectly, presupposed by the concept of autonomy (Barclay 2000, p. 59). This assumption contains both a descriptive and a normative claim, namely that humans are intrinsically self-interested, and that self-interest is a valuable human characteristic (ibid.). As opposed to this view, feminist authors deny both claims and argue that the self is motivationally social (ibid.). They claim that the notion of the self is defined by our capacity for care and concern for others as much as by our self-interest and that moral and political theories should be shaped accordingly<sup>8</sup>. However, albeit some moral and political theories do endorse an individualistic notion of the self, it does not follow that it is intrinsically incorporated into the concept of autonomy (ibid.). Thus, the feminist view combines the idea of autonomy with that of substantive independence, which is at odds with the procedural account of autonomy that has been our focus here (Friedman 1996 in Barclay 2000, p. 59).

Indeed, a procedural notion of autonomy encompasses self-reflection and critical assessment of one's wants and needs, the abilities which have been discussed throughout the previous sections. And, according to such notion of autonomy, a person's choices do not have to be substantively but rather procedurally independent, meaning that they can be primarily motivated by a sense of solidarity or attachment to other people, causes, or social groups (Barclay 2000, p. 60). Hence, our attachments and relationships should not be a source of threat to our autonomous agency, and there should not be any incompatibility between the motivationally social self and the autonomy (ibid.). The only ground on which it would be possible to question the autonomy of a person highly devoted to their social and altruistic ends would be if we thought that they had never critically reflected on those commitments, thus failing to exercise their procedural autonomy (ibid.). Nonetheless, this does not disprove the fact that many moral and political theories are based on this notion of autonomy and that feminists rightly argue against their proposed individualistic ideal. However, by presenting Barclay's (2000) arguments, I have tried to show that this ideal is not rooted in the concept of autonomy (p. 60).

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<sup>8</sup> The primary reference that Barclay (2000) makes here is to Gilligan, C. (1982). *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

What could potentially be problematic is how autonomy may sometimes threaten those deep attachments to other people or causes. It could be said that the proceduralist approach only takes into account our critical reflection on the relationships we have and overlooks the integrity of long-lasting attachments that motivate us to promote the interests of others (Barclay 2000, p. 60). This implies two further concerns. Firstly, one might claim that it is regrettable to use our autonomous agency to end certain relationships and stop being motivated to promote other people's interests (ibid.). However, being able to autonomously sever particular attachments is not always something bad or regrettable. On the contrary, standing up for yourself and deciding to leave an oppressive, exploitative, or unfulfilling relationship is a sign of healthy self-esteem. In some situations, it is necessary to critically reflect on a bond we share with someone because we feel its very nature has changed in a way that negatively affects us (Friedman 2000, p. 42). But, although we can exercise our autonomy in this fashion, it does not mean that such a capacity should be condemned just because it can sometimes lead to severing (unsatisfactory) social ties.

Still, this brings us to the second concern related to the notion of procedural autonomy, which seems to suggest that the proceduralist account encourages *constant* reassessment and critical reflection on our relationships after we have acquired new goals, desires, or values. (Barclay 2000, p. 61). Yet, it is unclear why the idea of individual autonomy should be burdened with such an unsustainable account of how often and to what degree it should be exercised (ibid.). Undoubtedly, ambitions and goals will change and develop over time, but it does not follow that this is the reason we should constantly question our previous commitments and relationships. It can certainly be beneficial to critically reflect on life-changing decisions, such as moving to a different country or marrying your partner, but exercising autonomy should not necessarily require a constant reassessment of these choices after they have been made (ibid.). When we commit ourselves to such major decisions, we actively choose to disregard other options and no longer view them as ongoing possibilities (ibid.). Of course, there might come a time when we must question and reevaluate the commitments we made in the past because of certain issues that arose in the present. However, ending a relationship because we had valid reasons to critically reflect on it still does not entail that we should continually question every attachment we autonomously choose to commit to.

And finally, we arrive at the third definition of the social self, which is constitutive. Building on the idea that the self is socially determined, this definition suggests that the content of one's goals or ends is also social, in the sense that these ends are not just one's own but shared by a particular community (ibid.). To illustrate it with an example, we can imagine a deeply religious person who is highly committed to the values promoted by their religion for they have been raised within a religious community. Thus, this person's commitment to faith is socially determined by their religious upbringing and, at the same time, represents a socially shared end. The notion of the constitutively social self emphasizes that many of our goals are like this one – both socially determined and socially shared. However, this idea has been criticized by communitarian authors who claim that the ideal of autonomy is incompatible with the constitutive view of the self (Barclay 2000, p. 62). In particular, Barclay (2000) comments on one prominent critique that was offered by Michael Sandel (p. 62).

