

Who Needs Needs? Defining a Contested Concept¹

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Abstract

Il presente articolo discute la sparizione del concetto di bisogno dal dibattito sulla giustizia sociale (1) e offre una definizione di questo concetto (2 e 3). Nel far ciò, stabilisce, in primo luogo, differenze tra il concetto di bisogno e quelli di preferenza, desiderio e impulso e, in secondo luogo, sviluppa una definizione positiva della struttura dei bisogni e della loro relazione con il funzionamento del sistema “essere umano”, sottolineando, al tempo stesso, il loro carattere sociale e politico.

Parole chiave: bisogni, preferenze, desideri, impulsi, giustizia sociale.

In this paper, I shall discuss the question of the disappearance of the concept of needs from the debate on social justice (1) and I shall offer a definition of this concept (2 and 3). In doing so, I will first differentiate needs from preferences, desires, and drives; and I will second develop a positive definition of their structure and of their relation to human functioning while, at the same time, stressing their social and political character.

Keywords: needs, preferences, desires, drives, social justice.

1 The disappearance of needs

If human life is basically needy it is not surprising that ethical theories which conflate need with desire (like utilitarianism) or overlook it entirely (like many rights-based conceptions of justice) have difficulty in determining obligations towards those whose lives are warped by needs

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Humans are needy beings. However, it seems that contemporary political philosophy is not willing to begin very much with this fact. Virtually every major theory of social justice carefully avoids using the concept of “need” (when it does not openly criticize it) and concentrates rather on concepts like “primary goods”, “capabilities”, “resources”, “social equality” and so on.¹² Needs seem to have disappeared from the map of political theories, with few exceptions¹³. In my opinion, there are three reasons for this fact and I shall try to object to all of them to restate the centrality of the concept of needs for a theory of social justice.

a) The “is-ought” fallacy argument

The first reason is the risk of falling into an “is-ought” fallacy: from the fact that humans have needs, we may not derive any normative proposition concerning their satisfaction. We may not, for instance, justify something like human rights to the satisfaction of basic needs without passing through other concepts that have nothing to do directly with the needs themselves – concepts such as human dignity, values, or justice in the sense of “what we owe to each other”¹⁴ and so on. This is a relevant objection. My response will pursue a double strategy.

The first step is to specify in which sense needs should be the object of a theory of social justice. By claiming this, one does not have to claim that a just society is a society that guarantees the satisfaction of every basic need and that, conversely, a society that does not grant this satisfaction is unjust. There is a correlation between justice and the satisfaction of needs, but it is not a direct one: a society may satisfy the basic needs of its members and still be deeply unjust, for instance, when it is organized according to a rigid hierarchy or a caste system. Furthermore, justice is a matter of degree and cannot be fully attained: no society can therefore be defined as unjust simply because it does not satisfy *all the possible needs* of its members. Finally, a claim concerning the correlation between justice and needs satisfaction does not necessarily have normative character (like the claim: “Since humans have needs, a just society ought to satisfy them”), but can have merely descriptive character (like the claim: “Humans have needs, whose satisfaction *can* be used as a criterion for measuring the justice of society”).¹⁵ No “is-ought” fallacy has therefore been committed so far by claiming that human needs can be the object of social justice.

The second step consists in pointing out that society exists precisely to satisfy human needs. Its main goal is not to grant rights, realize values, or distribute goods or resources; these are all means to pursue the most fundamental goal of satisfying the needs of its members. The fact that most theories focus on the means rather than on the goal is quite puzzling, but it may find an explanation in the dominant idea that society should enable its members to freely pursue their individually defined goals. In other words, according to this vision individuals elaborate life plans and society

should help them realize such plans. This leaves the question unanswered, on which basis do individuals develop their life plans? According to the theory sketched here, they do this based on needs, not on mere wishes, desires, values, and so on. While most current theories recognize the importance of some basic needs such as nourishment, health, etc., they tend to neglect or even openly deny that needs play a role in the formulation of more general life plans. I shall try to show that this attitude is wrong and that needs play a central role in this respect. Since needs represent the groundwork, on which individuals formulate their life goals and create the means to realize those goals (means such as individual rights, social goods, etc.), any theory of social justice and, more generally, any normative theory of society refers at least indirectly to them. Therefore, needs always enter such theories; and if a need-centered theory of social justice should really commit an “is-ought” fallacy, then *every* other normative theory of society or of social justice would do the same.

