Aristotelian Essentialism

1   Definitions

Realism   the view that the true nature of things is only known through a perspective independent of the contingencies of human history and life. Contrast: *internalist essentialism*.

Essentialism   "the view that human life has certain central defining features" (p. 205). Contrasted with *relativism*.

Relativism   the view that standards and values are relative to cultures. Often linked with tolerance on the grounds that one culture's standards and values don't apply to another.

Aristotelian   Three things stand out. 1. use of biology, 2. empiricism, use of human senses to gain knowledge (cf. Plato), 3. Aristotle held that "living well" is the purpose of the state (*Politics*, 1252b29). By contrast, *liberals* are primarily concerned with preserving individual liberty. Liberals are more likely to object to paternalism, interference for one's own good, than Aristotelians are.

2   Different answers

Common sense   There is a list of basic things that nearly everyone needs in order to lead a decent life.

Essentialist   Common sense is correct because a being that lacked elements on the list would not lead a fully human life. "The Aristotelian essentialist claims that a life that lacks any one of these [functional capabilities] will be lacking in humanness." (p. 222)

Subjectivist   Common sense is correct because nearly every psychologically normal person wants those things. This isn't logically necessary, but it is an enduring fact about human beings.

3 Adaptive preferences and capabilities

The main reason for adopting an objective view like this is that subjective preferences are malleable. (p. 230)

The main objection to adopting an objective view like this is that it forces an understanding of what makes life good on people, regardless of their beliefs. Nussbaum favors giving people capabilities that they can choose to exercise or not, rather than insisting that they function in particular ways. (p. 225)

Are those two positions compatible? (Jenn Wilcox's question)