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Flourishing and Essential Capacities

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ABSTRACT

I have previously argued that human flourishing partly consists in the ability to exercise essential human capacities, many of which are non-distinctive and shared with other animals. The concept of flourishing is itself species-specific. Thus, the development of essential capacities (human and nonhuman) comprises a large part of the goods that we ought to promote. Problems about the definition of 'essential' are discussed, as are related issues about whether there are necessary and sufficient conditions for the correct use of sortal universal terms. The relation of the exercise of essential capacities to basic needs is investigated, and the essential nature of the human capacity for meaningful work, which has been disputed by John White, is defended. Finally, some suggestions are offered about what the proponents of the capabilities approach might derive from that of essential capacities.

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1. The Theory of Essential Capacities

This address concerns my attempts to give an account of what is good for people and also for other living organisms. The underlying inspiration of this quest was from Aristotle, who, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, writes on the assumption that what is good for people is the development of their distinctive capacities. Rather than saying this explicitly, he assumes it, and develops an account of the human good, or 'eudaemonia', as he calls it, on the basis of the development of the distinctive capacity of rationality and its development in the fields of the intellect and of the character. For reasons that will soon emerge, I am not concerned to discuss his elaboration of this stance here. But it remains plausible that the development of capacities without which humans would not be human constitutes at least a key part of what we may call 'human flourishing', which is an approximate translation of his key concept of 'eudaemonia'. This certainly is the key thought that I derive from Aristotle.

However, being human involves much more than rationality. Many further capacities are involved, many of which are not distinctive, but are shared either with other living creatures (such as reproduction and self-maintenance) or with other animals (such as mobility, sensory perception, and some modest degree of physical fitness). Typically, human well-being involves the ability to exercise these capacities as well as rationality. Problems already lurk here, since it would be foolish to suggest that people who are immobile or blind or extremely physically unfit are not human. Yet the corresponding capacities remain at least characteristic capacities for human beings; and plausibly the link between these capacities and being human is strong enough to be defensibly recognised as some kind of necessary connection. For a species could hardly be human if it lacked mobility or sensory perception; and accounts of human well-being that omitted the ability to exercise these faculties would rapidly be seen as deficient.

Aristotle's views on these matters appear to fluctuate, depending on the context of his writing. Where he is writing in Book X of *Nicomachean Ethics* about how we should strive to be as immortal as existing circumstance permit, he plays them down, whereas when he is stressing the merits of studying animals, he reminds his readers, in a passage cited by Martha Nussbaum, that they too are animals, and should not despise such study. To make progress we need to leave Aristotle behind at this stage. But before we do so, it is worth remarking that his work strongly implies that not only human beings have a good and are capable of flourishing, but that the same is true of other living creatures. Maybe he would not have called this flourishing 'eudaemonia', but he could well have still held that any living creature is capable of attaining its good through living out its life-cycle and developing its inherited capacities.

However, an early move that I made was to represent the various capacities of human beings mentioned already as essential human capacities, adhering to a further Aristotelian theme developed in the mid-twentieth century by Irving M. Copi, that essential properties of an entity are properties that it must have, and that many entities have such properties (Copi, 1954). This stance

has been labelled 'essentialism' by T. Robertson Ishii, writing in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2008) on 'Essential vs. Accidental Properties', and, when such claims relate to sortal universals such as 'human being', distinguished as 'sortal essentialism'. It was not my claim that all human beings have and must have all these various capacities, but that a species lacking most of them would not be recognisable as a human species. This granted, their development, and the ability to exercise them, seemed to comprise a key element in human well-being or flourishing.

Nor was this stance about flourishing a stance restricted to human beings. Gazelles clearly do not have the same range of capacities as human beings, but for them too certain capacities, such as the capacity to run fast, are every bit as much essential capacity as rationality is for human beings. Accordingly, my account of flourishing applied equally well to the development of the essential capacities of non-human living beings, with the flourishing of gazelles involving the ability to exercise the capacity to run at a high speed. Similarly, plants like oaks trees could be regarded as having essential capacities, such as the ability to grow to the height to which oak-trees grow in forests, to photosynthesise, and to reproduce by generating acorns, and their flourishing involves actually being able to do all this. No doubt an account of the flourishing of funguses could also have been supplied on parallel lines.