Furthermore (and as an accessorial argument), justifying a principle of social justice by recurring to a fact is less problematic than one could think. As G. A. Cohen has convincingly claimed, principles appealing to facts are actually based on other principles that are not related to facts.¹⁴ So, if someone claims that “society should guarantee to people a free system of health care” (principle P) because “health is a basic need for human beings” (fact F), what is relevant for justifying P is actually the further principle P1 that “society should help the satisfaction of basic needs”, which is not fact-related or at least not related to F. Even if someone would conclude that health is not a basic need (that F is not true), or that it does not require the implantation of a free system of health (that P is not valid), one could still maintain that P1 is a valid principle. Of course, P1 could on its part be grounded on some other fact F1, like the one that individuals live in society in order to better satisfy their needs (a fact the present theory will assume); but – again – P1 would be considered valid only by recurring to a further principle P2 that is not fact-related, like for instance: “the basic needs of every individual should be satisfied either by society or by some other actor”. One can go further back in the search for such principles, but one shall always reach a principle that is not based on a fact or not justified by its proponents through appeal to a fact. In this sense, it shall be an unproved and non-provable principle – a postulate. Every practical theory is grounded on such a postulate. Some might claim, its ultimate principle is just self-evidently true; some might consider it a merely procedural principle with no other content but a rule according to which we should establish any further principle (like e.g. Habermas’ Discourse Principle or Rawls’ principle according to which we have to establish a fair procedure to ground the principles of justice). The present theory assumes that every individual should be put in the best possible conditions to reach well-being as defined in section 4 and to satisfy their needs as defined in section 3. There is no ultimate justification for this, precisely as there is no ultimate justification for the principle according to which we should not impose pain on individuals (if not to avoid a greater pain, like in the case of a life-saving surgery), or for the principle according to which a norm is

(normatively, not just empirically) legitimate only when it receives the consent of the individuals affected by its application – just to mention two widely adopted principles.

b) Do needs exist at all?

The second reason for the resistance to the use of the concept of need on the part of contemporary theories of social justice has to do with the epistemic status of this concept. The very existence of something like human needs is contested, since cultural relativists claim that there are no such things as universal needs shared by all human beings, but only culturally defined needs. A Japanese scholar, who was in charge of the Human and Social Development Program of the United Nations University, observed once that there is no word for “need” in Japanese and that ‘within the Japanese society and culture there is no concept of needs in the ‘objective’ sense.’¹⁷ How would he then describe the situation of a Japanese homeless woman starving or freezing in the snow? Does she just *desire* food and shelter? Does she just *want* them? Does she *wish* them? Of course, she does. But we would rather say that the reason why she desires, wants, and wishes food and shelter is that she *needs* them. Otherwise, we were claiming that her longing for food and shelter is just an expression of a subjective whim, to which no real necessity corresponds. She is begging for food and shelter, but she could also live without them. On the other side, if we claim that she has needs, even if there is no word in her culture to express this concept, and even if she is not aware of having needs at all, are we taking a paternalistic attitude? How can we, external observers, know it better than she?

To this accusation of paternalism, one could reply with two answers. The first one concerns the practical consequences of the allegedly paternalistic attitude and consists in saying that stating a person’s needs is not tantamount to forcing the person to recognize them or to help her to satisfy them if she does not want to be helped. One could simply state that the woman in our example *does* need food and shelter even if she refuses them, without taking any action aimed at satisfying these (objectively stated, but subjectively not perceived) needs. The second answer is more radical and consists in pointing out that as a matter of fact sometimes people do not know what they *really* need or, if they do, they do not act consequently: they may lack information on their situation, like in the case of a diabetic person who doesn’t yet know about her state and who thinks that she needs sugar, while she actually needs insulin; or they may lack strength of will, as an addict who knows that he needs quitting drugs, smoke, or alcohol, but who is nevertheless unable to do that; or they may have identified the wrong solution to their problems, as a person who knows that she is severely ill, but prefers to drink holy water instead of seeking a doctor. Experience often shows that people may have needs without being aware of them. Therefore, one can claim that needs do not depend for their definition on the subjective perception of individuals. It is possible to say what a person objectively

needs independently from what that person subjectively thinks about her necessities – and there is nothing paternalistic in this, as we shall see in section 2.

