

Life Value, The Common Life Interest of Legitimate Rights and Social Justice

Part II

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Theme: [History](#)

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FINDING THE LOST LIFE-VALUE GROUND AND MEASURE:

THE COMMON LIFE INTEREST OF LEGITIMATE RIGHTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

by

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The following essay by Professor John McMurtry is Part II of an sixteen part series, which will be published on Global Research in the course of the next two months.

Instituted exclusion of the common life ground and interest follows logically from the atomic division of interests into competing rights decoupled from life value in automaton self-maximisation – the ruling syntax of the age. The principle of life value goes underneath this *agon* of rights without life base. It explains the validity and invalidity of each and all positions by the *life-value comprehension* it stands for, seeking beyond competing partialities to coherence with life requirements without satisfaction of which life capacities are reduced or despoiled.

Life-value onto-axiology understands that the *common life interest* is grounded in objective life requirements at all levels, common life support systems. It recognises that human rights and rules must cohere with these life requirements through time, or disaster is constructed by the systematically life-blind assaults on life fabrics and conditions – for connected system example, by the ever deeper corporate looting of fossil oils from land, deltas and oceans and cumulative polluting effluents from extraction to global market to mass consumption.

The objective common life interest which is ignored begins with the universal life support systems all human life, life conditions and fellow life depend on. This life-ground is the real and unseen *base of legitimate human rights – what they must cohere with to be valid*. Revealingly this life-ground foundation of rights is unrecognised by economic, ethical, political and rights discourses. What life-value understanding requires is this comprehension, and so it rejects any position which does not take account of humanity's life support systems at social and individual levels as unsound, and perhaps unwittingly destructive. It works by the *life-coherence principle* towards understanding of what we might call *deep rights*. The ultimate starting point here and elsewhere is that all true values cohere in virtue of the common life-ground which enables the compossible validity of each.

It therefore follows from life-value onto-ethics that one can only justify a right as ultimately legitimate if it enables life in a way not possible without it – the *necessity condition* of the right along with its coherence with other life systems. For example, the human right to living space not violated by forces external to it is the life-value foundation of private-property rights and their historical justification before they are debased as absolutist rights which take account of neither. Any right has limits, and life space is one – most obviously overridden in such claims as the claimed rights of the Nazi regime to *lebensraum*, or global corporations to other societies' life resources. *A legitimate right is defined by both life necessity and life coherence.* The primary axiom and its converse explains the general life-value base here in universal principle, with margins of life-range gain or loss the life-value measure.

The human vocation is, then, *to be of living worth* in these terms, with *right and obligation arising where known reduction of human life capacities results absent their fulfilment.* Consider, for example, the human right to clean water and the corresponding obligation to provide for it at both social and individual levels. What is required at the baseline of understanding and prescription is an incontestable and *sufficient* criterion of life necessity or need coherent with others'. Such a criterion must meet three problems which are typically regarded as insuperable, but are perfectly soluble: (i) to distinguish needs from mere wants and habits; (ii) to provide a criterion which is consistent with and works for all needs; and (iii) clearly applies across diverse ways of life and individual differences.

Such a baseline criterion of life necessity then yields the ultimate principle of validity of human rights and obligations and the structure of social justice. What is *due to and from human beings*, the ancient formula of justice, right and obligation, is here understood in systematic and objective life-value terms, what has been long lacking in received conceptions.

Life-value analysis grounds in a universal criterion of life necessity or need and its corresponding good: that is, *N is a need if and only if, and to the extent that, deprivation of N's good always results in reduction of life capacity.* Thought experiment as well as the findings of science will demonstrate that there is no vital need that does not satisfy this criterion. Both also confirm that there is no life capacity that is not also *measurable* by this principle – for example, the need for drinking water measured by the calibrated life capacity loss *without* it through time.

Capabilities: Regrounding Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum in Life Need and Value

Both positive and negative poles of life capacity admit of many levels and kinds of *capability test*. Note, however, that the life-value meaning of capability is not that of Amartya Sen and the capabilities literature.^[4] It refers strictly to *life* capabilities and their ranges of function as are *needed* for human life not to be demonstrably reduced in its capacities. No such principled ground or qualifications are offered in the received meaning of “capabilities”. This is why political and corporate rhetorics have been quick to pick up on the loose concept in play, merely “ability to perform functionings” – a criterion which allows merely private preferences for non-life functionings, like private motor powers meeting no need but violating them in both owner (who needs the exercise) and other life (which is oppressed by its effects of noise, pollution and life-field occupation). Martha Nussbaum, the other best known leader of the capabilities literature, goes further than Sen in “taking a stand” on what these capabilities are, but here schema lacks any defined principled ground and any

criterion whereby the claimed life goods can be anchored, tested, or integrated. The missing life-ground and criterion is the N-axiom which sets the life necessity condition of legitimate rights.

