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Capabilities – From a Relationist Viewpoint

"Closing the capability gap", the programmatic lemma of this conference, presupposes that there is a rift between the actual situation of many people and the ideal of seeing them develop their capabilities of – let's say with the famous list of Martha Nussbaum – bodily health, integrity, emotions, social affiliation and much more. The Aristotelian ideal (based on empirical observation, not on metaphysics) of a good, a truly human life that fuels Nussbaum's approach is based upon an 'empirical essentialism' that focuses on equality, not on difference as many of her critics do (Nussbaum 1999b: 179). While these critics end up in cultural relativism, as Nussbaum judges, she searches for universal validity of her criteria. This is an important discussion that the philosopher masters by herself. Nevertheless, the notion of a "gap" connotes difference; and difference connotes relation. The latter is an important category to understand human life, seen from the viewpoint of modern philosophy (e.g. Cassirer) or social sciences (e.g. Bourdieu) or seen from most of the non north-Atlantic cultures in objection of Western individualism. A closer look at Nussbaum's list and her classification of 'combined, internal and basic capabilities' shows that many of her criteria are strongly relational: e.g. bodily health and integrity, emotion, affiliation, other species, control over one's environment. Finally, Nussbaum herself reflects upon social conditions for the realization of capabilities, which means that she takes into account social relations.[1] In terms of philosophical theory this focus is represented in the important (and very Aristotelian) role of experience and a strong concept of a 'good life' in the capability approach, in contrast to an abstract methodological individualism of "rational fools" (Sen) or to an equally abstract liberalism of 'state of nature' or 'original position'.

Taking this into account, the conference triggered my imagination to reflect upon possibilities to fruitfully combine Nussbaum's 'essentialism' of human nature with a strongly relational social and ethic theory – without drifting away into relativism, abstract principles or economic individualism. As my duty in the final panel of the conference was simply to draw some conclusions out of my own perspective – the one of a sociologist and theological ethicist – in the following I will simply sketch some brief ideas in a loose order.

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[1] This is even more the case for Sen's use of the capability-concept.

Experience, society and power – social theory as a means of ethics

It is crucial for Nussbaum's concept of universal human traits – condensed in her list of capabilities – that these are based upon a non-metaphysical, anti-Platonist, reading of Aristotle. Hence, there is no metaphysical 'backstage' that guarantees the list of capabilities. It is simply empirical observation and the sorting out of the most constant characteristics that allows establishing a list of 'essential' conditions for a truly human life.[2] In this regard, it is the observation of human *praxis* from which the ethical criteria are derived. A person who shares a contextual approach to ethics will have no problems with that (but there will arise some problems when it comes to intercultural relations). A further implication of the empirical approach is that the social context in which the universal human capabilities ought to develop comes into the focus. This is the case when Nussbaum claims an "Aristotelian Social Democracy" (Nussbaum 1990). This normative demand presupposes that a society (and with it the state and the government) is responsible of establishing adequate conditions for the realization of human capabilities. As the social science context of Nussbaum and Sen suggests, Social Democracy is understood as a counter program to neoliberal capitalist globalism and its way to organize societies according to simple economic maximization, to foster injustice, to marginalize the biggest part of the world's population and to reject social responsibility of property or even wealth systematically. From an epistemological point of view, there is something like a *descriptive* social theory[3] presupposed behind normative ethic claims. From a contextualistic point of view this is no problem either. Even more: it can be seen as a chance to develop an ethical hermeneutics that includes normatively identified instruments for the description and analysis of the social conditions in which capabilities can flourish or not. This, of course, is a circular operation. But, reflexively done, such an integration of social science expertise into the interplay of description and norm is far better than letting preconceptions of society exert their influence unconsciously upon ethic deliberations. Furthermore, an explicit and well suited social theory can help to frame all the necessary intents to operationalize the capability approach in developmental politics, education, life course related research, indicators for measurement a.s.f. very well. If this is the case, the question arises, what kind of theory fits best.

Taking into account that the Capability Approach focuses on human conditions, action and axiological orientation, a sociological program would have

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[2]   This is – in a strict sense – no statement of grounds, but can be accused of being based on an error in terms of Hume's 'is-ought problem'. We do not follow this well known line of discussion about contextualistic ethics here.

