ABSTRACT:

A number of thinkers have pointed to radical hope as both an appropriate affective state to motivate action in a time of radical change and perhaps the only appropriate reaction to the uncertainties expected in the Anthropocene. As Jonathan Lear characterizes it, radical hope is a hope that we might find a meaningful existence without the context and substantial constraints that previously provided one’s life with meaning. If we are to appeal to radical hope as an appropriate form of motivation in the Anthropocene, however, we need an appropriate object for that hope. We need some sense of what we are hoping for.

In this paper I argue that the most appropriate objects for radical hope are ideals generated from the substantial freedoms required for any recognizably human good life. These substantial freedoms amount to Senian capabilities. While, owing to its inherent uncertainties, we cannot conceptualize with suitable specificity what a good life would be in the Anthropocene, we can recognize that it will be shaped by the substantial freedoms required for most any good life, that is, by capabilities. As capabilities express ideals about the good life, these ideals provide the appropriate object for radical hope. Hoping for ideals of the good life should provide an object for our motivation in a time when the specifics of that good life are unclear. Just as radical hope seems an appropriate response to our changing climate, the ideals underpinning capabilities provide a grounding for that hope suitable for the Anthropocene.
I. The Need for Hope

“While there's life, there's hope.” (Cicero)

The focus of this paper is hope, and how we should understand hope in the context of a world that we expect to be strikingly different from anything humans have experienced in the modern era. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of this new era, dubbed the anthropocene, is a lack of continuity with our environmentally stable past (IPCC 2012, 2014; Melillo et. al. 2014). This lack of continuity may put into question our ideas of the good life and what it is to flourish. In such conditions what should we hope for? The novelty and instability that pervades the anthropocene makes it difficult to image the objects for which we might hope. Yet, normally, hope requires that we have at least a rough idea of that for which we hope. Characterizing sensible objects of hope will involve appealing to a highly unspecified conception of the good life, one we shouldn’t expect to know in any substantial detail in advance. That is a consequence of the instability that we can expect to become the new norm. In what follows I will suggest below that in conditions such as those we face we need a version of what Jonathan Lear and others have called “radical hope.” Here I will provide an account of radical hope that accommodates the need for an object to hope for, while recognizing the uncertainties and instabilities of the anthropocene. We can find the basis for these objects in ideals of the good life that underlie Senian capabilities. These substantial freedoms, which may be expressed quite differently across different social and environmental contexts, constitute ideals of the good life worth hoping for.

This paper has a smaller point, and a larger point. The smaller point is that recent characterizations of a form of hope called radical hope are incomplete, and so prevent radical hope from being characterized in a way that allows us to focus on what we should be hoping for. The larger point comes from the realization that, in light of our changing environment, we need to think about the good life, surely the genus of much of what we hope for, in terms that are substantial enough to be expressed as an object of hope, yet flexible enough to accommodate a world in which much is novel. We should think of the good life, I will here presume (but have argued elsewhere, see Shockley 2014), in terms of capabilities. The larger point is that radical hope, appropriately understood, is the proper affective counterpart to a capabilities approach to
the good life. It provides content to our motivations, our reactions, in a time of great uncertainty and instability. We need something to counteract the fear and despair that seem to attend predictions of our future.

In what follows, I will draw a connection between the hope that moves us in the face of the unknown and unfamiliar, and the ideals that ground and justify our actions. I will begin with a short discussion of the conditions that may make us look to hope, then I will consider various accounts of hope and provide a little criticism of those accounts. Following that I will shift to the primary focus of this paper, radical hope. I will proceed to provide an alternative conception of radical hope. The most appropriate objects for radical hope are ideals associated with substantial freedoms required for any recognizably human good life. These substantial freedoms amount to versions of Senian capabilities (Sen 2000, 2009; Schlossberg, 2012). These capabilities provide a form of stability in a time where instability will increasingly be the norm, and so provide an appropriately stable and enduring object for radical hope.

