Introduction

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The concept of need plays a significant but still relatively unexplored role in philosophy. In September 2003 The Royal Institute of Philosophy funded a conference held at Hatfield College, Durham, England, where philosophers from around the world devoted an enjoyable weekend to further exploration.[1] In everyday political life, scepticism about the importance of needs seems to be abating, perhaps reflecting an increased confidence among needs-theorists, grounded in years of painstaking analysis and argument on the margins of mainstream philosophy. This increased confidence freed participants at the conference to work less defensively and more constructively, and to extend their depth and range of their work. One happy result is that

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new aspects of the philosophy of need are identified and explored in this volume.

In this introduction I highlight three topics that struck me as central concerns at the conference. I don't claim that my topics exhaust important concerns in the philosophy of need, or that the developments I identify are by any means the only or most important ones to have occurred in recent years. My aim is simply to highlight topics discussed at the conference which may be of wider interest.

Several speakers would tackle aspects of a topic in their papers, and questions and discussion would return to each of these topics again and again. The first topic is the mistakes that are involved in neglecting need. What are those mistakes, exactly? And what might lead philosophers to make mistakes like that? The second topic is the role of need outside political philosophy. What is the significance of need in the history of philosophy? What role might it play in the philosophy of action, or in the philosophy of psychology? What is the metaphysical nature of needs, and how are human needs related to which aspects of human nature? The third topic concerns efforts to find the best way to characterise our responsibilities in relation to needs, given that people still tend to be wary of claims from need. Must we talk in terms of need, or is some other language preferable, for example the language of rights or capabilities? How can we ensure needy people are not patronised when they are helped? How can we ensure autonomy and freedom are respected?

In 1. I set these new topics in the context of some recent developments in the philosophy of need. In 2.–4. each

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new topic has a section of its own, in which I sketch the claims and arguments of papers that concentrate on that topic, and set the claims of each paper in the context of claims made by other participants. I also note relevant points from papers that make their main contribution on a different topic. I don't offer a full philosophical discussion of the arguments of every paper, but I do make brief comments, mentioning some possible objections and flagging up what strike me as intriguing questions, or promising lines of further inquiry on the topic. In 5. I conclude with thoughts about where the philosophy of need might go next.

My hope is that this introduction will enable readers to see which chapters they will need to read in full, which they should turn to first, and how each chapter, and the volume as a whole, are related to current debates in the philosophy of need and beyond. Another hope, of course, is that this volume will inspire readers to take the philosophy of need forward in their own work.

1.   Developments in the Philosophy of Need

In everyday life it is once again generally accepted that the concept of need is politically important. Needs are no longer so quickly dismissed as 'things you want, but aren't prepared to pay for'; liberal and capitalist worries that policies based on need will harm beneficiaries by being unduly paternalistic, or harm donors by fostering dependency and excessive demands, are no longer so widely, loudly or persistently voiced in political discussion. This change may be largely a matter of changing political fashion, a conceptual shift that

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has nothing to do with philosophical argument—but it is surely also in part at least thanks to the work on need of analytic philosophers, and political activists like the founders of the pragmatic Basic Needs Approach to international development.[2]

One way to reveal developments in the philosophy of need, is to compare contemporary questions with those treated a while ago. These developments can usefully be summed up with reference to an earlier collection of papers, *Necessary Goods*, edited by Gillian Brock in 1998, where Brock identifies the following questions as central concerns in the philosophy of need at that time:

1. Which needs are morally and politically important?
2. What importance do they have?
3. How can opponents be persuaded to accept the importance of these needs?
4. How can sceptical doubts be resolved?[3]

The task set by Brock's first question was to identify the central category of morally important needs ('essential', 'vital', 'absolute' or 'basic' needs).[4] The task set by her

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[2] See for example the work of Dharam Ghai and others at the ILO in the 1970s, and the further work by Paul Streeten, Frances Stewart, S J Hurki, Mahbub ul Haq and Norman Hicks for the world bank, which resulted in *First Things First* (Oxford: Oxford University Press World Bank Research Publications, 1982).