Namely, Sandel accepts that the concept of individual autonomy can be compatible with the idea of the motivationally social self as it is plausible that our ends include a concern for others and their well-being (ibid.). However, he proposes that there is a stronger sense in which a person is tied to a community and argues that it is opposed to the notion of individual autonomy. More precisely, Sandel claims that certain ends and values which constitute our identity are socially shared and that we determine our good by reference to them (ibid.). So, when we self-reflect on our wants and needs, we do not actually *choose* the ends to commit to but rather *discover* them based on the values we share with others, which are not only the constituents of a common identity but also of the identity of the self (Sandel 1982 in Barclay 2000, p. 62). According to Sandel's view, imagining the self as constitutively social cannot be compatible with the notion of autonomy because an autonomous agent should be able to choose rather than discover their ends (Barclay 2000, pp. 62-3).

Another reason Sandel claims autonomy and the constitutive self are not compatible is based on his understanding of autonomous agency as an exercise of deliberative rationality (Barclay 2000, p. 63). He believes that exercising one's autonomy equals the process of assessing and evaluating one's desires and then planning on how to satisfy as many of them as possible. This conception of agency, as Sandel claims, lacks the notions of choice and reflection, which are, in turn, present within the agency that results from the discovery of constitutive ends (ibid.). As he sees it, simple

introspection presupposed by deliberative rationality is not enough basis for creating qualitative hierarchies of our needs and desires. Instead, our agency should also include shared values that constitute both the identity of the self and that of the community, because those values provide a deeper understanding of what we genuinely want (ibid.). Therefore, by endorsing the view that autonomous agency is nothing more than evaluating our immediate desires, Sandel argues that it is incompatible with a deeper, more valuable conception of agency that stems from the shared values of a common identity (ibid.).

This critique, however, is not without its problems. Mainly, it rests on an ambiguous description of what it means to be constituted by shared ends, which could be interpreted in two ways (ibid.). First, we could understand this claim in a strong sense which would suggest that the self is so constituted by shared ends that they are unable to question or reject them. However, as seen throughout the discussion in this section, it *is* possible to reflect on and scrutinize the values that are socially derived and shared, so this first interpretation does not seem to be plausible. Indeed, a person can reassess their existing values and decide to reshape them, whether they are shared or not. This leads us to the second, weaker interpretation of the beginning claim, which states that, even if we are fully autonomous, our identity will always be mediated by our community (Barclay 2000, p. 64). Throughout the discussion in this section, we have seen that this is indeed true. We are all born into a community and develop our identities through various dependencies and complex networks of attachments and relationships. Even if we reject or reshape some of the values we share with our community, they will still have left undeniable markings on our identity. After all, we cannot make life-changing decisions starting from an empty spot. Yet even though our identity will always, at least to some extent, be partly constituted by the values acquired in our original community, this does not mean we cannot reject some of them. Even if we are not able to completely reinvent ourselves, it does not mean that we are instead unconditionally bound to the roles given to us by a particular community. Hence, the weaker interpretation of the claim that the self is constitutively social is more plausible than the first, stronger one and does not stand in opposition to the procedural account of autonomy (ibid.).

An additional objection to Sandel's view can be raised in regard to his claim that the agency obtained through shared values and by embracing a common way of life is more valuable than the agency gained by exercising deliberative rationality. Even if we accept, as Sandel does, that

autonomy is nothing more than reflecting on the intensity of our desires, it is still unclear why would that kind of agency be less valuable than the agency stemming from our shared values (ibid.). Let us take a look at the following example<sup>9</sup>. Let us suppose there is a woman who lives in a community whose highest values are ascribed to gender roles and motherhood as the greatest achievement in a woman's life. By endorsing these values, her constitutive ends become shared in the sense proposed by Sandel. However, this woman is, in reality, deeply unsatisfied with her role as a housewife and a mother, which makes her fantasize about a different life that would satisfy her other aspirations. Still, she never questions her values since they constitute her identity and uses them for reference when she critically reflects on her wants and desires. For this reason, she continues to be dissatisfied and feels selfish when she dreams about leading a different life. What this example shows is that acting upon our constitutive values instead of immediate desires is far from being a more valuable type of agency. This woman's agency is defined by the values of her community, yet abiding by those values makes her life unfulfilled. Thus, it is difficult to agree with Sandel that this kind of agency deserves more respect than that which centers upon careful introspection and assessment of our desires.

It may well be true that values play a crucial role in exercising our autonomous agency, but to have this role, they must be critically evaluated and not just discovered as purely constitutive social traits (Barclay 2000, p. 65). The example above nicely illustrates how subjecting oneself to socially imposed roles and values that are never questioned can lead to an unfulfilling life in which it is impossible to function as a fully autonomous agent. Therefore, Sandel's criticism of autonomous agency is based on a distorted idea of autonomy which limits it to mere introspection and makes it incompatible with the constitutively social self. However, the only plausible interpretation of the self as socially constituted is the weaker version of that notion, which, contrary to Sandel's view, is compatible with the conception of autonomy (ibid.). This also undermines his claim that shared ends and values build a worthier, more valuable agency. Hence, instead of denying the idea of autonomy, we should reject those versions of the constitutively social self that could threaten the notion of autonomous agency.

