The Philosophy of Need

Edited by **Soran Reader**

The Philosophy of
Need

ROYAL INSTITUTE OF PHILOSOPHY SUPPLEMENT: 57

EDITED BY

Soran Reader

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Notes on Contributors

Sabina Alkire is a Research Association at the Global Equity Initiative, Harvard University, and a founder member of the Human Development and Capability Association.

David Braybrooke is emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of Texas, Austin, USA.

Gillian Brock is a senior lecturer in philosophy at the University of Auckland, New Zealand.

Jonathan Lowe is a professor of philosophy at the University of Durham.

Sarah Miller is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Miami, USA.

John O'Neill is a professor of philosophy at the University of Lancaster.

Soran Reader is a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Durham.

Christopher Rowe is a professor of classics at the University of Durham.

Garrett Thomson is a professor of philosophy at the University of Wooster, USA

David Wiggins is emeritus professor of philosophy, University of Oxford, and emeritus fellow of the Leverhulme Trust.

Bill Wringe is a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Bilkent, Turkey.

Contents

Introduction

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 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

1

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 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 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 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

[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 Publication, 1982).

[3]   G. Brock, *Necessary Goods* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 2.

[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).

[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.

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 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

---

[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.

'How can we persuade opponents?', 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 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:

Introduction

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 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 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

6

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]

Frohlich and Oppenheimer set out to test empirically what principles of justice rational deliberators behind a simulated veil of ignorance would actually choose. They were particularly interested to see whether deliberators would prefer John Rawls' difference principle of maximising income for the worst off, or John Harsanyi's principle of maximising average income; two further principles were included as options: maximising the average with a floor constraint, and maximising the average with a range constraint. The experiments were detailed, and were repeated in different cultural contexts. Their striking results should give supporters of both Rawls and Harsanyi pause.

'Interestingly', Brock says in a most understated piece of criticism, 'the principles chosen in the experiment do not support either Rawls' or Harsanyi's models. Indeed, there was almost no support for the Difference Principle.' (p. 59) Only 1% supported the difference principle which was championed by John Rawls as a principle deducible a priori behind the veil of ignorance. Only 12%

[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).

supported the average-maximisation principle favoured by John Harsanyi again on the basis of a priori arguments. 9% supported the range constraint. 78% supported the floor constraint. The conclusion about needs that Brock draws is hard to avoid. Even behind a veil of ignorance, rational deliberators will seek first and foremost to ensure that essential needs are met. Reduction of inequality or maximisation of income do not matter as much as seeing to it that everyone has enough to avoid harm. Deliberators do not care as much about the relative well-being of Rawl's difference principle, or the average income of Harsanyi's, as they care about the absolute deprivation that the floor constraint is conceived to prevent. These experiments also showed that deliberators don't just prefer a needs-meeting principle when behind a veil of ignorance. When they are required experimentally to 'live by' the need-principle in various scenarios in later stages of the experiment, this increases their confidence in it.

Why do so many philosophers neglect need? Every participant at the conference felt the pressure to answer this question. The costs appear to be high, with moral compromise, conceptual weakness and poor fit with the facts already on the list. Persistent sources of doubt about needs include the thoughts that needs seem passive, that meeting them seems paternalistic, and that demanding they should be met seems apt to be manipulative and to avoid the issue of desert. Sabina Alkire considers the passivity and vulnerability to paternalism of the need concept, and argues the 'capability approach' of Amartya Sen provides an important corrective supplement. David Braybrooke confronts the worry about desert, arguing we should avoid the term 'need' when dealing with people who feel this doubt—other terms will elicit their help more effectively. Wiggins adds the suggestion that the sheer power of the concept might be what repels philosophers: if they let it in, it will take over, derailing their theories.[10]

John O'Neill concentrates on something else about needs that may put philosophers and politicians off: claims from need appear to humiliate the claimant. O'Neill distinguishes between talk of need as a principle of justice, which says people must have what they need as a matter of justice (as for example in the need

[10] If Wiggins is right, in place of classical Utilitarianism, Hare would have had a needs-based ethic; in place of the difference principle, Rawls would have had a principle of needs-meeting, and economists using the precautionary principle would have had to acknowledge their reliance on a concept they claim to dispense with in favour of preference.

principle endorsed in Frohlich and Oppenheimers' experiments), and talk of need as a principle of community or solidarity, which says meeting needs is constitutive of relations of care within a society. The liberal worry about need as a principle of community, distinct from worries about passivity, paternalism and desert, is that making needs-meeting central to social relationships may be incompatible with recognising the autonomy and independence of individuals. Correspondingly, needs based criticisms of the market may fail to recognise the ways markets foster independence and autonomy.