c) Needs and necessities

A final point before trying to define needs. They should not be misunderstood as necessities. Food, proper shelter, proper clothing, participation in social life, social and moral recognition, etc. are things we need to have in order to survive or to live a good life. As the means to satisfy these necessities abound and are easy to access, no social justice issue arises. The bare necessities of life can be easily satisfied in a context of an abundance of resources; under such circumstances, their satisfaction is not problematic, even when they tend to reappear more or less regularly (like the necessity of eating). However, under a situation of scarcity of resources or under a social arrangement, in which resources are not evenly distributed, some individuals might advance normative demands concerning their production and distribution. In this case, necessities become needs in the sense I would like to use the term, that is, an object of contestation and political dispute.^[8] However, since this paper aims to offer a definition of the concept of needs and not a full-fledged theory of needs, in the following I will use the term in its everyday usage as synonymous with necessities.

2 Needs, preferences, drives

The term “need” is often seen as synonymous with “preference”, “desire”, “wish” or even “drive”. Even if the idea of universal preferences or desires may seem quite improbable, one could still defend that claiming that all people need food or shelter is tantamount to affirming that all people prefer (or desire, or wish, or are driven) to get food and shelter rather than not. We should therefore consider in which sense needs cannot be defined as preferences, desires, wishes, or drives.

a) Needs as preferences or desires

The idea that a need is in fact a subjective preference is typical of an (orthodox) economic perspective. From this point of view, individuals are “the only authorities on the correctness of their interest, or more narrowly, their wants”^[9]. This latter point is extremely controversial, as we already saw. As Doyal and Gough put it: “The idea that individuals are the sole authority in judging the correctness of their wants is severely compromised once we admit limits to people’s knowledge and rationality”^[10]. Sen has argued convincingly that it is better to define an objective criterion of well-being than to recur to the notion of desire, since the latter strategy presents two difficulties. First, we desire something because it is valuable for us; therefore, we would still have to answer the question concerning the reason why this something is valuable at all.^[11] Secondly, our situation may lead us to prefer or desire things that are within our reach instead of things that we would need but are unable to get. Poor

people tend, for instance, to lower the bar of their desires and wishes since they know that their possibilities are quite limited by their situation – a problem known in the literature as adaptive preferences.^[12] The way in which individuals define their needs is affected by their subjective state and cannot be considered to correspond to an objective statement of their *real* needs. A theory of human needs should renounce the first-person perspective that characterizes many theories of ethics or of action and adopt instead the third-person perspective of an impartial observer, from which needs can be described independently from any individual conception. Such a theory ought to take into account the differences among individuals, but this means that it should consider not so much the differences connected to their personality, but rather the ones connected to their different social status and to their capacity of knowing (and even of desiring) what is necessary for them. One may not leave out of consideration these aspects in the name of a merely formal priority of the just over the good. There is nothing just in letting people, because of ignorance, delusion, or lack of information, make a decision that eventually harms them. Justice demands rather that they are enabled to make well-informed decisions and that every obstacle they may encounter in reaching the corresponding epistemic competence be removed.