I will not argue, but presume, that the flexible nature of capabilities provides a suitable framework for thinking about the good life or well being in a time of great instability (for an argument to this effect, see Shockley 2014). While we cannot conceptualize with suitable specificity what a good life would be in the anthropocene, we can recognize that it would be shaped by the substantial freedoms required for any possible good life, that is, by capabilities. Capability-based ideals then provide the appropriate object for radical hope. As capabilities provide the ideals of the good life in the anthropocene, radical hope provides the motivation necessary for the promotion of those ideals. In short, radical hope is well suited to capabilities. This has practical ramifications, although these ramifications are well beyond the scope of this short paper. How we think about the objects of hope informs how we think about conceptions of the good life more generally. Just as radical hope seems an appropriate response to our changing climate, the ideals I claim underpin those capabilities are the most appropriate foundation for social policy and political decisions in the anthropocene. As we think about designing policy and framing public deliberation in a time of climate change, we should expect this to become incredibly important.
II. Facing Instability

Before we address hope, we should consider why it is so important to consider hope. 1 Sadly, our need for hope is nearly obvious. There are all too many reminders that our world is getting less hospitable. One particularly well-publicized reminder occurred on the first day of the COP19 conference in Warsaw when a member of the Philippine delegation gave an impassioned plea for action on climate change in response to the horrific damage done to the Philippines by Typhoon Haiyan. His plea will almost surely provide the dominant image of the opening of the Warsaw conference, and provided the narrative through which the public perceived that conference. Even if the precise relationship between particular meteorological events and climate change is complicated, natural disasters provide a vivid reminder of the loss and damage we can expect from a changing climate.

Disasters of this sort are not new, of course. Yet a pervasive theme of the recent IPCC report is that the future will not be like the past. We should expect more and worse disasters.

Extreme weather events: Climate-change-related risks from extreme events, such as heat waves, extreme precipitation, and coastal flooding, are already moderate (high confidence) and high with 1°C additional warming (medium confidence). Risks associated with some types of extreme events (e.g., extreme heat) increase further at higher temperatures (high confidence). (IPCC 2014, 12)

The increased frequency and unpredictability of extreme events constitutes a form of environmental instability, one we can expect to be part of the new normal. This instability, our

1 But before I do that, I should make one important caveat. I have been taking for granted here the reality of the anthropocene, that the term “anthropocene” represents an era that is real and worthy of concern. But for my purposes here all I need is that the background environmental conditions we should expect to face in the future are substantially different in the past. I am using “anthropocene” to indicate that comparative novelty, and will leave it to the geologists to determine whether we are really in such a geological era (Crutzen 2002). Our climate is changing, and it is less predictable. And less stable. And that instability has ethically relevant consequences.
new normal, is an indicator of the anthropocene (Steffen, et al. 2007). From the Economist to the New York Times, “the anthropocene” has become a headline, and a meme for our time. While the usual focus of discussions of the anthropocene is on the anthropogenic causes of the conditions in which we find ourselves, in what follows I would like to leave questions of causation and control aside, and focus instead on the ethical ramifications of the set of conditions evidencing the anthropocene. These conditions point us to increased variation in most environmental systems (IPCC 2012, 2014; Melillo et. al. 2014). In short, the dominant feature of the anthropocene is instability.

The fundamental point of contrast is that whereas the anthropocene, our new world order, is characterized most centrally by instability, the holocene, the era in which modern societies have arisen and the era that has shaped our collective cultural experience, is characterized by stability. This instability constitutes a substantial deviation from the background ecological conditions that have shaped human culture and civilization to this point (Crutzen 2002). While this does not necessarily point to our doom, it does indicate that we should expect our environmental circumstances in the future to be comparatively novel (Light, mss). What sort of life do we hope for when the world in which we live is outside of our range of cultural experience? This requires taking a harder look at the nature of hope.

