Fundamental Needs

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The concept of need is promising and alluring because of three factors:

1. Needs are objective because it is a discoverable matter of fact what needs a person has and yet this fact has a bearing on what one ought to do. The concept is both factual and evaluative.
2. Needs are matters of priority; what we need usually overrides other reasons for action.
3. Needs are unimpeachable values. We cannot say truly that a person ought to have different needs and, in this sense, they are fundamental.

In this paper, I shall be concerned primarily with explaining the third of these features. I am interested in fundamental needs, but not necessarily basic or minimal needs, such as those pertaining to survival. Furthermore, I shall not be concerned directly in the strength of claims to need on other people, but rather on oneself. I shall use 'need' in such a way that the term indicates a disposition and does not imply a lack. I need food even when I am eating.

A definition of 'need' requires a distinction between 'need' and 'desire' and, perhaps more problematically and centrally, between fundamental and instrumental needs. An instrumental need is a necessary condition for the obtaining of a goal or for the satisfaction of a desire. To claim that X is needed instrumentally is simply to assert that X is a necessary condition for the obtaining of the contextually relevant goal, whatever that happens to be. It does not imply that the goal or desire in question is in any special way important or even good for the life of the subject.

In contrast, to claim that X is a fundamental need for person A is to assert that X is a non-derivative, non-circumstantially specific and an inescapable necessary condition in order for the person A not to undergo serious harm. There is nothing that the person can do to change this fact. In this manner, one of the main features of the concept of a fundamental need is that it makes a virtue of

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natural necessity by cutting down options and, thereby, simplifying choice. One has no choice except having X or undergoing serious harm.[1]

I will assume that there is a distinction to be drawn between instrumental and fundamental needs, and I shall examine the implications of this for the concept of serious harm. How can we explicate the nature of 'serious harm' in such a way that allows us to maintain this distinction?

1. Inescapability

Let us examine the ways in which the concept of need exploits and is shaped by natural necessity, or the different respects in which fundamental needs are inescapable. This feature of 'need' is important because one way of challenging a claim to X, which is different from showing that it is overridden as a reason, is to undermine it. One undermines a claim to X by revealing that it is dependent on conditions that ought not to obtain. For instance, a claim to X that is derivative on desires can be undermined by showing that the person would better off not having, or ought not have, the desires in question.

In contrast, in the case of inescapable needs, such an undermining is by definition impossible. If a need is inescapable then it is redundant to ask whether we ought to have it. 'Ought' implies 'can' and, therefore, 'cannot' implies 'not ought.' There can be no question of whether one ought or ought not to have the inescapable needs one has. Consequently, we are justified in treating inescapable needs as given in practical reasoning in the sense that such 'need'-claims cannot be undermined by showing that they depend on conditions that ought not to obtain. We have to accept the fact that we have the fundamental needs that we do have. In this manner, such needs are different from addictions, which one might be better off not having; and, in this sense, I cannot reduce my needs.

Fundamental needs are inescapable in two related ways.

[1] D.Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), and G.Thomson, *Needs*, (London: Routledge, 1987), Chapter 1.

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1. A fundamental need for X is itself inescapable in the sense that the fact that X is causally necessary for not suffering serious harm cannot be altered. The causal link is inescapable.
2. The harm itself must be inescapable. The fundamental sense of 'need' determines that the antecedent of a 'need'–statement must be A's life or the quality of his or her life, or more specifically, the avoidance of an especially serious type of harm. The concept of need, in this rich sense, also determines that what counts as relevant harm to A must be inescapable. One cannot escape a fundamental need by altering what substantially counts as harm. In this way, the concept of harm as employed by 'fundamental need' requires a certain lack of plasticity.

I would like to end this section with two observations regarding the inescapability of fundamental needs.

First, the term 'need' in its fundamental use has a connotation of practical necessity. What one needs, one cannot forgo. Objects of fundamental need are practically necessary in part because needs are naturally necessary. In using the term 'need,' we exploit the notion of natural necessity so as to force our hand practically.

