SORAN READER, ED. THE PHILOSOPHY OF NEED

Reviewed by Ed Brandon

Reader, Soran, ed. The Philosophy of Need. Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 57.
Cambridge: CUP, 2005. ISBN-13: 9780521678445 | ISBN-10: 0521678447. pp. v+251.

This volume gives us 11 chapters and a very useful introduction by the editor that
summarises the main points, argues for the centrality of need for philosophising about social
justice and human nature, and indicates directions for future work.[1]

As Reader says, the concept of need has not in general had a good press in philosophy. And
yet, as several contributors argue, it might seem a better, more plausible foundation for
responsible social thinking than, say, human rights, Rawlsian concerns for equality,
utilitarian issues about aggregate utility, or even Sen's capabilities. In one of the papers,
Gillian Brock (58-62) appeals to careful social psychological work by Frohlich and
Oppenheimer that also seems to show that ordinary people overwhelmingly prefer an
approach that caters to our basic needs over philosophically more prestigious principles.
She joins several others in noting also that policy makers in several international forums
have also relied on principles that invoke basic needs. With all that going for it, is there any
reason to maintain philosophical suspicion of the concept?

David Wiggins, who has been responsible for perhaps the most sophisticated defence of
needs-talk in English philosophy, obviously thinks there isn't. The concept of need is
indispensable, an idea we cannot do without – his title echoing his gloss on vital needs as
things we cannot do without, without which our life is "seriously harmed or vitally impaired"
(31). Wiggins sketches the history, both of practical politics and philosophical analysis, that
led him to investigate and urge the primacy of the concept of need, and which resulted in
the claim that 'need' has two senses, one which could usually be characterised as
instrumental, when '*A* needs *X*' tells us about an *X* that is necessary for *A* to be or achieve *Y*
(very frequently the *Y* is elided in non-pedantic usage), and another 'quasi-categorical'
sense in which the *Y*-slot has been filled in advance by the notion of *X*'s continuing survival
or avoidance of serious harm. When a person responds to a claim of the form, 'I need *X*,'
with the question 'But do you *really* need it?' or 'But you don't really need *Y*', specifying
what the first speaker had left elided, this is, according to Wiggins, a move to this absolute
sense of 'need'. Together with this understanding of vital needs as "*grave*, *deeply
entrenched* and *scarcely substitutable*" (33), Wiggins proposed a Limitation Principle: "it
counts as *unjust* to sacrifice the truly vital needs of one citizen to the aim of meeting the
mere desires of some larger number" (33).

Wiggins proceeds to show that these ideas furnish a better basis for social and moral

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[1]After the editor's Introduction, we have:
David Wiggins "An Idea we Cannot do Without";
Gillian Brock "Needs and Global Justice";
John O'Neill "Need, Humiliation and Independence";
Christopher Rowe "Needs and Ethics in Ancient Philosophy";
Soran Reader "Aristotle on Necessities and Needs";
Sarah Clark Miller "Need, Care and Obligation";
Jonathan Lowe "Needs, Facts, Goodness, and Truth";
Garrett Thomson "Fundamental Needs";
Bil Wringe "Needs, Rights, and Collective Obligations";
David Braybrooke "Where does the Moral Force of the Concept of Needs Reside and When?";
Sabina Alkire "Needs and Capabilities".
Proofreading could have been better, but I do not recall any cases where errors obstructed
intelligibility.

thought than Rawls or Hare can offer. Against Hare's aim to maximise the satisfaction of preferences, Wiggins asserts "Surely a rational deliberator asks himself constantly not so much *how to maximise* his preference-satisfaction but *what to prefer*, or *what preferences to persist in*" (35). Against Rawls' concern with what kinds of inequality deliberators behind the veil of ignorance should accept, Wiggins suggests (and Frohlich and Oppenheimer's empirical evidence supports him) that it is better to ask "what guarantees of what strength can be placed among the conditions of social cooperation in order to ensure that the worst of the bad luck anybody encounters will be alleviated by concerted social action?" (38). As he says, inequality as such does not have to blight the lives of people in society, rather "dire unsatisfied need" (38).

Wiggins' concluding sections deal with the Precautionary Principle quoted from the Bergen Ministerial Declaration of May 1990 (often invoked in environmental matters): "Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation" (42). He laments that this notion has fallen flat in "the way in which philosophical campaigns have fallen flat on behalf of the concepts of need and vital need" (47), and urges that we should yet continue to work for it and its implementation, recognising its inherent and inescapable imprecision.