III. Hope, generally

On first blush that attitude we label “hope” seems unremarkable. We might think that hope is just a form of desire, an attitude that takes as its object a way we would have the world be. For if I hope for something I desire the occurrence of the object of that hope. But desire alone is insufficient. Suppose I desire that black squirrels appear in my backyard this spring. I believe that there is some small chance (they’ve been seen in parks in urban Buffalo, perhaps they’ll make it out my place), say 5% of that occurring. But to hope requires more than the desire for the

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2 “Welcome to the Anthropocene” was the cover of the May 26th, 2011 issue of The Economist, and on February 27th the New York Times ran an oft-cited editorial titled simply “The Anthropocene.”
squirrels appearing and a set of beliefs about the probability and the justification of that probability. It requires a certain attention to that probability. One might think this would be satisfied by a further desire that that probability be higher than it is or that the desired situation might actualize. But any further desire, focused as it is on that previous desire, does not seem to capture the right object of hope. I hope for black squirrels, not for a more reasonable desire. The object of hope matters.

However inadequate such accounts might be, there is a feature of a simple desire-based account of hope that is of interest for our purposes here: it requires that one be able to assign (perhaps quite rough) subjective probabilities of the desire actualizing. We see this focus on an expected state of affairs and our ability to characterize that state of affairs quite clearly in Luc Boven’s claim that hope requires a “mental image” of that thing hoped for (1999; Martin 2014, p. 18). Yet this appeal to mental images is too strong. I may hope for a way out of a financial mess I am in, one that is without any obvious solution. I may be not be able to generate a mental image of the way out, but I can understand what it would be for me not to be in the state I am in. It may be that my hope is for an alternative, for something other than my current situation. I can make no mental image of this hope. To this extent it is insufficient. Yet Boven’s approach does capture the sense in which in order to hope I must be able to characterize that for which I am hoping, in this case, that my financial mess is resolved.

A promising account of hope is found in Adrienne Martin’s work (2014). Hoping, on Martin’s account, is a way of treating and responding to one’s own attitudes about some end in such a way that we incorporate our reactions to our own attitudes and reasons into our evaluation of those ends. As she puts it,

“…to hope for an outcome is to:

1. Be attracted to the outcome in certain of its features;
2. Assign a probability between and exclusive of 0 and 1 to the outcome;
3. Adopt a stance toward that probability whereby it licenses treating one’s attraction to the outcome (and the outcome’s attractive features) as a reason for certain ways of thinking, feeling, and/or planning with regard to the hoped-for outcome; and
4. Treat one’s attraction and the outcome’s attractive features as sufficient reason for those ways of thinking, feeling, and/or planning.” (2014, p. 62)

Martin’s account, then, rests on our capacity not only to recognize the objects of our desire, but for those objects to be sufficiently stable that we might reflect on our attitudes toward those objects. To engage in such reflection, we need to be able to generate a reasonable estimation of our ends if we are to hope for those ends. This holds for any purported object of hope, whether it be something we are willing to characterize as an “end” or not – Martin’s point is about the structure of hope, not the sorts of things that are suitable objects for hope.  

Although instructive about the logical structure of hope, Martin’s substantive account is unduly restricted. Martin focuses only on normative hope, a form of hope that we hold in others. Yet we hope for a wider range of objects. We will return to this below in our discussion of Plenty Coups and Radical Hope. But for now we can set this aside and accept her point that hope is tied to a special form of attention to our own expectations, an attention that involves behaving in a way that would be more appropriate for a higher probability of the hoped for outcome.

The tendency to elevate the probability of a hoped-for outcome occurring can also be seen in Philip Pettit’s (2004) account of what he calls “substantial hope.”

“Three elements emerge… in the account of substantial … hope:

1. The agent desires that a certain prospect obtain and believes that it may or may not obtain—these are the conditions for superficial hope—but may do so only at a level of confidence that induces a loss of heart, sapping spirit and effort.

2. The signal danger of this loss of heart prompts the agent to adopt a strategy that consists in acting as if the desired prospect is going to obtain or has a good chance

3 By way of contrast we should see that hope is not the same as wish, as wishing is divorced from probabilities that the wished for event might occur. And again we see it cannot be merely desire, as desires do not require the attendant reflection on attitudes and practices that we find indicative of hope. To hope for black squirrels I need more than a wish for the squirrels, and something other than a mere desire. I hope that there will be no more Love Canals, no more Fukushima, no more Deep Water Horizons, …
of obtaining.

3. This strategy promises to avoid that danger and secure the related, secondary benefit, relevant even for someone relatively optimistic, of ensuring stability across the ups and downs of evidence.