A strong objection to the importance of need is advanced by Frankfurt, who conflates needs and desires and claims that “the moral significance of a need is not necessarily greater than that of its corresponding desire”.^[13] According to him, “there are many occasions when it makes perfectly good sense for a person to sacrifice something he needs, even something he needs very badly, for the sake of something he desires but for which he has no need at all”. As an example, he mentions the case of a seriously ill person who decides to use “his limited financial resources for the pleasure cruise he has long wanted to take rather than for the surgery he needs to prolong his life”.^[14] This example shows however that also Frankfurt recognizes the existence of objective needs and of possible conflicts between one individual’s desires and her needs. Of course, an individual is entitled to choose to satisfy a desire that goes against her interests. The whole point of discussing needs, however, is not to prohibit individuals to act against their real needs, but to establish moral reasons for demanding from institutions that they create public policies aiming at helping individuals to satisfy their needs. The fact that individuals may follow highly subjective, even whimsical desires instead of pursuing the satisfaction of their needs does not allow for the conclusion Frankfurt comes to, namely that the moral significance of needs is not greater than that of desires. He is so far right in claiming that “we cannot *unequivocally* accept the doctrine that it is morally preferable to allocate resources to those who need them rather than to those who only desire them”^[15] as we have first to establish which needs do justify the public allocation of resources.

b) Needs as drives and “true” vs. “false” needs

The radical alternative to defining needs as subjective preferences would be to consider them as natural and irresistible forces, as *drives* that impel individuals to act

in a certain way in order to reach their satisfaction. By describing needs in such a naturalistic, almost physiological manner, the difficulties of subjectivism seem to be avoided. However, drives do not necessarily correspond to needs: one can have drives that harm oneself and go against one's needs, like in the case of an obese person who has the drive to eat more and more, while she actually needs a diet in order not to threaten her health. In everyday language, however, we often use the term "need" as synonymous with "urge". When the notorious drunkard says that he needs a drink or the chain-smoker affirms that he needs a cigarette we do not interpret these claims as expressing an objective, general or universal human necessity, but just as expressions of their individual addictions, therefore as subjective urges. We would not consider drinking alcohol as a way of satisfying a general human need (particularly not in the case of a drunkard), although it may be the case that in certain cultures drinking alcohol – even in big quantity – is an important means of socialization or of performing a religious ritual and that in that culture these goals are considered as needs to be satisfied. This shows that we might distinguish between natural and cultural needs, between needs, which have to do with our animal nature, and needs, which have to do with the fact that we are also cultural animals, but it shows also that this distinction can be blurred (for instance in the case of the complex cultural codes regulating the satisfaction of certain natural needs like nourishment or sexual activity). But even if we could distinguish with a clear-cut "just" natural from "just" cultural needs, they would not be defined subjectively, but objectively, even if this word refers in the first case to general traits that are common to every human being and in the second case to traits typical of a specific culture.

The same can be said with regard to the example of a person who is seized by the *idée fixe* of buying a sports car.^[16] We would consider this to be the expression of a subjective whim or of an inferiority complex or a socially imposed desire to show one's economic status by making a display of luxury objects. One could recur to the traditional distinction between natural and artificial needs made by Rousseau in the *Discourse on Inequality* or to the more recent one between true and false needs made by Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man*. According to Marcuse, false needs are imposed upon the individual by society in order to achieve particular social interests. Their satisfaction might create in the individual a feeling that she misrepresents as happiness, but its ultimate result is rather "euphoria in unhappiness". Among such "false" needs are the needs "to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate" and, we may well add, to buy a fancy sports car. "Such needs have a societal content and function which are determined by external powers over which the individual has no control": economic and political powers, which aim at creating docile, submitted individuals who are worried only about satisfying these induced needs and have no interest at all in identifying and solving the real problems of society (economic inequality, alienation, political repression, etc.). True needs, which Marcuse considers to be "the only needs that have an unqualified claim for satisfaction," are limited to

“vital” needs such as “nourishment, clothing, lodging at the attainable level of culture”.^[17]

