Does a Basic Needs Approach Need Capabilities?

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THE ‘basic needs approach’ (henceforth BNA) is an approach to social justice ‘that gives priority to meeting people’s basic needs—to ensuring that there are sufficient, appropriately distributed basic needs (BN) goods and services to sustain all human lives at a minimally decent level’. BNA draws on the intuitive moral force of claims of need (compared to claims of preference or subjective or objective benefit, for example), to develop a practical normative theory about what should be done.

Its intuitive humanitarian appeal notwithstanding, BNA has been subject to many criticisms, with the result that it has declined in popularity. It is now widely accepted that BNA is inadequate, and should either be wholly replaced by, or at least be made a subordinate part of, a more comprehensive, better theory. The ‘capability approach’ (henceforth CA) founded by Amartya Sen, and developed in different directions by Sen, Martha Nussbaum, Sabina Alkire and others, is widely taken to be that better theory. CA is an approach which aims to expand capabilities or valuable freedoms. Capabilities are what people are actually able to do and to be, that is, their freedom to enjoy valuable beings and doings. BNA has been overtaken by CA. But how many criticisms of BNA were well-founded? How many of its problems were intrinsic to the theory, and how many were contingent results of the way the concept of need was misunderstood or misused?

In this article I consider criticisms of BNA made by capability theorists, and argue that BNA can meet them all. I conclude that BNA has been unfairly criticised and too hastily displaced by CA. This raises a further question: what should be done? My hope is that defenders of BNA will be encouraged to revive their approach by these arguments, and that defenders of CA will be encouraged to reconsider and modify or withdraw their criticisms.

1Stewart 2006.
3The focus of this paper is Amartya Sen’s CA and Sabina Alkire’s development of it. Martha Nussbaum’s CA differs from Sen’s in 1) being normative rather than just providing a framework, 2) distinguishing types of capabilities, specifying a list of basic capabilities and giving content to them, 3) rejecting relativism, 4) grounding CA in the work of Aristotle and Marx, 5) not attaching significance to the distinction between well-being and agency capabilities and 6) rejecting the capability-utilitarianism Sen seems to endorse, instead treating basic capability requirements as grounding rights (2000, pp. 11–15; see also 1988; 1993). I consider CA and BNA in relation to rights in Reader (forthcoming).
I. THE BASIC NEEDS APPROACH

BNA had its heyday as a working political idea in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Paul Streeten’s *First Things First*, with the *imprimatur* of the World Bank, gave a comprehensive statement of BNA, and described the ambitious aim of those using the approach: ‘to halve world poverty by the year 2000’.\(^4\) BNA proceeds by identifying a set of ‘basic human needs’, then designing political systems to meet those needs. The approach focused on identifying and supplying resources that are universally needed (water, food, houses, equipment, production systems, schools, hospitals, community infrastructure). To enable consensus, BNA practitioners defined needs as universally and ‘basically’ as possible. A need is ‘basic’ in BNA terms if it is a necessity for a fundamental life function, like physical survival, or participating in the community as a citizen, worker or parent. Only of such ‘basic’ needs was it claimed that we have a political obligation to meet them.

Two sorts of practical (as opposed to philosophical) problems undermined BNA: problems with implementation, and shifts in political priorities. With implementation, the measurement of commodity-requirements proved difficult. It was, for example, complicated by the fact that different groups needed different quanta of the same good to achieve the same outcome, which could also be achieved through the provision of many different forms of help. Delivery of commodities was also often poorly judged, inefficient or demonstrably unhelpful. Recipients, given little opportunity to identify their own needs, felt patronised. The emphasis on the ‘basicness’ of needs caused offence, suggesting helper-groups believed poor people ‘really need’ water, but do not ‘really need’ goods subserving other dimensions of human life like religion or relationships.\(^5\)

Shifting political priorities also undermined BNA. The enthusiasm of powerful politicians like Robert McNamara at the World Bank did not last. The debt crisis and political shifts away from social provision and towards libertarianism in the 1980s led to an abandonment of needs-centred thinking, in favour of efforts to foster growth by pursuing free market trade, productivity and efficient servicing of debt. The governments of developing countries did not protest against this shift, since they had in any case never been enthusiastic about BNA, seeing it as a diversion from their demands for improved terms in the international system.