“To hope that something is the case [is] … to act and react as if the prospect were going to obtain or stood a good chance of obtaining. It involves forming attitudes, and performing actions, of the kind that this would make intelligible. And it is to do this, in particular, whether or not subjective probability happens to come in line.” (2004, p. 158)

From Bovens, Martin, and Pettit, we can extract the following account of hope:

HOPE: to hope for an outcome, X, is to have a desire for X, to believe that X has some probability less than 1 and more than 0, and to judge that one’s desire for X warrants “thinking, feeling, and/or planning” in ways appropriate a higher probability than what is actually assigned.

One of the crucial features of hope is the need to have enough information about the object of hope that one is able to treat the satisfaction of one’s desires as more likely than it is apt to be, and to do so on the basis of one’s desire for that satisfaction. A comparatively detailed characterization of the hoped-for outcome is required (even if it is not the sort of full mental image Luc Bovens would have), yet this is precisely what is being put in jeopardy by the projected conditions of the anthropocene, a comparatively novel world presents difficulties for characterizing hoped for outcomes. As we have seen, the presumption of stability making these clear characterizations of hoped for outcomes possible may no longer be warranted. Instability is the new normal.

IV. Radical Hope Reconsidered

“Carry the fire.” – Cormac McCarthy, The Road
Catastrophic threats to the stability of our society are not new to humanity, even if the current source and nature of the threat is unprecedented. Near the end of the 19th century, Chief Plenty Coups, of the Crow Nation, saw the collapse of the Buffalo, and with this collapse, the loss of the context against which his people could understand themselves and the world in which they lived. According to some interpretations, rather than respond to this loss by assimilating or fighting for a past that cannot be recovered, Chief Plenty Coups appealed to what Jonathan Lear has called “Radical Hope”, a hope that without knowledge of how they might do so he retained confidence in the ability of his people to remain true to themselves in a new and largely unrecognizable world. Sometimes all we can know is that we must go on in a way that allows us to be ourselves.

When Chief Plenty Coups described the loss of the buffalo to his biographer, Frank Linderman, he said, “But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not life them up. After this nothing happened” (Lear, 2006, p. 2). Of course a good deal happened after the buffalo went away, most of it not good for the Crow people. Chief Plenty Coups’ point was, rather, that the cultural catastrophe associated with the loss of the buffalo was not merely about the destruction of a resource for food, clothing, and the myriad other uses to which the Crow people put the buffalo; it was about the sense in which the Crow people understood the world in terms of buffalo. Without the buffalo the Crow didn’t have the cultural bearings to understand their world in recognizable ways. Perhaps the closest comparison in the modern American context, ironically, would be if suddenly there were no automobiles or credit transactions. Not only would this mean the end of the usual methods of accomplishing very basic actions central to day-to-day life, the physical structure of cities, the nature of commercial transactions, and even our notion of “work” would become unhinged. Without certain cultural fixtures, there would be nothing stable on which to get ones bearings and make sense of the world. Without the buffalo, the Crow lost the stability necessary to make sense of themselves in their rapidly changing environment.

Chief Plenty Coups saw the crisis his people faced through the collapse of the familiar as a time for reflection on who they were, and who they, as a people, would be in the future. Their courage to resist had to be transformed into the courage to face a new reality within their traditional ways. They should, Chief Plenty Coups thought, neither assimilate nor fight with the empty hope of a
return to a bygone era. Nor should they embrace the sadness of loss. The Crow needed to generate hope for a good life in an inconceivable future.

Our contemporary challenge then has similarities to that faced by the Crow. Of course, our environment has not yet become completely unhinged. Yet we face a time of crisis, a time for reflection on the ideals that are apparent in our lives, and a time to reflect on those that are worth preserving. We are in need of radical hope, a hope that avoids the drive toward hopelessness and despair at the possible (probable) loss of the familiar. As Lear understands it, radical hope is a hope that we will find a meaningful existence without the usual constraints that have previously made one’s existence meaningful. “What makes this hope radical is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it.” (2006, p. 103) As Lear characterizes it, radical hope is a hope that while we may not be able to imagine what a good life would be like in a time of climate induced instability, we may still hope that we will find a way to have a good life.