[3]   …more developed in the works of Amartya Sen.

to be actor oriented. This – and many more traits in capability-logics – prevent the option for functionalistic grand-theories; especially those without actors. Equally or even more, Rational Choice and any methodological individualism are *per definitionem* excluded from the list of candidates. Praxeological theories, on the other hand, that integrate 'structure' and actor (Giddens, Sahlins, Bourdieu) seem to be capable of providing significant instruments for social analysis as well as for matters of application.

To me, it is especially Bourdieu who provides a sufficiently coherent and, at the same time, flexible framework for Capability interests. First of all, Bourdieu's focus on the actors is counts with a highly developed theory of the interplay of internal and external conditions of action. The concept of 'habitus' in combination with those of 'practical logic', 'strategy', 'sense of the game', 'taste' and 'style' depicts a person as a social being (a *zoon politikón*, to use an Aristotelian term) and not as an exponent of formal reasoning or of rationally calculated maximization (Bourdieu 1977, 1980). The concepts furnish a wide range of ways to understand how perception, judgement and action of human beings are incorporated in deep-rooted affective and cognitive dispositions, influence upon tastes, lead to value ascriptions and communication, regulate strategies in accordance with objective determinants and situations, form styles and social coherence, constitute images of the self and of others, relate individual and collective identities etc. It seems to me quite obvious that these instruments permit, for example, to develop models of how capabilities generate and develop (in processes of socialization) in midst of the tension between dispositions of habitus and the challenges, opportunities and constraints of the social conditions in a given society. Second, the focus on actors is intimately connected with the theories of fields and the social space. Thus, the perspective of subjective disposition and capability (!) of action is framed by a combined theory of the objective conditions of identity formation and (individual as well as collective) action. The concept of 'field' – together with those of 'game', *'conjoncture'*, 'power', 'capital', 'investment', 'doxa', 'nomos', 'profit', 'stakes' etc. (see Schäfer 2011) – allows to describe and analyze 'horizontal' social differenciation in a way that closely links to the concepts related to subjective dispositions and action (Bourdieu 1996, 1983). Thus, different fields of social practice can be dealt with in a more dynamic way than it is possible with functionalistic theories (including Systems Theory) and in a more structure-related way than it is possible with Rational Choice individualism. Hereby, chances and restrictions for the development or realization of capabilities in specific fields – like education, law, politics, economics, religion etc. – can be framed and analyzed according to the specific logic of practice in that field. So we can, for example, frame the use of the concept of 'capital' (as in 'social capital', 'educational capital' etc.) within a broader theory of the objective and subjective conditions of human action. Moreover, the concept of 'field'

according to Bourdieu is strictly constructivistic, which means that there *'are'* no ontologically given fields, but any object of research can be constructed as a field – so that its logic of action, power-distribution, chances and constraints can systematically be focused on. Finally, the concept of field theorizes relations of power according to specific 'spheres' (Weber) of social reproduction. And power seems to be a crucial category when social support and hindrance to human capabilities are of interest. Third, the theory of social space (Bourdieu 1984) – together with the concepts of economic and cultural capital, style, class, culture, career perspectives etc. – offers another objectivistic means of framing human action by taking power into account. It organizes social inequality according to the vertical *and* horizontal differentiation. Thus, instead of abstractly talking about human conditions – the model permits to locate the actors of interest and their subjective ('internal') conditions within a framework of the distribution of social power. So their subjective chances of realization of capabilities can be seen in a direct relation to their objective opportunities and constraints according to the distribution of – basically – wealth and knowledge.[4] For capability research this means that social inequality comes into focus as a basic condition of the realization of capabilities. And beyond this, inequality is theorized as a condition for and a function of power. Thus, capabilities of given actors can be interpreted within the framework of objective social power relations. So research can clearly name the social reasons – e.g. too big a share of social wealth of some actors, in difference to a very small share of others – for a positive or negative realization of capabilities in different social actors; and it can name causal relations between one and the other.