But although such practical factors surely contributed to the shift away from BNA, the official story has always been that BNA faces theoretical criticisms which CA can avoid. In the following sections, I consider those criticisms.\(^6\)

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\(^4\)Streeten 1981. BNA was launched at an International Labour Organisation conference in 1976, then taken up by Robert McNamara and the World Bank. Theoretical presentations culminated in books like *First Things First* and Frances Stewart’s *Basic Needs in Developing Countries* in 1985. See ul Haq 1995 for one narrative of the evolution of the approaches.

\(^5\)Robert Chambers (1997) chronicles in painful detail mistakes made in international action to address deprivation. His criticisms are not limited to BNA, but they apply to it.

\(^6\)My main source for the criticisms is Sen (1984, pp. 509–32). I also draw on the candid list of problems in Paul Streeten (1984) and on Sabina Alkire (2002, ch. 5; 2006), where she considers Sen’s criticisms and adds her own.
II. ‘BNA IS PHILOSOPHICALLY INADEQUATE’

Criticism of BNA’s philosophical credentials takes many forms, and it is often unclear what is meant. Even BNA theorists say things like ‘BNA is not philosophical, it is purely pragmatic’ and ‘the capability approach . . . is richer’ and has ‘deeper philosophical foundations than BNA’.7 Sen says ‘it is a mistake to see [BNA] as a deeply founded approach’.8 Alkire says ‘the capability approach is . . . philosophically more rigorous’.9 CA is also often said to be philosophically ‘more elegant’ or ‘fuller’. The complaint might be that BNA is not deeply rooted in the history or contemporary concerns of philosophy, or that BNA does not have an adequate set of concepts to provide a theoretical framework for action to address deprivation.

A. RESOURCES FOR BNA IN THE HISTORY AND HEART OF PHILOSOPHY

Reading around the topics of need and necessity in the history of philosophy and in contemporary work shows this criticism to be ill-founded. In fact, BNA can draw on very rich philosophical resources indeed. Here are two examples, one from history, the other from contemporary analytic philosophy.

One important resource for philosophical understanding of the concept of need is to be found in Aristotle, particularly in his discussion of necessities at *Metaphysics* 1015a – b15.10 Aristotle identifies a core generic sense of necessity as ‘that which cannot be otherwise’, and then distinguishes four further senses which are ‘somehow derivable from it’: 1) that which must be if life or existence is to be, 2) that which must be if some good is to be achieved or evil avoided, 3) that which must be because coerced against will or nature, and 4) that which must be because logically compelled, like the conclusion of a demonstration. All of these derived senses of necessity are in some way ‘hypothetical’—necessary if something else (which is contingent) is to be—not necessary *simpliciter*.11,12

A BNA concept of human need will fall under either 1) or 2) or both of the senses Aristotle derives from his core sense of necessity. Some philosophers have understood human needs in sense 2). Elizabeth Anscombe’s seminal remarks led

8Sen 1987, p. 25.
10Aristotle has also been claimed as a source for CA, by Martha Nussbaum. How Aristotle’s accounts of necessity and capability are related is a question that will reward further study.
11For the claim that all needs-statements are hypothetical (‘elliptical’), see Flew (1981, p. 120) and Barry (1965, ch. 3). David Wiggins (1987, pp. 6–9), citing Anscombe (1958) and Feinberg (1973), argues that statements of vital human need are not elliptical. But this depends on what one takes ‘end’ to mean. If it includes ‘existence or life’, as in Aristotle’s sense 1), vital human needs will be elliptical, as in ‘I need this in order to live/exist’. Whereas Aristotle believed that some things (God, eternal cyclical motion) are necessary *simpliciter*, for him no human needs could be.
12The philosophical significance of the connections between the ethical/political concept of need and the metaphysical and logical concepts of necessity, unremarkable to Aristotle, is beginning to be rediscovered. For some initial explorations, see papers by Wiggins, Lowe, Thomson, Rowe, Reader and Miller in Reader 2006a.
the way for many analytic philosophers to define morally important needs this way, as necessities for the possibility of a flourishing life. Others, including Joel Feinberg, David Wiggins and Garrett Thomson come closer to Aristotle’s sense and define need in terms of what must be if harm is to be avoided.