The uncertainties characteristic of the anthropocene make this form of motivation sadly appropriate for this, our new, era. While we have a sense of what a good life would be in terms of our past practices and recognizable social and economic conditions, the discontinuity with the past, characteristic of the anthropocene, makes such an understanding of the good life less accessible. However, as Lear presents it, radical hope is largely a promissory note, more akin to an article of faith than a motivational response to the good life in the anthropocene. When suitably refined the notion of radical hope requires that there be an object, something to hope for, even if that object is not a recognizable conception of the good life. Some way of characterizing flourishing, or of conceptualizing the good life in the anthropocene, is required if we are to have more than an unjustifiable appeal to faith as a motivation. If we are to appeal to radical hope as a way of managing our expectations for the good life in the anthropocene we need more than an appeal to a nostalgic past, we need an object appropriate to a time of instability.

A few others have sensibly developed the idea of radical hope as a way of addressing human existence in the anthropocene. As David Orr (2009, p. 173) points out, the quality of inspiring radical hope provides a crucial piece of a viable narrative in a time of climate change. Radical
hope allows us a means of making sense of ourselves in a time of changing environmental conditions. His focus is on leadership. Closely following Lear, Orr understands radical hope to be a praiseworthy quality of leadership such that one has hope in one’s people, a form of courage that one’s people will be able to find a way to live. The object of hope is here, again, individuals, not the states of affairs in the world that generally serve as the object of hope.\(^4\) Similarly, as Allen Thompson understands Radical Hope, it constitutes a form of “courage manifest in environmental virtues of transition.”\(^5\) The idea of building radical hope into an account of virtue is a promising one. For it certainly seems virtuous to have the sort of steadfastness of character required to have hope in the face of the unknown, the unpredictable, and the threatening. That one is disposed to radical hope may be characteristic of courage (or perhaps some other virtue). But that to which we are disposed is not the same as the virtue which constitutes the source of that disposition. It may be virtuous to adopt radical hope or praiseworthy to be disposed to have radical hope, but those states of being and dispositions are not the same as the attitude of radical hope.

One general worry one might have with the approaches to radical hope taken by Lear, Orr, and Thompson is that they seem to take the object of hope to be limited to an agent or subject. We saw something similar in Martin’s general account of hope. While this is an interesting approach, it makes radical hope a different form of mental state than hope. That seems implausible. Moreover, there are epistemic reasons to worry about radical hope understood in this way. Unless one can provide an account of what we would want those leaders or visionaries to hope

\(^4\) Of course one might take one’s people’s character to be the object of hope. That might serve as an appropriate object of hope. But this is just the limited scope concern raised against Martin above. There is good reason to think that hope generally is focused on states of affairs in the world, that things will turn out some way or another. As radical hope is a species of hope, we should expect it to follow suit accordingly.

\(^5\) One can see a sensible tie between radical hope and virtue, of course. The passage from which the above quotation is taken points to a powerful motivation for that connection. “Radical hope, as courage manifest in environmental virtues of transition, is primarily against despair and hopelessness, which the apparently intractable problem of climate change can supply in spades.” (Thompson 2010, 52)
for, we have no more than blind hope that they will be able to figure out what we haven’t. A blind hope is really no hope at all. Further, relying on others in this way seems to miss the point. It is not that Chief Plenty Coups had a radical hope that his people would find a way, but that there was a proper object of hope that his people would find. Having confidence in his people is crucial, but, despite Lear’s characterization, I warrant that Plenty Coups hope was for a way of life rather than for individuals who would find a way of life. Indeed, this last seems to undercut his confidence in his people, as this form of hope would indicate, following our previous analysis, that Plenty Coups’ expectations needed to be artificially augmented. With these qualifications in mind, we can build a more formal definition of radical hope.

Recall our earlier characterization of Hope.

**HOPE**: to hope for an outcome, X, is to have a desire for X, to believe that X has some probability less than 1 and more than 0, and to judge that one’s desire for X warrants “thinking, feeling, and/or planning” in ways appropriate for a higher probability than what is actually assigned.