Conversely, it follows from the N-axiom that nothing that does *not* satisfy this objective and comprehensive criterion qualifies as a need or necessary good, nor can have a *just* right to it as distinguished from a privilege. Again contrast this to Sen's position that all capabilities we might "have reason to value" count. Such a criterion legitimates the right to any commodity which people 'have a reason to value' so a personal sports vehicle with 6-foot tires or a 500 horse-power marine engine one desires to have like others or to be "safe and well-served" qualifies. What in the capabilities literatures rules against these capabilities? As in the capitalist market of choice, there is none. Corporations talk about their capabilities all the time, and those of their products –giant gas-fuelled personal motors, fast-repeat guns, exciting video kill games, two-pound burgers piled high, and so on. All grant the abilities to "perform functionings" that "the individual chooses", and everyone is given a "reasons to value" them. Until a life-value criterion is built in, the worst can and does happen in the name of 'choice', 'capability' and 'reason to value'. What people want is their good, and individuals choose or – in aggregate – the market does. No life-value principle guides judgement.

Sen is concerned with equality of capabilities and rights to them, however, whereas the market system selects for inequality with no concerns. All that matters is that people pay.. While the market is bound by money-demand, Sen wants those *without* it to have more equal standing. So far, so good. But again the question insists at a general level. What if the desired capability for which people claim a right is for what stunts or violates life capacities at an ecological or organic level? The issue is avoided because a common syntax of freedom of choice and worth rules at both market and high-theory levels. A fateful question is posed by life-value principle. *How can corporate rights to exploit the resources of the world to maximally satisfy what individual consumers have a right choose have any limit or end to despoliation of life fields and support systems by this ruling logic of rights and freedoms?*

Neither market theory or received rights doctrines can meet the problem until life-value standards are grounded in. With no life-value requirement or need entering as a condition of the legitimacy of these kinds of rights and freedoms, we end as we have with a collapsing planetary life system and social injustice beyond bearing.

Individual Differences and the Life-Value Criterion and Measure of Legitimate Rights

The plot thickens further, however. Before we can re-ground in the universal *life* needs and goods all people require which follow from the N-criterion, many will protest that cultural or *individual differences* make this universalist idea impossible, or undesirable, or both.

For example, some choose to satisfy their need for food in the form of fish and beans, others by meat and potatoes, and still others by vegetables and fruits, with many further variations among these menus. Hence the false inference arises that the *need* for food too is various. More careful consideration resolves the problem, however, because it recognises that organic *need* is for a complement of nutritional food which can be spelled out across these different fares by the N-criterion and primary axiom of value. No-one chooses this life

necessity and good itself, nor can impose it on another. It is a necessity of life recognised by life-value understanding, and admits of endless degrees and choices within its principles of recognition, bad and good and mixed. Whether it is recognised or not, the objective criterion of life value remains constant, and thus too the life-value ground of rights and the principles of social justice across cultures.

The *test* in all situations is invariant: whether life capacities are more restricted or reduced in range without the life necessity and good than with it. Empirical science can confirm or disconfirm, but need is *always* this in principle. Right to what is *not* needed by these objective and comprehensive life-value criteria, while other human life needs it to live as human, *cannot* therefore be a legitimate right, or be consistent with social justice. This is what life-value onto-axiology concludes, and it is open to counter-argument any step of the way.

Thinking Past the Life-Blind Paradigms

Yet how manifold is the resistance to *understanding* the self-evident. Acculturated stupefaction and wilful blindness seem at work, and one can explain this as a product of a corporate system which is not only structured to the unliving, but invades what is not itself as its feeding cycle. The academy follows suit way by abstracting out all that lives by formulae and conceptions indifferent to life needs *a-priori* – as we can see in particular with economic thought whose price and profit calculus cannot distinguish between what enables and disables life or what is alive and what is dead. Life value and need do not compute. We could walk through the other disciplines and find a similar blocking out of all the life necessities to live as human – philosophy and theory that avoid the life-ground in principle in self-referential idea systems, history that fixes more on how many can be killed and ruled to erect monuments on the wreckage to record for posterity, and so on.

Still another avoidance is to argue that the need-criterion of legitimacy of right is reductionist for people's lives *beyond* need. Yet again one asks: *what* exactly is worthwhile that is not an expression or enjoyment of a life capacity? If nothing is, and need is solely that without life capacities are reduced, *what* of true life-value can be ruled out? Nothing can be – as thought experiment will confirm. As we consider the universal life needs which satisfy the N-criterion – a long research study whose conclusions are reported for examination ahead – we find that there is nothing worthwhile in life that is excluded because all that people do or choose to do requires life capacities, and they in turn require *the life goods* that meet needs to flourish however free and unique they may be. Whatever the manifold variations and choices *within* the generic goods of these universal life needs, no life-coherent possibility is pre-empted. Moreover, all that a human life can have a legitimate *right* to is that which is needed to *enable* life capacities to live and flourish as human – the universal life needs and goods which derive from the primary axiom and the N-criterion.