In contemporary philosophy, David Wiggins provides a good example of profound and useful work on the concept of need, which BNA can draw on. Wiggins analyses the relationship between the concept of a need and that of a right, and seeks to discover the role that the concept of need will play in an adequate conception of justice. His project is nothing if not philosophically sophisticated, rigorous and ambitious. Wiggins uses the concept of need to structure an original (and plausible) \textit{a posteriori} constraint on any adequate social morality, and then shows how need plays a central role in a dense and difficult refutation of Rawls’ theory of justice, and formulation of an alternative needs-centred \textit{a posteriori} set of principles, grounded in the constraint.

Morally important needs for Wiggins are \textit{vital} needs, needs for avoiding harm as a human being. The philosophical test for the genuineness of a vital need is: can the needing being continue in being, unharmed, if this need is not met? It is important for a correct philosophical assessment of BNA to notice what isn’t being claimed here. It is not being claimed that there is an \textit{a priori} universal truth, for every claimed need, about whether or not it is vital. Rather, needs are held to be multiply relative: to an understanding of the needing being’s identity, to culture and individual outlook, and to what is practically feasible. Each relativity is essentially contestable, subject to the standards and norms of public practical rationality.

Vital needs in addition are \textit{grave} needs (the harm of damaged life is very bad), \textit{urgent} needs (the harm will ensue relatively rapidly, and may be irreversible), \textit{entrenched} needs (they are determined by relatively unchangeable facts of nature) and not very \textit{substitutable} (the standards are relatively resistant to being shifted and alternative forms of help aren’t much use). A philosophically subtle but important distinction between dispositional and occurrent needs is often missed and contributes to criticisms of BNA (see Section IV below). A dispositional need is one the needing being has essentially, simply in virtue of being what they are. Human needs for water and air are dispositional in this sense. A dispositional

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17Wiggins 1987, pp. 31–57; see also 2006. Alkire (2002, ch. 5; 2006) discusses Wiggins’ work, suggesting she recognises some philosophical depth in needs-theory and senses it may be essential to any adequate ‘framework’. Wiggins’ important broader political philosophy should be more widely studied.
need can only be met, it cannot be eliminated.\textsuperscript{20} An occurrent need, in contrast, is one the needing being has only when in a state of lack. The dispositional human need for water is thus an occurrent need only when the human being is dehydrated or thirsty.

We should also distinguish between the subject of the need (the needing being with their innate, ineradicable dispositional needs), the state of lack (their occurrent need), the object of their need or ‘satisfier’ (that which will meet the need), the process by which the need is to be met and the non-needy state achieved once the need is met. The non-needy state is defined minimally and negatively by BNA, as the state of having no occurrent vital needs.\textsuperscript{21}

\section*{B. BNA’s Conceptual Adequacy}

An apparently more rigorous interpretation of the ‘philosophical inadequacy’ criticism is given by Sen, who charges that BNA fails to provide a philosophical account of the ends towards which needs-meeting actions must be directed, giving no philosophical analysis of conceptions of ‘the good life’, human utility or well-being.\textsuperscript{22} Sen and Alkire then cite this inadequacy as the rationale for supplementing or replacing BNA by CA, since CA supposedly does describe the ‘valuable human ends’ which needs-meeting must serve, claiming that they are capabilities to do and be valuable things.