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<sup>9</sup> The example is taken from Friedman, M. (1986). Autonomy and the Split-Level Self. *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 24(1), 19–35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.1986.tb00434.x>.

Before moving on to the next section of this thesis, I will briefly outline the central ideas presented in the so-far discussion. Beginning with two separate notions of vulnerability, I have attempted to show that Mackenzie's (2014) taxonomy of different sources of vulnerability offers a suitable solution for reconciliation of those views, as it captures the essence of both, proving that we can be vulnerable due to intrinsic, as well as extrinsic factors. This further relates to the idea of autonomy. As humans are not fully independent and self-reliant, I introduced a relational approach to autonomy as an alternative to the individualistic account of autonomous agency. More precisely, I focused on the theory of recognition, which emphasizes the connection between autonomy and vulnerability. This added to the fact that our self-conception is construed through intricate relationships and interactions with other people. By asserting our demand to be recognized as worthy of respect, we make ourselves, our acts, and our choices vulnerable to the judgment of others. However, this vulnerability is a constituent part of autonomy.

Building on the idea that we are shaped by society and shared values, I presented the notion of the social self, understood as determined, motivated, and constituted by environmental influences. Despite some authors' concern about the compatibility between individual autonomy and social forces that define us, I seconded Barclay's (2000) arguments that rebutted such worries. Namely, I agree that each person is, in one way or another, a product of their society, but not in a way constrictive of their autonomous agency. The cases that prove differently should not discourage us from acknowledging the overall positive aspects of forming our identity through relations with others but rather motivate us to identify the negative ones and find ways to address them. With that being said, in the following section, I shall lay out the grounding notions and ideas behind the Capabilities Approach, holding that its theoretical framework auspiciously combines all leading concepts that have been summarized above. Specifically, I will attempt to defend the version of The Capabilities Approach developed by Martha C. Nussbaum as a theory that recognizes the complexity of human vulnerability and advocates for equal respect of all persons based on dignity.

## 6. The Capabilities Approach

The Capabilities Approach can be generally understood as an approach to comparative assessment of the quality of life and to theorizing about basic social justice (Nussbaum 2011, p. 18). The version developed by Martha C. Nussbaum (2007) is fully *universal* and treats *each person as an end*, taking no one to be a mere tool to the ends of others, and focuses on the opportunities available

to each individual (p. 70, 78). Its primary concern can be expressed by asking what each person can do and be, and it prioritizes choice or freedom, holding that the good societies should promote is a set of opportunities, which people then autonomously choose whether to exercise in action (Nussbaum 2011, p. 18). Furthermore, it offers a pluralist view of values, arguing that the crucial capability achievements are different both in terms of quality and quantity, suggesting that the understanding of the specific nature of each is necessary for producing them (Nussbaum 2011, p. 18-19). Lastly, the approach scrutinizes injustice and inequality rooted in societies, especially capability failures resulting from discrimination or marginalization, urging public policymakers to improve the quality of life for all people as defined by their capabilities (Nussbaum 2011, p. 19).

But what are these *capabilities*? Namely, they answer the question of what each person can do and be by representing a set of opportunities people can choose and act upon (Nussbaum 2011, p. 20). More precisely, “they are not just abilities residing inside a person but also the freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment” (ibid.). They capture the interrelatedness of the capacity to exercise our abilities and the contextual influences, so Nussbaum (2011) refers to them as *combined capabilities* (p. 21). Thus, our personal traits, such as intellectual and emotional capacities, bodily fitness and health status, perception and coordination skills are all constituents of the combined capabilities, which we develop through interaction with different environments. They are fluid and dynamic characteristics of a person that Nussbaum (2011) distinguishes as *internal capabilities* (p. 21).

The distinction between internal and combined capabilities can be linked to the distinction between internal and situational sources of vulnerability. For example, a society that successfully produces internal capabilities consequently protects them from being internally vulnerable, but if it fails to provide the avenues through which people would have the opportunity to exercise them, it will make them susceptible to situational vulnerability. This could mean, for instance, that people are educated to be internally capable of free speech but then denied from exercising this capability in practice (Nussbaum 2011, p. 22). Conversely, a society that creates a political and social environment in which people can freely and publicly express their opinions protects them from situational vulnerability but might lack the opportunities for a person to develop their critical thinking or public speaking skills, making them internally vulnerable.

However, our internal capabilities are not synonymous with our innate equipment. Nussbaum (2011) refers to these innate powers or faculties as *basic capabilities* that people are born with and which enable them to further develop their other capabilities (p. 24). She also cautions about the potential detrimental effects of misunderstanding the idea behind basic capabilities, arguing that it is easy to imagine a theory that would endorse a proportional relationship between people's political and social entitlements and their innate intelligence or skills (Nussbaum 2011, p. 24). On the other hand, the Capabilities Approach makes no such claim but insists that all people "should get above a certain threshold level of combined capability... in the sense of substantial freedom to choose and act" (ibid.). This means treating all people with equal respect and recognizing that sometimes it will be necessary to provide help to those who cannot get above the threshold by themselves. Therefore, this approach does not support the idea that more innately skilled people should be treated better but addresses the situations in which people experience dependency as a special form of vulnerability discussed earlier in this thesis. For example, a person with cognitive disabilities should be provided with needed resources for the opportunity to develop the same capabilities as other people, even though the person (or persons) they depend on for care might sometimes be an intermediary for such opportunities, as in the case of supplying part of the internal capability if the one cared for is not sufficiently able to make autonomous choices (ibid.). Such partial supplying of one's internal capabilities can be exercised by voting on the behalf of a person who cannot make the decision themselves, or by special interventions in the education of an innately cognitively disabled child (ibid.).

