

*On Needs and Interests**

The logical relation between "needs" and "interests" may be summarily analyzed as follows:

1. Presupposed by any talk about "needs" and "interests" is something like Whitehead's postulates about (1) the art of life, i.e., to live, to live well, and to live better; and (2) the function of reason to promote the art of life.

2. An individual or social organism capable of living functions successfully only insofar as it lives, lives well, and lives better.

3. What an organism needs is relative to its successful functioning; and if its "needs" are not satisfied, it will malfunction, i.e., it will not live, or not live well, or not live better.

4. An organism, accordingly, has "interests" corresponding to its "needs"—interests, namely, in satisfying its needs.

5. In the case of a rational organism, or, in the proper sense, an agent, to speak of its "interests" is to make a judgment about the way its particular desires, wants, or preferences could be rationally integrated so as not only to live, but also to live well, and to live better, i.e., to have a "good life."

6. With or without such a judgment, however, an agent has "interests" as well as desires, wants, or preferences, simply because it has "needs," and therefore has interests in satisfying them.

7. If agents are deceived or mistaken about their interests, it is because they are deceived or mistaken about their needs, as distinct from their desires, wants, or preferences.

8. In that case, it is proper to say that they are pursuing "merely apparent" or "subjective" interests, instead of their "real," "true," or "objective" interests. i.e., the interests corresponding to their "needs."

9. One approach to determining the "real" interests of a person or group is the "perfect-knowledge approach," according to which a person's or group's "real" interests are the one's she, he, or it would have in the limiting case of having perfect knowledge of her, his, or its "real" needs.

10. Another such approach is the "optimal-conditions approach," for which the "real" interests of an agent or agents are those that she or he or they would discover under most satisfactory conditions—conditions of nondeprivation, noncoercion, minimally correct information, and so on—by becoming aware of her or his or their "real" needs.

*Based on notes made sometime in the 1970s after reading a book by Geuss (attached).

6 December 2006

Interest

1. (1) right, title, or legal share in something
(2) participation in advantage and responsibility
2. welfare, benefit, advantage
3. (1) a readiness to be concerned with or moved by an object or class of objects
(2) the quality in an object that arouses interest

The characteristic attitude of the mind toward any object which attracts and absorbs its attention

verb:

- (1) to engage or excite the attention or curiosity of
- (2) to concern someone in something; involve
- (3) to induce to participate
- (4) to concern, relate to, or affect

"To speak of an agent's 'interests' is to speak of the way that agent's particular desires [wants, preferences] could be rationally integrated into a coherent 'good life.' . . . I have an 'interest' in the satisfaction of anything which can be reasonably be termed a 'need'" (Geuss: 47 f.). "'Needs' are defined relative to the successful functioning of an individual or social organism; if the 'needs' of the organism are not satisfied, it will malfunction" (Geuss: 46). Thus whether X has interests is not entirely a function of whether X can make a rational judgment about which of its desires, wants, preferences, etc., ought to be satisfied, because insofar as one has needs, one has an interest in satisfying them, with or without any rational judgment. "If agents are deceived or mistaken about their interests, we will

say that they are pursuing 'merely apparent' interests, and not their 'real' or 'true' interests" (Geuss: 48).

There are (at least) two different approaches to the definition of the "true" interests of a person or group. (1) On the "perfect-knowledge approach," a person's or group's "real," or "true," or "objective" interests are the ones he or she or it would have in the limiting case of having perfect knowledge. (2) On the "optimal conditions approach," the agent's or agents' "real" interests are the interests he or she or they would have found in "optimal," i.e., beneficent, conditions, conditions of non-deprivation, non-coercion, and minimally correct information.