But already this stance proved ripe for criticism, put forward as it was in the heyday of Wittgensteinianism, with its characteristic claim that there are no necessary or sufficient conditions for the correct ascription of universal terms. The wrong-headedness of all forms of essentialism was axiomatic for many. One reviewer once wrote: 'Attfield is an essentialist and I am not', as if this was itself a crushing criticism. However, there do seem to be cases where sorts of things have essential properties. For example, a Euclidean cube has the essential property of having six squares as its sides or faces. And even when we get closer to the sorts of things discussed in ordinary discourse, it is plausible that things like tables and chairs have essential properties of a disjunctive character, having, for example, either four legs, or six legs, or an even number of legs, or in some cases three legs. Nevertheless, it may have been unwise, in the sense of being strategically foolish, for me to make essentialist claims about the capacities of living organisms, even in the modified sense already remarked, as to do so was to court instant rejection on the count of essentialism. Thus, the comparable stance of the capabilities approach, put forward later by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, managed to avoid such criticism through not claiming to depict the capabilities in which they were interested as essential ones.

The above stance about essential capacities was first presented in a 1974 article in the Norwegian journal *Inquiry* called 'On Being Human' (Attfield, 1974). This article also argued that there was a necessary connection between morality and human flourishing or well-being; for while promoting human well-being contributed to an action's rightness, neglecting or undermining human well-being contributed to an action's wrongness. In my later book *A Theory of Value and*

Obligation, this link was presented in a consequentialist framework (Attfield, 2020). Thus, actions with foreseeably favourable impacts on human well-being were presented as right, unless alternative actions would have greater foreseeable impacts, and so on. By the time that this book was composed and published, non-human flourishing was included among intrinsic goods, and foreseeable favourable impacts on the flourishing of animals and of plants were incorporated among factors making right actions right. This was recognised to require a theory of relative value among intrinsic goods, and such a theory was offered (see the chapter 'Priorities Among Values'); but that theory cannot be expounded here.

What is needed here is an account of which capacities were taken to be ones the development of which (up to the stage of ability to exercise them) were held to be essential human capacities. In 'On Being Human' both theoretical and practical reasoning were given as such capacities. *A Theory of Value and Obligation* supplies an ampler list, not excluding these ones. Capacities for growth and self-motion were included, despite their being shared with other animals, and so were sight, taste, hearing and perception in general (Attfield, 1987, 42); smell and touch were not explicitly mentioned, but were included via the mention of perception. So here the theme that essential capacities need not be distinctive ones was pressed into service. The text goes as far as to declare that such distinctive capacities as the ability to cook or to play the *cor anglais* are not essential capacities, because neither could be required of a population 'on pain of not being recognised as a group of humans. However, these capacities were suggested to be examples of more generic capacities, such as those for skilled production and for creativity, which were hinted to be genuinely essential ones (Attfield ,1987, 43). This distinction between generic and what we might call 'ramified' depictions of capacities will be found later to be a crucial one. Nevertheless, the chapter that introduces these points ends with an acknowledgement that 'much remains to be said to supplement the account of human flourishing given in this chapter' (Attfield, 1987, 52).

The following chapter adds capacities that are pivotal to human lives being worthwhile lives. At that time there was much discussion of worthwhile lives, as in Jonathan Glover's books *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (1977) and *What Sort of People Should There Be?* (1984), but there is not enough time to dwell on that concept here. This chapter at once launches into an exposition of autonomy, its nature, reasons for recognising its development as valuable (here the value of autonomy is given as one of the reasons why most people would reject the offer of a life on Nozick's 'Experience Machine'), and its (that is autonomy's) comprising an essential human capacity. It is acknowledged that opportunities for autonomy can rationally be preferred to pleasure in cases of a choice between the two (Attfield, 1987, 55); and it is maintained that self-determination (a variety of autonomy) is one of the characteristics of a life being worthwhile. Let us set aside the various distinctions and nuances presented around autonomy, and move on to self-respect.

The section on self-respect argues that self-respect is necessarily of intrinsic value, but not, overtly, that it embodies an essential human capacity. However, it also argues that self-respect involves awareness of one's compliance with standards of one's own, and at least the compliance (if not also the awareness) certainly seems to satisfy the requirement of essential human capacities. This section borrows from, and also criticises, John Rawls's analysis of self-respect, presented in *A Theory of Justice* (1972); for Rawls, self-respect depends on a person having a life-plan; and yet (I claimed) people can have self-respect without such a plan, as long as they have some priorities about which they care (Attfield, 1987, 56-57). However, once the concept is clarified, self-respect is implicitly found to be another characteristic of a worthwhile life, and to have intrinsic value as well, although the reasoning about this cannot be expounded here. Its plausibly embodying a further essential human capacity has already been suggested.