Then the species of HOPE with an under-specified object, RADICAL HOPE, should be as follows.

**RADICAL HOPE**: to have radical hope for X is to have hope that there will be a suitable object Y such that we would HOPE for Y, where we able to estimate the probability of Y occurring, and where Y is one of a set of objects that would satisfy a set of unspecified conditions, A, B, C, some conjunction of which would satisfy X.

Radical hope is a hope that the background conditions will be such that one will be able to develop the sort of life for which one could hope. Not quite a “meta-hope”, a hope about hope. Not a wish, for then could be no assurance that we could estimate the probability of Y occurring were it a wish. We can wish for the impossible (Aristotle 1984, 1111b20-25). If there is no plausible way of understanding how the object of our hope could come about, then what we claimed was a hope is merely a wish. This we can see if we imagine a case of unrequited love. Yet we can, under most scenarios, understand how the hoped for outcome might come about. We just find those scenarios improbable. We can give some characterization of possible scenarios
whereby the problem is resolved. This is not like trying to imagine a world without the automobile or banking, for those of us in contemporary western society, or, for the Crow, a world without the Buffalo. We are not living in a truly alien world. In an alien world there would be no ground for understanding what would be needed to support a good life. In such cases a radical hope is all the hope we might have recourse to.

Let us hope radical hope need not be more common than it is. Yet, as the case of Chief Plenty Coups makes clear, even in conditions where radical hope is our best option, there are still ways of being, conceptions of the good life, that provide some substance to that hope. There is something to hope for, even if in such circumstances the particular content of that hope is not clear. As we will see below, radical hope is a hope about the manifestation of some ideal that might be manifested in any number of ways. While we cannot see how that ideal might be expressed, we recognize that it can be expressed in some way or another.

V. What to hope for: Ideals, Capabilities, and the Good Life

“The very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for.” (Barbara Kingsolver, Animal Dreams)

This brings us back to the question motivating this paper: What should be the proper object of radical hope? Lear provides us with the beginning of an answer. Lear characterizes radical hope as intentional, in the sense of being object oriented. It is an attitude with an intentional object. I take this to be of some importance, not only for a reconfiguration of radical hope, but also for understanding the good life in the anthropocene, something for which we all hope. We saw above that to serve as an object of radical hope we need to be able to provide enough descriptive content to enable us to estimate, roughly, the probability that that we hope for will occur. As we will see below, we have an answer to how we might live well under environmental circumstances with which we are not familiar: we enable opportunities that would be needed to flourish in any context. We hope the world is such that we have freedoms and opportunities and options supportive of a viable life, and plausible hope for a life worth living. The best way to
think about enabling opportunities is in terms of what Amartya Sen has called capabilities (Sen 2000, 2009).

We should have a radical hope, in short, for a world in which the capabilities that we need to support a recognizably good life might be actualized in the novel world that we face. Whatever we have hope for it will surely be a part of the good life, and in uncertain and novel times (even if only comparatively novel), capabilities are the key to the right sort of object.

Capabilities are just those substantial freedoms required (most generally) for flourishing; they provide an outline for understanding the human good, flourishing, or even well-being in a time of comparative climate instability. Capabilities involve the freedoms and opportunities necessary to enact ideals about the complete life, typically involving issues of education, of social and economic opportunity, of having a place to call home, to have the sort of security that allows a life without fear. Being in possession of different capabilities represents different ways of doing, different functionings. These functionings are basic to human activity: Living to a full life, engaging in meaningful social interaction, engaging in productive and fulfilling employment, political participation. Some have suggested that we add to this list the importance of having a place to call home (Holland 2012, Schlossberg 2012). All of these functionings, these capabilities, constitute features of human flourishing.

