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Basic human needs: Abstraction, indeterminacy and the political account of need¹

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ABSTRACT

The basic human needs approach contends that the needs which matter – the *basic* needs – are *human* needs. This article conducts a critical examination of that approach, and finds it wanting. My claim is that the abstract, indeterminate nature of human needs makes it impossible to establish their normative priority (or ‘basicness’). I begin by showing why human needs are necessarily abstract. This follows from the standard response given by basic human needs theorists to the problem of cultural diversity: to avoid favouring one way of life over others, and to plausibly apply universally, human needs must be specified at a high level of generality. The problem, however, is that this abstract specification undermines the capacity of basic human needs to offer guidance in concrete contexts. The approach thus requires some account of the properties which shape the concrete specification of basic human needs. However, the special status thus afforded to those properties (what I call ‘specifiers’) undermines the arguments deployed to establish the basicness of human needs. Having rejected the basic human needs approach, I finish by sketching an alternative: namely, the political account of needs.

KEYWORDS Needs; human needs; harm; abstraction; politics of need

Introduction

Needs matter; but not all needs do. Needs range from the urgent and dire to the insignificant and even trivial. Given this, a central task for the needs theorist is to give some account of *which* needs matter. In contemporary analytical political theory, one approach to this task

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predominates: the basic human needs approach. This holds, in short, that the needs which matter – the *basic* needs – are *human* needs. The significance of a given need thus depends on its membership of or derivation from a set of basic human needs, usually laid out in a convenient list. This framework is then filled out via a range of methodologies, producing lists of basic human needs that vary – in general – only around the margins.

This article's central claim is that the basic human needs (BHN) approach has failed to show that human needs must be basic needs (or vice versa). To establish this, I begin by surveying the BHN approach, arguing that it rests on two theses: the *human needs thesis*, which contends that there is a set of universal human needs; and the *basic needs thesis*, which asserts that those human needs have normative priority over other needs and features of our wellbeing.

In general, critics of the BHN approach have zeroed in on the human needs thesis. In particular, BHN theorists have encountered the problem of cultural diversity: how can the BHN theorist posit – so the argument goes – some set of universal needs without trampling over cultural differences? To tackle this problem, BHN theorists adopt a standard response: they distinguish human needs from their mode of satisfaction, arguing that whilst the latter is culturally relative, the former is universal. BHN theorists combine this with highly abstract specifications of BHN, allowing their universalist accounts of human needs to cover a wide range of varying concrete instances. That abstract specification, furthermore, makes accounts of BHN compelling, since they can be couched in terms general enough that they can be endorsed by widely differing (and even contrary) normative stances.

This apparent strength has, however, led to further problems. Endorsing an argument made by Soper (1993a, 1993b, 2007), I show that in shifting to a high level of generality, the BHN approach becomes indeterminate, undermining its ability to assess needs in concrete contexts. Given this, if the BHN approach is going to say anything about which needs matter,

it must go beyond abstract accounts of generally human needs, telling us which needs can validly be derived from those abstract categories. The BHN approach must, therefore, give some account of the properties which shape the concrete realisation of BHN; I call these properties ‘specifiers’.

This article then extends these critiques in a novel direction. As I show, in responding to the problems of cultural diversity and of indeterminacy, the BHN approach constructs an assemblage of concepts – especially the tripartite distinction between human needs, satisfiers and (crucially) specifiers – which make it difficult to establish the basic needs thesis. To demonstrate this, I consider the grounds for assigning basicness to human needs, identifying two arguments: the argument from universal preconditions; and the argument from substantive harm. As I show, both of those arguments are undermined by the status afforded to specifiers in the theory of BHN. My approach, therefore, is unusual in that it exclusively targets the basic needs thesis. I thus do not problematise the existence of human needs, but the equivocation between basic needs and human needs.

I go on to argue that disposing of the theory of BHN creates space for a new approach. The failings of the BHN approach can be traced, I contend, to its attempt to transcend the political via processes of abstraction. This results not only in indeterminate accounts of needs that are untenable, but also a closure of the political dimension of needs. It is this drive towards closure, I argue, which leads the BHN approach down a blind alley. Having analysed that closure, I then sketch an alternative, positing that the normative importance of needs can only be determined in and through political processes. I call this alternative the political account of needs.

This article begins by outlining the central presuppositions of the BHN approach. In the second section, I examine the problem of diversity, the standard response given to that problem, and the consequent abstract nature of human needs. The third section highlights an

ensuing problem; whilst highly abstract needs can be compelling, they are also indeterminate. The next section offers a rescue of BHN, introducing the concept of specifiers. This leads me to the critical fifth section, where I show that this assemblage of concepts is internally incoherent. In the final section, I offer some reflections on these failings, and indicate a path forward.

Basic human needs

The term ‘basic human needs’ has historical associations with an approach to international development adopted by the International Labour Organisation in the 1970s, and later holding sway in World Bank circles. Contemporaneous with, and partly stimulated by, that policy paradigm was a considerable theoretical project. This attempted to develop the conceptual resources of the BHN approach, generating a sizeable literature and commonplace framework of concepts. And whilst the BHN approach has largely been superseded as a policy programme, that framework continues to be highly influential in moral and political theory (Gasper, 2004, pp. 131–162; Reader, 2006; Siebel & Schramme, 2020). In those circles it has been put to a number of uses: as a grounding for human rights (Doyal & Gough, 1991; Floyd, 2011; D. Miller, 2007, 2012; Plant, 2002); as a prerequisite for international justice (Brock, 2009; Copp, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2005); as the basis for a duty of care (S. C. Miller, 2012); as a criterion for cultural evaluation (Johnson, 2014); and more besides. It has even been suggested that amongst analytical accounts of need, the BHN approach constitutes something of a dominant paradigm (Brock, 2009, p. 65; Reader, 2006, 2007, pp. 64–67).