The analogy between false needs and drives is evident: in both cases the individual is the passive victim of a higher power that seizes her and imposes on her a need that is either unnatural or harmful. However, while the harm that might result from yielding to a drive can be objectively stated (like in the case of an addicted person) and sometimes even measured (in terms of reduced life expectancy or of financial loss), the problem with the concept of false needs is the idea that it is possible to *clearly* identify needs that society imposes upon us in order to curb individual freedom and to defend a status quo based on repression and economic injustice. Sometimes it seems plausible to make such a claim – e.g., in the case of an individual convinced that he has to buy a fancy sports car to achieve acknowledgment and self-fulfillment. In many other cases, however, the repressive potential of the social and cultural definition of needs is in fact a civilizing force, as shown by Freud.^[18]

c) Needs and individuality

Needs express objective necessities that do not depend for their existence on idiosyncratic traits of specific individuals, even if they depend on the way individuals *are*. They depend on certain aspects of individuals’ animal and cultural nature. One could object that in certain cases needs seem to be also the expression of individual traits. It has been remarked that “every man is in certain respects (a) like all other men, (b) like some other men, (c) like no other men”^[19]. An individual is like all other individuals at least in her biological features; she is like some other individuals when she shares with them certain traits (for instance, when they belong to the same culture); she is like no other individuals for having a peculiar biography, personal experiences, etc. By saying that A has individual needs one refers to the fact that these needs are peculiar to A. The reasons for this claim can be of two basic kinds: either this happens because of a certain peculiar constitution of A, or because of her biography (or because of a combination of both aspects, since they do not exclude mutually). In the first case, we may be referring to physical or to psychological traits. We could claim that A has individual needs for being extremely tall or for being blind, or for suffering from a severe allergy to pollen. In all these cases, however, the corresponding needs are typical for any person who happens to share the same physical traits. All extremely tall, blind, or allergic persons share the same needs among themselves. A’s supposedly individual needs reveals to be needs she has as a member of a group (the (b) case). The same can be said of psychological traits: A can suffer depression, be extremely shy, or lack self-consciousness. Again: the corresponding needs are common to any other individual sharing these traits. What if we refer rather to A’s biography? Nobody shares her own biography with anyone. On the other hand, the needs one comes to develop as a consequence of one’s own biography are not necessarily needs no other person can have. A and B can come to share certain needs through very different life experiences. The fact that they had

different lives does not imply that they have exclusive needs no other can share. In a sense, when we say that a person is like no other person (the (c) case), we do not refer to her needs and to her physiological or psychological traits separately considered, but to the fact that these needs and these traits are peculiarly combined in her, and that the chances that they are combined exactly in the same way in another person are extremely low or even non-existent (this depends on to which extent you consider the environment responsible for molding our personality as opposed to our genes). The fact, however, that every person appears to be like no other does not imply that she has needs no other person can have or has. As James Griffin puts it, an account based on the notion of objective needs focuses on “aims flowing from human nature and not on any flowing from a person’s particular tastes, attitudes, or interests”.^[20] In this sense, the adjective “objective” does not refer to some truth, independent from our existence as observers (such as the objective fact that an atom of gold has more protons than an atom of oxygen), rather it refers to a truth that is relative to our peculiar human condition. A need is objective in the sense that it does not depend on an individual’s desires, tastes or preferences, but on our general human nature, which of course is not unchangeable and “objective” as the number of protons in an atom of gold.

3 A Positive Concept of Needs

So far, we have claimed that (1) needs are not wishes, preferences, or drives, and that (2) needs do have an objective character also when they seem to be connected to an individual’s peculiar biography or related to some personal traits. However, we still have not defined what a need is. In order to do that, some authors recur to the concept of harm^[21].

a) Needs and Harm

The basic strategy of these authors is to define need as that, whose dissatisfaction would cause harm. Garrett Thomson recognizes the importance of having an objective criterion to define harm, in order to avoid the same kind of subjectivity connected to the definition of needs as desires or preferences. For this reason, he defines harm “as a type of deprivation rather than as a state of mind”:^[22] this explains why sometimes harm is not subjectively felt (as we saw with the aforementioned examples of diabetes, addiction, etc., one might have a need without feeling it and the same happens with deprivation). Contrary to the saying “What you don’t know can’t harm you”, Thomson claims that “clearly, what we are not aware of can harm us” and that “we can be harmed without knowing this.”^[23]