In an earlier passage, the capacity for meaningful work was also defended as another essential human capacity. Meaningful work is free productive activity where the skill and/or judgement of the worker contribute to the product, and the worker endorses the standards and the point of the work. Clearly some human beings are prevented by disease or disablement from many kinds of (or, in some cases, from all) meaningful work; but it was argued that a species lacking this capacity would not recognisably be a species of human beings, as long as we include within meaningful work not only material production but also the production of works of art and of theories, and of appraisals of theories (Attfield, 1987, 48-50). More will be said about this capacity when I turn to criticisms of this aspect of my theory of essential capacities. However, this aspect of the overall theory is one that, in my experience, many people warm to, including a wide range of philosophers with vastly diverse affiliations and approaches.

Yet further capacities were considered for inclusion among essential human capacities. The discussion of self-realisation concluded that this development of individually distinctive inclinations and aptitudes should *not* be included (Attfield, 1987, 58-60). Reasons could include that in many cultures it is impossible, and that in many others it is strongly discouraged. However, the capacity for self-creation, involving, as it does, not only responsibility for one's own actions, beliefs and attitudes, but also the capacity to mould, to some degree, one's future and to develop an identity of one's own, shaped by earlier actions, reactions and choices, does seem to comprise an essential human capacity, available even in conformist societies. This is a capacity that some people may actually call 'self-realisation', although in a different sense from the one just considered, but granted what has been said, I preferred to adopt Glover's label of 'self-creation' (Attfield, 1987, 60-61).

2. A Fuller Account of Flourishing, And Some Problems

No doubt further capacities could be considered, but there is a need to step back at this stage, and ask whether human flourishing simply consists in the ability to exercise the various essential human

capacities, or requires something more. My stance about this matter has all along been that some degree of health is also required, together with some degree of happiness in the sense of feelings of happiness. The picture is more complicated than the possible suggestion that these are distinct components of flourishing. For health widely involves and depends on the exercise of a range of capacities (something that we conveniently call 'exercise'). And happiness depends not only on the attainment of wishes and on satisfactory relationships, but also on awareness of one's ability to perform various capacities, some of them essential ones. It is also a defensible view that people whose lives involve considerable suffering are nevertheless flourishing people, if they have been exercising their capacities for artistic production or creation, or for philosophical reflection: think of the claims of the dying Ludwig Wittgenstein that he had had a good life. Nevertheless, there are limits to how much a life of suffering can be a flourishing life. Thus, many of those who were enslaved, whether in ancient times or in the modern era up to the nineteenth century, can hardly be understood as leading flourishing lives, even if there were exceptions, and the same holds good for the many victims of modern slavery, who sadly abound in the modern world.

I should also ventilate a problem for the theory of essential capacities, which was recognised as a problem in the first full-scale presentation of the theory, the problem of undesirable capacities. For the capacity to harm other human beings or other creatures is so pervasive and so basic that it appears to qualify as an essential human capacity; and if so, the theory appears to imply that the exercise of this capacity is an element of human flourishing (Attfield, 1987, 50-52). What has to be acknowledged is that some of the abilities that make such harming possible are indeed essential human capacities, both of a physical and of a psychological character. A species lacking these capacities for interaction with conspecifics and with members of other species would hardly count as a human species. However, the ability to exercise these capacities is what is, on my account, necessary for flourishing, and not actually exercising them. Flourishing involves various kinds of fitness, but does not involve deploying the developed capacities that this involves, whether in armed conflict or in casual acts of maiming and murdering around the back-streets of our cities, towns and villages. The relevant generic capacities can be manifested through, for example, athletic prowess, or even through participation in war-games, but developing them need not involve the actual infliction of harm. This reply to a possible fundamental objection continues to stand, and seems to have proved sufficient to divert critics to focus their criticisms elsewhere.