Beyond these specifically sociological aspects of Bourdieu's theory, there are two more that come along with it. First, it has often been commented that Bourdieu carries quite some axiological load in his social theory, insofar as his focus on power and social struggle is undergirded by an – neo-Marxist – option for the lower classes. This is, first of all, an effect of a power-oriented methodology in the perception of an observer. Seen from the viewpoint of the Capability Approach however, there is nothing wrong with it, since one of its basic assumptions is that power relations that go against the realization of a truly human life are ethically disqualified. At this point, there is much more overlap of the Capability Approach with Bourdieuian assumptions than with those of Rational Choice or whatever kind of Functionalism. Second, Bourdieu puts emphasis on a *"Realpolitik* of reason" (Bourdieu 2002; Bourdieu & Wacquant 2006), sociological epistemology of auto-critique. For the social scientist it is important to take into account from what social position and habitual dispositions he or she approaches the object of research. Thus, the researcher does not remain simply objective, but is himself set into his or her

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4   There are, of course, other possibilities to construct a model according to other sorts of capital.

social relation with the object. These critical hermeneutics are of some worth for ethicists, since in ethics it is even more important to critically reflect upon the social conditions of judgment.

Human nature – a relational view

Nussbaum puts very much emphasis on 'essentialism' and a substantive theory of the good (Nussbaum 1993, 1999b: 178ff.). I read this as to underscore that there are conditions of a truly human life that can be positively named (and thus form a semantic content) and that each and every human being has a right to – in distinction to theories that emphasize mere procedures and formal maximization and to theories that favour a strict cultural relativism. Now it may seem – according to the impression that render some passages of Nussbaum's writings – that such an empirical essentialism has to be understood in those strong ontological terms of the substance theory in ancient metaphysics – and thus exclude any attempt of a modern, relational understanding of personhood, subjectivity, identity etc. I do not think that this is the case. If it was, however, I would not deem it necessary or even detrimental for a capability oriented ethics, since it would appear as a strong theory of objective grounds and, moreover, it would bind the statement of grounds to an ancient idea of how the physical and the metaphysical world is structured. But Nussbaum does not even claim that her list is closed; instead she explicitly leaves it open to results of new empirical observation. This means that the list of necessary capabilities for a truly human life can (slightly) develop according to varying social relations. Moreover, the way Nussbaum explains the *social* genesis of what is sometimes called the 'female nature' (Nussbaum 1999a: 170ff.) indicates that her concepts of capabilities cannot be understood as metaphysical, but instead as historical and bound to human socialization. In consequence, the concept of 'human nature' does not denote some*thing* self-contained, closed in itself; something that could be depicted as a ball or a sphere – as it would be in classical substance-ontology. If the concept of 'human nature' in the Capability Approach turns out to be historical, then there are two conclusions at hand: First, as the items of Nussbaum's list break down the seeming 'substance' of human nature into different states and practices of human beings which, ontologically, are *not* transcendental (platonic) entities. Instead, they are simply states and practices that make up – as well – items of human self description. This does not seem to be much. However, when a person says 'I am human', (most of) these items are (somehow) present in this description and therefore they are a personal and social reality. To untie the concept of 'human nature' from specific metaphysical preconditions and to historicize it according to human experience facili-

tates intercultural plausibilization. But on the other hand it transposes the discussion of basic underpinnings and substantiation from metaphysics to anthropology and history. Second and in consequence, the 'substantive' (Nussbaum) content of the list of capabilities has to be confirmed in its morally binding character simply on this basis. Nussbaum substantiates it – following a non-metaphysical reading of Aristotle – simply by stating that virtually every human being in normal conditions is endowed with the listed capabilities. So, the statement of grounds and the claim of universal too, are based on nothing more than empirical experience. The good grounds weaken, the concepts become relative and the items of the list become vague. On the other hand, Capability-people have an interest in strong grounds for their statements. But there is no way back to metaphysics in a pluralist world and finite history does not produce absolute truth. But there is some chance to create stronger plausibility and wider evidence for Capability-claims, I suppose: not fleeing the historicist argument, but deepening it.