O'Neill considers the arguments of Adam Smith against the appeal to necessities in economic life, which in turn draw on the Stoic values of self-sufficiency and independence. Speaking from need is humiliating. Depending on others and appealing to their benevolence to meet one's needs is humiliating. Worse, such dependency 'tends to corrupt and enervate and debase the mind' (p. 79) Yet vulnerability to need, and mutual dependency between members of any society, are, as Smith also recognises, ineliminable facts of life. Smith's solution is the market: 'through market exchange individuals can meet each others' needs without benevolence' (p. 81). This is because the market avoids the appeal to benevolence. Rather than appealing to the benevolence of the person to whom I sell my labour, I appeal to their self-interest. This is how I can preserve my independence and dignity. There are objections—the independence thus achieved is an illusion, as I now depend on the system of exchange, and if that fails to meet my needs, it is no longer clear that there is anyone to whom I can appeal.

This independence depends on my having something somebody wants to pay for, and, notoriously, for the most needy in society this condition will never be met. Not everyone can play market. But the objection that O'Neill develops focuses on Smith's concept of self-sufficiency. Smith himself acknowledged that to believe in the self-sufficiency presupposed by the market requires self-deception, but insisted it is necessary for economic development:

> [The 'invisible hand' metaphor refers] to the indirect and unintended link between the self-deception of the rich, 'their natural selfishness and rapacity' in the pursuit of 'vain and insatiable desires' and 'the distribution of the necessaries of life' across the whole population and hence the general improvement of the condition of the poor through the encouragement of commerce and industry. (p. 95)

Introduction

O'Neill argues that Smith's claims in support of this self-deception cannot be sustained. First, self-deception (like dependency, which Smith wants us to avoid for this reason) corrupts the mind. Second, autonomy and independence are represented as virtues, but they are only contrasted by their defenders with vices of deficiency—heteronomy, as lack of autonomy, and dependency, as lack of independence. O'Neill points out that a virtue must be contrasted with vices of excess, as well as vices of deficiency, and suggests that the excesses of autonomy and independence, which are fostered and thrive in the market economy, have been given insufficient attention by supporters of autonomy and independence.

The missing vice O'Neill christens 'arrogant self-sufficiency'. Autonomy 'can take the excessively individualistic form which fails to acknowledge necessary dependence on others: the resulting conceit is as much opposed to autonomy as excessive dependence' (p. 96). Modern market societies don't just fail to theorise and warn against any such vices, but actually present them as virtues. The individual self and its wants are made sovereign. The remedy O'Neill proposes is an egalitarianism founded on the existence and recognition of common vulnerability. Only if human beings recognise common vulnerability to need, can the humiliation involved in speech from need be eliminated. Only if we allow it could happen to any of us, will neediness cease to be shameful, and the resulting impulse to avoid the needy, and blame them for their plight and our discomfort, be overcome.

3. Where might needs matter beyond political philosophy? How are they related to human mind and nature?

In this topic, we see a shift of emphasis. Rather than considering which needs are morally or politically important, as did those addressing Brock's first question, 'Which needs are important?', participants take for granted that existence needs are morally and politically important. Some branch out from there to explore the role need can play outside political philosophy, for example in the history of philosophy (Rowe, Reader and Miller), or the philosophy of action (Lowe). Others consider the nature of needs more deeply, exploring its connection with interests and desires (Thomson), and question the assumption that morally important needs are especially connected with human agency, rather than with human life more broadly conceived.