Is Sen right to identify BNA’s silence on positive ends as a reason to supplement or replace it with CA? Sen gives no philosophical argument to show that an account of distributive justice must include a substantive account of human well-being. He simply takes it to be obvious. But there are good philosophical reasons why BNA might avoid giving any positive account of well-being—reasons which belong to the same family as the reasons Sen himself gives for refusing to list or give substantive content to the capabilities he takes to be constitutive of the good life, the expansion of which he takes to be the aim of distributive justice.\textsuperscript{23} One such reason could be that the substantive conception of the positive state beyond need is an essentially contestable matter for social negotiation. Any attempt to stipulate what its content must be will obstruct the process of political negotiation and prevent community-building consensus-formation from taking place, thereby imposing external values on the needy rather than helping them.

Another good reason could be that BNA theorists take the view that a ‘framework’ is intended to describe actions that are morally required (rather than

\textsuperscript{20}There is philosophical work to be done on this ‘cannot’. Is the necessity here logical, physical, or metaphysical? Or is it best understood some other way?

\textsuperscript{21}It is a fair charge against BNA and against philosophers of need more generally that they might have been more careful and thorough in making these distinctions. See the discussion of Wiggins’ (2006) comments on this point in Section III below.

\textsuperscript{22}Sen 1987, p. 25; 1984, p. 515.

\textsuperscript{23}Sen 1993, pp. 47–9.
supererogatory, for example), and that they believe moral requirements are limited to needs. Once needs are met, although further ends might morally permissibly be sought, there is no obligation on agents of justice to seek them. There is no moral obligation to expand anything (whether it be utility, preference satisfaction, holdings of primary goods, capabilities, or whatever). Human beings are beings who naturally define and seek their own ends. If this is right, far from being a failure of BNA, the fact that it does not provide an account of, and a method for, attaining positive goods beyond need would be a feature of the approach that better captures the moral realities that concern us. CA, insofar as it takes a positive view about what people should be and do beyond need, is shown in the light of this to go further than a ‘framework’ properly should.24

III. ‘BNA IS COMMODITY-FOCUSED’

Basic needs, this criticism goes, ‘are defined in terms of commodities’.25 In the terminology of Section II, the complaint is that BNA identifies needs in terms of their satisfiers and defines satisfiers as material commodities. Although this criticism of BNA is common and persistent, BNA theorists have always defined basic needs not as lacks of material commodities, but as requirements for ‘the opportunity for a full life’. Paul Streeten explicitly distanced BNA from ‘commodity fetishism’,26 and Frances Stewart distinguished the ‘bundle of goods’ from the ‘full life objective’ interpretation of BNA and argued that only the ‘full life’ interpretation is sustainable.27 Even at the 1976 International Labour Organisation conference, where BNA was first launched, employment—evidently a non-material need—was prominently listed as a basic need.

But the ‘commodity-focus’ criticism might be sustained if it is correct, as both Sen and Alkire claim, that even in the ‘full life’ interpretation, BNA presumes that meeting needs is a matter of supplying persons or communities with appropriate bundles of commodities to enable them to lead a full life.28 This criticism may apply to some of the claims that pragmatically oriented needs-theorists have made. Stewart, for example, is explicitly in the business of getting governments to supply necessary goods to citizens. But it fails when applied to any form of BNA that takes advantage of the kind of philosophical resources sketched above.

As David Wiggins emphasises, to meet a need is not always to supply a good:

If the always sentential form of needs claims had been consistently and carefully emphasized, moreover, there would have been far less cause for the ‘Capability

24I develop this criticism of CA in more detail in the course of distinguishing a full needs-centred normative moral theory from consequentialist theories in Reader (forthcoming).
26Streeten 1981.
Theory’ . . . to be seen as a rival to ‘Needs Theory’ . . . I share in the blame for this. I should have said that ‘have [the satisfier]’ was only a place-holder for the right verb.29

Just as the verb in needs statements need not be limited to ‘having’, so the ‘satisfier’ need not be ‘a medium-sized dry good’ (as J. L. Austen christened the category to which material commodities belong). A human being may need to [verb] [any kind of thing]; to do philosophy, to rest in a quiet atmosphere, to lose adipose tissue, to keep their teeth, to speak their native language, to entertain a memory, to be welcomed in a community, to be left alone, to share the earth, to have an idea, to suffer a punishment, to be allowed a good cry.

