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The essays collected in this volume derive from a conference held by the Royal Institute of Philosophy in Britain in September, 2003. It appears that the concept of needs has had a checkered history in philosophy. Perhaps it is because of philosophy’s origins in Plato that needs, being tied to the body, are seen as less important than such theoretical entities as rights or utilities in discussions of ethics and social philosophy. Philosophers prefer to speak of meeting ‘subsistence rights’ or maximizing utilities when discussing what our duties of beneficence are in relation to needy others.

The problem with the concept of ‘utility’ is that it takes people’s preferences at face value and urges us to satisfy as many of them as possible without distinguishing those preferences which are for things necessary to a dignified human life and those which are for superfluous things we merely want. Without this distinction the ethical demand to maximize utility is too indiscriminate. According to David Wiggins’ contribution to this volume, this can only lead to injustices where the preferences of the many are given priority over the vital needs of a few.

Of course, just what is to count as a basic need is in need of some clarification. Is the drug addict’s need for a hit basic in the same way that anyone’s need for food would seem to be? Both Wiggins and Gillian Brock address this question and it is also discussed with reference to Plato and Aristotle in essays by Christopher Rowe and Soran Reader. The view that emerges is that a need is something which is necessary for human agency. Insofar as agency involves deliberation and choice it requires physical and mental health, a degree of security, a sufficient level of understanding of what one is choosing between, and a certain amount of freedom to act. Moreover, one will need some social relationships to support one in one’s action.

For his part, Garrett Thomson speaks of ‘fundamental needs,’ which are inescapably necessary conditions in order for a person not to undergo serious harm. A need is inescapable if it is not based on a desire which the person would be better off not having (like a need for drugs) but on a desire which is intrinsic to the person. But if needs are based on desires we seem to be back to the utilitarian’s indiscriminate preference satisfaction. Thomson’s solution is to distinguish between desires and the interests that motivate them.
We all have an interest in food, but the food we desire will be relative to circumstances. The desires are contingent and malleable while the interest is basic. It is this deeper level of interest and motivation that enjoys objectivity and grounds the harms we can undergo. Sometimes it might not be good to get exactly what we want. This also allows us to explain how desires change but continue to express our deeper interests. Interests allow us to critically evaluate desires. So if fundamental needs are inescapable they must be based on those of our interests which are also inescapable rather than on our contingent desires.

It will be clear that the concept of needs has ethical and political import. It would seem intuitive that the fundamental needs of others establish an obligation to provide what is needed. Sarah Clark Miller addresses this issue from the perspective of an ethics of care. She explains how the care ethic acknowledges the situatedness and interdependence of human existence. However, she does not think that the ethics of care can generate a duty to meet vital needs. For this we need Kant. Given that we are interdependent, no one could universalize the maxim that they would not help another in need. In this way a Kantian argument for the duty of beneficence can amplify the ethics of care. If there is such a duty, then needy people might be said to have a right to assistance.

This raises the issue of subsistence rights. The problem here is that rights are tied to obligations. But to whom is the obligation to meet the needs of the indigent and poor around the world to be attributed? Is it enough to say that we all have an obligation not to prevent a needy person from getting what they need? This seems too weak. Yet the obligation to give to each needy person what they need is too strong. No one person can achieve that goal. Bill Wringe’s solution is to speak of collective obligations and to suggest that the collective obligation generated by the subsistence rights of the world’s poor can be discharged by collective action through political institutions.

The issue of human rights emerges in several of the essays with the suggestion that to discuss global justice in terms of rights is not as helpful as to discuss it in terms of human needs. Gillian Brock begins her essay with a variation on John Rawls’s original position in which she suggests that the choice made by participants in the original position would not be for principles of distributive justice but for the principle that basic needs should be met before any surplus is distributed. She cites empirical research which shows that most people prefer social arrangements that protect people from serious harms and also guarantee some basic liberties. Distributive justice is seen by most people as of secondary importance to the meeting of basic needs.

The fact is that many basic needs are not being met in the world today. This raises some questions as to how best to articulate the goals that social and political action to create global justice should take. Essays by David Braybrooke and Sabina Alkire compare the discourse of needs with Amartya Sen’s discourse of capabilities, and suggest that needs identify a basic level of provision which, because of the necessities that it addresses, is more fundamental than capabilities. If I might put it in my own terms, perhaps needs are necessary conditions for human dignity while capabilities are sufficient conditions. Alkire suggests, however, that it is important that providers of aid and assistance be aware of local cultural and material conditions and ways of understanding needs. The discourse of needs can lead to insensitive and oppressive policies (such as China’s one child policy). Accordingly, thinking in terms of capabilities, or the freedom to do things for oneself, can be preferable. If aid agencies and governments seek to enhance the capabilities of needy people to meet their own needs justice is more likely to be served.

Underlying such suggestions are deep philosophical understandings of how needs figure in the social fabric. John O’Neill contributes an interesting historical essay which discusses Adam Smith and the problem of so organizing society that the needfulness of some does not lead to their humiliation as receivers of charity. Smith thought that commercial society provided a form of solidarity between people which honored both their own initiative and their interdependence. The modern welfare state, on the other hand, seeks to overcome the problem of humiliation by depersonalizing the giving of assistance by turning it into a bureaucratic entitlement. The problem with this is that it breaks down social solidarity.

The concept of needs even contributes understanding to the philosophy of action. Jonathan Lowe denies that reasons are causes and yet wants to draw a close relation between reasons and actions such that reasons are necessary if not sufficient conditions for an action. The argument is that just as facts are truth-makers for beliefs and propositions, so needs are ‘goodness-makers’ for actions. Needs support actions in the way that facts support beliefs. A good action is one which corresponds to need. According to Lowe, needs belong to a distinct ontological category. The world is not just all that is the case -- it also contains needs.

While some essays in this collection are less satisfactory than others -- especially those that summarize the author’s own previously published work -- and while the book contains far too many typographical errors and word omissions, this collection presents important work in the philosophy of need. I have no doubt that philosophers working in this field will critically evaluate and extend the arguments presented here.
social philosophy and ethics need to come to grips with the concept of need, and its relevance to metaphysics and the philosophy of action also seems compelling. This collection will be a good place to start.

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