The (implicit) anthropology of Capability-thought counters – as far as I see – both simple rationalism and (methodological) individualism. It claims, instead, the importance of bodily, emotional, intellectual and social life of any individual.[5] And it is from here that we can historicize somewhat more. While we keep on ascribing the rights – connoted in the capabilities – to each and any individual, we conceive of individuals as intrinsically social beings in a quite radical way. Richard Rorty (Rorty 1989) – in Wittgensteinian as well as in American pragmatic tradition – develops the idea of the very *self* as a contingent *network* of convictions, knowledge, desires, relationships a.s.f., quite much in the same way as he conceives of language and society as networks, too. The network that constitutes the self is anchored in the experiences of the past, as well as extended to the future by its desires and projections. Such a network is being woven during the process of socialization. Its texture in some regions is dense and strong: stark experiences and reflection upon it have produced deep knowledge, firm convictions and staunch sentiments in certain realms of life; other areas of the tissue are like light and thin gauze: few experience, dim knowledge and little orientation in other realms of life. And the tissue has no rim, but it is open to shed old and to tie up to new threads. And, of course, such a network is finite in a double sense: it never can encompass everything, catch it all; and it is never complete, but its weaving disrupts with death. We can – drawing now on Bourdieu's concept of habitus – think of such a network as the entirety of cognitive, emotional and bodily dispositions of the habitus of a given individual, group, people etc. These dispositions are embodied figurations of the persons' experience of the social world and of the persons' self-experience within the context of social

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5   … similar to many Latin American philosophers of liberation in dialogue with Kantian tradition 'Discourse Ethics', e.g. Hinkelammert 1994; see Fornet-Betancourt 1992a, 1992b, 1994; also Schäfer 2004.

world; and they are utterly social since any individual shares almost all of its dispositions with a certain amount of other individuals. So all networks of dispositions are both individual and collective fabric – while any individual stays individual by virtue of its unique combination, integration and processing of its experience. Such a network of the self of course contains all the experiences of a person with his or her own basic needs and capacities, the trained skills and the external relationships – or in other words: with basic, internal and combined capabilities as Nussbaum would say. From such networks, their generation, their interchange etc. it is that a common ethos develops. And of course the network of any person contains notions of what can be called 'human' – even if they are distorted by oppression and misery.

It is important for the habitus-based network model of the self that the dispositions a person embodies during its life can be heavily molded by dominance, violence, injustice, slavery, humiliation etc. – as Bourdieu often points out.[6] Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1999b) – in this line of thought – mentions e.g. poor women in India, who have interiorized their disadvantage in such a way that they accept it as 'natural'. Domination has become part of the cognitive, emotional and bodily dispositions. The networks of a common ethos, thus, are more or less interwoven by the strong threads of domination that exert influence on the shared convictions. In midst of given social power relations we humans weave our common networks of ethos, develop communitarian morals, reflect upon them and construct ethic systems and, finally, principles with universal claims. And, of course, we oppose against oppression, misery a.s.f. in the name of human dignity – reminding one another of what that means, among other ways by referring to the Nussbaum-list.

Networking convictions – thick and thin morals

'Reminding one another' is a communicative act that presupposes social relations, interests of the actors involved, cognition and recognition of situations that call for remembering human dignity etc. – in short: it needs perception, judgment and action on a common social ground. The anthropological considerations in the former section also think of the humans as embedded in a social environment (*politiká*) since the human being is a social being (*zoon politikón*). Then the community has to be taken into account for the generation of moral and ethic orientation. However, it would rather be a short-circuit than a short-cut to opt for a normative edition of communitarianism, as e.g. of Alisdair McIntyre or Samuel Huntington. Instead, I should like to derive from our anthropological considerations what one might call a 'methodological

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6   …and as the sociological approach presented above facilitates to detect and to analyze.

communitarianism'. It is methodological in the sense that it makes a specific premise for work. This is different from e.g. the Kantian premise in baroque anthropology (dividing reason from experience), from the liberal premise of an 'original position' (Rawls) or from the axiom of a free, calculating and maximizing individual. The anthropological premise is that humans are social beings and their self can be conceived of as a network, as explained above. What does that imply for an ethics that is competent to communicate convincingly and for everybody alike the normative contents of Nussbaum's list?