Another notion that is important for the Capability Approach is *functioning*. A functioning is an actualization of one or more capabilities. Functionings are a part of our well-being, and, as such, they do not need to be especially active, which means that they include being physically and mentally healthy, well-nourished, safe, or simply happy (Mackenzie 2014, p. 49; Nussbaum 2011, p. 25). They stand in contrast to capabilities because capabilities entail an opportunity to choose or select, thus having the notion of freedom built into the concept of capability (Nussbaum 2011, p. 25). To illustrate it with an example, we can imagine a person who decides not to go to college and a person who does not have enough money to attend university. Both people have the same functioning regarding education, but they do not have the same capability since the first person could still pursue higher education, while the other person does not have that choice.



Thus, one crucial aspect of capabilities is that they can lead to functionings. In a certain way, our capabilities would be pointless if they were not oriented toward a specific functioning. Yet, as spheres of choice and freedom, capabilities also have an intrinsic value, and promoting them means promoting areas of freedom, which is not the same as being able to function in a particular way (ibid.). Therefore, the Capabilities Approach does not propose measuring the real value of options based on how to utilize them the most but draws attention to the fact that options represent freedoms and that being free to choose between them is intrinsically valuable (ibid.). Moreover, this approach does not aim to be a theory that would define human nature but is rather evaluative and ethical from the beginning, asking which capabilities, among all that we have the capacity to develop, are the most valuable and should thus be supported in a society (Nussbaum 2011, p. 28). Of course, selecting the capabilities to focus on is not a task to be taken lightly. That is why Nussbaum (2011) decidedly invokes the notion of human dignity and a life worthy of it (p. 29).

Even though human dignity is quite an intuitive notion, it is not easy to define. Drawing on the Aristotelian conception of humans as political animals and Marx's idea that we are creatures who need a plurality of activities through life, Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach views our rationality and animality as utterly entwined (Nussbaum 2007, p. 159). It sees rationality as just one constituent of our animalistic nature, that is not even necessarily the most significant one for the notion of truly human functioning (ibid.). Indeed, this approach considers human dignity to be specified by a type of rationality that is not idealized or contrary to animality, but just ordinary practical reasoning (ibid.). It also recognizes gregariousness as a fundamental feature of our dignity, alongside bodily needs, such as the need for care. Consequently, when designing the political conception of the person, this approach incorporates the acknowledgment that we are needy, vulnerable temporal beings who come into this world depending on others and often end in other kinds of dependency (Nussbaum 2007, p. 160). Additionally, by drawing attention to the complex network of symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships that can both be reciprocal and contain truly human functioning, Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach can be seen as compatible with the notion of social self from the previous section. Moreover, it also highlights the close connection between dignity and respect, just as relational theories point out the relevance of being respected by others in a non-passive, reciprocal way. The main idea here is that the environment we live in can have a huge impact on our dignity, securing a life that is either worthy or unworthy of the human dignity we possess.

What follows is that the Capabilities Approach as proposed by Nussbaum (2011) focuses on the protection of those areas of freedom that are so crucial to a life worthy of human dignity that their removal would seriously compromise it (p. 31). The cases of freedoms that are not that crucial will be left to the usual political processes to settle them (Nussbaum 2011, p. 31). As it may be obvious that there is a broad consensus that primary and secondary education are important, or that reciting a poem whilst doing a handstand is not a freedom of crucial importance that needs special protection, some cases will not be as clear-cut. There might also be cases that will remain unclear for a long time, as it was with the centuries-long denial of a woman's right to refuse her husband intercourse as her crucial right of bodily integrity (Nussbaum 2011, p. 32). That is why it is necessary to discuss each freedom given at hand and provide arguments that would attempt to show its centrality to the idea of human dignity. However, this process cannot rely on the obscure intuitive appeal to the notion of human dignity but must call for a detailed discussion of the relationship between the liberty under consideration and other existing entitlements (ibid.). Still, there will be many unclear cases and the Capabilities Approach will leave many of them to the workings of the political process.

Regarding many areas of our lives where we act and participate, Nussbaum's approach asks what is required for people to lead a life worthy of human dignity. She answers that, at a bare minimum, we need an extensive threshold level of ten Central Capabilities (ibid.). More precisely, she offers a list containing these ten capabilities, arguing that a decent society must guarantee at least a threshold level of them. The list with ten Central Capabilities looks as follows:

1. Life. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.
2. Bodily health. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.
3. Bodily integrity. Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.
4. Senses, imagination, and thought. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and

thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid nonbeneficial pain.

