

Basic Needs: Normative Perspectives

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In recent years the debate on basic needs and their place in normative theories of ethics and politics has been rekindled. This controversial concept has finally been openly adopted by authors who take different approaches to discussing issues of social justice. There are good reasons for this revival of the debate on needs.

As a currency of justice, needs have several advantages or so argue Lukas Meyer and Thomas Pözlzer in their contribution to this volume. First, in contrast to preferences, desires, and some other currencies, basic needs are objective: the fact of a person having a basic need for things like nourishment, housing, social participation, etc., is independent of their or anybody else's mental attitudes towards those things. A second important reason for preferring basic needs as the currency of justice is that they are also universal, although their definition might be culturally influenced. Thirdly, basic needs are intrinsically morally demanding: that P has a basic need for O entails that P ought to be able to have, be, or realize O. Finally, basic needs also have an important advantage when it comes to defending sufficiency as a principle of distributive justice. One of the main objections against sufficientarianism is that it is unable to provide a plausible substantive specification of its threshold of sufficiency. The concept of basic needs, in contrast, essentially entails the idea of a qualitative difference. Being able to fulfill such needs takes precedence over being able to fulfill non-basic needs and desires. Moreover, it distinguishes a life that has a certain minimum quality from a life that lacks this quality.

However, not all authors contributing to this special issue rely on this understanding of needs as a currency and its relation to sufficiency as a principle of distributive justice. The texts collected here concern different aspects of the ongoing debate of the significance of (basic) needs and the idea of sufficiency or “having enough” for understanding of what people owe others and how policies and institutions can and should be assessed. Delamar Volpato Dutra's contribution reconstructs how Immanuel Kant can be understood to have already contributed to this debate among contemporary social justice theorists. The first two contributions to this special issue are Italian translations of chapters that appeared first in English.

The aim of Meyer's and Pözlzer's paper is to offer a programmatic view of a theory of intergenerational justice that the authors call needs-based sufficientarianism. According to it, present generations ought to enable future generations to meet their

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basic needs – for example, their needs for drinkable water, food, and healthcare. The authors introduce, first, what they consider to be the most plausible variant of needs-based sufficientarianism. Then, they argue that this variant is superior to alternative interpretations of both the currency and the distributive principle of intergenerational justice. In doing so, they defend basic needs as the currency of intergenerational justice and sufficiency as its principle, and they argue that this understanding of the currency and this understanding of the principle of intergenerational justice are mutually supportive.

Lawrence Hamilton's paper focuses on the political dimension of needs and discusses the relationship between the language of needs and the language of representation. The author criticizes that due to the legacy of utilitarianism, human choice, judgment, and well-being are reduced to the self-interested satisfaction of desires. This, he argues, has entered into utilitarian-informed models and institutions for policymaking that artificially reduce human motivation to the dimension of utility maximization. The author argues for the idea of human needs. Properly understood, the author argues, it offers a normatively and historically rich tool for understanding most human goods and motivations for action, as well as a viable mechanism for organizing policy and to think about representation and its associated institutional forms. Hamilton argues that one of its advantages is that in understanding and evaluating the institutions and practices that generate needs, the idea allows us to question how those preferences or wants came to be. The idea of human needs also, he argues, allows us to question the institutions and practices through which needs are represented and judged. The author identifies three broad categories of needs (vital, agency, and social needs) and argues that their definition and satisfaction are political issues that demand deep changes both in our understanding of democracy and in democratic institutions. The other papers of the issue are original contributions. Daniel Petz's paper can be seen as dialoguing with the paper by Meyer and Pözlner. It claims that sufficientarian theories of intergenerational justice need to fulfill five threshold criteria: defensibility, determinacy, intergenerational validity, demandingness for currently living persons, and justice for future persons. Based on these criteria it compares two basic needs conceptions (Doyal and Gough, Meyer and Pözlner) and one capability conception (his own) on how they justify attaining these criteria. The author argues that capability theories can benefit from using the normative strength of basic needs claims, while basic needs theories benefit from endorsing some version of capability theory. This leaves the path open to the possible development of a form of hybrid theory.

Frank Nullmeier's paper argues for an understanding of sufficiency as between a low threshold of fulfilling one's basic needs and being excessively rich. In doing so the author critically engages with both proponents of sufficientarianism and limitarianism. The author makes three main points. First, he claims that reflections on economic distribution should refer to the entire distribution order, instead of focusing solely on the weakest positions or of referring to the extreme positions (poverty and wealth). What is needed, however, is an assessment of the entire distribution spectrum. Such an assessment, the author argues, allows for determining a level of 'enough' in the middle range of the distribution structure. Second, the paper claims that the real challenge of normative theory on distribution issues consists in the conception and

precise specification of this ‘enough’. Third, it points to strategies to create procedures for determining a threshold for excessive wealth and for what is enough, the ‘sufficient’.

Alessandro Pinzani’s paper discusses the question of the disappearance of the concept of needs from the debate on social justice and offers a definition of this concept. In doing so, the author first differentiates needs from preferences, desires, and drives; and he second develops a positive definition of their structure and their relation to human functioning while, at the same time, stressing their social and political character. In particular, and among other things, the author distinguishes between basic needs and derived needs and argues that one can classify needs without establishing a hierarchy between material and non-material needs. Furthermore, the author argues that when evaluating policies in situations of resource scarcity, we should consider the impact of not meeting all the different types of needs.

Nicole Hassoun’s paper starts with the question: What do we owe to others as a matter of basic justice? What are we entitled to claim for ourselves? The author argues that most answers are either too demanding or not demanding enough (or both at the same time). For this reason, the author defends a minimally good life view according to which everyone is entitled to the protection of their ability to live a minimally good life and must give up anything not necessary to live such a life to those who require assistance in doing so. She argues for a unified standard for what people owe others and what they can legitimately demand as a matter of basic justice. Moreover, she argues that this understanding makes it possible to define (the limits of) what people owe others in non-ideal circumstances of non-compliance and scarcity. Finally, Delamar Volpato Dutra’s article focuses on a classical author, Immanuel Kant. The author analyzes Kant’s position concerning the sustenance of the poor and, particularly, the state’s duties towards the poor while at the same time excluding the poor from active citizenship. This leads Dutra to showcase Kant’s thinking on property, inequality and the fulfillment of the most elementary basic needs of the poor as a condition to the possibility of them having a juridical status, but not as a condition of citizenship. This strategy clarifies how poverty can be interpreted according to the Kantian terms of freedom and equality, but not independence.

We hope that this issue will contribute to putting the concept of needs at the center of the debate on social justice.