I guess that, even if controversial, Michael Walzer's distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' morals can be usefully adopted to the network-idea. If we think of communities of people generating common convictions etc., the local or regional praxis tends to be regulated by a high number of (implicit or explicit) dos and don'ts. Norms, virtues, values, commandments etc. generate in the 'thick' contexts of meaning that dominate the every-day experience (and condenses e.g. in routines etc.). The actors adopt their orientation from traditions, link emotional loyalties, value judgments and self esteem to them. The accompanying ideas mostly have a strong semantic or semiotic content – transmitted by stories, parables, symbols etc. – and are closely associated to the concrete daily life. Thick morals are focused on the regulation of 'life world'-issues; a claim to universal validity normally is made only in a naïve way, if ever. On the other hand, we can visualize thin morals as lighter networks with just some thread which, in turn, are quite strong. Historically, they can be understood as the result of a longer period of reflection upon thick norm, especially when encountering other cultures with different thick morals. Typically 'thin' are formal, procedural principles. These abstract from the networks of thick habitual dispositions and reflexively draw conclusions from the large amount of seemingly unstructured experiences. Hence it is possible to think of Kant's 'Categorical Imperative' as a result of a long standing reflection upon reciprocal relations. Principles recall what historically has been achieved (Rorty 2001: 186), condensing the achievements in formulas. J.B. Schneewind sees an important function of principles – be it the Categorical Imperative or the utilitarian 'Happiness' – as a self-critical 'moral ambulance'. Among others, the claim to universal validity implies that principles can easily be used by others in order to critically examine those who emitted the given principle; they are of reciprocal use. Moreover, to hold on to a principle categorically makes one's own behavior results predictable for others and, thus, produces certainty. Principles generate from the dealings between people of different thick convictions their interest in the universal perspective. Therefore they are most useful in (international) political contexts with highly formalized standards of regulation.

But where are the items of the capability list to be localized, in thick or thin environments? If we examine the distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' morals according to systematic criteria, it seems to me that the items do not fit

in either. Nor does it make much sense to divide the items as to ascribe 'life' and 'bodily health' to 'thin' and 'affiliation' or 'control over one's environment' to 'thick'. But we interpreted the distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' morals also in relation to different contexts of practical use: local everyday life and translocal political decision making. It seems to me that Nussbaum's list has a bridging position between both. In its general focus is the human being as such. This is the bridging interest. At the same time there are some items that are more easily related to a universalist and formally political background (life, health ...) and other items that invite one to be filled with everyday cultural practices (e.g. emotion, affiliation, environment). As long as this distinction is a practical one and not a categorical, the similarity of certain items to certain types of practices invite one to work with the list, beginning with the items closer to one's own practical context and thus gaining plausibility for the other items. Thus, the list can acquire a kind of 'glocal' (Roberston) character, combining both levels of practice without urging uniformity – and this could turn out to be a little bit more than just specifying the list according to 'local conditions' (Nussbaum 1999b: 213).

Networking between cultures – transversal reason

The theme of thick and thin morals already connotes much of the discussion about the intercultural validity of the list. Nussbaum sees herself in a strong contradiction to cultural relativists (Nussbaum 1999b: 176ff.). On the other hand she warns her critics not to misunderstand her universalistic claims as some kind of 'metaphysical realism' (Nussbaum 1999b: 182). As mentioned above, a non-metaphysical universalism that does not recur on reason in the Kantian sense but highlights the characteristics of a good life ought to be a *historical* and empirical one.[7] As such, it is 'relatively relative': If we imagine a continuum between a strong metaphysical realism on the one end and a strong cultural relativism on the other, then an empirical universalism of the good life falls somewhere in the middle. Its certainty about the truth and validity of its criteria (the list) is being produced by studying constant traits of human life and generating a *consensus* about the results among a certain group of humans (e.g. the Capability-people). What comes to pass is that the criteria are a social reality due to a network of convictions shared by a network of people. Hence, the criteria can neither be implemented by decreeing nor by recurring to a higher form of reason – as evident in a strongly plural but not pluralistic word! As a consequence, a strategy to further the convic-

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7   Nussbaum's (Nussbaum 1999b: 178) self definition as 'essentialist' rks!) does not help very much, since it triggers misunderstandings.

tions has no other way than to use the dynamics of the network to produce *plausibility*. As another consequence, especially for the intercultural relations, it might be a good idea to rethink the (Western) concept of reason. This is the only point of interest that I will focus on under the rubric of intercultural relations.