That approach is characterised by a framework of concepts that can be summed up, first and foremost, by two central theses:

- (1) *The human needs thesis* – there is a set of abilities and characteristics $[H_1 \dots H_n]$ that are essential to human life. Some subset of $[H_1 \dots H_n]$ yields a set of human needs $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$.
- (2) *The basic needs thesis* – $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$ constitute the basic needs for all human beings.

To begin with the human needs thesis, this identifies a set of needs $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$ grounded in the essential features of human life $[H_1 \dots H_n]$. At the most minimal level $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$ constitute the prerequisites for human survival. The group of theories I examine here, however, are explicitly more expansive, aiming not only at the continuing existence of the human animal, but the higher standard of a distinctively human form of existence. In this way human needs pertain not just to facts about human physiology, but to an evaluative notion of a minimally decent (or dignified, flourishing, etc.) human life (Siebel & Schramme, 2020).

Having identified $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$, the BHN approach goes on to make the normative claim – in the form of the basic needs thesis – that $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$ constitute our basic needs, meaning they have priority over other needs and features of our wellbeing (Copp, 1992; Frankfurt, 1998; Gasper, 2004, pp. 141–142). The claim made by BHN theorists is that there is something special about human needs which justifies ascribing those needs, and *only* those needs, some form of normative priority; indeed, much of the literature goes so far as to contend that basic needs must, *by definition*, be shared universally (Copp, 1992, 1998; Doyal & Gough, 1991, pp. 35–45; S. C. Miller, 2012, pp. 20–22; Plant, 2002). It follows that the normative importance of a given need is determined by its membership of, or derivation from, the set of human needs $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$. A defining feature of the BHN approach, therefore, is that it deploys an exclusive connection between normative importance and shared humanity in order to distinguish significant from insignificant needs: to tell us, in short, which needs matter.

My target in this article is a cluster of scholarship within analytical political theory which shares these two theses. That focus is both narrow and broad. It is, firstly, narrow in that it lies exclusively within analytical political theory. The term ‘need’ is, after all, ubiquitous, and there is a vast related literature distributed across numerous disciplines (Dean, 2010). A narrowing of scope is therefore necessary for pragmatic reasons.

Despite that narrowing, my target is still a broad one, in that I am drawing together a number of distinct theories in order to elucidate a common problem. Inevitably, therefore, I lose some of the nuanced distinctions between those theories. My claim, however, is that despite some divergence, these approaches a) endorse the human needs and basic needs theses; b) adopt a shared framework of concepts; c) confront a standard set of problems; and d) deploy some standard responses to those problems. My choice of scope is thus prompted and justified by those commonalities, which – I argue – are shared by all the BHN approach’s central proponents, including Doyal & Gough (1991), Copp (1992, 1995, 1998, 2005), Brock (1998, 2002, 2009), S. C. Miller (2012) and D. Miller (2007, 2012).

One might wonder how far beyond that list my argument extends. It could be asked, for instance, if Nussbaum’s (2000) celebrated capability account falls within the scope of the BHN approach. This is certainly plausible, and several commentators have indeed posited such an overlap (see, for instance, Brock, 2009, pp. 69–71; S. C. Miller, 2012, p. 40; Reader, 2006; Siebel & Schramme, 2020). The problem, however, is that Nussbaum’s account has several distinctive features – not least her focus on capabilities rather than needs, and her politically liberal methodology – that make it difficult to provide a straightforward categorisation, and impossible to do so in the space available. To avoid getting unnecessarily embroiled in debates about scope, my argument focuses primarily on the proponents identified above.

Human needs, cultural diversity, and abstraction

My case against the BHN approach begins by examining some common challenges, the standard responses to those challenges, and the consequent framework of concepts that has been developed. In this section, I consider the problem of cultural diversity, and how this leads BHN theorists to couch BHN in highly abstract terms.

The problem of cultural diversity goes like this. The BHN approach posits that human needs are universal in scope, in that they are held by all people in all societies, simply *qua* their humanity. That universal scope clashes with the reality of cultural difference, in that whatever set of human needs one puts forward, one can always find some people in some cultures who are hostile to the content of that set. The BHN theorist thus appears to confront a stark choice between a universalist account of human needs and a respect for the value of cultural diversity. As D. Miller (2012) puts it, the problem is to find some way of specifying a universal account of human needs without thereby engaging in a partisan favouring of one way of life over another.

Fortunately, the BHN theorist has a ready response. Whilst indeed the activity of needs-meeting differs between cultures, these differences equate merely to different modes of satisfaction for common, universal human needs. Thus, for instance, one can meet the need for food in countless ways, and the precise manner of doing so is sensitive to cultural differences. This does not, however, change the fact that humans need food.

This form of argument constitutes the standard response to the problem of diversity. The BHN approach has, furthermore, developed a handy framework of concepts to systematise and embellish this response. It is common to distinguish, in particular, universal human needs (such as the need for nutrition) and specific ‘satisfiers’ for those needs (the various nutritious diets one might have). The standard response thus holds that cultural diversity can be accommodated at the level of satisfiers without abandoning the universalism

posited by the human needs thesis. Some form of this distinction can be found in pretty much all of the major contributions to this cluster of scholarship (Brock, 2002; Copp, 1998, p. 123; Doyal & Gough, 1991, pp. 69–75, 155; Gasper, 2004, pp. 142–152; D. Miller, 2012; S. C. Miller, 2012, pp. 38–39).