5. Emotions. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development.)

6. Practical reason. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance.)

7. Affiliation. (A) Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.) (B) Having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin.

8. Other species. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.

9. Play. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.

10. Control over one's environment. (A) Political. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association. (B) Material. Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers (Nussbaum 2011, pp. 33-4).

As previously mentioned, this approach takes each person as an end, holding accordingly that capabilities primarily belong to individuals and only derivatively to groups (Nussbaum 2011, p. 35). It claims that each person should be enabled to develop and use their capabilities, as opposed to some people being used as mere tools for the capability of others. Likewise, it treats all people as worthy of equal respect and recognition, even if it is sometimes difficult for them to think that way about themselves (ibid.). The diverse character of Central Capabilities acknowledges that it is not possible to compensate for the need for one capability by replacing it with another. Each is different and needs to be guaranteed and protected in different ways. Thus, Nussbaum's version of the Capabilities Approach states that respect for human dignity demands securing the placement of each individual above an ample threshold of all ten Central Capabilities (Nussbaum 2011, p. 36).

However, it is important to note that this list is a proposal. Someone might argue that it contains capabilities that are not crucial to a dignified life and, hence, don't require any special protection but should be governed by the usual political process (ibid.). For example, one could question the centrality of play and free time. But, if we think about our lives and how it can become exhausting to cross out one thing from our schedule just to add another two, we can see why Nussbaum insists on this capability. In today's fast-paced world, work for most people doesn't just include what they do for a job, but they also come home to different kinds of obligations, from housework to parenting. However rewarding all this may be, it can become burdening and hinder access to other capabilities, such as physical and emotional health or deep and meaningful friendships. Having leisure time and being able to exercise your imaginative capacities does not play only an instrumental but also a constitutive role in leading a life that is worthwhile. This needs to be the case with all other capabilities that get put on the list (ibid.). Consequently, this also means that the list is not final. There is always a possibility that our experience will uncover other capabilities that are crucial to human dignity and should be included on the list (Nussbaum 2011, p. 15).

So, based on the above-mentioned example, we can see that the Central Capabilities support one another in various ways. Nevertheless, there are two that Nussbaum distinguishes as having *architectonic* roles as they organize and permeate the others. They are, namely, *affiliation* and *practical reason* (Nussbaum 2011, p. 39). When other capabilities are present

in a form corresponding to human dignity, affiliation and practical reason are what underlies them. For example, if a person is wealthy but not empowered to use their practical reason to plan and take care of their wealth, that situation does not fully correspond to human dignity because they are likely to get manipulated by others who would want to take advantage of them. Correspondingly, to say that the capability of practical reason organizes all the others is to say that we are in control of planning our lives by choosing and ordering the functionings that correlate to numerous other capabilities (ibid.). Affiliation permeates the other capabilities similarly. When they are commensurate with human dignity, affiliation is woven into them, meaning that the individual is respected as a social being or the social self. Once again, we can see the connection between the Capabilities Approach and the relational notion of autonomy. As capabilities imply freedom and making our own choices, affiliation implies the importance of various relationships for our dignity, such as good workplace relationships or doctor-patient confidentiality. It also organizes the capabilities in a sense that many types of relationships, whether familial, political, or friendly, play a structuring role in public deliberation as a social matter (Nussbaum 2011, p. 40). Therefore, as architectonic capabilities, affiliation and practical reason, if adequately available and developed, can make all the others less vulnerable, especially to extrinsic influences, such as manipulation or undermining relationships.

Of course, one more related notion that needs to be mentioned is the idea of a *threshold*. So far, we have seen that the Capabilities Approach argues that a life worthy of human dignity means at least having an ample threshold of ten Central Capabilities. Still, how to decide on such a threshold remains a question. As the list acts like a proposal, the accurate establishment of the threshold is a matter left to each society. Due to context-specific factors, such as different histories and traditions, it is reasonable to assume that each society would secure its levels of the threshold. Thus, the Capabilities Approach offers a valuable framework for analyzing the most crucial aspects of human<sup>10</sup> life that inevitably impact our dignity but does not warrant an exact procedure for making clear-cut decisions (Nussbaum 2011, p. 41). The

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<sup>10</sup> In the Capabilities Approach proposed by Nussbaum, she extends her theory to nonhuman animals who also deserve a life of dignity. However, as this part of the approach does not fall under the scope of my thesis, I recommend reading Nussbaum, M. C. (2007). *Frontiers of justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Harvard University Press., for a detailed exploration of this topic.

usual workings of the political process in well-functioning societies certainly play a salient role at this level of threshold-drawing (Nussbaum 2011, p. 42). These differences further invoke the question of pluralism. Both between and within societies, people have differing conceptions of what it means to lead a good and flourishing life. In the forthcoming section, I will show how the Capabilities Approach respects this plurality, as it was purposively made to account for various views on pursuing a decent life.