The risk of this strategy is to be circular, since harm is defined as the violation of a state of things corresponding to the satisfaction of needs, or as the impairment of the realization of such a state of things. Of course, authors using this strategy do

not use the word need, for the circularity would be too obvious, but mostly they fall into a *petitio principii*. Doyal and Gough, for instance, define needs with reference to the concept of harm. According to them, basic human needs “stipulate what persons must achieve if they are to avoid sustained and serious harm”, while serious harm itself is understood “as the significantly impaired pursue of goals which are deemed of value by individuals”. This means that “to be seriously harmed is thus to be fundamentally disabled in the pursuit of one’s vision of the good”^[24]. The consequence is that, as David Miller puts it, “in order to decide what a person’s needs are, we must first identify his plan of life, then establish what activities are essential to that plan, and finally investigate the conditions which enable those activities to be carried out”^[25]. This is insofar problematic as it connects the definition of needs to subjective visions of the good. Secondly, via such concepts as “valued goals” or “plan of life” harm is defined ultimately as the impaired satisfaction of needs – and this is the *petitio principii*. In some cases, it can be useful to start defining a concept negatively, namely when there is no basic consent on its meaning. So, if you want to define happiness or justice, it could be useful to start by looking at unhappiness and injustice (at least in their most blatant form). But ‘need’ is not such a concept. We should rather define it in the same way we can define a ‘right’, that is, by showing its logical structure and status.

a) Basic needs and derived needs

The first point we should make clear is whether a need is a means or a goal. When we say that humans have the need for food or for nourishment, what are we indicating: the final state of things (getting fed and being nourished) or the means to that goal (getting food or having the chance to get food)? Do we need food or do we need to be nourished? This might seem an irrelevant distinction: we want food to be nourished and we get nourished only when we get food. But the fact that there is a practical correlation between these two things does not make them *the same* thing from a logical point of view, and not even from a practical one. Classically, one distinguishes the *need* to be satisfied from its *satisfier*. If getting nourished is the need, then food is the satisfier. On the other side, needs can be on their part satisfiers for other needs (for instance: I may need nourishment not only to survive but also to be strong enough to work and maintain my family). It is therefore impossible to establish an absolute or ultimate hierarchy of needs, even if it is possible to identify needs that are more basic than others. Being fed is a more basic need than reaching religious enlightenment, since being fed is a necessary pre-condition to be alive and therefore to pursue some goal at all, including religious enlightenment; but some individuals may prefer to sacrifice nourishment to religious enlightenment even at cost of their life. A basic need is not a higher need or a need that is more worthy to be satisfied than others: it is just a need whose satisfaction is the pre-condition for the satisfaction of other needs. We could speak of primary and secondary needs, but this word choice seems to me to imply an evaluative or even a normative moment (primary needs have

a higher value and ought to be always satisfied, while secondary needs are not so important and their satisfaction may be postponed). We could speak of fundamental and instrumental needs, but also these terms contain an implicit evaluation as if instrumental needs were not real needs after all. Finally, we could speak also of first-level and second-level needs, or of non-derivative and derivative needs^[26], but I think it will be *easier* if we just speak of basic needs and derived needs. A need is derived if its satisfaction depends on the satisfaction of a basic need, but its satisfaction can be itself the condition for the satisfaction of another need: in this case, the derived need will become a basic need for the new derived need. Defining a need as being basic or derived is therefore a matter of perspective.

b) Hierarchical theories of needs

What I have just stated is not an undisputed point. Quite on the contrary, theories of human needs tend to establish a hierarchy in an evaluative sense (Abraham Maslow developed one of the most influential theories in this respect).^[27] However, we can adopt a logical hierarchy of needs such as the one developed by Andrzej Sicinski, who formulates it as follows:

- (1) Needs whose non-satisfaction results in the annihilation of the system (needs for existence);
- (2) Needs whose non-satisfaction results in the system's inability to perform some of its functions (needs for integration);
- (3) Needs whose non-satisfaction results in disturbances in the system's performance of some of its functions (needs for optimum functioning);
- (4) Needs whose non-satisfaction results in disturbances in the development of the system (needs for development).^[28]

In this view, a person is considered to be a natural, self-organizing system and the satisfaction of needs is a necessary condition for the functioning of the system (not necessarily for its well-being).