It follows from the standard response that BHN must be defined in a sufficiently abstract manner, since they must accommodate a wide range of different concrete needs, including various culturally-specific forms of needs-meeting. Indeed, variations in concrete specifications are down to more than just culture: needs vary in line with physiological differences (such as age or sex), economic factors (those with strenuous jobs require, for instance, different nutrition), religious belief or moral principle (Muslims and vegans might need different diets), and so on. To reach a sufficiently high level of generality, concrete needs must be abstracted from particular circumstances and grouped with other, similar needs in clusters which ascend in increasing levels of generality (Doyal & Gough, 1991, p. 40; Heller, 1993; Reader, 2007, pp. 79–81). Those processes of abstraction can occur to different extents and in varying dimensions: the statement ‘babies need milk’ can be abstracted into ‘humans need nutrition’, requiring an abstraction of the subject (‘babies’ becomes ‘humans’) and the object (‘milk’ becomes ‘nutrition’). There is thus – as this example highlights – a connection between the level of specification of the subject and the object (Reader, 2006). Given this, identifying a set of needs applicable to all humans requires a highly abstract specification of the needs themselves (Heller, 1993).

Human needs are abstract in the further sense that they do not specify particular forms or standards of provision. The phrase ‘humans need nutrition’, for instance, leaves the appropriate quality and kind of provision unspecified. And whilst some unmet nutritional needs rapidly result in certain death, others lead to qualitatively different forms of deprivation with varying degrees of certainty over differing periods of time. Thus all human needs – even

the most vital ones – display diverging degrees of necessity (Hamilton, 2003, pp. 29–30). It follows that judgements of sufficient provision are needed. Those judgements do not, however, follow straightforwardly from the nature of the needs themselves without applying some criterion of adequacy (D. Miller, 2001, pp. 206–213; Plant, 2002, p. 167; Soper, 1981, pp. 10–18). And whilst BHN theorists recognise the need for such judgements, they leave their specification open-ended and for determination at a level below the generically human. This is why terms like ‘adequate’, ‘normal’, ‘sufficient’, and ‘appropriate’ can be found in many of the lists of BHN (Brock, 2009, pp. 66–67; Doyal & Gough, 1991, pp. 157–158; S. C. Miller, 2012, pp. 41–42).

We thus have – on the one hand – a range of specific, concrete needs that vary markedly according to particular circumstances, and – on the other hand – a set of human needs couched in terms general enough that their scope encompasses all those varied concrete instances. The BHN approach undertakes a division of labour between those two levels, splitting the tasks of (a) identifying human needs and (b) determining which needs can be validly derived from these abstract categories in concrete contexts. The BHN approach offers theoretical accounts at level (a), with the latter task (b) left undetermined and for specification by some further process.

The BHN approach’s strategy for endorsement hinges on that division. By separating tasks (a) and (b), the BHN approach avoids controversial debates about which needs can be derived from generic human needs. There can, for instance, be strong agreement that education is an important need, even when there is equally strong disagreement about the form that education should take. A space for agreement can often be opened up by shifting to a higher level of generality (Alkire, 2002, p. 160; Sen, 1995, pp. 108–109), and through this method even the most trenchant disagreements can be transcended. If, therefore, human needs are defined generally enough, this opens a path to endorsement for a range of differing,

even contradictory conceptions, with any remaining disputes shifted from the level of human needs (a) to the secondary processes of specification (b). This explains why ‘thin’, abstractly specified human needs are far less controversial than the concretely-specified, ‘thick’ forms of those same needs (Dean, 2010, p. 100; Fraser, 1989, pp. 162–164; Soper, 2007).

This avoidance of controversy via abstraction plays a key role in the standard response to the problem of diversity. By shifting to ever-more abstract levels, the BHN theorist is able to address concerns about partisanship (in D. Miller’s sense) by shifting any controversy regarding BHN themselves (a) to the level of concrete specification (b). This allows the theorist to maintain that their universalist accounts of BHN are compatible with a respect for cultural diversity. Consider, for instance, the critic who argues that some vitally important need has wrongly been excluded from the list of BHN. One way to mollify this critic is to argue that this need follows from the existing list; it is simply a concrete realisation of a need already found there. D. Miller (2012), for instance, pursues this strategy when he considers the need for religious education, arguing that a more abstract need for education-in-general encompasses this particular demand. A similar strategy is pursued by Doyal (1993), in response to Soper’s (1993a) criticism regarding the need for sexual relations. Both these examples deploy a kind of *incorporating* abstraction, where the original list is defended on the basis that excluded items are one concrete specification of the existing list of BHN. Alternatively, the BHN theorist might be confronted by a critic who contends that an item on a given list should not be there because it is not universally shared. One response is a *universalising* abstraction, where the BHN theorist shifts to a higher level of generality, thus making their list – once again – universally applicable. Copp (1992) pursues this strategy in defence of the need for education, arguing that this need might itself be a particular form of an even more abstract need.

In both cases the BHN theorist moves trenchant debates away from (a) – the list of BHN which must be universally endorsed, to (b) – where different (and even contrary) actualisations can coexist. It is notable, furthermore, that there is a certain fluidity between those two levels, a fluidity that the BHN theorist can exploit to avoid controversy by shifting to ever higher levels of abstraction. Thus, for instance, whilst D. Miller thinks the need for education is abstract enough to be plausibly universal, Copp feels it necessary to take a further step up the ladder of abstraction. What follows are lists of BHN that are highly abstract and difficult to dispute, with any remaining disagreements shifted from the list itself to debates about what is implied by that list (Soper, 1993a, 1993b).

So human needs are abstract. I am not, however, making the strong claim that the under-specification of human needs demonstrates in-and-of-itself that they are theoretically incoherent: just because one cannot pin down specifications at the generically human level does not mean there are no human needs (Reader, 2006). Instead, highlighting the abstract nature of human needs constitutes the first step in my argument.

The indeterminacy problem

The problem with abstract specifications is instead that they lead to indeterminate accounts of BHN, undermining the capacity of the BHN approach to guide us in concrete contexts. As a result, when the BHN approach descends from abstract BHN to the level of particular needs in specific contexts it becomes unable to perform the very task it was designed for: to tell us which needs matter.