Second, the notion of inescapability can help explain why or in what sense fundamental needs may form part of the essential nature of a person. 'Need' contains the idea that A needs X to be A or to function as A, and this implies that the end-state for which X is needed by A is defined by A's essential nature. In order to avoid some of the metaphysical complications that arise from such a claim, I suggest that we should understand it in terms of three points, namely that:

a) A's need is non–derivative; if A needs X fundamentally then A needs X not in virtue of needing something else.
b) A's need is non–circumstantial; it does not depend on specific circumstances but rather is a need that the person carries from one situation to another.
c) A's need is inescapable.

The third of these implications has the most obvious significance for practical reasoning.

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2. Harm

A person is harmed when he or she is deprived of engaging in non-instrumentally valuable experiences and activities, as well of the possibility of appreciating them. By 'experiences,' I mean something we undergo or live through. An important task in explicating 'harm' is to explain what constitutes the value of these activities and experiences.

A desire theory of harm would explain such values in terms of the activities being desired by the subject. However, if there is a distinction between fundamental and instrumental needs, then harm cannot be constituted by the non-satisfaction of desires or preferences. If it were so constituted, then all so-called fundamental needs would be a species of instrumental needs. The distinction requires that harm should not be explicated in terms of desire-satisfaction.

The desire account tries to define the value of activities in terms of their being the objects of desire or of informed preferences.[2] In so doing, it urges us to accept our desires at face value, as a given. To understand well-being and harm, one does not have to look beyond them and ask why we desire what we do. In this way, it urges an uncritical attitude to our wants and preferences. In opposition to this, I would suggest that desires act as a guide to the relevant kind of non-instrumental value and that, as a guide, they can mislead us. If they are merely guides then desires do not constitute the relevant kind of non-instrumental values. This suggestion indicates the need for a critical attitude towards one's desires. Such an attitude does not imply mistrust, but it does necessitate trying to identify the interests that motivate our desires, as we shall see.

It is time to sketch briefly the beginnings of an alternative theory. Activities and experiences are worthwhile because they have desirability-characteristics. When we explain what makes an activity worthwhile, we usually cite general desirability features of the activity. For example, an activity is exciting, soothing, engaging, and so on. Such characterizations show what makes the activity valuable.

What is the relation between these characteristics and our desires? There are two extreme positions. On the one hand, there is the desire theory, which we have already rejected, which claims that desirability features are entirely derivative on our wants. On the

[2] J.Griffin, *Well-Being*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

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other hand, some thinkers advocate that desirability characterizations do not depend at all on our wants, but rather explain them. We want things that we perceive to have such characterizations.[3]

I shall advocate a view that combines these two positions. It rejects the idea that desirability is entirely independent of desire on the grounds that what is desirable for one person might not be for another. (This is not the claim that what a person thinks is desirable for himself might be different from what another thinks is desirable for herself; it is the assertion that what actually is desirable for one person might not be for another). In other words, some of the psychological differences between people will amount to the fact that, for one person, X is desirable and for others not. On the other hand, the position we are advocating rejects the identification of the desirability of X for A with A desiring X. Part of the problem is that object-individuated desire is too specific. Although these characterizations depend on general features of our desires, they do not depend on specific conscious wants.

Our motivational make-up cannot be entirely irrelevant to our well-being. The fact that we are broadly socially motivated creatures is surely relevant to what constitutes a good life and harm, even if that cannot be spelled out directly and specifically in terms of what a person wants (or would want under certain conditions).

Freud realized that even our deepest desires have a motivational source behind them, of which we are not usually aware.[4] Unfortunately, he tended to think of this as yet another desire, albeit unconscious. Freud's insight does not have to be couched in Freudian terms of repressed unconscious sexual desires. Freed from the particularities of the Freudian message, the important insight is that desires for very different things can have a similar motivational source. Wants are structured by this source.