In our context of a culturally plural world many postmodern thinkers tend to criticize formal and universalistic Kantian or utilitarian concepts of reason and counter with a strong relativism. If we, again, imagine a continuum between the 'birds perspective' of reason on the one end and the idea of an 'archipelago' of dispersed rationalities on the other, again an adequate concept of reason for intercultural networks should be placed somewhere in the middle.[8] The metaphor of 'reason as an archipelago of rationalities' serves, according to François Lyotard, to protect particular and plural forms of reason from the uniforming power of capital. Cultural relativity becomes an instrument to serve the powerless. But aren't particular cultures already strongly involved in relations with others on almost all the fields of human life? And isn't it already a universalistic manipulation of the particular, if someone tries to 'save' it by isolating it? On the one hand, it seems that the metaphor of the archipelago of unconnected rationalities produces a performative contradiction. On the other hand, there are deontological ethics, in Kantian liberal tradition, promoting universalistic principles. The interest is to strengthen what is common to everybody, in opposition to particularism. The bird's perspective of these approaches, however, generates serious difficulties for intercultural communication as e.g. Karl-Otto Apel underscores for the Moral Principle of Discourse Ethics (Apel 1994). Moreover, insofar as the cultural background of these rationalistic ethics is based on typical European (and North American) Enlightenment tradition, they also end up in a performative contradiction. A Western principle is not directly evident in any other culture. As any other ethical orientation it has to enter into dialogue, compete with other ideas and prove its usefulness within a network of coexistence and communication. As a matter of fact, there are many different rationalities, but they are interconnected in very different ways (sometimes violent) and there is also an interest in universally valid orienttation. When it comes to the concept of reason, it seems to me that Wolfgang Welsch proposed an interesting idea: 'transversal reason'.[9] According to this approach, reason is always woven into the cultural practices of different 'lifeworlds'. Reason works as the particular rationality of this praxis, and at the same time as the human capacity to develop concepts of larger units and of the commonly human. Different rationalities are not completely dispersed and different. They are imagined as different regions of a vast landscape of

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8   See for the whole argument Welsch 1996.
9   Welsch 1996. For some reading in a similar vein compare Wittgenstein 2009 and the phenomenological works of Bernhard Waldenfels (Waldenfels 1980, 1985, 1990) and others.

human life. Reason, according to this approach, is woven into the fabric of specific cultural rationalities, but its specific use is to build as many bridges as possible from this specific rationality over to different ones: It operates transversally comparing and combining different rationalities with an interest in common traits. Thus, the perspective of the 'commonly human' is present, but it is not connoted with uniformity; and the perspective of the culturally specific is present, but it is not connoted with particularism. However, reason itself does not hold the majestic position anymore that rationalism once gave to it. Reason is simply a (very important) capability among others.

Certainty and solidarity – networking among power relations

The relational approach to Nussbaum's historical 'essentialism' renders obvious that the items of the list do not have the objective strength to *oblige* actors to realize these conditions in their social context – even if we conceived of the items as principles in the strict sense of the word. They need consent to be acknowledged and heeded. Or they need to be codified in international law (on constitutional level) and enforced by transnational organisations like the UN. It is this context that e.g. the relation between the capability-list and Human Rights are discussed in, a context impregnated by power relations. Taking these considerations into account I would like to discuss two more points. First: what helps, in a relational perspective, to generate plausibility for the capability-thought? Second: what about power relations? Both questions can best be answered if we take into account, in a short remark, that both have to do with the specific genesis of the Capability Approach.

The Capability Approach of Amartya Sen originated as a critique of a (neo-)liberal bureaucratic development policy; a critique 'from below', out of the perspective of the Disadvantaged and the Marginalized. This hermeneutics renders the Capability Approach quite similar to Latin American Liberation-Philosophy and -Theology: e.g. Franz Hinkelammert developed in dialog with the Mexican Zapatista-movement and in debate with the German Discourse Ethics the criterion of corporal integrity as the basic condition of any ethical judgment and as criterion of truth of "universalism of the concrete human being" (Hinkelammert 1994: 139). This idea leads to similar results as the "Theology of life" and the "Conciliar Process for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation" of the *World Council of Churches* (Geneva)[10] that employs a hermeneutic from below and integrates worldwide into international institutional resources with local religious-groups fostering social

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10   http://www.oikoumene.org/en/who-are-we.html.

justice, conciliating violent conflict, advocating Human Rights a.s.f. This kind of genesis, hermeneutics and practical engagement aligns, up to a certain point, these positions in the field of ethics with the people on the low end of the global stratification and, in consequence, it makes them relatively weak on the field of ethics. This has consequences for the ways in which capability-ethicists generate plausibility and find themselves positioned among the power relations.