I suggest that we adopt this classification, but without creating any hierarchy between material and non-material needs. Let us consider some examples of the way one can describe needs from the perspective of Sicinski's categorization. Eating is a fundamental material need, since its non-satisfaction would result in the death of the person; if the person can eat, but suffers undernourishment, she may not be able to perform certain functions because of the resulting physical weakness; if she can eat, but has an unbalanced diet provoking diseases such as diabetes or cardiovascular problems, the performing of certain functions (e.g. sport or other forms of physical activity) may be affected; if her diet lacks certain fundamental substances, she may suffer in her physical and even psychological development (e.g. when the lack of iron provokes anemia). The same can be held of non-material needs, even if apparently their non-satisfaction does not result in the annihilation of the system – at least not directly (but one could think of psychological pathologies that may lead to death such as anorexia). Self-esteem is a fundamental, non-material need, whose non-satisfaction

would make a person unable to perform certain functions, in certain cases even everyday functions like going out of her house and walking on the street or addressing a stranger; even when it does not lead to such dramatic consequences, it may affect the performing of certain functions (the person can be extremely shy and this may impair her social and affective life); finally, it may impair the person's psychological development (the person can cripple her own intellectual faculties by thinking she will not be ever able to accomplish something relevant in her life). From this point of view, we don't have to look at Sicinski's categorization as if it would consider the "lower" needs as being material needs and the "higher" needs as being non-material or intellectual (or spiritual) needs. Our examples show that even the satisfaction of material needs such as nourishment and of non-material needs such as self-esteem can happen to several degrees and affect different aspects of a person's functioning (and of course also of her well-being, however it may be defined).

Therefore, needs can be considered to be basic or derived according to their relative position as goals or as means for the satisfaction of other needs; and they can be described through a hierarchy with regards to the effects of their non-satisfaction: there are levels of non-satisfaction that cause more harm than others. This is a very important theoretical instrument when we have to discuss concrete policies aiming at satisfying needs, since it allows us to establish a priority not so much among the needs, but among the levels of satisfaction of different needs in situations of scarcity of resources.

How does this allow us to avoid the abovementioned risk of circularity? We are not referring to a generic concept of harm, but to the effect that the not satisfaction of needs has on the 'functioning' of humans, that is, on their capacity to exist; to perform basic physical, psychological and social functions; to strive for optimal performance of these functions; to develop the physical, psychological and social abilities needed to perform these functions. One could object that this definition makes needs and their fulfillment the means for a higher goal, namely the 'functioning' of humans.^[29] This, however, is defined in terms of needs: their satisfaction does not, therefore, represent a mere means, but the very content of the 'functioning.'

On the other side, I would like to avoid defining a list of needs that define human functioning. There are two reasons for this. The first one is that the definition of needs and of their legitimate satisfiers are the result of social agreement, as we saw with regard to 'basic' needs such as nutrition and sexual desire. It is, nevertheless, possible to identify broad categories of needs while leaving open their particular content.^[30] Such categories will refer to different elements of human functioning (survival, physical and intellectual development, social integration, etc.). However, I cannot discuss this in this context.

The second reason for avoiding complete lists of needs has to do with the political nature of needs. Since they are socially defined and since their satisfiers are socially produced and distributed, they are paradigmatical objects of political conflicts.

Both the definition of socially accepted needs and the production and distribution of the corresponding legitimate satisfiers can be disputed and give rise to normative demands towards social and political institutions. This too is an aspect I cannot elaborate in this context.

My aim in this paper was to offer arguments for giving centrality to the concept of needs when discussing issues of social justice and to propose a definition of this concept that might allow developing a social and political theory of needs. The latter task will have to be carried out separately, though.