Gillian Brock can be seen as taking up Wiggins' suggestion for a rather different Rawlsian veil of ignorance. She spends several pages (51-58) on the information and issues to be put to our rational deliberators. The upshot is

> the minimum package it would be reasonable to agree to in the ideal choosing situation … is that we should all be adequately positioned to enjoy the prospects for a decent life, as fleshed out by what is necessary to be enabled to meet our basic needs and those of our dependents (but with provisions firmly in place for the permanently or temporarily disabled to be adequately cared for) and certain guarantees about basic freedom.[2] (56)

As already noted, Brock invokes empirical work to suggest that this is indeed the sort of principle people would actually choose if asked to engage in her Rawlsian experiment on global justice. Brock sees basic needs as prerequisites of agency. They include

> a certain amount of (1) physical and mental health, (2) sufficient security to be able to act, (3) a sufficient level of understanding of what one is choosing between, and (4) a certain amount of autonomy. Because of its important role in developing (and maintaining) (1)-(4), I also add a fifth basic need which underlines the importance of our social needs, namely, (5) decent social relations with at least some others. (63)

The ways we satisfy these basic needs may vary enormously, within and between cultures. We can get some handle on the effectiveness of social policy in this area by appeal to indicators familiar in the work of development economists (64) (Brock appeals here to Doyal and Gough's A Theory of Human Need). Brock has a short section arguing that needs are prior to human rights: "In order to draw up a sensible list of our human rights we must have a sense of our basic needs" (65). In her final section, Brock argues that her resultant framework for global justice does not undermine each individual's responsibility to meet his own needs, in so far as this is possible. Greater transparency in payments by trans-national companies is suggested as one potent way to counter the corruption associated with oil sales and similar activities. And constructing international agencies can better deal with disasters than leaving things to whoever happens to be close by. Brock concludes that "If

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[2]I think this language betrays an inadequate recognition of the demands of some disability theorists for a more positive view to be taken of this kind of life. See, for instance, the collective work by Anita Silvers, David Wasserman and Mary B. Mahowald, Disability, Difference, Discrimination: Perspectives on Justice in Bioethics and Public Policy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998) that I reviewed for Metapsychology.

we have an overriding interest in relieving suffering, this would suggest that we set up global institutions that can manage to relieve suffering, and that we should all be forced to support them, if we are unwilling to do so voluntarily" (69).

Brock's abstract theorising is complemented by the final paper by Sabina Alkire, who shows how thinking of Wiggins' sort is infused throughout global attempts to meet needs, such as the Millennium Development goals, and who argues for fruitful interaction between such a needs-based approach and the capabilities approach sponsored in particular by Amartya Sen. (Sen's approach is also discussed and compared with the appeal to needs in David Braybrooke's contribution.)

As Thomson's chapter shows in some detail, there are several advantages to talking about needs. The notions I have reviewed above sound plausible. Why haven't philosophers embraced them more willingly?

One reason, I suspect, is that needs are just too variegated. Wiggins tries to circumscribe the important area by focussing only on his absolute sense, but even there he has to admit several dimensions of variation and 'essential contestability', all of which add to the contentiousness of many claims about needs. For myself, I prefer to see the same logical structure in all claims about needs, which means in practice that virtually anything can be a need in some context, and that we have to appeal to Gricean points about salience in dialogue to explain away the apparent absolute sense.[3] But on either view, it is not easy to get agreement on what should count as a need that we should act upon. As Wiggins has pointed out elsewhere, it is easy and common for bureaucrats to take a very exiguous interpretation of vital needs.[4] Indeed, I used that point to endorse King Lear's rejection of the appeal to need in his speech "O reason not the need" (2.4.260). Wiggins tells us of his concern for the way motorway building around London in the 1960s and '70s trampled on people's needs. But however shabbily they were treated, one did not, as far as I am aware, find them setting off across the Channel in frail boats in search of an endurable life in the way we find Senegalese or Somalis doing. One might well wonder whether the preservation of village life in Berkshire is a proper context to invoke anything as stringent as Wiggins' Limitation Principle.

None of this is to deny the importance of the exploration of alternatives that Wiggins urges. But it is to say that one might be suspicious of a concept that seems not to provide answers when we are faced with competing considerations.

The extensive range of conceptions even of vital needs is displayed by some of the essays in the collection. The editor's own paper on Aristotle's views on necessities and needs takes issue with Aristotle's judgment that "the 'grand' necessities of warcraft, politics and religion are proper parts of human life while the 'ordinary' necessities of food-provision, arts and crafts, trade and work are not" (123).[5] These menial tasks sustain life but are not what

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[3]I set out the basic ideas in my "O reason not the need," Education for Development, 6 (1980): 18-25, and defended them more fully in my "Is 'A needs X' elliptical?", Grazer Philosophische Studien 45 (1993): 125-134.