To establish this, recall that the BHN approach equates normatively important basic needs with universally shared human needs. Consequently, whether or not a particular need (call this PN) is deemed important depends on whether one must satisfy PN in order to meet some human need HN (Braybrooke, 1987, pp. 81–99; Copp, 1992, 1995, pp. 173–174, 1998).

The normative significance of particular needs in concrete contexts thus depends upon their derivation from abstract human needs, via a chain of ‘in-order-to’ statements. Having ascended to a set of needs which are sufficiently abstract to plausibly be considered generically human, those chains of derivation allow the BHN theorist to descend again, and thus make judgements about this or that concrete need. The links in such a chain are, however, open to contestation (Fraser, 1989, pp. 162–166): human needs are, after all, compatible with multiple possible specifications and thus indeterminate (this is what their abstractness implies), and the concrete specification of abstract human needs does not follow from the internal logic of those needs alone (Plant, 2002). And the more abstract the human need, the longer the chain of derivation, and the less clear it is whether or not a particular need can be validly inferred from the abstract category.

That process of derivation is further complicated by the strategy outlined in the previous section. By shifting controversies about needs from the list itself (a) to the ancillary process of specification (b), the BHN approach can avoid many of the disputes about needs. But whilst those disputes have been avoided, they have not been overcome; and when the BHN approach returns to concrete contexts, exactly the same points of difference resurface. Thus the more effective the BHN approach is at deriving widely endorsed accounts of human needs (a), the more contestable and controversial is the process of specification (b). Consequently, many of the deepest disagreements about needs are not disputes about whether this or that is in fact a human need, but which particular needs follow from those abstract categories. This can be observed, for instance, in the debates surrounding: how far the demands of BHN extend, given the reality of aging populations (Braybrooke, 1987, pp. 293–301); the global economic and environmental consequences that follow from the generous specification of BHN in developed countries (Soper, 2007); and the judgement of BHN in welfare practices (Fraser, 1989, pp. 144–187).

These observations have been drawn together by Soper (1993a, 1993b, 2007) to show that the BHN approach is on the horns of a dilemma: its plausibility and persuasive power requires BHN to be specified abstractly; as a result, however, those specifications cannot guide the assessment of needs in practice. Or to put this another way, a list of BHN defined abstractly enough so as to transcend all controversies would be plausible and compelling but pointless, since it could never, by definition, give any guidance in those controversies. And whilst there are dire cases of need which are uncontroversial, if the BHN approach can tell us only about those cases, it offers nothing beyond the obvious. Soper thus describes the BHN approach as ‘vacuously uninformative’ in concrete contexts (Soper, 1993a, p. 113). The BHN approach largely avoids these difficulties via tactical silence, leaving the concrete specification of BHN to other processes. But in defining needs abstractly and leaving their specification open-ended, the BHN approach can be deployed paradoxically to justify just about any specific form of consumption as ‘needed’ (Soper, 1993b, p. 77). The end result, as Alkire puts it, is that we must continually ‘hold our breath’, never knowing what the theory of BHN tells us until it is specified in one way or another (Alkire, 2005, p. 238). To take one example, the BHN for shelter remains – despite its seemingly self-evident importance – durably opaque when it comes to the specific, concrete needs it entails. Does meeting this need require permanent housing? If so, of what type, size and quality? In what location? The indeterminate character of this need results, as Fraser (1989, pp. 162–164) thus argues, in debates about provision which proliferate indefinitely. That proliferation, crucially, is not merely incidental: it follows directly from the BHN approach’s theoretical design.

The abstract nature of BHN results, therefore, in an indeterminacy at the level of specification (b), making it difficult to operationalise the theory of BHN without injecting controversial content. Up until now, however, this particular critique has had limited bite. Critics bemoan the nugatory nature of BHN discourse; BHN theorists respond by saying that

the identification of certain important and universally shared needs is a substantive achievement with tangible normative consequences; in reply, it is pointed out that those achievements are only possible when the theory of BHN smuggles in substantive, partisan content; and so on. This critique has thus had limited success in dislodging the BHN approach from its predominant position in analytical political theory.

My intention, therefore, is to extend and deepen this critique by showing how the assemblage of concepts characteristic of the BHN approach – notably the human needs thesis, the basic needs thesis, the standard response to the problem of diversity, and the distinction between needs and satisfiers – are internally incoherent. Doing so requires, firstly, a further elaboration of that assemblage of concepts.

Specifiers

Addressing the indeterminacy problem requires the BHN theorist to specify which concrete needs can be validly derived from abstract BHN. This leads me to introduce the concept of ‘specifiers’.

The role played by specifiers can be observed in the case of the diabetic’s need for insulin injections. Such a need is not in-itself a human need, since it is not universally shared or grounded exclusively in the properties $[H_1 \dots H_n]$. Instead, the BHN theorist analyses this case as follows: (a) humans have a BHN for appropriate healthcare; (b) the health of the diabetic requires a particular form of provision, namely insulin injections; thus (c) the diabetic’s need for insulin injections is justified by her BHN for appropriate healthcare. This argument has the following structure: there is an abstract human need (HN) and a particular need (PN). One judges the validity of PN by considering whether it can be derived from HN. To do so, one identifies a range of properties that specify how the abstract human need applies in this concrete circumstance. It is these properties I call ‘specifiers’ (S). In this case,

the diabetic's need for insulin injections (PN) is a concrete manifestation of her human need for appropriate healthcare (HN) given her diabetes (S).

