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The Architect and the Ditch-digger

There is an excellent diagnostic question by which one can discern much about a person, depending how they answer. It runs thus:

“You have an architect and a ditch-digger working together on a construction project. Who gets paid more, and why?”

Following the principle that arguments neither arise nor persist in a vacuum, that they live and die by their context and character, that their logic is merely auxiliary to the purpose to which it is put, we can describe two sorts of response corresponding to two rather timeless worldviews, along with their accompanying characters or “mind-sets”, these being broadly sketched as they are commonly observed today. The degree to which these views indicate differing “kinds” in human nature, primordial “types” beyond which there can be no further reduction to common ground, whether conversely they simply reflect historical and economic circumstance, or to what extent they are both, will be left to the reader. One might spot in the sensibilities described some alignment along traditional epithets of “bourgeois” vs. “working class”, but this is not necessarily so. Class consciousness is increasingly fluid in modern times, and arguably never quite fit the “bourgeois-worker” bifurcation. Aspects of what the reader might anticipate as a “working class” view (demands for meritocracy, for example, and corresponding notions of happiness) are aspects of Platonic, early Christian and Old Testament ideals, and were implemented with great success by the Ottoman Empire from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. Plenty of Enlightenment elements can be spied evenly on both sides. And was individual or conventional thinking ever either “bourgeois” or “prole”? I will therefore avoid overwrought labels, but admit that such family resemblances speak to a longer historical view and a persistent problematic.

Answer #1

“The architect, clearly, must be paid more. Aside from the fact that this is just how markets work, empirically stated, his skill is rarer than that of the ditch-digger, and therefore of higher value, per se. Secondly, his is the greater responsibility, for he oversees the entire project. A slight mistake on his part dooms the whole endeavor, and for the weight of this responsibility, he deserves the higher compensation. Finally, and in conjunction with these reasons, he can only be motivated to take on the burden of such oversight, as well as nurture his talent with years of sacrifice and study, if his remuneration well exceeds what he would earn if he didn’t. Laziness is a ubiquitous human trait, countered only by necessity. This is perfectly rational. Therefore, for there to be architects (by which we may read highly skilled professionals), instead of just ditch diggers (lower skilled workers), there must be class inequality. History supports this: every attempt to level economic inequities, to the degree it has done so, has resulted in the erosion of the educated class, of its standards, the loss not only of their crucial skills and services but of civilized conduct and striving for excellence in general, and has been to the detriment of the whole of the community.”

Character #1

This person presents as informed, articulate, and well-mannered. They think of themselves as impartial, equitable, and knowledgeable. They are principled. They have done all right in life, or at least not too badly, and take some pride in what they’ve accomplished, but it has not been easy for them and they have only their own initiative and hard work to thank. Now and then, they’ve considered cultivating other abilities, doing other things, but there was never time, and so they’ve long been reconciled to their roles and fates. This was good enough for them and it should be good enough for others. The term “rational discourse” means for this person something rather vague, but vaguely involves rules, adherence to rules, facts, experts, people knowing their place and the rules and the facts, linguistic if not conceptual fluency, or at least semblance thereof, and, most importantly, very little discourse, which they dislike, unless it

is not too obscure and endorses their self-image and world-view, in which case they like it very much. They are reluctant to seriously examine assumptions, question convictions, and are fearful of change. They dislike solitude, and have far more need of approval and affirmation than they care to admit. The world has a static, immutable quality for them, in which one can only be wholly right or wholly wrong. When in doubt, majority opinion is generally relied upon as touchstone, even if tacitly. Beneath this, however, they worry.

Answer #2

“The architect and the ditch-digger should be paid the same, which is to say, both the same sort of modest, unpretentious living. That a skill is rare testifies perhaps only to the fact that it is resource-intensive, requiring care and cultivation. Even supposing that the more cerebral sorts are inevitably the minority in a population, this is in accordance with the necessities of the division of labor, which require workers at all levels for material production, the majority being less skilled. Still, the architect and ditch-digger could not do without each other, and owe a mutual respect. As for the economic disparity presumed to be the condition for the possibility of intellectual talent, it is the contrary: economic equality, perhaps as a basic form of welfare state, is the only way to ensure true meritocracy. “From each according to (their) ability...” Hierarchies in remuneration provide the wrong motivations, producing mercenaries, not dedicated servants of their callings, and privileges are passed across generations. These hierarchies degrade the professions, causing them to follow along caste lines and greed, rather than the spirit of service and fulfillment of natural endowments. The notion of “vocation” is lost in a capitalist society, and it is only this which can ensure that social function is appropriately mapped to ability. A calling is not only a job, but an end in itself, doing what one loves its own reward. Plato, in his musings on the organizations of states, wrote there could be no greater satisfaction than the exercise of one’s natural gifts, without regard for material gain: this is what it is to be rational (among other things). Aristotle, though more of an aristocrat, laid out in his ethics that only an activity the pursuit of which is complete in itself leads to happiness, rounding out a virtuous life, tying up the loose ends that would otherwise be pointless intermediaries, dangling means to further purposes, *ad infinitum*. Individual humanity, and individual human

flourishing, is also the Enlightenment ideal. What we end up with in a capitalist system is not the nurturing of talent and civilization. It is stagnation, reification, alienation, vicious cycles, antagonism and nihilism.”

