# A PHILOSOPHY OF NEED

Appeals to need abound in everyday discussion. People make claims about their own needs all the time, and they do so in a way that suggests these should have a certain moral force. Needs also play an important role in contemporary popular discourse about social justice, climate change, obligations to future generations, dealing fairly with refugees, treating animals humanely, and critiques of consumerist lifestyles – to name just a few of the many examples. The idea of need is present in an increasing number of debates and domains. There is interest in need from several disciplines, not just philosophy, which also include psychology, economics, political science, social work and sociology. This volume, then, offers a fine introduction to an increasingly important concept in day-to-day life. In a new Foreword, Gillian Brock discusses the continuing significance of several innovative chapters in the book, indicating how they presaged new directions in philosophical conversation.

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# FOREWORD

GILLIAN BROCK

Appeals to need abound in ordinary discourse. People make claims about their needs all the time, and they do so in a way that suggests their needs should have a certain moral force. Needs also play an important role in contemporary popular discourse about social justice, climate change, obligations to future generations, dealing fairly with refugees, treating animals humanely, and critiques of consumerist lifestyles, to name just a few of the many examples. The idea of need seems to be appealed to in an increasing number of domains and debates. There is interest in need from several disciplines, including psychology, economics, philosophy, political science, social work, and sociology. And so it is no surprise that many might turn to a work such as *The Philosophy of Need* in search of philosophical wisdom concerning this ubiquitous concept.

When Soran Reader edited *The Philosophy of Need*, originally published in 2005, she did an excellent job assessing the state of philosophizing about need and collecting some of the best work being done at that time in the field. She marked her assessment of the state of play by looking back at some of the questions I originally posed in my earlier collection on the philosophy of need, *Necessary Goods: Our Responsibilities to*

*Meet Others' Needs*,[1] published in 1998. As she summarized the questions posed there, there are four categories:

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?[2]

Reader reports that at the philosophy of need conference, held in Durham in 2003, which gave rise to the essays collected here, 'there was a newly confident consensus that some needs are morally significant, . . . that such needs entail substantial political and moral responsibilities'.[3] This is not surprising, given that we were a bunch of needs-enthusiasts all already predisposed to think needs, in some form, were important and could ground significant responsibilities! But it is also not surprising that our confidence in needs was not uniformly shared with colleagues across our various fields. In fact, all of those four categories of questions posed in 1998 still dominate literature today.

At any rate, on Reader's assessment in 2005, the field had moved on significantly and she summarized these

[1] G. Brock (ed.), *Necessary Goods: Our Responsibilities to Meet Others' Needs* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).
[2] S. Reader, 'Introduction', *The Philosophy of Need* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3. For the original, longer formulations of concerns, see Brock (ed.) *Necessary Goods*.
[3] Reader, 'Introduction', 4.

developments by framing new questions that she correctly imagined would shape continuing debate. These were:

1. What mistakes do opponents make in neglecting need? What is it that 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?[4]

These questions orient the original introduction to this volume, and Soran Reader situates the chapters in offering answers to these questions. It might be worth mentioning in particular that, in their important essays, Christopher Rowe, Sarah Miller, and Soran Reader draw attention to the important role the concept of needs has played in understanding the history of philosophy. And Jonathan Lowe makes a powerful argument that the concept of need plays a uniquely important role in the explanation of actions. Indeed, there is much scope for more work in highlighting the prominent role that needs can and have played across domains and in philosophizing through the ages. Reader's first two groups of questions remain as pressing today as they were in 2005. The same can be said for her third question, which has preoccupied needs theorists for millennia.

[4] Reader, 'Introduction', 4.

As I have noted, Reader was perhaps overly optimistic about the progress that had been made in accepting needs as an important concept ready to take its place with other core notions in normative domains. She believed that needs theorists had become less defensive in their positions, no longer having to expend as much energy on clearing away scepticism about needs, and misconceptions about these ideas. However, there has been a reversal in any gains that might have been made at the 2003 conference. Needs theorists continue to have to do much ground clearing before they can advance their views. And they are drawn back into some of the core issues that have long plagued theorizing about needs. The innovative work collected in this volume offers important and innovative approaches that can be used to shore up answers to some of the dominant recurring questions for needs theorists. Many of these contributions are highlighted in Reader's introduction.