As we shall shortly see, one of these areas was that of human needs, of which some account is needed if human flourishing is to be properly understood. We may find it helpful to note here a remark about needs from Elizabeth Anscombe, cited in my 1995 book at page 70: 'To say that [an organism] needs an environment is not to say, e.g. that you want it to have that environment, but that it won't flourish unless it has it' (Anscombe, 1958, 7). Some human needs are unlike autonomy and self-respect in being valuable for well-being only instrumentally, but remain crucial as

necessary conditions of people's flourishing being attained and preserved; they include food, drink, clothing and shelter. While these needs are not included in the concept of flourishing, they are vital to that concept being and remaining instantiated in each of us. Yet autonomy and self-respect remain needs in a different sense, because they are necessary ingredients or components of human flourishing, and should in my view figure in any adequate analysis of the concept of human flourishing; and they count as needs for this reason. This was explained in my 1987 book. The suggestion that this passage evoked from a reviewer will be remarked a little later.

Perhaps the preceding remarks will suffice for present purposes to summarise the parts of my 1987 book that were concerned with flourishing and essential capacities. There was much more to that book, as it also defended a theory of intrinsic value and a related theory of relative value, and then a theory of obligation of a consequentialist kind involving obligations to make more than marginal differences to valuable states of the world, insofar as one's situation and capacities permitted this to be done. It also included a meta-ethical theory, which was both cognitivist and naturalist, seeking to show how some moral 'oughts' could be known to be true, even if such knowledge was often unattainable, and that it could be derived from various facts about the world, including ones about harm, achievable differences to quality of life that actions and policies could make, and, come to that, differences to flourishing that could also be brought about. But all these matters must be set aside on this occasion.

3. Reviews and Responses

A Theory of Value and Obligation soon received around ten reviews from philosophers of varying degrees of prominence. Yet before the reviews could appear, other writers published overlapping work, some of which I was able to quote when I rewrote the book in a publication of 1995, entitled *Value Obligation and Meta-Ethics*. The 1995 book retained much of the structure of the 1987 book; and so, in the section on self-creation I was able to quote a passage of Gerald Dworkin, published in 1988. Here is that passage:

> autonomy is conceived as a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences, desires, wishes and so forth, and the capacity to accept or attempt to change these in the light of higher-order preferences and values. By exercising such a capacity, persons define their nature, give meaning and coherence to their lives, and take responsibility for the kind of person they are (Dworkin, 1988, 20).

This passage was cited in my later book of 1995 as a clear characterisation of 'continuous self-creation'. Fairly clearly it depicts one particular variety of autonomy, and not all varieties, and so there was no need to retract or modify my earlier section on autonomy in a broader sense. This passage was rather a helpful presentation, in different vocabulary from mine, of the self-creation

that I had argued to be an essential human capacity, and the development of which I had maintained, and continue to maintain, to be an element of human flourishing. And like me, Dworkin too seemed to be implying that self-creation can be central to human flourishing and well-being.

It should be added that around this time, a financial and leadership crisis struck Cardiff University, and for several years from 1987 all the Cardiff philosophers were concerned about whether our jobs would survive the crisis. As things were, we ceased to be an independent Department, as we had been for a century, and became part of the School of English Studies, Communication and Philosophy, although that School had a fast-changing sequence of names. In 1991 I became the Chair of the Philosophy Board of Studies, and was working long hours just to keep it running, and also taking part in teaching a part-time MA in Social Ethics, which my colleagues and I initiated to boost our student numbers. This was a great success, and several of its alumni have had careers as academics, or, in one case, as a bishop. Its success was part of what secured our future. However, the Head of School eventually noticed that I was working 60-hour weeks, and arranged for someone else to take over as Chair of the Board of Studies, granting me a year of study leave. And that is what made it possible to revisit the 1987 book and rewrite it in the light of reviewers' criticisms and of further reflections.

To return now to the reviews, it was widely granted that the book cited most of the major contributors to moral philosophy of recent decades, and most of the key topics of recent discussion, but it was also widely held that the book failed to be altogether satisfactory, albeit for a range of different reasons. One of these was its essentialism, already discussed; another was its argument from human capacities to flourishing or the human good, and this was one of several moves in the book that I decided to set out better by producing a revised edition. However, the series editor whom I found to be willing to host this revised text (Robert Ginsburg of the Value Inquiry Book Series) insisted that the new work was to have a new title and to comprise a new book, and, during my unforeseen study leave, I eventually complied with his wishes, and authored a partially different book, with an additional chapter on consequentialist theory and an additional chapter on meta-ethics. But neither of these themes are our concern today, and so I will say no more about them here.