Further, if satisfiers need not be commodities, meeting needs evidently may not be a matter of providing commodities either. A statement of need merely signals an obligation to meet the need. It does not say who should meet it, or with what, or how. The need for a quiet atmosphere might oblige a community to move away from windswept Kerguelen (as I gather happened in the eighteenth century); it might require another community to make them welcome in a quieter place. If the need is widely shared, it might require a government to pass legislation banning noisy activities in places where people live. A state of occurrent need may sometimes be a state where only a quantum of a material good will help, but there is nothing in BNA as such to suggest this is the norm for neediness.

IV. ‘BNA GIVES INSUFFICIENT PRIORITY TO FREEDOM’

The practical problems with implementation described in Section I helped to give BNA a bad name as a paternalistic approach. But there is nothing in the core BNA idea, that as a matter of justice we must meet vital human needs, that implies that agents rather than recipients of needs-meeting justice should define which needs are to count, or how they should be met. At worst, BNA theorists may be guilty of leaving this question ‘unsettled’, of not saying enough to show how the freedom of recipients must count.30

Alkire develops this objection, arguing that BNA lacks the theoretical resources necessary to show how the needy must be given a central role in defining their own needs and determining how they should be met and how meeting human needs as such must involve ‘participation’. CA then allegedly comes to the rescue, making ‘explicit’ some ‘implicit’ assumptions in BNA about the value of choice and participation’.31

The objectivity of need does make needs-meeting policy vulnerable to paternalism. It is a small step from saying that needs are not first-person

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29 Wiggins 2006, fn. 10.
Authoritative to saying that they are so third-person authoritative that we can leave the needy first-person out of our deliberations altogether. But there is a balance of risks here. The objectivity of need is a fact, and it is also a fact that being needy, or being subjected to other pressures and privations, makes it harder for a person in occurrent need to identify their needs correctly and form appropriate preferences and values. Any defensible framework will have to be sensitive to this problem of ‘adaptive preferences’.

But the danger of paternalism in the conceptual structure of BNA has to be balanced against an equally real danger of choice- or freedom-fetishism which may be built into CA. CA requires us to expand freedoms to engage in valuable beings and doings.\textsuperscript{32} The word ‘valuable’ here tries to cover the difficulty and have it both ways. But if it means ‘what these people already actually do value’, then it risks perverse free-choice-fetishism. And if, on the other hand, it means ‘objectively valuable’, then it risks paternalism as much as BNA.

One aspect of the objection is that BNA fosters paternalism in the agents of justice; another is that it fosters passivity in the recipients:

‘Needs’ is a more passive concept than ‘capability’ . . . the perspective of positive freedom links naturally with capabilities (what can the person do?) rather than with the fulfilment of their needs (what can be done for the person?). The perspective of fulfilling needs has some obvious advantages in dealing with dependents (e.g. children), but for responsible adults the format of capabilities may be much more suitable.\textsuperscript{33}

To think neediness is a passive state, capability theorists must take ‘need’ to mean two things which the philosophical account of need sketched in Section II.I shows to be strictly independent of it. Having needs, in itself, is not a passive state. Depending absolutely on other things in order to exist is the normal and inalienable condition of every contingent being in the universe. For a need-state to be passive, the need must, in addition to being dispositional, also be occurrent—that is, the object of need must currently be lacking. And it must also be a need the needing being cannot meet for themselves. Every human being, necessarily and as such, has dispositional needs. But only some are ever occurrent. Thus, speaking philosophically strictly, the deprived have no more needs than the wealthy, children no more needs than adults and sick people no more needs than healthy. The differences are to be found, not in the number of needs, but in how many of the needs are occurrent and in how far the needy can meet their own needs.

If my needs are not occurrent, I am not passive: on the contrary, I am fit and ready to live my life. And even if a need of mine is occurrent, provided I can meet the need myself, again, I am not passive. Indeed, it is hard to think of a more

\textsuperscript{32}See http://fas.harvard.edu/~freedoms/resources/655CAtraining_Alkierre.pdf.