Here, I turn my attention to some of the ways in which debates have evolved since the volume was originally published. As I see it, debates concerning needs have developed in several consequential ways, and here I identify a few important areas as key examples.

There has been substantial work in political philosophy on a variety of topics relevant to the study of needs. Notably, significant work has been done in analysing notions of how to distribute according to needs.[5] As Marx famously

[5] For some examples, see David Miller, 'Needs-Based Justice: Theory and Evidence', in A. Bauer and M. Meyerhuber (eds.), *Empirical Research and Normative Theory* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019); Nicole Hassoun,

advocated, a just society is one in which there would be distribution according to need. But what would this actually entail? There are numerous difficulties that should be considered even when we limit our attention to distribution according to needs. For instance, should strict priority go to the most needy? Should we, rather, give priority to those whose needs can be efficiently or effectively met with limited resources? When there are conditions of scarcity, should we simply observe a principle of equal provision for needs even though all will remain needy? Is there ever scope for meeting needs via lotteries? How should (say) housing needs be ranked, relative to (say) needs for education or health care, if choices must be made with limited budgets?

Another area of political philosophy where needs have gained considerable attention is in the debate between egalitarians and sufficientarians. Advocates for equality have been engaging extensively with proponents of a position known as 'sufficiency'. Whereas egalitarians promote a conception of justice that favours equality, sufficientarians typically claim that what justice requires is that everyone get sufficient for a good life, and needs have a prominent role in defining what is sufficient. The contemporary debate, sparked off by Harry Frankfurt, arises because he claimed that having *enough* rather than an *equal amount* should be

'Meeting Needs', *Utilitas* 21 (2009), 250–75; and Gillian Brock and David Miller, 'Needs in Moral and Political Philosophy', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/needs/>.

the focus of justice. Indeed, the focus on equality is harmful and misguided, according to Frankfurt. There is much to learn from this lively debate, but also, in my view, many ways to resolve the alleged tensions between the two opposing sides.[6] Needs have a distinctive role to play in understanding justice. And understanding what is important about the idea of equality has a central role to play as well. There is interesting work being done, and to be done, in tracing the important and subtle ways in which concern with needs and equality should be connected.[7]

Normative philosophers have also been much more engaged with global concerns over the last decade or so. For political philosophers, responsibilities to meet needs in the global sphere have been a prominent concern, with many different kinds of views being proposed. The debates about distributive justice, begun in the 1970s with Rawls's seminal work *A Theory of Justice*, originated in a context where the state largely defined the scope of justice. However, if we adopt a global perspective, how should this alter our account of distributive justice? There are many interesting accounts of how the global extension does or does not matter, and

[6] For excellent treatment of the debate between sufficientarians and egalitarians, see, for instance, Paula Casal, 'Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough', *Ethics* 117 (2) (2007), 296–326, and Liam Shields, *Just Enough: Sufficiency as a Demand of Justice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

[7] For some possibilities, see Gillian Brock, 'Sufficientarian and Needs-Based Approaches to Distributive Justice', in Serena Olsaretti (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Distributive Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 86–108.

innovative work has been done on showing the role of how needs combined with other salient considerations might affect responsibilities in the global domain.[8]

Following other trends in philosophy, there has been considerable interest in doing empirical work on needs. By studying ordinary folks' beliefs about needs, we can often gain some useful insights and much-needed correctives to more abstract philosophical approaches and positions.[9] Experiments have been designed to test people's convictions about how needs matter in a range of contexts. Research suggests that claims of need carry considerable weight when ordinary folks are asked about their views concerning such matters as social justice, fair distributions, and the like. Many experiments show that concern for needs is robust. However, as one might expect, justice is a multi-faceted concept and several considerations are relevant to our thinking about what justice requires, notwithstanding our views that needs carry significant weight in many contexts. So, researchers have been refining our knowledge of when and

[8] For some particularly interesting or different accounts focusing on the relationships between those who are needy and those in a position to assist, see Richard Miller, *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999); and Gillian Brock, *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[9] For an excellent summary of key points, see, for instance, Miller, 'Needs-Based Justice: Theory and Evidence'.

how needs matter, especially relative to other concerns that are relevant to justice.