Character #2

This person has a grudge. It is written all over them, one can spot such a person and such a grudge a mile away. They feel cheated by life, by society, by their parents. They had more to offer and were never given the proper chance. They grieve deeply for this, but also wonder if they might be mistaken, after all, and if they'd have failed anyway. They frequently play at sour grapes. They can be resentful. They can be lazy and dishonest. They wonder openly about the justification of crime. They try to wish others well, when others do well, but privately there is always the refrain, “it is unfair.” They long to transcend their circumstances, but are rarely able to do so, and chafe at the limitations of their lives and occupations, limitations that close in on them further the older they get. They are often taken for fools, since they miscalculate the intentions of others. This is because they consistently make the mistake of assuming others are like themselves and want the same thing, namely some sort of fundamental transparency, some communicative and cooperative harmony. When they are made fools of, they rage, but eventually revert to their habitual reticence. They are not necessarily articulate and may be ill-informed, but beware of initiating a conversation with them: it will become a very involved affair from which you will not easily extricate yourself. “Rational discourse” for them is this sort of affair; they might lack rhetorical skill, but they are with it as a dog with a bone. They wish to put the whole world on trial in a grand inquisition.

Much has been written on theories of justice and on rationality. But we must remember that we cannot separate an argument from its context. Privilege will inevitably wish to reproduce itself, and it reasons accordingly. It will also have guilty misgivings. And would the grudge-

holders hold their grudges, if they had no cause? Would the frustrated artist, the unappreciated intellectual, the basement inventor, the disaffected worker, the reluctant homemaker parent, the regretful school dropout, gradually forget their claims of injustice, of unfair playing fields, of stolen dreams, if they suddenly became successful in life, doing what they want and choose, not merely what circumstance dictates, spending their days happily following their bliss, with economic means and social recognition to match? Would they put aside their egalitarianism, little by little, gradually – but maybe it would take a couple generations - coming round to the conviction that they are successful and happy because they deserve to be, and, abstracting by that typical amnesia, conclude that all who are self-realizing are so because they deserve it, and those who are not, are not deserving, never were, that there was nothing lost, because in those persons there had never been anything, nascent but worthy, that could have been realized?

This is of course a gross over-simplification: between the two arguments, and between their corresponding characters, lie countless gradations and hybrids, not to mention that the two poles are rarely articulated so starkly. Aspects from both camps are commonly appealed to and intermingled in random fashion, with little consistency, when there is talk of happiness and livelihoods, of welfare and educational programs. The disgruntled demand “good jobs”, but what do they mean by this? The issue is almost never pursued in a serious way, with the underlying framework. Politicians play to the story that people want jobs doing what they’ve always done, are used to doing, or imagine they’d like to do, only with better pay and benefits. It’s a forgone conclusion that working class people want working class jobs. Do they, really? Would they take even a lower pay, if they had the chance to pursue more fulfilling tasks, even as a second chance, later in life? It’s taken for granted also – and this is a deep-running prejudice – that manual labor is the “lower” kind, and requires less intelligence. Finally, a good deal of fantasizing goes on – this is what youth is for, though the fantasizing often long outlasts youth - but the fact is, it takes exposure, flexibility, tolerance, experimentation, many chances, failure and resilience, to determine what and who one is. Or perhaps it is this experience, trial and error that make us what we are. Either way: capacities, ambitions and identities grow over time in response to resources and environment. They are nurtured, or stunted and thwarted, whatever the original substrate. If formed, they will seek to grow and thrive, and to perpetuate the conditions of their existence and reproduction.

Enter the Capability Approach in economic and political theory. It is self-evident that capabilities require favorable circumstances for their generation and development. It is self-evident that economic goods are only as good as the use to which they can be put. However, both sides of the Architect-Digger parable (arguments #1 and #2) are amenable to measurement in terms of the degrees to which they foster and account for capabilities, and both sides are also susceptible of fatal criticism. At issue, rather, are two fundamentally different, and possibly irreconcilable, views of human nature, of rationality, and of happiness. Have these questions been given their due, or quickly brushed under the rugs of “softer” disciplines? Are they brushed away entirely, in scientific and statistical zeal? Is the question of motivational context, the for-the-sake-of-which, given its scope today by the social studies, by economists in particular, without concealment behind the jargon of formulas, theorems, the empirical (a word which takes aim at the universally and independently true, but may in fact involve the hopelessly contingent)? Or does a pretense of objectivity, that bane of scientism, obscure the character, situation and bias from which all economic and political theorems stem? Should not the general mathematical leaning of the discipline of economics – a *social* study, a *humanity*, after all – make us suspicious that something has been overlooked, in our rush to quantification? And what, on the other hand, of Rawlsian theories of justice, that reduce desire and thinking to algorithms, abstract norms and impersonal institutions? What progress can be made, when the questions are wrong? And for the right questions, with their answers, can we ever dispense with either side of the ditch?