Creating *plausibility* for the capabilities and their claim is a communicative process that operates with cognitive contents, emotional states, social relations and reflection on their logics etc. Pointing to cognitive contents, reinforced by their affective connotations, the listed capabilities themselves are of primary importance. To me, they should be evident to anybody and easy to explain[11] – as long as no interests stand against the recognition of their validity in relation to *other people*. Out of a relationist view, however, I think that the convincing power of human 'essentials' can be fostered by taking relational operations into account.

Any communication, according to Habermas (Habermas 1988), goes along with an experience of the intersubjective validity of communicational rules. Communication and its way of operation can hence be useful to create a conscience for interdependency, mutuality and, thus, under good circumstances, for the right of *other people* to realize their capabilities, too. I would like to sketch briefly some axiologically relevant communicational relations on the cognitive and emotional level.

(1) Reciprocity is a type of relation that, for ages, has made moral similitude and human equality a regulating notion for social organization. The exchange of gift and counter-gift is, since Marcel Mauss, recognized as a basic social relation and as a strong means for social coherence.[12] Anthropology of law considers reciprocity as groundwork of legal common sense and organization.[13] Reciprocity is plausible everywhere, even if the gifts as such are different: in one society the valid currency may be money and its symbols, in another it may be honor. In any case, we can state some fundamental points: reciprocity presupposes the recognition that the other person has the right to live a life more or less comparable to one's own life. Reciprocity relies

11   About the universal evidence etc. of capabilities a discussion is going on; it is not object of our considerations out of a relationist perspective.
12   See Mauss 1954 and Malinowski 1922. For economy see Thurnwald 1932. Ceremonial exchange of gifts is simply a special form of exchange. Even modern social theories presuppose reciprocity, even if it is mediated by institutions multiplied by functional differentiation (Luhmann 1995).
13   See Thurnwald 1934. When we are talking about do ut des it is a good idea not to underscore too much the word ut, since this would happen out of a subjectivistic misunderstanding.

on socially shared ideas of what is valuable. And if a given actor recognizes the rules of reciprocity other actors can count on his schemes of behavior as reliable, and social stability is fostered (what, on the other hand, also makes it so easy to gain short hand profit by a calculated rupture of reciprocal logics). Reciprocity can count on practical, almost universal plausibility. From reciprocity stems social recognition, stable conditions and, in the end, universalistic reasoning – it confirms each and any of the capability items.

(2) On the basis of simple reciprocity, many religions developed the so called "Golden Rule". The *Project World Ethos*,[14] initiated by the German theologian Hans Küng, showed clearly that the Golden Rule is a good starting point for intercultural understanding. Moreover, the Golden Rule implies a dynamic of auto-obligation for the actor who commits to it. Jesus pronounced in the Sermon on the Mount: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets" (Mt. 7, 12). This obligation to act in favor of the other is valid, independently of the other's response and calculations concerning any counter-gift. This obligation turns the Golden Rule to be strong and weak at the same time. It is strong, since such a way to act it helps actors in a given situation to act counter-intuitively and, thus, e.g. to find a way out of the escalation of a (possible) conflict. It is weak, since it can be exploited by others. Believers might be strong enough in themselves to risk this without any protection. For the general public and even outright selfish people the Golden Rule might still be attractive, if sanctions protect the rule against exploitation.

(3) The experiences of suffering and solidarity are very intimately interwoven into the cognitive and emotional fabric of the most particular cultures (Rorty 1989). At the same time, suffering and solidarity are universal experiences. Especially suffering is very different from the ways in which cultures celebrate themselves. Celebrations often do seem strange to foreigners. Think about Shiite *Ashura*-celebrations in the eyes of Western observers or the *Christopher Street Day* in the eyes of Muslim believers. Both trigger feelings of rejection. In contrast, experiences of suffering, pain or humiliation, the burning of houses, the death of a child, hunger, epidemic sickness a.s.f. invite to identify with the victim. A sentence as "I know what it means to lose a child. What can I do for you?" is an expression of primordial solidarity transcending all boundaries. Here we have the groundwork for a secular ethic of solidarity as Richard Rorty (Rorty 1989) projects. Moreover every religion has some account on suffering and soli-