Another noteworthy influence on the field since 2005 is the contribution Soran Reader herself made to theorizing about needs before her unfortunate death in 2012. In her book, *Needs and Moral Necessity*, Reader makes a number of bold claims about the role needs should play in moral philosophy. For instance, Reader claims that we should understand ethics as 'the practice of meeting needs'.[10] In order to understand the practice, we should understand four features of the moral terrain. These are: the agent; the act; the end that action is aimed at achieving; and the patient. While consequentialists focus on ends, deontologists on acts, and virtue theorists on agents, in the moral domain, the patient – the being who has needs – is sorely neglected.[11] Reader argues that examining the patient and her needs gives us important insights into successfully understanding the moral domain. Drawing on Aristotle, she develops an account according to which needs are those things that are central to a being. Human beings are not just biological beings, but rather have different identities – as, perhaps, a parent, a farmer, or a householder. All these needs central to identity can be morally demanding needs, but they are demanding only within the context of moral relationships. However, Reader's account of moral relationship is somewhat idiosyncratic, since it turns out that

[10] Soran Reader, *Needs and Moral Necessity* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 27.
[11] Reader, *Needs and Moral Necessity*, 42–4.

encounters, even brief ones, count as a form of moral relationship on her view. But some might wonder whether this not only stretches the idea of relationship, but rather dissipates the concern she was aiming to address in trying to limit the demandingness of needs. At any rate, Reader's provocative claims on how needs should transform our understanding of moral matters have provided much food for thought.

At least one other place where Soran's views did much to stimulate debate can be found in the influential paper that might help to revive interest in a needs-based approach in global public policy. Her paper, 'Does a Basic Needs Approach Need Capabilities?',[12] takes aim at some of the criticisms of needs concerning their so-called conceptual inadequacies. She argued that there is more conceptual richness in the concept than critics suppose. In particular, she has done much to advance understanding on the relative strengths and weaknesses of a needs-based approach, compared with its main rival based on 'capabilities'. This matters to global public policy. A basic needs approach played an important role in global public policy in the 1970s and early 1980s. However, the capabilities approach came to replace it in the late 1980s.[13] Indeed, the capabilities approach is a dominant framework used by the most influential organizations within which international development issues are

[12] Soran Reader, 'Does a Basic Needs Approach Need Capabilities?', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 14 (3) (2006), 337–50.

[13] For more on this approach, see the essay by Sabina Alkire in this volume.

implemented in policy and practice.[14] But, as Reader shows, many of the original criticisms of a needs-based approach were misguided – or, where they did have force, were criticisms that could have been avoided through better implementation policy. As she carefully documents, many of these criticisms simply do not hit their targets and are based on misunderstandings about needs-based views and their necessary commitments. Given Reader's important work in this area, it is possible we might see renewed interest in a needs-based approach to matters of global public policy.

As we look ahead at some new directions that needs theorizing might usefully take in the future, it is worth noting that there is important work on needs taking place in several disciplines. Needs theorists might profitably consider some of this literature, as there is much we can learn from such ventures. Of course, there have always been important cross-disciplinary approaches to the study of needs, and these have made influential contributions to the field. The work of Len Doyal and Ian Gough is particularly noteworthy in this regard. Their ground-breaking book *A Theory of Human Need*[15] has been prominent in the literature for almost three decades. Philosophers interested in needs should show more willingness to engage with and

[14] The most prominent of these is the United Nations, which makes use of capabilities in such important instruments as the UN Development Index and the UNDP Poverty Index. All of these are playing key roles in steering international development policy.

[15] Len Doyal and Ian Gough, *A Theory of Human Need* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1991).

learn from colleagues working in other fields. In this regard, there are important contributions to understanding needs being made in psychology,[16] human development and development ethics,[17] social and public policy,[18] and social work,[19] to name just a few of these significant areas. There should be more appreciation from philosophers that we might learn something important about needs by looking across disciplines. Indeed, many disciplines have useful insights to offer which can improve our philosophizing about needs.

[16] See, for instance, Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development and Wellness* (New York: Guilford Press, 2017).

[17] Des Gasper, *The Ethics of Development: From Economism to Human Development* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

[18] Ian Gough, *Heat, Greed and Human Need: Climate Change, Capitalism and Sustainable Well-being* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2017).

[19] Michael Dover, 'Human Needs', in E. Mullen (ed.), *Oxford Bibliography Online: Social Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Michael Dover, 'Human Needs: Overview', in C. Franklin (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Social Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).