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- [3] See D. Miller, *Social Justice*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1976; D. Braybrooke, *Meeting Needs*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1987; G. Thomson, *Needs*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1987; L. Doyal, I. Gough, *A Theory of Human Need*, Macmillan, London 1991; G. Brock (ed.), *Necessary Goods. Our responsibility to meet others' needs*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 1998; D. Wiggins, *Claims of Need*, in Id. *Needs, Values, Truth. Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, 1-57; L. Hamilton, *The Political Philosophy of Needs*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003; S. Reader (ed.), *The Philosophy of Needs*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005 and H. Dean, *Understanding Human Needs. Social issues, policy and practice*, Policy Press, Bristol 2010.
- [4] Cf. T. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1998.
- [5] Cf. A. Sen, *Liberty and Social Choice*, in «The Journal of Philosophy», 80/1, 1980, p. 6 f.
- [6] G. A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2008, p. 232 ff.
- [7] Quoted by Katrin Lederer in her "Introduction" to K. Lederer (Ed.), *Human Needs. A Contribution to the Current Debate*, Anton Hain, Königstein a. T. 1980, p. 7 f.
- [8] I am following Lawrence Hamilton on this point (see Hamilton, *The Political Philosophy of Needs*).
- [9] L. Doyal, I. Gough, *A Theory of Human Needs*, cit. p. 10.
- [10] L. Doyal, I. Gough, *A Theory of Human Needs*, cit., p. 23.
- [11] «Valuing something is a good reason for desiring it, but desiring something is not an obvious reason for valuing it» (A. Sen, *Well-being, Agency, and Freedom. The Dewey Lectures 1984*, in «Journal of Philosophy», 82, 1985, p. 190).
- [12] Ibidem, p. 191.
- [13] H. Frankfurt, *Necessity and Desire*, in: «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», 45, 1985, p. 3.
- [14] H. Frankfurt, *Necessity and Desire*, cit., p. 1.
- [15] H. Frankfurt, *Necessity and Desire*, cit. p. 3 (emphasis added).
- [16] The same example is discussed also by Lawrence Hamilton, who speaks of a "felt impulse or drive" (Hamilton, *The Political Philosophy of Needs*, p. 21).
- [17] H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, Beacon Press, Boston 1964, p. 5.
- [18] S. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, W. W. Norton, New York 1962.
- [19] C. Kluckhohn, H. Murray, D. Schneider (eds.), *Personality in Nature, Society, and Culture*, Knopf, New York 1953, p. 53.
- [20] J. Griffin, *Well-Being. Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1986, p. 53.
- [21] See e.g., D. Miller, *Social Justice*, cit., p. 131 ff., G. Thomson, *Needs*, cit., p. 35 ff., L. Doyal, I. Gough, *A Theory of Human Needs*, cit., p. 50 ff., D. Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth*, cit., p. 1 ff.
- [22] G. Thomson, *Needs*, cit. p. 36.
- [23] G. Thomson, *Needs*, cit. p. 42 f.
- [24] L. Doyal, I. Gough, *A Theory of Human Needs*, cit., p. 50. On this topic David Miller writes: «Harm, for any individual, is whatever interferes directly or indirectly with the activities essential to his plan of life; and correspondingly, his needs must be understood to comprise whatever is necessary to allow these activities to be carried out» (D. Miller, *Social Justice*, cit., p. 134).

^[25] D. Miller, *Social Justice*, cit., p. 134.

^[26] G. Thomson, *Needs*, cit., p. 18.

^[27] A. Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, in: «Psychological Review», 50/4, 1943, p. 394; A. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, Harper & Bros., New York 1954.

^[28] A. Sicinski, *The Concepts of 'Need' and 'Value' in the Light of the System Approach*, in: «Social Sciences Information», 1978, p. 73 ff.

^[29] Hamilton too recurs to the concept of 'functioning', which he, however, defines differently (L. Hamilton, *The Political Philosophy of Needs*, cit., p. 22 et passim).

^[30] Most authors who offer a theory of needs tend to do this (see, e.g., L. Doyal, I. Gough, *A Theory of Human Needs*, cit.; L. Hamilton, *The Political Philosophy of Needs*, cit.).