Specifiers can thus be defined as any property peculiar to a person's concrete circumstances that has a bearing on the required provision for their BHN. Such properties delineate the boundaries of the set of possible satisfiers in specific circumstances, determining which *particular* satisfiers *can* and *must* – given those circumstances – meet abstract BHN. The importance of their role can be highlighted by considering the distinction between contingent and necessary forms of provision. Any person can meet their BHN for nutrition by choosing either apples or oranges; those with nut allergies, however, or celiac disease, require specific forms of provision. In these cases, it is not merely that BHN can be satisfied in different ways; sometimes they have to be satisfied in ways peculiar to a person's specific circumstances (Copp, 1995, pp. 173–174; Doyal & Gough, 1991, p. 74). It is specifiers that shape these particularities, delineating the specific, concrete needs that follow from BHN in given contexts. They play, therefore, the crucial role of determining what counts as a valid step in the derivation of a particular need PN from a human need HN.

Specifiers have a ubiquitous part to play in the theory of BHN. The extent of their role varies somewhat; the need for shelter requires considerable specification, the need for oxygen little (if any) (Soper, 1993a). Nevertheless, judgements regarding BHN are often fine-grained and sensitive to a range of facts about a particular person, their context and the life they lead. Copp (1992, p. 251) suggests, for instance, that needs must be specified according to physiological factors, including health, sex, and metabolism; contextual factors, like climate; differences between cultures; and differences between individual 'psychologies'. Others have further augmented this list of potential specifiers: perhaps, suggests D. Miller (2012), religion comes into play; S.C. Miller (2012, p. 38) adds economic factors like 'patterns of trade'; Doyal & Gough (1991, p. 74) contend that 'groups subject to racial oppression' will require

‘additional and specific satisfiers’; later, those authors posit that one’s ‘food requirements’ depend on the level of ‘heavy labour’ one performs (Doyal & Gough, 1991, p. 164); Brock (2002, p. 297), meanwhile, adds that indigenous people must be able to meet BHN in ‘their own traditional ways’. What one finds when one excavates the literature in this way is a ragbag of different properties – relating to biology, culture, social structures, climate, individual psychology, economics, tradition, and more besides – which seem to have some bearing on how BHN are specified.

Having encountered such a diversity of potential specifiers, one might wonder what exactly draws all these various properties together, and whether in fact all of them should count as specifiers. These are questions which elicit considerable debate: whilst some specifications are obvious and scarcely contested (the healthcare needs of the diabetic, for instance), the exact role played by various potential specifiers is rarely self-evident, and often a matter of ongoing controversy (indeed, as I have argued, such controversy in specification follows directly from the *design* of the BHN approach).

The BHN has, however, largely avoided these controversies, leaving the specification of BHN primarily to culturally relative processes (Brock, 2002; Gasper, 2004, pp. 148–149; D. Miller, 2012; S. C. Miller, 2012, pp. 38–39). It is notable, however, that the claim that specification is sensitive to cultural variation is itself a theory of specifiers, since it assumes that concrete needs are shaped by one crucial specifier: cultural membership itself. This presupposes a significant role for culture in the chains of derivation between particular needs and BHN. Indeed, the standard response to the problem of diversity makes no sense at all unless one posits culture to be a specifier: unless the BHN theorist holds that culturally-specific forms of needs-meeting are *necessary* forms of provision, the theory of BHN can be used to justify trampling over cultural differences. The standard response requires the BHN

theorist to specify, in effect, that one *particular* relativity *must* determine the specification of BHN in a given set of circumstances.

Against the basic needs thesis

Thus far this article has focused on elaborating the BHN approach, explicating its central concepts, and outlining some standard positions adopted in response to various critics. This leads me to my central claim: that this assemblage of concepts and arguments is internally incoherent. This is because – as I will show – the role ascribed to specifiers in the theory of BHN is incompatible with the basic needs thesis.

To see why, let me begin by outlining the possible groundings of the basic needs thesis. Normatively significant needs are usually considered to display two properties: they are inescapable, since one cannot avoid or forsake an important need; and their frustration leads to serious harm in the form of some objective, normatively significant consequence (Frankfurt, 1998; Thomson, 1987, pp. 1–22; Wiggins, 1998, pp. 6–16). Deploying those dimensions, the BHN theorist establishes the basic needs thesis by showing that human needs are either uniquely or particularly inescapable, or exclusively connected to serious harm. The problem, however, is that once the role played by specifiers is properly recognised, both these arguments fall apart.

The inescapability of universal preconditions

The argument from the inescapability of universal preconditions goes like this: whatever lives we lead or things we value, and whatever context we find ourselves in, there are certain fundamental features of human life. Those features require us to be sustained in various ways, thus determining certain needs. Such needs are, consequently, preconditions to any form of human life. Given this we must fulfil these preconditions first before we move on to contingent aspects of our existence. A human being who is denied water, for instance, will be

unable to live any sort of life at all, and thus the need for water is prior to any needs which follow from other, more particular aspects of the life one happens to lead.

This argument can be traced to Doyal & Gough's (1991) seminal account, in which harm is equated with disablement in the pursuit of one's vision of the good. They go on to identify two basic needs – health and autonomy – which must be satisfied to successfully engage in any such pursuit. Thus whatever a person's particular conception of the good, and whatever cultural form they find themselves in, there are certain universally human preconditions to successful action and interaction, and these constitute basic needs.

A number of contributors have endorsed and expanded this argument (see, for instance, Brock, 1998, 2009; Copp, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2005; S. C. Miller, 2012; Plant, 2002). The central claim being made is that meeting one's BHN is a precondition for whatever else one happens to value, and that this gives BHN particular normative significance. For these theorists, the significance of BHN lies in their inescapability: whilst other needs depend on features of one's circumstances that are contingent or volitional, there is nothing that can be done (or could have been done) to avoid BHN (Brock, 1998). The human needs $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$ are thus uniquely important because those needs are grounded in the essential human properties $[H_1 \dots H_n]$, and are, therefore, impossible to forsake, avoid or otherwise escape, simply because people cannot dodge their humanness.