\textsuperscript{33}Sen 1984, p. 514.
active condition, than the condition in which I have an occurrent vital need which I can meet for myself. If I break my leg on a hike and can splint it well enough to hobble for help, I am about as active as I will ever be (and probably a lot more active than I would like to be).

If neediness is not a passive state, it follows that BNA need not foster passivity, but can take full advantage of the fact that needy human beings need as far as possible to have a say in defining their own needs, determining how they should be met and meeting them for themselves. It is an interesting further question, given the ineradicable fact of dispositional need, and the universal human vulnerability to occurrent need we cannot meet that this entails, why CA theorists seem to think that we should conceal the reality of human vulnerability to helplessness and dependency behind brave talk of human freedom to do and be.34

Sabina Alkire presses another version of this objection. She charges that BNA treats freedom and choice as separate needs, which may be traded against other needs: ‘BNA separates physical survival from autonomy and so tries to incorporate desirable choice into the framework as a separate variable’.35 CA improves on this, Alkire claims, using the notion of ‘capability’ rather than having or functioning, to build the requirement for freedom and choice into the concept of the morally demanding end. A freedom-restricting policy to meet needs could not count as good for CA, but, she argues, might count as good for BNA.

Capability theorists are right that their core distinction between having a good and being free to have that good is important. But they are wrong to think BNA cannot capture it. Some BNA theorists have indeed listed autonomy as a separate need. But once a philosophically nuanced concept of need is in hand, it becomes clear that this is not necessary. If my identity—what I am—determines what my vital needs are, and if I am essentially a free, rational, social human being, then that essential freedom will pervade and shape all my needs.

It is true that, if I were a ‘mere biological human being’ (if such a thing is conceivable), my vital need for food might then conceivably be a need to be fed in any old way, however carelessly or coercively—so that tossing me scraps or force-feeding me could count as meeting my need. But because I am the free, rational, social human being that I am (and of course all human beings as such are), my vital need for food cannot be anything other than a need to be treated with respect in relation to food as in relation to everything else. We can apply the philosophical test for morally important need readily here: could I go on without this? I am as surely prevented from living a human life if I am force-fed, as if I am starved. To the extent that freedom and choice are central to our identities as

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34John O’Neill (2006) explores an association common in Western culture between neediness and humiliation and suggests that this motivates denial of neediness and shunning of the needy. This association may motivate this criticism of BNA. See also Eva Kittay’s (1999) groundbreaking work on the implications of human vulnerability and dependency for ethics.
human beings, dispositional human needs cannot but reflect this fact. Human freedoms are not in tension with needs, they generate and structure them.

V. ‘BNA UNDER-SPECIFIES WHAT IS TO BE DONE’

Sabina Alkire charges that the multiple relativities of needs statements described by David Wiggins mean that ‘specifications of need could only be made in a very local situation and timeframe and could not possibly be framed as a set of global goals’. Needs statements are, indeed, relative: to an understanding of the needing being’s identity, to culture and individual outlook and to what is practically feasible. Each relativity is contestable, subject to the norms of public practical rationality. These relativities are ineradicable. But they do not put global goals out of reach, as Alkire fears, nor do they condemn us to hold our breath pending revelation of a mystery, or prevent us from forming any prediction or hypothesis about need, or from looking for ways to improve identification of need, communication about need and provision of help. Far from being a special problem for BNA, such relativity is actually a universal feature of normative statements as such. It is as much of a problem for CA as for BNA.

The right philosophical solution is to show that this is not a real problem at all. Relative statements can be robustly and usefully true. Indeed, spelling out the relativities—what sort of being this statement is about, their way of life and habitat and what is available to help them here and now—is what makes robust, useful normative truth possible. To see how this can be done in ways that make meaningful hypotheses, predictions and global goals possible and that provide concrete guidance to people trying to help, we need to look more closely at the mechanics of normative statements in general, through the lens of needs-statements in particular.