a. History of Philosophy

Christopher Rowe, Sarah Miller and I explore the role that the concept of need has played, albeit largely unremarked hitherto, in the history of philosophy. Rowe considers the implications for our understanding of needs of a view he attributes to Aristotle, that there is no necessary connection between being a biological human being, and being rational and potentially virtuous. Rowe points out that this leaves open the possibility that those lacking what we moderns call needs may be sub-human. The accidents of human life, instances of occurrent essential need, that result in a lack of rationality or virtue, such as deprivation in childhood or misfortune in later life, are seen from Aristotle's perspective as accidents that deprive their subject of full humanity, because full humanity is defined in terms of rationality and virtue. This explains Aristotle's distasteful doctrine of natural slavery, and his relegation of 'necessary people' (farmers, labourers, traders and craftsmen) to lesser status, leaving full rational humanity the sole prerogative of those with sufficient leisure time to conceive and pursue their own projects. On Rowe's view, for Aristotle neediness impinges on humanity. Rowe contrasts this with an earlier Socratic or Platonic view, according to which human beings are necessarily both rational and virtuous.

For the Socrates and Plato of the *Lysis*, the text Rowe draws on most heavily, human beings as such inalienably desire only the actual good, and, by implication, necessarily have only one real need, the need for the wisdom required to acquire the good. The view does not deny that human beings may have felt desires for the bad—but it does insist that those are not desires properly speaking, they are to actual desire as illusion is to veridical perception. Rowe argues that this view has the political advantage against Aristotle's, of preserving the idea of a valuable core of all human beings as such which is intrinsically set on the real good, and by implication must always be respected. But the implications for our understanding of needs are less immediately attractive. The Socratic view suggests that the things we normally take to be human needs are only ever circumstantially good, and so only ever circumstantially desirable. Even a physically healthy life, assumed by contemporary needs-theorists to be an essential need if anything is, is only a circumstantial need on the Platonic view. The only unconditional need turns out to be not any basic or vital need of human life, but wisdom: the knowledge of human nature and good which will tell

Introduction

us what, in any actual circumstance, is good for us, thereby telling us what we need, which is to say, what we in fact desire there.

I explore Aristotle's views about needs in more detail. Aristotle's account of human needs is valuable because it describes the connections between logical, metaphysical, physical, human and ethical necessities, but Aristotle does not fully draw out the implications for human needs and virtue. Like modern sceptics about need, Aristotle was ambivalent about necessities. He thought the absolute necessities of God and eternal cyclical motion were a good thing, but he was hostile to many of the necessities we call 'human needs', and I argue that this prevented him from seeing the constitutive role meeting needs must play in human virtue. Aristotle regards many ordinary human necessities, including labouring, farming, trading and craft, as mere necessities, not really proper parts of human life; but he regards other more grand necessities, including war, politics and religion, as necessities that are proper parts of human life, and proposes virtuous people should not meet ordinary needs, but should leave that to those others Rowe charges Aristotle thought fall short of full humanity.

I argue Aristotle was wrong to downgrade ordinary needs: they are as apt to be proper parts of a good life as the grand ones, and the Aristotelian good man must be able to recognise and meet needs. I then argue that Aristotle was led into error, first because his conception of life and action as aimed at leisure is flawed; second because his conception of human self-sufficiency as having fewer or no needs, rather than met needs, is incoherent; third, because his claim that self-sufficiency might consist in having the power to get others to meet your needs, rather than the ability to meet them yourself, is false. The proper Aristotelian conclusion, is that far from being an inferior activity fit only for slaves, meeting needs is actually the first part of Aristotelian virtue.

Sarah Miller turns to more recent history, and describes a problem in the ethics of care which she suggests can best be resolved by drawing on the account of true human needs and what must be done about them that is to be found in Kant's moral philosophy. Philosophers working from the perspective of the ethics of care notice that the needy require care, and argue that caring is constitutive of an agent's goodness. Good care must also be interactive, rather than active on the part of the carer and passive on the part of the cared-for. Whilst the recognition of need, respect for the dignity of the needy, and recognition of the value of what needs-meeters do are all extremely valuable original contributions to contemporary moral philosophy uniquely made by