As each of these functionings can be manifested in quite different ways, and as the capabilities that enable these functionings represent the different forms of value found in recognizably human lives, capabilities represent the range of ways one might perform these functions in recognizably human ways. Capabilities, therefore, amount to expressions of the possible ways humans might flourish. These ways of flourishing will include different ways of expressing ideals of the good life: political participation, completion of a life, the pursuit of productive and fulfilling work, social interaction, freedom from want and need and suffering, etc. For example, the capability described as political participation represents the ideal of having a voice in political decisions, of being part of the body politic. While we should not expect an exhaustive list of clearly defined elements, the point is that the capabilities themselves express a set of ideals underlying the good life, any good life.\footnote{The argument here follows closely from Shockley 2014, p. 210.} These freedoms are required for any reasonably human
conception of well-being should hold wherever we are, and provide a suitable foundation for an ethical framework in the anthropocene (Holland, 2012; Schlossberg, 2012). A good life may be expressed in any number of ways, but it will capture the ideal of a place to call home, even if many of us move from place to place, the ideal of a life without fear, even if we all face fear, the ideal of experiencing environmental beauty, even if we see that beauty compromised more than we would like.

Capabilities are also just the sorts of considerations likely to fill in the conditions, ‘A,B,C,’ in the definition of radical hope presented above. The ‘X’s of the formal definition provided above will be constituted by ideals which might be instantiated in a wide range of perhaps self-determined ways, the ‘Y’s containing the range of possible ways in which capabilities might well be manifested. The objects of radical hope will then, typically, be ideals associated with substantial freedoms required for any recognizably human life. The objects are broadly undefined, but still constrained by the nature of capabilities: any object suitable for radical hope must typically be an ideal appropriate for the capabilities, as substantial freedoms sufficient for capture some aspect of flourishing of a recognizably human life.

As capabilities provide the ideals of the good life in the anthropocene, radical hope provides one form of motivation necessary for the promotion of those ideals. Insofar as it is plausible that we are motivated by a conception of the good life, radical hope provides a set of motivations for the ideals we use to frame the good life. Such provide not only motivation, but (following Lear 2004) a framing mechanism that allows us to conceptualize the good life or flourishing in a time when we cannot characterize the details of a good life, a time when objects of hope – and so hope – are hard to frame. This hope, we have seen, is a Radical Hope.

VI. Conclusion: What we should hope for in a time of great change

Given the conditions we face in the anthropocene, we need hope, for there is much to fear. The content of hope must include some characterization of that which is hoped for. It needs propositional content. But under conditions of environmental instability, the object of hope is insufficiently recognizable. We need something to provide content to hope. Here we need
something more, something to take the place of simple hope where we cannot characterize hope’s object in directly descriptive terms. This, some have said, requires a form of radical hope, of the sort attributed to Chief Plenty Coups and the Crow. The object of radical hope, as it is still a species of hope, needs to be flexible enough to ground hope across individuals and across the unknown variations of the anthropocene. Substantial freedoms and opportunities that make a good life possible provide such a grounding. These are simply Senian capabilities (2000, 2009). Capabilities, understood as those substantial freedoms necessary for the good life, include the functional requirements for living to an old age, engage in commerce, or participate in political activities. The shift from traditional accounts of well-being to capabilities requires a shift from focusing on the current state of people to focusing on what those people are able to do. They invoke a shift from a conception of well-being based on our current state to one based on possibilities and potentialities regarding what we are able to do. We should hope for the conditions enabling the manifestation of these capabilities. But without a clear articulation of these conditions, something manifested as exceedingly difficult under conditions in the anthropocene, it seems difficult to utilize these conditions as objects of hope. Hence we see the importance of radical hope, a hope in the manifestation of the ideals of the good life that capabilities represent. These ideals then give radical hope its object, a suitable thing to hope for in the anthropocene.

Plenty Coups and the Crow did not doubt the persistence in the world around them. They just couldn’t make sense of it as their world. The focus on stability that has pervaded the paper may appear to provide not more than a programmatic reason – one based on institutions and efficient responses to novel circumstances. But the shift is deeper – if not a change in our understanding of flourishing and well being, then an acknowledgment that our earlier views regarding flourishing and well being contained a suppressed premise to the effect that the stability to which we had become accustomed would continue. The world is not, and perhaps has never been, as stable as we would like to think. Perhaps, then, the instability of the anthropocene is a wake up call: it is time to see the world without the veneer of stability and its accruements. So might have said Plenty Coups. So might we say ourselves.
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