Needs statements can be general or specific, universal or particular. These two dimensions of variation are distinct and determine the truth-value of needs statements. The general/specific axis describes the size of the kind: ‘animals’ is general, ‘Californian condors’ is quite specific. The universal/particular axis describes the range of application within the kind: ‘all animals’ is universal; ‘animals in drought conditions’ is more particular, ‘this animal’ is a unique particular.

If we say, ‘Muriel needs her landlord to give her access to her land to dig’, we speak of all three elements with perfect specificity: this needer, this need-meeter, this object of need. But we can make more general statements that can be true and

36Wiggins 1987, pp. 11–14; discussed in Section II.A above.
37Alkire 2006; see also 2002, ch. 5.
38Martha Nussbaum 1993, discussing the ‘basic capability’ approach, uses similar arguments to show how contestability and specification relative to variable local factors are consistent with robust objectivity and truth.
39Wiggins first drew my attention to the importance of this distinction in correspondence. His thinking about it is influenced by Hare (1963, pp. 39–40 and passim).
useful for different purposes: ‘Tilling women need landowners to give them access to suitable land’; or ‘Farmers need a system of entitlement relations that give them land’; or ‘People need to be able to enact their working identities’. The levels can also be mixed, as when we say ‘Muriel needs some landowner to make land available’. or ‘The people need this land for digging’. True statements about the same need can be general or specific.

Every statement above was universal, applying to all members of the kind. A particular statement does not hold for all members of the kind. Some human beings—babies—need milk. ‘Some humans need milk’ is robustly true normative statement, but it is not universal. A policy supplying milk to all human beings would show the meaning of this need-statement had not been appreciated. Each of the elements of a needs-statement can be given at any level of particularity or universality. The particularity at the point of action (where it must always be this being needing this from this moral agent) is where the dimensions of generality-specificity and universality-particularity intersect—the perfectly specific is the particular.

Just as ‘overspecificity in a needs sentence [might] make[s] it false’, as when Wiggins points out that our ‘need’ for transport is overspecified, what we really need is access to facilities that are frequently needed, so overgenerality, universality and particularity can have the same effect, as when we say overgenerally that ‘human beings need milk’, or make the universal claim that ‘all mothers need to stay home to care for their children’, or the particular claim that ‘this mother needs to breastfeed her baby’.

While Wiggins suggests that greater generality aids truth, it is more accurate to say that specification of needs is difficult, with the result that any specific claim is empirically more likely to be false. But however vulnerable to error specification of need is, we cannot meet needs without it. This difficulty of making true useful normative statements is a practical difficulty, which faces any policy to guide action, from individual action, as when each of us must decide whom to help and how, to international aid agency action, as when a NGO or a governmental agency must decide which community requires what, who should deliver what and how. The idea that it could be otherwise is wishful thinking. It is an understandable temptation for CA theorists to imagine that their framework, which is relatively new and untainted by failures of specification and delivery, carries its own specification within it. But this analysis of normativity shows why it cannot be any better off than any other normative theory.

VI. ‘BNA “THRESHOLD” IS LIMITING AND QUESTIONABLE’

Central to BNA is the idea of a threshold. This threshold distinguishes vital needs, which are morally important and impose obligations to help, from other states

(e.g. capacities to benefit), which are morally neutral and place no obligations to help on anyone. The threshold invites two objections. First, if BNA is only concerned about well-being below the threshold, it may be guilty of ‘concentration on just the minimum requirements’\(^{41}\) and so only be ‘useful for poor countries’.\(^{42}\) It may be ‘confined to a narrow box’ and need to be made ‘just one part of CA’.\(^{43}\) There are two ways to meet this objection.

The first way is to remind critics of the inalienability of dispositional need. All communities, if they comprise human beings rather than gods, are needy. Human beings depend on their environment and on each other for their very existence. Any framework which implies that a human community could ‘advance’ to a stage where entrenched vital needs no longer have fundamental importance, would have lost its grip on reality. If CA does imply this, it undermines itself rather than BNA. Even the most narrowly defined basic needs—health care, food, shelter, freedom from violence—must remain as important in ‘advanced’ communities as in ‘undeveloped’ ones. Ensuring that such needs remain met is essential, even if in some lucky communities most of those needs are non-occurrent for many, much of the time.