### 6.1. Capabilities and Pluralism

The Capabilities Approach is guided by questions about concrete options of what a person can be and do that real people ask themselves and others daily in many different contexts (Nussbaum 2011, p. 106). What is characteristic of Nussbaum's version of the approach is the idea of human dignity at its core and the list of ten qualitatively distinct Central Capabilities, which highlights the plurality of ends that decent societies should promote (Nussbaum 2007, p. 78). From the start, it acknowledges the plurality of aspects of a life with dignity and the corresponding need for crucial social entitlements to be plural as well (*ibid.*). Thus, a life without any one of the respective capabilities would not be considered to be worthy of human dignity. However, at first glance, it might seem difficult to apply the same list of capabilities not just to culturally different societies, but also within a society that is unavoidably characterized by a plurality of cultural values. Nevertheless, as Nussbaum (2011) observes, more often than not, the tradition of a culture is dominated by the most powerful and influential voices of a particular society (p. 107). Consequently, the views of minorities and marginalized groups remain unseen and unaccounted for. That is why it becomes questionable whether traditional values bear any authoritative weight. Indeed, Nussbaum (2001) rightly states that "tradition gives us only a conversation, a debate, and we have no choice but to evaluate the different positions within it" (p. 107). Founded upon a universal conception of human dignity as the basis for such evaluation, the Capabilities Approach plausibly becomes a framework that could be implemented in many culturally diverse societies.

Of course, we cannot ignore that people make different choices and that by respecting a person, we must also respect the areas of freedom in which they make them. Many of these choices are made according to the individual's cultural, religious, ethnic, or political values. By recognizing these facts, the Capabilities Approach intently attends to respect for choice

and protection of the spaces where people should be free to develop their identities according to those choices (Nussbaum 2011, p. 107). Firmly believing that freedom of cultural and religious expression is a prominent concern, Nussbaum made sure to include sensitivity to cultural pluralism in her version of the approach. As previously mentioned, her list of Central Capabilities is not finite, and it is precisely because of the ever-changing circumstances and context-specific experiences. If the need arises, the list can be revised and altered accordingly. In connection to that, the capabilities are purposely specified in a general and abstract way to accommodate to any potential changes that might result from varying ways of implementation by different societies (Nussbaum 2011, p. 108). Furthermore, both the list and the approach are versatile in the sense that people with different religious or secular conceptions of a purposeful life can incorporate them into their comprehensive belief systems (Nussbaum 2011, p. 108). In addition, Nussbaum's list of Central Capabilities tasks the governments with securing a place above the threshold on all ten capabilities for all citizens (Nussbaum 2011, p. 110). By promoting capabilities rather than associated functionings, the people are ensured an area of freedom to choose whether to pursue the given functioning (for example, by leading a healthy lifestyle) or to avoid it (by neglecting healthy habits).

Moreover, the list gives a central, non-negotiable place to liberties that are crucial for the protection of pluralism. They include the freedom of speech, association, conscience, and political access and opportunity, all of which are fundamental entitlements in a society protective of cultural and religious pluralism (ibid.). Unlike the societies ordered based on local traditions that, in most cases, do not condone different religious or secular practices constitutive of meaningful pluralism, the Capabilities Approach requires the endorsement of comprehensive, universal values that would protect all people in their choices (Nussbaum 2011, pp. 110-11). Also, this version of the approach separates the issue of justification from that of implementation, thus avoiding the possibility of the framers of the capabilities list forcing the values on other societies that do not uphold them (Nussbaum 2011, p. 111). Providing sound arguments can justify the list as a good foundation for cross-cultural political principles, and its justification can offer valid reasons for promoting and implementing the approach (ibid.). However, this process is voluntary, meaning that it is limited to a society that is willing to discuss the capabilities list and consider its application within its borders. Therefore, no kind of forceful intervention with the affairs of a nation that does not willfully

recognize the theoretical framework, or wants to use it, is suggested nor supported by Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach.

What follows is that this version of the Capabilities Approach is imagined as a (partial) political doctrine with strong implications regarding basic social justice<sup>11</sup>. Securing the ample threshold level of Central Capabilities opens further questions about specific details related to their implementation and obligations of governments and institutions. Even though this aspect of Nussbaum's theory is certainly important, it exceeds the scope of this thesis, so my focus will remain on the notion of human dignity and its susceptibility to multiple kinds of vulnerabilities. In the following section, I will attempt to show how the theoretical framework of the Capabilities Approach encompasses the concept of human vulnerability and relational autonomy, thus offering a view that respects the plurality of meaningful ends, and successfully combines ontological and non-ontological conceptions of vulnerability.