One of the reviewers, and by far the most devastating, was Fred Feldman of Amherst College. One of the worst moments of my career occurred when the journal 'Noûs', in which his review was due to appear, sent me his review and invited me to correct any errors; this message reached me just as the academic year (probably of 1990-1) was about to begin, and I had no choice but to reply that there this was literally no time in which to send a detailed response, and that the review would have to go ahead largely as it stood. Among several targets of his criticism dewas my earlier definition of the essential capacities of a species. That earlier definition had related to the presence or absence of capacities in most members of a genetically more or less homogeneous population;

but that definition failed to allow for 'the possibility of a population that comprises a subgroup of a species, and which is untypical of its species in lacking one or more essential capacities' (Attfield 1995, 48). So, I now replaced that definition with a version of the definition that was introduced much earlier in this address: 'Capacities may be defined as essential capacities of a species, if and only if a species would forego its current identity in the absence of any of these capacities from most of its members (Attfield 1995, 48). This definition, as my 1995 book goes on to say, 'admits the possibility of many individual members lacking some of its essential capacities' (Attfield 1995, 48). Yet they could still flourish, through developing the ability to exercise most if not all of the others, as, for example, blind people or paraplegic people have often proved able to do. Since Feldman's review is what made this revision possible, I owe him a debt of gratitude, at least in this regard.

A much more supportive and constructive review was produced the following year by David Brink in *The Philosophical Review*. Brink's tone was sympathetic, and his text included several suggestions about other ways in which I might address knotty problems. Here is an example. Granted what I had written about basic needs, Brink detected 'a tension within my theory of value concerning whether basic needs are of intrinsic or extrinsic value' (Attfield,1995, 72). The examples that he had in mind included health, which on my account has intrinsic value as well as instrumental value; but there are other examples, such as food and shelter, which are probably contingent needs, however vital. Here, now, is Brink's suggestion. He suggested that I should:

> represent the objects of basic needs, not as intrinsic goods, but either as necessary conditions to realising value, or as extrinsic goods whose importance derives from the fact that they are maximally flexible assets in exercising one's essential capacities (Brink, 1991, 143-4).

Indeed, both of these options were open to me with regard to food and shelter, as I recognised in the 1995 book (Attfield, 1995, 72). But I was also including among basic needs the exercise of autonomy and of practical reason, and, as I went on to say, these are *conceptually* necessary for living well as a human being. So, Brink's suggestion is inapplicable to basic needs of this kind, which are to be regarded as intrinsically valuable, as I continue to maintain.

It is worth noting that Brink was prepared to go along with and himself employ my concepts of essential capacities and of intrinsic value. Also, that he did not raise the possible claim that needs are relative either to culture or to perspective. I did nonetheless furnish replies to these possible objections on the pages that followed (73-5), but as they were not raised by Brink, I will refer those interested to these pages of *Value, Obligation and Meta-Ethics*, rather than parading them here. Brink's review extended to over 20 pages, and proved a welcome addition to the varied and sometimes jaundiced sequence of reviews that had appeared by then.

To complete the account given of flourishing in my 1995 book, I will just add one small point, presented in the chapter on 'Worthwhile Lives'. For my friend David Crocker had shown me a forthcoming essay called 'Consumption, Well-Being and Capability', in which he maintained that 'extra capacities' need 'to be developed for' a person's 'life to graduate beyond well-being to a condition of flourishing (Crocker, 1998). Now there may possibly be slight differences of overtone between the ordinary language usage of the terms 'well-being' and 'flourishing', but I do not make any such distinction, unlike Crocker. So, what I have been arguing about flourishing applies equally to well-being, and clarifying this was one of the new points presented in the new book.

Value, Obligation and Meta-Ethics, however, seems to have received few reviews if any. One of my students once ascribed this to the rather uneven quality of the books included in the Value Inquiry Books Series, and she may well have been right. This book had to be supplied in camera-ready format, and that was done, albeit with some difficulty. Eventually its publishers, Rodopi, otherwise known as Editions Rodopi, were incorporated within Brill of Leiden, and Brill decided to produce a new edition of the book in 2019. Some time later I even began receiving royalties for it.