This insight is important, and should be developed, because it allows us to recognize that our motivational nature as individuals, as members of a culture and of a species, is relevant in determining what counts as well-being and harm. It permits us to recognize this, without trapping us in the idea that obtaining what one wants is all there is to value. It allows us to distinguish between the feeling 'I

[3] See M.Platts, *Ways of Meaning*, (London: Routledge, 1979) and 'Morality and the End of Desire,' *Reference, Truth and Reality*, (ed.) Platts, M., (London: Routledge, 1980).

[4] S.Freud, 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes,' *Standard Edition of the Psychological Works of S.Freud*, Vol. 14, 111, (International University Press, 1964).

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have to get what I want' and the idea that one's life has to fit one's nature as a person. It requires us to separate the specific thing that a desire is directed towards (the object of desire) and the general source or motivational nature of the desire. This permits a mature attitude towards wanting than that which exclusively focuses on getting exactly what one desires.

To develop this idea, we require a theory of the interpretation of desire, which allows us to distinguish interests and desires in a way that is relevant to well-being. First, in our everyday life, we need to understand our motivational natures in a way that transcends knowing our existing preferences identified in terms of their specific objects. We need such comprehension in order to be able to predict what people would want and like in hypothetical situations, and to anticipate how our desires alter in changing circumstances. For example, when one cannot obtain exactly what one wants, one's desire switches to something relevantly similar. The standard desire or preference account cannot explain adequately what counts as 'relevantly similar' insofar as it simply lists preferences and thereby ignores their structure or the patterns of our desires.

Furthermore, the desire theory implies that value must be defined in terms of getting exactly what one wants. It disallows the idea that it can be defined more broadly using the concept of something relevantly similar to an existing desire. For these reasons, to understand harm, we require an account of desire that does not take wants at their face value and which attempts to interpret them. Implicitly, this critical attitude implies that there is more to the concept of 'better' than simply the satisfaction of preference.

Second, our capacity to live well and fully is not restricted to satisfying our existing desires, which are limited by our beliefs and character traits. We can reach beyond them to something better. In other words, new situations can bring new desires or preferences that the individual might never have imagined and which can constitute an improvement over the actual. Once again, this implies that there is more to the concept of 'better' than simply the satisfaction of preferences.

Third, in effect, the standard economic theory of utility ignores the intentionality of desire. Desires are intentional, and this means that an object of desire is always wanted under a certain description and not under others, and that we are not necessarily aware of every aspect of our desire. Because of this intentionality, the process of

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understanding desire should be thought of hermeneutically. It is a question of interpreting or reading desire and not just identifying the object that is wanted.

3. The Hermeneutics of Desire

In our everyday practice, we interpret people's desires without necessarily taking at face value their word concerning how this should be done. We read between the lines of verbalized conscious desires to find broader patterns but without impugning unconscious drives to the individual. Hermeneutics constitutes an approach to understanding desire that is significantly different from both the economic model and psychoanalytic theory, which postulates unconscious drives. In our everyday interpretations of people's wants, we usually employ a method that is hermeneutical. It is holistic and self-critical.

At the same time, this interpretation often involves characterizing desires in terms of their motivating interests. Here I am employing the word 'interest' in a special and unusual way, which needs explanation. Desires can be instrumental or non-instrumental; instrumental desires are directed to things wanted as means to something else. Things wanted non-instrumentally are desired for their own sake. The term 'interest' refers to the motivational sources or nature of non-instrumental desires. In this sense, interests indicate from a psychological viewpoint the desirable aspects of what we desire. Interests are not *things* separate from our normal desires, but rather they are facets of our wants. An alternative term might be 'core motivations.' They constitute a way of characterizing desire that is distinct from specifying the object of desire. They indicate *why* we want and not *what* we want.

The notion of interest allows us to see what apparently disparate desires have in common. For example, the interest people have in belonging may express itself in many different ways. It may be manifest as a general desire for certain kinds of friendship or to live in a community. Alternatively, it may express itself as a desire to conform or to outshine others in competition. It is also important factor in the way people decorate their houses and tend their gardens. In each case, these general wants will generate more specific desires in particular circumstances. These very different object-individuated desires can have a unifying aspect, namely

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shared motivating interests. In this way, the notion of an interest enables us to understand how wants for disparate things are nevertheless similar.