## 7. How it's all connected

At the beginning of this thesis, I introduced two seemingly opposite accounts of vulnerability. The first, ontological account recognizes our innate capacity to be vulnerable, while the non-ontological one draws attention to the context-specific circumstances that can make us succumb to vulnerability. On their own, both accounts attract criticism, whether for neglecting the detrimental effects of specific environments or the potential of creating certain stigmas and harmful biases. That is why authors such as Mackenzie (2014) proposed combining both views since their claims can be equally applied to the human condition. The result of this approach, as we have seen, was a taxonomy of different sources and states of vulnerability. This distinction connects to the Capabilities Approach in that it helps to identify the lack of a particular capability and the actual or potential harm it can lead to. In the preceding section, I only briefly referred to this connection and now I shall explore it in more detail.

First, the inherent vulnerabilities can be linked to the capabilities we need to sustain a minimally decent life in which our physical, emotional, and social needs are met to the

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<sup>11</sup> To read about this part of Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, I recommend her following works: Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and human development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge University Press., Nussbaum, M. C. (2007). *Frontiers of justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Harvard University Press., and Nussbaum, M. C. (2011). *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Harvard University Press.



required threshold level. These are Nussbaum's internal capabilities, and their deficiency is indicated by the experience of substantial or dispositional inherent vulnerabilities, like in the cases of malnutrition, ill health, lack of profound social relationships, or scarcity of opportunities to develop and exercise capacities for autonomous agency. How long and to what extent a person is subject to being inherently vulnerable will depend on their specific constitution, or their basic capabilities, and environmental factors, which leads us to situational vulnerabilities. If a person is not above the requisite threshold of combined capabilities, it is likely that their inherent vulnerability is actualized by certain forms of the situational vulnerability, whether because of disadvantaging interpersonal, political, economic, or environmental influences. The third category Mackenzie (2014) proposed are pathogenic vulnerabilities, and they serve a useful twofold function. Primarily, they expose the deficit of combined capabilities by drawing attention to existing situational vulnerabilities that resulted from private, societal, or political relationships of domination and subordination. Thus, a decent society should aim to extirpate such corrosive relationships and provide an ample threshold of combined capabilities to each citizen in order to mitigate pathogenic forms of vulnerability. Secondly, they also reveal how social policies that do not adequately respond to different sources of vulnerability might also not provide an access to the necessary threshold of Central Capabilities, leading to the unequal treatment of individuals who all deserve equal respect of their human dignity.

Hence, a society that is ready to recognize that vulnerability is both an intrinsic and extrinsic trait of the human life should also be willing to consider the capabilities that are central for our well-being and strive to create an environment that would provide opportunities for each person to achieve the needed threshold of crucial capabilities. Having the freedom to choose to turn available capabilities into corresponding functionings relates to the notion of socially determined self who can autonomously decide whether or not to pursue a certain functioning. Even though we are shaped by the influence of whatever society we find ourselves in, the autonomy granted by the accessible capabilities enables us to evaluate which ends are best suited for us. This also brings us to the concept of constitutively social self and shared ends. To recall an example of the woman dissatisfied with her life as a full-time housewife and a mother who feels ashamed for wanting a different life, Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach also supports the weaker, more plausible conception of a life influenced by the values that are

dominant in one's society. More precisely, if we imagine that this woman lived in a society that upholds the values promoted by the capabilities list, she would not have to feel shame for wanting to pursue her other aspirations, as it is perfectly normal for a person to have multiple life goals and not feel ashamed because of it. She would be free to choose which capabilities she wants to turn into functionings without being judged by others, who would be guaranteed the same options and opportunities.

Furthermore, by emphasizing sociability as one of the fundamental constituents of our dignity, the Capabilities Approach is also compatible with the notion of motivationally social self. By including emotions and affiliation on the list of Central Capabilities, this approach recognizes that our agency can sometimes be motivated by the care for others and our wish to promote their interests. This does not impede our autonomy as we are the ones who choose to form meaningful relationships, accepting the fact that they inevitably cause a range of emotions. Even though we might experience some negative emotions and certain attachments could make us vulnerable, it is a risk we willingly take, knowing that we are beings who need love and care and thus can decide to end the relationships that consistently compromise our well-being. Indeed, this approach values individuality by highlighting that no one deserves to be treated as a means to the ends of others, while at the same time it complements the relational approach to autonomy. The architectonic capabilities of affiliation and practical reason are especially relevant for the exploration of this connection. As we have seen, the recognition theory, which is a relational approach to autonomy, observes the existing link between our self-conception and the way we are treated by others. The demand to be recognized as worthy of respect goes hand in hand with the respect of our dignity and freedom to make autonomous choices. A brief satisfaction we might feel from unwarranted admiration or as being only passive recipients of care is not an appropriate goal for adults capable of functionings related to affiliation and practical reasoning. Nussbaum (2011) makes this point about public policies, claiming there is a difference between a public policy that aims to take care of people and one that aims to respect people's choices (p. 56). I suggest that this claim can be extended to interpersonal relationships since it generally relies on practical reason as the capability that pervades our other goals, making their pursuit worthy of human dignity. Indeed, we assert our authority by believing in the appropriateness of our decisions, and we make them by exercising our capability of practical reasoning.