4. John White's Criticisms Regarding Meaningful Work

Long before that, I wrote an article about one essential capacity, that for meaningful work, for the first volume of *Journal of Applied Philosophy* in 1984, an article called 'Work and the Human Essence'. That article argued that meaningful work, being an essential human capacity, should be allowed to figure in as many lives as possible. That article was subsequently criticised by John White in his 1997 book *Education and the End of Work: A New Philosophy of Work and Learning*. White's stance foreshadowed the recent utterances of Elon Musk; work was only desirable when it reflected a worker's central goals in life; otherwise, it was best avoided, and we should educate people for lives of leisure accordingly. It should at once be acknowledged that White's concept of meaningful work diverged from mine, because White related it to one's life-goals, whereas mine left room for much work to be meaningful even if it did not further the worker's goals except through benefits like providing pay and the company of the workplace. What is relevant here is White's criticism of my claim that meaningful work (in my sense) is an essential human capacity. Shortly I wrote a reply to White in the first volume of another journal, *Reason in Practice*, a journal which soon afterwards changed its name to *Philosophy of Management*. My reply was entitled 'Meaningful Work and Full Employment', and I would like to cite some of it to explain White's criticisms and my replies.

At one stage in this paper, I foregrounded the argument advanced in both my books on ethics for meaningful work being an essential human capacity, and it may help to present it again at this point.

> To flourish as a member of a species involves being able to exercise either all or most of the essential capacities of that species. The capacity for meaningful work is (as I had argued in those books) an essential human capacity. Hence being able to exercise one's capacity for meaningful work … is a constituent of flourishing human lives, and need to figure in a satisfactory account of such lives (Attfield, 2001, section III).

In his book, White set out the 1984 version of this argument, and then presented a *reductio ad absurdum*. If, he argued, meaningful work is an essential human capacity, then so are the capacity to eat hamburgers and the capacity to read *The Sun* newspaper; and this serves to cast doubt on the premise that to flourish as a member of a species involves being able to exercise its essential capacities (White, 1997, 24).

To this argument I replied that 'since no one had the capacity to eat hamburgers before hamburgers were devised, or to read The Sun before that periodical was first published a few decades ago, White's claims would, if correct, imply that there were no human beings prior to these events, and that humanity only came into being in the twentieth century.' (Attfield, 2001, Section III). Admittedly White was not committed to this being the case, because his premise about eating hamburgers and reading The Sun was no more than a hypothetical one. But it is worth pointing out that his reductio ad absurdum was itself full of absurdities. For, granted the meaning of 'essential capacities', a species would not be recognisable as human in a period in which no one had the capacities in question.

Then I went on to diagnose the basic problem with White's suggestion about the capacities in White's examples. 'It should rather be recognised', I wrote, 'that the capacities for eating and for linguistic communication are both essential capacities of human beings … even though at least eating is a non-distinctive capacity. But the capacities for eating particular concoctions and for reading particular newspapers are inessential, since the absence of these capacities from most members of a species would incline no one to claim that the species was nonhuman. Nor would humanity become unrecognisable as such if, during the twenty-first or twenty-second century, hamburgers became obsolete and *The Sun* ceases to be published and read. Indeed, given the definition [sc. of essential capacities], essential capacities are far likelier to be found among generic capacities such as eating, playing and thinking than among specific forms of such capacities like the eating of particular foods, the playing of particular instruments such as the *cor anglais*, or thinking about particular topics such as meaningful work' (Attfield, 2001, section III).

Yet at this stage 'White proceeds to question whether it is "a necessary truth that to live well, develop, or flourish as a member of a species involved being able to exercise the essential capacities of that species". He is inclined to accept that this holds good with regard to the capacity for linguistic communication; human beings cannot flourish without exercising that essential capacity.

But "it is hard to think how one could show that we must come to grief if we never watch *Blind Date* or play the national lottery." Presumably White says this because he thinks that there are essential capacities to watch this show and to play this game, at least on' [my] 'definition of 'essential capacities'. But this supposition is equally misplaced; for a species incapable of watching *Blind Date* or of playing the lottery might well be recognisably human despite these apparent impoverishments. Hence no one committed to the argument from essential capacities has to show that people who fail to watch television shows or to participate in particular pastimes are failing to flourish or to develop as people.'

To explain this a little better, I then added some ethnography. 'White seems to have selected these examples because most people (or rather the majority of people in Britain) participate in these activities. If so, he may suppose that [my] definition of essential capacities means that there are essential capacities corresponding to these activities, simply because they are activities of the majority. But to suppose this would be to misconstrue the definition. Even if most people all over the world watched British television and participated in the (British) national lottery, that would not make the associated capacities capacities essential to being human. For, before the definition of essential capacities became as much as relevant, the question would have to arise whether, if these activities and the associated capacities were to lapse, there would be any tendency for anyone to say that the species was no longer human, or had forfeited its identity. But this question would never arise except in jest. Thus, White's objections leave the argument from essential capacities unscathed.' (Attfield, 2001, section III).