Additionally, 'interest' is often necessary to interpret how desires change. For example, it allows us to comprehend how a desire for material success might be replaced later by a desire to conform. As a person acquires new beliefs and his or her character traits change, his or her desires alter. However, such change need not amount to transformation insofar as the motivating sources of the desires remain constant. If our motivational nature is structured like a web, the outer part consists in specific desires individuated by their objects, which change with belief. In contrast, the central core remains relatively stable and permanent, constituted by general motivating interests, which are belief-independent. Changes in the central core constitute a transformation in character and nature. As the outer ring of the web alters, sense and order can be made of this flux by concentrating upon the relatively stable motivating interests. In summary, without the notion of an interest, one cannot see the patterns in the ways that desires change, nor structure in the varieties of our wants. Interests explain desires by structuring them into choice–independent groupings.

I need to clarify why interests are not simply general desires. In fact, the two are significantly different. First, object-individuated desires are often belief-dependent, and interests are not. For instance, a person's desire to buy a specific painting depends on the individual's judgments about its desirability and cost. On the other hand, if a person has aesthetic interests then he or she has aesthetically motivated desires, and this is not dependent on beliefs regarding the desirability or cost of beautiful things. Indeed, the person may not even realize that he or she has aesthetic interests. Second, desires act as potential causes of actions in conjunction with suitable beliefs. For example, I want to eat ice cream and believe that the ice cream is in the refrigerator; jointly, these explain my action of walking towards the fridge. They constitute my reason for action. In contrast, interests act as potential explanations of desires without the need of a relevant belief. Such explanations indicate the reason for a desire by revealing its motivational nature, but they do not give the person's own reasons. The individual may not acknowledge these reasons, and so such acknowledgment cannot be essential to their existence, nor to the fashion in which they explain the desires in question. In summary, a description that characterizes a person's interests indicates the motivational nature

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of the individual's desires; they inform us of the non-instrumental reasons *why* a person desires, but without necessarily specifying *what* he or she desires.[5]

Finally, I should explain why this distinction is important. First, we have seen why the desire-based theory of value is unsatisfactory. We have now offered the preliminaries of an alternative account based on interests, which avoids the problems of the desire theory. In particular, it allows the idea that value does not have to be tied to the specific things wanted, and yet does depend on the patterns of our motivations. One of the interesting points apparently in favor of the misguided attempt to explain value in terms of desire is that it permits individual variations in what counts as value. However, an interest-based account has the same advantage but without the problematic aspects of the desire theory.

Second, interests provide a basis for the critical evaluation of desires. For instance, social forces can lead to a situation where the object of a person's desire clashes with the interests that motivate the want. For example, many people aspire for status and this aspiration generates many more specific wants, which can demand tremendous effort. However, suppose that the desire for status is largely an expression of an interest in belonging. If this is true, then it is worrying because trying to attain status is a muddled way to belong. Indeed, the search for status, which will make a person ambitious, may actually thwart the possibilities to belong, for example, by making a person work too hard, thereby ignoring his or her friends and family. In which case, what the person actually desires (status) is incongruent with the interest that motivates the want (belonging). The satisfaction of the desire and the effort that this entails frustrate the interest that motivates the want.

Third, we interpret desires in part because often we cannot obtain exactly what we want. This interpretation consists in characterizing the interests that motivate the desires, and it shows what is valuable about the desire without indicating its specific object. For example, when your child wants a popsicle and the shop is shut, you might cool a banana on a stick. Now, imagine that there is no banana and no fridge. What should you do? It depends on the nature of your child's desire. Is she thirsty? Does she have a bad taste in her mouth? Does she just want a treat? Is she hot? Or, is it more than she wants loving attention? If it is the latter, then a walk

[5] Thomson, op cit., Chapter IV.

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in the park might be better than a popsicle. This ability to predict what people will want in new circumstances is crucial to the understanding of well-being.