[3] G. Brock, *Necessary Goods* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

[4] See D. Wiggins, 'Claims of Need' in *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1–57, and G. Thomson, *Needs* (London: Routledge, 1987).

second, was to characterise the kind of moral importance such needs might have in political contexts (grounding rights, entailing obligations, or being a valuable aspect of well-being).[5] The task set by her third question was to find arguments to resist political opponents (for example, by arguing that commitments to freedom, equality, justice or well-being entail a commitment to meet needs).[6] The task set by the fourth question was to deal with sceptical objections about the need concept (such as that it is contestable, and vulnerable to paternalism and manipulation).[7]

At the conference it was evident that concerns had shifted since Brock posed her questions in 1998. There was a newly confident consensus that some needs are morally significant, and that what makes them significant is their necessity for the life and activity of the needing human being. There was consensus that such needs entail substantial political and moral responsibilities, and much less time was spent on convincing opponents or dealing with sceptical doubts than used to be felt necessary. This increased

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[5] Several philosophers address these issues in their contributions to *Necessary Goods* and elsewhere, including David Wiggins, Onora O'Neill, Robert Goodin, David Braybrooke, Gillian Brock and James Sterba.

[6] See for example David Braybrooke's work, particularly *Meeting Needs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), the work of Paul Streeten in *First Things First* and elsewhere, and that of Frances Stewart, Len Doyal, Ian Gough and Des Gasper.

[7] Most analytic writing on need pays considerable attention to sceptical doubts. In 'Claims of Need' David Wiggins addresses a particularly wide range of doubts.

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confidence is liberating for needs-theorists. No longer limited to proposing and defending their approach, they are now free to expose and diagnose the mistakes which led their opponents to ignore or dismiss need. They are free to explore the concept more deeply, to show how it contributes to a wider range of areas of philosophy (like action theory, philosophy of psychology, metaphysics, and history of philosophy), and to give detailed attention to the practical political problems of implementing a needs-responsive public or private ethic.

We might sum up these developments by framing a new set of questions:

1. What mistakes do opponents make, in neglecting need? What is it they dislike about need?
2. Where beyond political and moral philosophy might needs matter? What is the fundamental nature of needs? How do they fit into human nature?
3. How should we best frame, and how should we best meet, our moral responsibilities in relation to needs?

Each of these questions furnishes the topic of one of the sections below.

2. What mistakes are made in neglecting need, and why?

In this topic, we see a change in tone from defensive to critical. Rather than trying to persuade opponents by addressing their doubts, as needs-theorists did in answering Brock's third question 'How can we persuade opponents?',

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participants use powerful arguments to expose the mistakes involved in failing to give needs their due (Wiggins and Brock). Another change is from defensive to diagnostic. Rather than offering arguments to show why liberals, libertarians, utilitarians and classical economists must take account of needs, participants begin to explore the interesting question of what it is about needs that opponents dislike (O'Neill), and what might be done about it.

David Wiggins recalls a time when 'everyone knew in practice what need meant, knew a need from a mere desire, and knew a vital need from a need which was less than that' (p. 26). When the primacy of need began to give way to the maximisation of economic goods like wealth and time-savings, Wiggins was led to the philosophy of need, in search of ways to restore the concept to its rightful place. Outraged for example by the way, in 1960s proposals for new ring roads for London, the disvalue of the destruction of people's homes and communities was 'swamped ... by the simple numerosity of a vast sum of time savings for persons driving motor-vehicles' (p. 27), Wiggins began a lifelong search for arguments for need that sceptics and critics of the concept would not be able to ignore. Of course, as Wiggins points out, sceptics and critics of need continued as if deaf and blind to such arguments, however rigorous, however reasonable. And as he also points out, they continue still. The increased acceptance of the concept of need amongst philosophers, political theorists and development thinkers that I noted above has so far had little influence on the thinking of governments, economists, or executives of powerful corporations. The mistake such agents make is a

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moral one: they deny and ignore something of obvious and fundamental moral importance.