The following passage is also currently relevant. 'White supplies no reason to doubt that human flourishing involves the ability to exercise' (genuinely) 'essential capacities, or at any rate to exercise most of them. Indeed those who, like White, are prepared to recognise linguistic communication as an essential capacity, and also to acknowledge that the ability to exercise this capacity is required for human flourishing, have every reason to apply this argument to other essential capacities, such as those for autonomy and for self-creation (capacities which between them cover what White means by "meaningful work"), and also for meaningful work (in the widespread sense in which I have been using that phrase). Such meaningful work turns out, then, to be the exercise of one of those capacities, the exercise of most of which is required for human flourishing, and the loss or deprivation of which thus comprises a harm. And this strongly suggests that it should, if possible, be made available to everyone capable of it' (Attfield, 2001, section III). That article went on to present an argument for full employment, but that is not our theme for today.

5. Comparison with The Capabilities Approach

It remains to make some brief observations about the now widespread 'capabilities approach' of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, and to compare it with the earlier capacities approach, as described in this talk. Because of limits of time, I will assume that those present are broadly familiar

with the capabilities approach, and will proceed to elicit some likenesses and differences. (One key text is Sen and Nussbaum 1993: see in particular Nussbaum's chapter 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach'.)

The main important likeness is that the capabilities approach, like the essential capacities approach, offers an account of human flourishing. Nussbaum has well delivered such an account, which can be and has been supplemented from time to time as a further relevant capability has come to light, such as the ability to associate with living organisms and the environment.

Another apparent similarity is that capabilities and capacities seem at first sight to be much the same as each other. But this impression is misleading, in my view. For while capacities are potentials, capabilities are probably intended to be current powers, powers that those who hold them are currently able to exercise. Thus, the capabilities approach probably has no need to discuss the desirability of the ability to exercise capabilities, since capabilities already involve current powers. This aspect of the capabilities approach probably has both benefits and liabilities. The benefits include the direct application of the capabilities approach to themes such as economic and social development in Third World countries. The essential capacities approach is also amenable to application to this important field, but less directly.

An obvious difference is that the capabilities approach avoids mention of essential capabilities or powers, and thus avoids alienating the many philosophers who are determined to have no truck with essences. Another implication is that the capabilities approach lacks the kind of argument that the essential capacities approach has for identifying the powers on which it focuses; but it has fared well despite this lack.

One further difference should be brought to attention. The essential capacities approach offers an understanding of human flourishing that is part of a consequentialist theory of the good; human flourishing, thus understood, is something that agents ought to bring about, and in some cases are obligated to bring about. The capabilities approach, by contrast, seems not to be a form of consequentialism, although there seems to be nothing to stop adherents of this approach hitching it to an adjusted form of consequentialism. Standardly, though, adherents of the capabilities approach relate their stance to policies by maintaining that the capabilities that they espouse should be fostered either by the same people as hold or will hold these capabilities, or by others such as governments or their organisations. In this way, these adherents seek to make a virtue of their emphasis on the agency of all parties; they claim that they are not seeking to fulfil people's needs on their behalf, but to encourage them to put their own capabilities into practice. Once again, this aspect of the capabilities approach has both advantages and disadvantages.

In my view, it is a disadvantage if no attempt is made to argue that agents ought to bring about the fulfilment of people's human powers, alongside the health and happiness of fellow-humans, and parallel states of other creatures as well. Those who do argue in this way have an incentive to

develop and articulate an account of the relative value of these different goods, and of priorities between them. But such an account is beyond our theme for today. Besides, some adherents of the capabilities approach probably do take part in this enterprise as they reflect on the application of their approach to public policy, at least implicitly. I would certainly want to encourage them to do so.

David Crocker once said to me at a dinner, probably in jest, that if someone could claim to have anticipated the capabilities approach before Sen and Nussbaum presented it, that would really really be something to boast of. In some ways my work on essential capacities probably did partially anticipate their work, but since the two approaches are so different, this is probably a boast that I should refrain from making. Yet it is possible that, as the capabilities approach marches forward and acquires new adherents, some of them should take a good look at the essential capacities approach, and borrow some of its components, if only to press them into different service from the uses envisaged by myself.

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