As a result, what makes BHN important is not their content; the importance of universal preconditions does not depend on some particular good they enable or harm they avoid. Brock (2009, pp. 58–63) thus envisions the pursuit of BHN as a negative ideal; BHN delineate preconditions to successful action, whilst remaining neutral on what 'success' constitutes. Doyal & Gough (1991, pp. 50–51) similarly argue that whilst the preconditions for avoiding harm are universal, harm itself is culturally relative. BHN are thus posited as the universal, inescapable preconditions for avoiding the harmful end state of [whatever].

The argument from universal preconditions is sophisticated and intuitively compelling. I argue, however, that it fails to establish the basic needs thesis. The claim to basicness made here is grounded on the contention that human needs, and *only* human needs, are characterised by some normatively important type and/or degree of inescapability. Against that claim, I argue that specifiers must possess the same relevant inescapability. What is more, specifiers can ground other needs beyond BHN, and such needs will share that inescapability.

Specifiers play, as I have shown, a crucial role in the theory of BHN; they show which particular needs PN can be validly derived from $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$. If, however, specifiers are to play this role, then they must possess the same normatively salient inescapability as BHN. Imagine, for instance, that one wants to establish that when need PN goes unmet, this constitutes a violation of some human need HN. To do so, one would have to show that failing to satisfy PN would contravene the conditions of adequate provision for HN. But it might be asked: why *those* conditions of adequate provision? What if some different (perhaps less generous) specification applied in other circumstances? To avoid this problem, the BHN theorist must contend that a given specification *must* apply in this particular case. That contention, however, presupposes that the relevant specifiers are inescapable.

It follows that whenever the BHN theorist judges some concrete need PN to be normatively important, that judgement requires them to deem inescapable *both* the human needs $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$ *and* the relevant specifiers $[S_1 \dots S_n]$. Claims to inescapability are, after all, only as strong as their weakest link; that my claim to need an apple rests on my need for nutrition matters little if I could eat an orange instead. Even the most inescapable BHN can, after all, be specified in escapable ways: humans need oxygen, but this does not mean that the need of deep-sea divers for oxygen tanks is a BHN (after all, they don't really need to go deep-sea diving). If, by contrast, one were to posit that specifiers lacked, in general, the

required inescapability, then even the most compelling concrete specifications of BHN – the healthcare needs of the diabetic; the dietary restrictions of different faiths; the additional calories required by manual workers – would become similarly escapable. And if, furthermore, the basicness of human needs is grounded in nothing more than their inescapability, this would dissolve the normative importance of those specifications.

The BHN theorist must, therefore, hold that specifiers possess whatever they take to be the normatively salient type and/or degree of inescapability. Specifiers can, furthermore, ground needs independently of human needs, and such needs will share that normatively salient inescapability. This applies, for example, to the contention that BHN are locally specified in culturally relative ways. Recall that human needs are deemed inescapable because they are grounded in features of our existence we cannot dodge (the essential human properties $[H_1 \dots H_n]$). If, however, culturally-specific forms of needs-meeting are indeed worthy of special protection, then this presupposes that cultural membership possesses the same normatively salient inescapability as $[H_1 \dots H_n]$. It follows, therefore, that *all* the needs grounded in that cultural membership would be similarly inescapable: just as the needs $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$ derive their inescapability from $[H_1 \dots H_n]$, cultural membership will ground its own corresponding set of inescapable needs, some of which will have no connection whatsoever to BHN. Alternatively, if the BHN theorist refuses to ascribe cultural membership the normatively salient degree of inescapability, then one can simply ignore culture when determining how to meet BHN. This would, however, undermine the standard response.

This leads to the failure of the argument from universal preconditions. If human needs are especially important because of an *exclusive* degree of inescapability, that precludes other needs being similarly escapable. Specifiers must, however, be attributed the same

normatively salient inescapability, as must – consequently – any needs derived from those specifiers. This undermines the privileged inescapability of BHN.

Substantive harm

Alternatively, it might be claimed that human needs are uniquely connected to particularly serious consequences. The BHN theorist might point to the physical deprivation caused by under-nourishment, or the way a person's capacities are thwarted if denied education. It is thus – so the argument goes – an exclusive connection between human needs and serious harm that justifies their basicness. I refer to this as the argument from substantive harm, since – unlike the argument from universal preconditions – it offers a view on the substantive content of 'harm' and deploys this to determine which needs matter.

That content might take a number of forms. Some theorists connect it to the capacity for agency (Brock, 2009; Copp, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2005; S. C. Miller, 2012); others to a more general notion of a decent human life (D. Miller, 2007, 2012; Siebel & Schramme, 2020); more expansively, to a conception of human flourishing (Reader, 2005); or more minimally, to the bare requirements for human survival (Schuppert, 2013). My critique, however, does not depend on 'harm' having any particular content. Whatever substance is implicated by the notion of 'substantive' harm, the argument from substantive harm rests – I argue – on two claims. Firstly, the connecting claim: that there is a connection between human needs and substantive harm such that whenever a human need is thwarted this results in substantive harm (of whatever particular sort). Secondly, the excluding claim: that there are no needs other than the human needs [HN₁...HN_n] which are similarly connected to substantive harm (of whatever particular sort). Taken together, these two claims justify the basic needs thesis.

Those claims are, however, in tension with BHN approach's commitment to flexibility in the concrete specification of BHN. The BHN theorist is faced with the following

dilemma: how can one hold that there is a unique feature of human needs such that those needs, and only those needs, are connected to harm, whilst simultaneously allowing those needs to vary between contexts? Or, to put this another way, how can the exclusive connection between human needs and harm be maintained even as the specific concrete form of those needs changes? As the remainder of this section will show, the BHN approach lacks a plausible response to these questions.