[4]David Wiggins, "Claims of Need," Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 49. The essay dates originally from 1985.

[5]To quibble, one might also invoke Aristotle somewhat against Wiggins who claims inspiration from that source: one of Aristotle's two examples of that without which it is impossible to live or for the good to exist is as clear a case of derivative, instrumental need as one could wish for, which may suggest that he would not have wanted so strong a distinction of senses as Wiggins here (cf. Wiggins's discussion on 29).

makes for human flourishing. Reader rightly observes that "Aristotle seems to have mistaken a fact about excessive quantity of any activity for an intrinsic quality specific to activities of a particular type" (124-5), but the point I would make is that, given his social position, Aristotle seems unconcerned about letting others provide for him in these respects. (Rowe goes further: "Our basic needs we share with animals . . .; anyone who does no more, as Aristotle sees it, than fulfilling his own, and his family's basic needs—or, indeed, anyone who spends his time fulfilling the basic needs of *others*—is to that (considerable) extent sub-human" [101].)

John O'Neill's typically enlightening paper also touches on the way in which our dependence on vast numbers of usually anonymous others remains out of sight and out of mind. He looks at Adam Smith's argument that in capitalist society such concealment is itself a necessary distortion. O'Neill wants to go further, to castigate the excessive individualism and self-conceit, or "arrogant self-sufficiency" as he quotes John Benson's characterisation of it (96), that often arises in capitalist societies. Capitalism of this sort may not be inescapable, but to the extent that we are stuck with something like it, Smith's point may reveal a kind of need that does not sit well with our usual assumptions.

Christopher Rowe offers an even more extreme perspective that he claims to find in the Socrates of the Lysis: that wisdom itself is the only goal of human existence, so "there will be no room for any notion of *needs* at all. There are only *things that we might generally be said to need if the circumstances dictate it, if it's good for me to go on living and breathing*, and so on" (108). Whether or not he and Terry Penner are right in attributing the view in question to anyone, it is at least a view, and one totally at odds with the conceptions of people like Brock and Wiggins.[6]

I have suggested that the variety of plausible claims and counter-claims about even basic human needs is one potent reason for the distrust of the notion found among philosophers. But where there is a fair consensus on background issues, needs have the same sort of attraction as negative utilitarianism: it is usually easier to see where things are going badly than when people are flourishing and it is easier to know what to do to ameliorate those in need than to provide for human flourishing.[7] And defenders of needs could reasonably say that other philosophically more celebrated notions, such as equality, display a similar degree of contention and lack of specificity.

Several essays address distinct issues connected with needs. Sarah Clark Miller builds bridges between an ethics of care and a more Kantian approach by arguing for a duty to care, "an obligation that requires moral agents to respond to the constitutive needs of others" (159). Bill Wringe takes up an argument by Onora O'Neill that would undermine the moral utility of needs-talk: basic needs generate what Wringe calls 'subsistence rights', but these generate unallocated obligations. 'Unallocated' means that they fall neither to specific people nor to all of us. O'Neill's point is then that such obligations are incoherent. Wringe offers a careful discussion of how one might get around the problem of unallocated obligations, concluding that rather than allocate them to nation states they should be allocated to the world's population *collectively*.

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[6] Another variation on the notion of vital needs makes a brief appearance in Alkire's paper (241) where she notes Sen's case of a Brahmin or hunger-striker deliberately refraining from satisfying some of their basic needs in the pursuit of other aims.

[7] It is probably important to replace the binary opposition flourish/do badly with at least a three-way contrast flourish/get by/do badly.

Jonathan Lowe's paper is somewhat isolated. He offers a schematic argument for aligning belief and truth on one side with action and needs on the other. Facts give reasons for or support beliefs; needs similarly constitute reasons for action. Lowe refrains from offering much of an account of the ontology of needs, being content here to draw attention to the parallels between action and belief, and some differences.

Overall there are many valuable discussions, some closely tied to needs, others ranging elsewhere. From my perspective, several of the papers reveal the ideological utility of the implicit logic of need-statements as simultaneously objective and normative: '*A* needs *X* for *Y*' states an objective relation between *X* and *Y*, while our tendency to elide the *Y* permits the locus of value to go unmentioned. The contributors are more concerned with elaborating than with unmasking this structure. Despite my continuing doubts, it is important that public thinking about needs be taken further: however we characterise them, the issues of poverty, of 'development' and the achievement of the millennium development goals, and of the environment require our urgent attention.

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