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14   http://www.weltethos.org/dat-english/index.htm. See similar: Parliament of the World Religions 1993.

darity, richly expressed by symbols and stories as the Biblical account of the Samaritan highlights. All the religions – except their fundamentalist transformations (but up to a certain point even these) – are masters in contradicting the reality of suffering and finally even death. And they know how to mobilize the power of compassion (e.g. Metz 2004). If ethics ties up to experiences of suffering, it gets in touch with the most intimate fabric of feelings and convictions; and at the same time it always is on the brink to universal consensus. And compassion in solidarity is something very different from sentimentality. Acting in solidarity always also means to act out of the threshold of inter-subjective and objective needs and rights. This becomes obvious, if one conceives of the Human Rights as a response to systematically produced experiences of suffering and injustice. In this sense, the universal validity of Human Rights does not stem from Western dogmatism but from the mere universality of human suffering itself – and the social conditions that guarantee the development of human capabilities thus become criteria also for judging a situation according to the Human Rights.[15]

Power, of course, is a relation that withstands in many contexts the thriving for capabilities to be developed. A brief look at the history and the focus of the Human Development and Capability Association shows that there is quite clear conscience of how important social power relations and their political transformation are. The HDCA takes a viewpoint 'from below', and Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1999b: 186) points out that even in Aristotle's ethics the powerless are omitted easily. Identifying with the 'miserables' (or at least with their interests) obliges the ethicist to refer to a social theory in order to justify his or her judgments. Thus, some fields of debate in ethics drift towards empirical, sociological reasoning. There are only some few thoughts that I would like to point out about this drift.

Social science, out of a relationist perspective, can be of some use, when the debate between Nussbaum's (empirical) 'essentialism' and cultural-relativist opinions arises (Nussbaum 1999b: 178ff.). If we do not argue in a metaphysical but historical (stronger: historicist) way, we cannot make a strong stance for 'essentials'; but that does not mean that a naïve relativism has to be the consequence. Individuals cannot be compared without their relations and positions in their social context; cultures cannot be compared without their intercultural, social relations on the regional and global level. Comparison in context presupposes that any social action is embedded in social relations. And these are relations of inequality and power. Hence, to me it seems that it is not so much of interest, if people of a given culture have the right to do this

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15   The long complex discussion of the relation between Human Rights and Capabilities, however, is not object of our brief considerations.

or that. The question is, if they exert power relations upon other people that these people dislike. And this is the moment when the oppressed people can claim their rights, for example referring to their right to develop their capabilities. But: this argument still needs to be sharpened. Since there are people who are so accustomed to being oppressed that they habitualize it and would not even complain about it (cf. Nussbaum 1999b: 210). Here, of course, the ethicist would have to act 'enlightening' this person's situation and line up with her in solidarity. But this is nothing more than to fight according to one's own convictions or, in other words, tying up to the network of convictions and action (which is a network of power relations) in order to weave new patterns.

Power relations, in my understanding, need to be addressed with priority. But this does not solve problems of substantiation with one strike. It only transforms them as two gross issues of ethical relevance may illustrate. These are exploitation and exclusion of many human beings by neoliberal economics i.e. economists – beginning with the 'Chicago boys' benefiting from a torturing dictator in Chile and ending with investment bankers causing by their usual business hundreds of millions of people starving (to death). All of this is, of course, a matter of ethics. But it cannot be resolved by ethics alone, as the comparison between torture and banking shows. That torture is unethical, even an investment banker would agree upon (even though Friedrich Hajek and Friedman-followers in the seventies legitimized Pinochet). But he would not agree upon his responsibility whatsoever for starving people. He would – as any neoliberal – more or less say that poor people are themselves responsible for their situation; and he would try to legitimize that with economic and socio-scientific arguments – not with ethics. So, we are caught within a kind of double bind. Without a strong theory of social power relations and inequality behind our interest in justice, we cannot argue the reasons of injustice and the way to justice. And without a strong ethic commitment to human basic needs and/or capabilities we are not able to substantiate our socio-scientific approach. This means that things inevitably become political.

Thus, the action connoted by the lemma of this conference: "Closing the capability gap" turns out to be, finally, political transformation."

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Closing the Capabilities Gap

Renegotiating social justice for the young

Content

Part I – Renegotiating Social Justice

Part II – Capability Gaps of the Young

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