I substantiate this argument through the following example, based on the BHN for education. The BHN approach allows that the concrete realisation of this need will differ: the requirements of adequacy might diverge; and different individuals have varied educational needs. Imagine now two individuals, A and B, for whom the concrete specification of this need differs. Both individuals thus share a need for education (HN) but live in circumstances characterised by different sets of specifiers (call A's specifiers $[AS_1 \dots AS_n]$ and B's specifiers $[BS_1 \dots BS_n]$). As a result, the concrete needs which follow from the BHN for education diverge, such that A and B have non-overlapping sets of particular needs whilst both satisfying, in their own way, the BHN for education. Perhaps, for instance, A's culture places greater emphasis on aesthetic education, whilst B's focuses on employability.

Given that analysis, suppose there is some particular need of A's (call this APN) that is derivative of HN given specifiers $[AS_1 \dots AS_n]$ but which is not derivative of HN given specifiers $[BS_1 \dots BS_n]$. The question I want to consider is this: is APN connected to substantive harm, or not? There are four possible responses to this question which I now examine. What I show is that these responses end up – in one way or another – undermining the argument from substantive harm.

Two responses are plainly untenable. It might be claimed, firstly, that APN is not connected to harm for either A or B. If that were the case, then A would have a particular need that is derived from a human need and yet unconnected to harm. This would violate the

connecting claim. Alternatively, one might say that APN is connected to harm in both cases. In that instance B has a need that is not derived from her human needs, and yet which is connected to harm. This would violate the excluding claim.

A more sophisticated response contends that this kind of divergence is not possible: if APN is connected to harm for A, then it is for B also. The supposition, in other words, is that A and B share all particular needs in common. Such an argument might be further elaborated by contending that what differentiates A and B is not their different needs, but the different satisfiers they have for the same needs. Thus whilst A and B share common needs, even at the concrete level, these are differently satisfied according to context.

This response effectively sidesteps the problem by dismissing specifiers from the theory of BHN, returning to a bipartite distinction between needs and satisfiers. The problem that follows, however, is that the distinction between contingent and necessary forms of provision is also lost. That distinction – as I showed above – follows from the fact that what is a normatively important particular need in some circumstances will not be in other circumstances. It is implausible, therefore, to collapse all differences between A and B into different modes of satisfaction for the same particular needs; such a move makes it impossible to formulate, for instance, the particular needs of infants, asthmatics, or vegans. And what is more, the argument that BHN are specified locally in ways sensitive to culture (the standard response) is vacuous if it cannot ground morally compelling differences in the particular needs one can claim.

One final response is to hold that APN is connected to harm in the circumstances of A, but not in the circumstances of B. This response is intuitively plausible, and accurately describes a range of cases: if, for example, A required specific provision because of a physical or cognitive impairment, this might yield particular needs that would be irrelevant in B's case. Something similar might be said of any instance where additional provision

afforded to A in light of their need APN would not, if given to B instead, enhance the quality of provision for their BHN.

Not all differences between A and B are, however, like this. This is most obviously the case when the judgement of particular needs depends on specifications of adequacy that vary between cultures. The notion of adequacy plays – as I showed earlier – an important part in the theory of BHN: after all, what the BHN approach offers is not that every possible marginal increase in the quality of provision is guaranteed as a BHN, but some specified standard and kind of provision. What it promises, in other words, is not *maximal* provision, but *adequate* provision. Conditions of adequacy are themselves determined by notions of what is usually required by normally functioning human beings (Copp, 1995, pp. 175–176; Doyal & Gough, 1991, pp. 42–45; Soper, 1993a). Those notions are contestable, dynamic, and sensitive to culture (Alkire, 2002, pp. 158–162; D. Miller, 2001, pp. 210–213, 2007, p. 182; Wiggins, 1998, pp. 11–14). Issues arise, however, when we examine needs that fall in the space between adequate and maximal levels of provision. Those needs – says the BHN theorist – are in excess of what is required, and thus excluded from the necessary provision for BHN. The problem, however, is that those needs are not excluded on the basis that they are unconnected to relevant consequences, but simply because they exceed the level of adequacy. This, however, causes problems for the excluding claim.

This can be seen by returning to my earlier suggestion that in meeting their BHN for education, A might have more provision in some areas (aesthetic education) and B in others (employability). A thus has a need APN (in this case, for some form of additional aesthetic education), which B lacks. According to the argument from substantive harm, APN is a normatively important need in A's case because if it goes unmet, it leads to some particular weighty consequence (which the BHN theorist designates 'harm'). The problem, however, is that this may also be true in B's case: one can imagine a scenario where B faces *exactly the*

same consequences, but simply lives in a culture with a divergent notion of adequate provision. In such a case, the variation in specifications of adequacy leads to different judgements about particular needs not because of differences in the weighty consequences faced by these two needs-bearers, but because of different understandings of what is ‘weighty’. And in such a scenario, B has a need (APN) which is not derived from his BHN, and yet is connected to the kinds of consequences that the BHN theorist considers to constitute substantive harm. This contradicts, however, the excluding claim.

We thus have, on the one hand, the claim that human needs, and only human needs, are connected to harm; and on the other hand, the contention that the specification of those human needs varies between circumstances. This section has demonstrated that these two claims are incompatible, and thus that the BHN’s commitment to the varying specification of BHN undermines the argument from substantive harm.

Towards a political account of needs

Having rejected the BHN approach, this section offers an alternative: the political account of need. Given the space available, my discussion is limited to sketching the outlines of such an account. This includes three elements: 1) a political conception of need; 2) the search for political settlements; and 3) the politics of need.