The second way is to remind critics of the contestability of the threshold. Rational public deliberation determines the threshold. While some assume that needs must be held to be more morally demanding the more ‘entrenched’ they are (that is, fixed by unchangeable facts of nature), there is nothing in the concept of vital need as such to prevent ‘advanced’ communities from reaching, via deliberation, a broader view of entrenchment. Needs related to social identities (being a Mak’em or a Geordie, say), or practices (being a philosopher or a musician) could then count as basic.\(^{44}\) The philosophical test will still work: can this being live unharmed without this? Provided musical instruments are required for musicians to live unharmed, a robust justification is available for counting musical needs as vital needs. With this broader conception, the idea that BNA’s usefulness might be limited to deprived contexts is less plausible.

The second objection is that the threshold concept itself is problematic. Richard Arneson argues that it is impossible to draw or justify a sharp \textit{a priori} clear line between need and non-needed benefit, and uses this difficulty to support his claim that we should give up the idea that any particular point on the ‘scale’ of well-being can have more moral significance than any other.\(^{45}\) But this is a poor argument. Compare an argument from twilight to the conclusion that there can be no important difference between day and night. The impossibility of drawing a line must be conceded, but it does not undermine the claim that there is a

\[^{41}\text{Sen 1984, p. 515.}\]
\[^{42}\text{Alkire 2002, p. 166.}\]
\[^{43}\text{Sen 1984, p. 515.}\]
\[^{44}\text{MacIntyre 1981, ch. 14 and Alkire 2002, pp. 138–40.}\]
\[^{45}\text{Richard Arneson’s (2005) arguments against threshold views in the course of criticism of ‘basic capability theory’ provide a useful foil.}\]
significant difference. Clear cases on either side keep that beyond doubt. All the impossibility shows is that when we need our distinction to be sharp (say, when we need to decide a marginal case), we will have to do some rational contesting and deciding of the matter. And this is precisely what BNA claims: the threshold between morally important needs and morally neutral states is drawn in different places, using procedures of rational public deliberation, in different contexts.

Giving up the idea of a threshold may also be morally risky. It may lead one to find morally shocking claims plausible. ‘Bites of chocolate, if sufficiently numerous, can morally have more weight than a single premature death’.

As well as moral compromise, there is a risk of conceptual confusion. The claim about chocolate and early death is confused in the same way that ‘midnight is a very dark sort of day’ is confused. If we deny a significant difference between night and day, we lose our grasp of what midnight is. Just so, if we dispense with the idea of a moral threshold, we may lose our grasp of what moral demandingness is. If this is right, it implies that, far from limiting the usefulness of needs-theory, the threshold anchors BNA in the reality of moral priorities. And it also implies that to the extent that CA dispenses with a threshold, it lacks a vital resource. To frame helping action, we need conceptual tools to sort situations which require us to act, from those which do not. BNA provides the tools; CA may not.

VII. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to show that BNA has the resources, in what BNA writers themselves have claimed and in the extensive work on need available in historical and contemporary philosophy, to meet all the criticisms that have been levelled at it by those who have argued for its replacement or at least subordination to CA.

BNA is potentially philosophically sophisticated and has promising links with other areas of philosophy. BNA is not commodity focused and need not be paternalistic, foster passivity or be insensitive to the importance of freedom and choice. BNA as such is no more or less prone to under- or over-specifying what is to be done than CA (or any other normative theory). And BNA (which we should perhaps re-christen ‘NA’, to avoid misunderstanding), far from being useful only when thinking about how to help those in occurrent, persistent dire need (‘the poor’), is useful for ensuring the right political priorities wherever people with needs are to be found—that is, everywhere.

46 Arneson 2005.
47 I argue for this claim in detail in Reader (forthcoming), and make some preliminary related points in Brock and Reader (2002) and Reader and Brock (2004).
48 Thanks to Robert Goodin, Paul Streeten, Sabina Alkire, Des Gasper, Thomas Pogge and anonymous referees for The Journal of Political Philosophy, for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.
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