But conceptual and empirical mistakes have also contributed to the marginalisation of need, for which philosophers and political theorists must share some responsibility. Wiggins focuses on the conceptual mistakes, seeking to demonstrate the indispensability of the need concept to any adequate theory of rationality. He first tackles prudential rationality, using Richard Hare as his example. For Hare, prudently self-interested agents have to be consistent, which he takes to require valuing others' preferences or interests as they value their own. This generalised prudence Hare argues is equivalent to classical Utilitarianism, which would make utilitarianism a requirement of rationality. But, Wiggins protests, Hare's project must fail since he relies on a false picture of individual prudential reasoning:

> Is "maximise the satisfaction of my preferences" really the thing a rational deliberator actually intends in practising individual prudence? Surely a rational deliberator asks himself constantly not so much *how to maximise* his preference-satisfaction but *what to prefer* . . . Indeed, one might think that he will be foolish not to interest himself always in the question *what really matters here? what does a person such as I am (and such as I aspire to be) vitally need*? [This is a] miserably attenuated . . . conception of the ordinary rationality of ordinary first-person deliberation. (p. 35)

Wiggins makes similarly fundamental criticisms of John Rawls' account of political rationality. Rawls invites us to imagine a group of free, rational, self-interested deliberators

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behind a veil of ignorance of their own social positions and conception of the good, charged with the task of rationally deciding principles to govern the basic structure of their society. The first question Rawls has them ask, is by what principle they will be able to accept inequalities resulting from contingencies. Wiggins objects that a question about need, like 'what guarantees of what strength ... [can be made] to ensure that the worst bad luck anyone encounters will be alleviated?', is what rationality actually requires, because 'what harms the dispossessed or destitute is not so much inequality as dire unsatisfied need' (p. 38). A principle aimed at preventing inequality misses what people really care about, which is that no-one should suffer unnecessary harm. Rationally grounded social justice, Wiggins argues, will begin with thoughts about need, and will 'go by a direct route against contingency', and be 'essentially ameliorative'.

Wiggins then considers economic rationality, and proposes that the precautionary principle, often cited as a requirement of economic rationality, ought to be understood in terms of need. The principle requires that where human activities risk environmental damage, they must be restrained even in the absence of full scientific certainty about the negative effects. Wiggins champions Hans Jonas' version of the principle, which requires us to 'act so that the effects of our actions are not destructive of the possibility of economic life in the future' (p. 44).

We must give priority not just to present vital needs, but to the needs of that on which all earthly things depend to meet their needs: the earth itself. Our reluctance to protect the earth may be rooted in a fear that we will be unable both

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to meet needs, satisfy desires, and leave enough and as good for the future. Wiggins points out this fear may be unfounded: there is hope for sustainability. But even if sacrifices from the present generation are required, he argues, they are indeed *required*—and by practical rationality itself, not by any particular philosophy or creed. Given that our generation is but one moment in history, we cannot afford to be ignorant or reckless about what the world needs from us if it is to be sustained for future generations.

With these brief but powerful sketches, Wiggins reveals 'just some of the possibilities . . . of setting free the serious notion of need and giving it its independence' (p. 41–2). Where Wiggins focuses on the moral and conceptual mistakes involved in ignoring need, Gillian Brock highlights some empirical mistakes, arguing that the most popular current liberal theories of justice underestimate the priority rational political deliberators will give to need. Brock first outlines a veil of ignorance device which she argues will plausibly help rational deliberators to be impartial, by concealing from them what will be in their immediate self-interest.[8] With the usefulness of the veil of ignorance established, Brock draws our attention to the experimental work of Norman Frohlich and Joe Oppenheimer.[9]

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[8] Brock's veil of ignorance is structurally and procedurally similar to Rawls' well-known one, but Brock makes different assumptions, and so draws different conclusions, to Rawls.

[9] N. Frohlich and J. Oppenheimer, *Choosing Justice: An Empirical Approach to Ethical Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

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