Subsequently, given that we are placed above an adequate level of threshold for each capability, there is a chance that Nussbaum's approach could lessen the vulnerability that stems from unfounded misrecognition. Namely, we would be able to detect that it isn't our openness to the judgment of others, but their unwillingness to engage in reciprocal communication that makes us unsure of our entitlement to respect. Thus, adopting the Capabilities Approach could make us understand that being vulnerable does not equal being weak. Someone who might often experience disrespect may be tempted to suppress their vulnerability, particularly its relational character, and strive towards becoming invulnerable. Because of the somewhat unpredictable nature of vulnerability, which can be discomforting, a person could try to persuade themselves to think and act as if they were invulnerable to avoid feeling uncomfortable (Gilson 2014, p. 79). Thus, such behavior becomes utilized in social contexts that make people insecure, closing them off from the judgment of others that might challenge their self-conception (Gilson 2014, p. 98). However, this defense mechanism, fueled by a desire to be recognized and respected, can make *us* unwilling to participate in an open and ongoing process of mutual exchange of reasons for granting or withholding recognition, which would also make us guilty of denying respect for others' dignity.

Therefore, if we do not distinguish between different forms of vulnerability, as proposed throughout this thesis, and cling to its conventional negative connotations, we risk becoming a source of vulnerability for others. By trying to become fully invulnerable because of believing it to be the only way to realize oneself as autonomous or competent, we end up chasing an illusion that we are in complete control of everything around us (Gilson 2014, p. 76). We cannot escape the reality of being vulnerable without detrimental consequences for us and those around us because avoiding to recognize ourselves as vulnerable can make us overlook the vulnerability of others, thus denying a fundamental part of human dignity. Hence, by acknowledging that being susceptible to various kinds of vulnerability is simply a fact about human life and does not necessarily hinder our autonomy and overall well-being, a person begins to accept that they are continually evolving through interaction and experiences with others. Equipped with ten Central Capabilities, with affiliation and practical reason as architectonic, we become more aware of our capability to affect and be affected by others, at the same time realizing that recognition of others as equals does not entail agreeing with their choices and values but respecting their freedom to make autonomous choices (Turner 2006,

p. 56-7). Even though this openness can sometimes make us vulnerable, as long as there is respect for human dignity, we should not feel compelled to seek some unobtainable ideal of invulnerability but rather exercise our capability of affiliation elsewhere, as we are free to choose when and where to turn each of the capabilities into functioning.

Based on all this, we can conclude that Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach proved to be compatible with notions that were previously discussed in former sections. Thus, I consider this approach a suitable proposal for creating a well-functioning society in which human vulnerability is not deemed a weakness but an integral part of our existence. Starting from an intuitive idea of basic respect for human dignity, Nussbaum developed a theory that recognizes the real needs of real people, asking about what one can be and do, provided with opportunities to pursue and exercise capabilities necessary for a flourishing life. It takes into account the plurality of values, goals, and beliefs, making sure to accommodate for a potential practical usage within a range of culturally diverse societies. Moreover, it provides a commonsensical understanding of human functioning as being led both by affection and practical reasoning, affirming that we do not need to continuously reassess our aims, but have the ability to do so if necessary.

## 8. The conclusion

What I hope to have shown throughout this thesis is that the conventional understanding of vulnerability as an undesirable trait of human condition obstructs our view of the ways in which people develop and exercise their capabilities. Instead of denying or looking to escape from it, accepting that we are vulnerable can help us to identify the cases in which certain forms of vulnerability could seriously undermine our well-being and should thus be mitigated. Hence, I introduced Mackenzie's taxonomy of three distinct, yet related sources of vulnerability to further explore its effects on our autonomous agency and forming of identity under the influence of contingent external forces. By endorsing the theory of recognition, as one of the relational approaches to autonomy, I continued to explore the notion of social self, supporting Barclay's arguments in favor of its weaker interpretation on how we are shaped by our society and different environments. The underlying idea of interconnectedness between intrinsic and extrinsic factors that affect our well-being has then led to proposing Martha C. Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach

and her list of ten Central Capabilities as a metric of equality based on human dignity. Specifically, I have argued that her theoretical framework successfully incorporates and contributes to previously developed ideas of mutual respect between autonomous individuals who assert their demand to be recognized as equal based on their choices and active agency.

Therefore, I have expressed my belief that securing an adequate threshold level of capabilities and granting people the freedom to exercise their autonomous agency by choosing whether to act upon them makes for a good recommendation regarding how decent societies should function to treat individuals with respect. Although this thesis did not touch upon Nussbaum's specific political aspirations related to this approach, it outlined the key ideas that can become a general guide for navigating our interpersonal relationships and responses to unpredictable circumstances that could make us vulnerable. Even though the Capabilities Approach may still not be used as a large-scale doctrine, acknowledging its proposal leaves each one of us with a freedom to choose to recognize others as worthy of human dignity. Indeed, building a decent society cannot be done overnight, but deciding to be a decent individual who respects other people's choices might just be the first step towards its creation.

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