In conclusion, let us summarize these points.

1) First, non–instrumental desires have a motivational source, which we may call an interest and which is not another more general desire. Our belief-dependent desires and preferences are expressions of such interests. Because such interests are not based on choices and beliefs, they constitute a feature of desire distinct from what is wanted. However, although interests are different from object-individuated desires, they are not some *entity* completely distinct or separate. They are facets of our wants.

2) Second, these interests define the temporal patterns and non-temporal structures of our desires. They permit us to see that desires for very disparate things may have common motivational sources. In this way, they make interpretation of desire possible.

3) Third, what is important in desire satisfaction is not the obtaining exactly of what one wants, but rather that the interests behind the desire are satisfied. If I need more beauty in my life, then it is not so important that I obtain exactly the specific beautiful things that I want, but rather that there is more beauty of a certain kind in my life. Indeed, I may not be aware that my desires are aesthetically motivated.

4) The fourth point is that the objects of desire do not necessarily express well the interest behind the desire. For example, I may have an interest in belonging, and this may express itself as a range of desires pertaining to status, which drive me to work so hard that I end up feeling alienated. In this sense, interests provide a way to evaluate desires.

The truth in the desire model is that our motivational patterns can define what has non-instrumental value for us. In this sense, our desires are relevant in defining what constitutes harm, without it being the case that harm consists in the satisfaction of desire or informed preferences. Desires bid us to do, but what they urge is not automatically good for us. The promptings of desires can be fickle voices and, when they are clear, they are sometimes a stubborn and persistent nagging that leads us away from what is good. Yet, at the same time, desires have motivational sources that reveal our deeper interests, which do define, in part, what has non-instrumental value for us. Being deprived of activities and experiences that answer such interests is part of what counts as harm.

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4. Conclusion: Back to Needs

Let us now return to the concept of need and the two aspects with which we started. First, if we are to maintain a distinction between instrumental and fundamental needs, this requires that the antecedent of a fundamental 'need' claim (i.e. not undergoing serious harm) should not be explicated in terms of desire-satisfaction. Second, the concept of a fundamental need is characterized in part by the way it employs the notion of natural necessity and, more specifically, inescapability to limit choices. For a fundamental need to be inescapable, the nature of the harm caused by the lack of the object of need must itself be inescapable.

The interest/desire distinction allows us to maintain with some plausibility the claim that certain features of harm are inescapable. Desires individuated and identified by their objects usually are alterable; perhaps none of our desires are inescapable. But, although we can exercise control over what we desire, we can exercise much less over the motivational nature and the structure of our desires. Therefore, the distinction between interests and desires is required for the claim that some primary values are relatively inescapable because they are subject to the constraints of natural necessity. If certain general types of activity are inescapably valuable, then this is because the interests that define them are themselves inescapable.

The concept of an interest must form an integral part of the concept of a fundamental need because our interests determine in general terms what types of activities and experiences we are deprived of when we are harmed. We require the notion of an interest to explain what harm is, and we require the notion of harm to explain what a fundamental need is. The concept of an interest demonstrates in what sense our well-being consists of living in accordance with our nature, rather than consisting of getting what we desire. The significance of inescapable interests is that these define in what way we must treat this nature as given. They provide a certain starting–point for deliberation and a certain fixedness in what is to count as good or bad for a person.

Prudence can require us to change ourselves, and thereby what has primary value for us. The significance of inescapable interests is that they set limits to how radically and deeply we can change ourselves, and that they determine ends that must be taken as given in prudential deliberation. It is in relation to this given multiplicity of goods that we can assess whether we ought to change the more optional sides of our nature. In this way, it is possible to include the

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more optional and plastic aspects of our nature, as well as the inescapable, in our conception of the range of goods relevant to well–being and harm. In other words, our conception of primary goods does not have to be restricted to our inescapable interests. It can include more optional interests, so long as prudence does not require us to change these. Thus, starting from inescapable interests, we can build a more full–bodied picture of the types of primary goods relevant to harm and well–being.

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