My first point of departure is to revisit the role of political contestation in the determination of normatively important needs. As I have shown, the BHN approach has a complex relationship with that contestation. At the heart of that approach is an attempt to ground the normative importance of needs in a universal humanness that cuts across differences between people’s concrete circumstances. Such theories hinge, therefore, on the supposition that there is some core content to people’s needs that transcends the political vagaries of different contexts. The BHN theorist thus addresses the question with which I began this article – the question of which needs matter – prior to and in abstraction from any

political processes. Having done so, the BHN theorist then confronts the reality of difference and contestation surrounding needs, a reality accommodated via abstract specifications of BHN, and the needs-specifier-satisfier distinction. And indeed, when it comes to determining the concrete forms taken by abstract BHN, BHN theorists are happy to embrace political contestation, and several have offered fulsome accounts of such politics (Doyal & Gough (1991, pp. 297–312) in particular). This does not, however, change the fact that the BHN approach constitutes a fundamental curtailment of political contestation surrounding needs, since that approach is premised – by design – on identifying normatively important needs pre-politically, thus relegating the political dimension of needs to the secondary process of specification.

Political accounts of need, by contrast, begin with a different supposition: that the normative importance of needs is determined in and through political processes (Dean, 2010; Fraser, 1989; Hamilton, 2003; Soper, 1981). This approach holds that judging the importance of needs requires the theorist to confront basic questions of value: to say which needs matter, one must not only describe, abstractly, the sort of beings we are, but consider the sort of beings we should be or aspire to be (Pitkin, 1981; Soper, 1993a, 1993b). Those questions of value are, furthermore, subject to fundamental, irreducible and ongoing contestation that cannot be tidily resolved in abstraction from, or prior to, political processes. It follows that the attempt to abstract away from the vagaries of politics – characteristic of the BHN approach – takes needs away from the very processes which ascribe them their value. Political accounts thus deny that needs have a pre-political reality which is subsequently specified in this or that way. Needs are, in short, political all-the-way-down.

Political accounts of need cannot, however, simply assert that there is ongoing political contestation about needs, and leave it at that; if needs matter at all, the requirement to take collective decisions and actions regarding them is unavoidable (Hamilton, 2003, pp.

134–170). Describing needs as political implies that actors caught up in ongoing contestation over needs recognise the necessity of some sort of collective decision and action, and that non-coordination would be unacceptable (Galston, 2010). Asserting the normative importance of a particular need is, in other words, a political act not just because such assertions are subject to ongoing contestation, but also because the very act of ascribing needs normative importance – of saying ‘this need matters’ – is itself a call for coordinated action. The politics of need therefore involves – for it to constitute a politics, rather than a chaotic mishmash of different valuations – the pursuit of some kind of settlement.

Understanding needs politically thus requires a balance to be struck between the requirement for collective actions and decisions, and the contention that conflict is endemic to the concept of need, ongoing and open-ended (Galston, 2010, pp. 390–394; Honig, 1993, pp. 200–211). It follows that political accounts of need cannot offer ultimate resolutions: a settlement that targeted such finality would succeed only by – once again – closing the political (Dean, 2010, pp. 159–177; Hamilton, 2003, pp. 1–20; Heller, 1993; Soper, 1981, p. 189). Instead, political accounts of need posit that settlements are the products of political processes that can be messy; that any common ground is unlikely to remain settled; that achieving such common ground against a background of ongoing conflict will inevitably produce winners and losers; and that power can and does come into play.

This might, at first glance, look like an argument for abandoning the political theory of need: political accounts of needs cannot – by definition – directly tell us which needs matter, and they actively assert that there are insurmountable limits to what theory can do. I argue, however, that this does not amount to giving up theorising about need in general, but ruling out a particular type of theory characteristic – as I have argued – of the BHN approach. The question that follows is that if one cannot theorise about needs in that particular manner,

then what sort of theoretical approach does the political account of need offer? And what purpose, furthermore, can such a theory serve?

That approach, I argue, is an immanent form of theorising inspired by agonistic and realist trends in contemporary political theory (Galston, 2010; Honig, 1993; Humphrey et al., 2014). Because such an approach is premised on abandoning the search for transcendental solutions, it does not attempt to assign needs normative importance in abstract, extra-political conditions, instead taking as its starting point the actual political settlements that one finds in contemporary life. This is, in other words, to theorise the politics of need as it stands today, rather than seeing theory as a way to pre-empt, get outside or solve the political. The subject matter of such a theory is, therefore, the concrete content of political conflicts and settlements in particular times and places, which might include various prevailing stances on need, some of which may be dominant, and some of which may be marginalised; the different distributions of harms, burdens, and benefits posited by those stances; the mechanisms by which any settlements have been brought about; the relations of power involved in those mechanisms; and the winners, losers and resistances thus produced. The goal of the theorist is to analyse these formations, revealing their dynamics, and thus identifying next steps; to explore, in other words, what ought to be done in specific contexts, rather than offering abstract solutions. To take one example, Fraser (1989, pp. 144–160) conducts just such an analysis, elucidating the conflicts, exclusions, indifferences, and power relationships posited by contemporary welfare practices.

This approach can be difficult to swallow, since it offers no ultimate solutions, emphasising instead ongoing contestation, and the incomplete nature of settlements (Honig, 1993, p.14). I argue, however, that political accounts of need nevertheless have plenty to offer. They can, firstly, open up political contestation in areas that were previously closed; in doing so, identify spaces for political action; and offer, consequently, an empowering

expansion of political agency (Dean, 2010, pp. 159–177; Honig, 1993, pp. 14–15; Schaap, 2010). Secondly, by exploring the power-relations, exclusions and indifferences implicated in contemporary settlements, such a theory emphasises and amplifies the voice of the marginalised (Fraser, 1989, pp. 161–183; Honig, 1993, p. 13). Finally, by examining contemporary settlements political accounts of need can reveal dynamics that were previously obscured, thus clarifying next steps, and providing conceptual resources for actors involved in political processes (Humphrey et al., 2014).

The political account of need requires considerable elaboration beyond this initial sketch. I argue, however, that such an approach offers an alternative to the dominant and – as I have argued – flawed BHN approach.

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