The Universal Human Life Necessities

They are the *common life-ground* of humanity, and they entail the rights and obligations required to fulfil them. Life-value research has accordingly established seven distinct domains of human life necessities and goods required by human beings across persons and cultures. Each domain of universal human life need may be personally tested, in turn, by asking which of *any* one could live without and *not* suffer a reduction of life capacity.

Some goods are physically undeniable. One cannot do without oxygenated air or potable liquid or caloric intake in any degree without a proportionate reduction or destruction of life capacity. The *life-value calculus* identifies for every life good the *scientifically establishable limits of life capacity range and the degrees of its reduction correlating with the degrees of deprivation of it*.

Thus one cannot live six minutes without any breathable air, a day or so without water, a week without any food, and so on. The italicised parameters apply across need-capacity domains, with very different lines of necessity and loss from deprivation of different universal needs. Insufficient breathable air leads quickly to incapacitation by the degree of deprivation, but no open space or light – other goods of one’s atmospheric situation – take far longer to show the loss of life capabilities or ability to function through range. Nonetheless they too are universal life necessities and goods in a correspondingly qualified sense. And so on through the entire framework of universal life needs/goods spelled out ahead.

Consider an example. The nourishment requirement is many-sided in calorie, protein, and vitamin necessities of intake, with research establishing required range quantities for size and age parameters, and corresponding physical degeneration by significant deprivations. Deprivation of communicative culture, on the other hand, is more complex and less dramatic in the effects of its deprivation, but still expresses deprivation of its goods in life capacity loss. Although no reading or writing tools for a writer would score far higher as a disabling deprivation than it would for someone preferring music and play as human expression and communication forms, still people without *any* cultural creations or means of creation – from language interaction through the arts to play – are made subhuman in their quality of life. *Cultural goods* thus also constitute a universal human life necessity by the N-criterion. Although the need satisfiers and choices vary immensely, reduction of life capacities without any of them is clear and usually quantifiable by functioning range.

Universal Life Needs the Basis of All Legitimate Rights

It is important to be very clear on these matters because the generic principles involved cross all domains, goods and necessities of human life. To move into still further spheres of these universal human life necessities and goods – the *real basis of legitimate human rights* – we may consider what is often blinkered out as a merely subjective or individual or cultural issue without unifying objective principle of determination or life-capacity measure.

Consider in this light a human life *without anyone caring* for its existence at any level. Such a deprived life is a kind of hell, although capacity loss from its deprivation is not so easily measurable as life without sufficient caloric intake or potable water. There is a human life necessity of supportive care or “love” which some say the greatest need of all. Certainly without it people variously lose life capacity including the will to live itself, and infants and children variously shrivel up and die to the world without it, as research has shown across the primates.

In every domain of universal human life need, in short, there are implications for human rights and obligation corresponding to the life-value loss and provision involved.

Still another universal life good and necessity for human beings across cultures, again admitting of very different forms, is the need for a physical or natural environment in some integrity of form. This is why people being confined to an environment of squalid disorder is

a human-right violation and social injustice. Deterioration of the life fields of thought, felt being and action follows – as has been shown by animal welfare research with even livestock reduced in their vital signs of alertness, brightness of eye and skin sheen if they are deprived of environmental shape and stimulus.

At this point explanation calls for some *unifying complete set* of these universal human life goods/needs/ necessities without which human beings variously suffer life capacity loss towards inertia, disease and death. Life-value understanding requires the full life-value framework and coordinates of legitimate human rights and obligations. Whether every vital life need is agreed upon or not is less the ultimate issue than that we have some objective and generalizable framework to ground in as opposed to an absurd intellectual and market culture which recognises no objective ground of human life at all but money demand, priced supply aggregates, a one dollar a day differential of poverty, and so on. The furthest analysis has gotten beyond this in the new well-being indexes beyond gross market sales (GDP) are lists without any principled ground, unifying criterion, or delimiting framework of universal life goods.

The standard need-set of “food, clothing, housing, and so on” which Marx first recognised 176 years ago after centuries of theory without any life-requirement is obviously inadequate. It has no criteria, measure or connected whole. The ubiquitous “basic needs” of non-governemntal organisations is vacuous. It is ambiguous enough that marketeers can deny deprivation as long as income is rising by less than the cost of a bottle of pop.

The most important human life need for a vocation or meaningful employment is always left out, and food itself can continue to be processed junk – as in U.S. school lunches where the highlight of food for poor children, ketchup, may qualify as a vegetable. Humanity has been a long time without its most basic life-value bearings, and this vacuity of meaning fits the ruling money-rights system like a glove.

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