

# The Structure of Well-Being

## Incommensurability, Needs, and Sufficiency

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**Declaration**

I, Benjamin Patrick Fardell, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. I have properly acknowledged all ideas drawn directly from other authors.



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**Abstract**

As it is discussed in philosophy, economics, and some other social sciences, well-being is very commonly conceived of and treated in quantificational terms. However, it is difficult, if not impossible to make room in the quantificational conception of well-being for any notion of sufficiency—of having enough in a sense that it is especially ethically significant that people attain. This difficulty with sufficiency is encapsulated by the Threshold Problem: that of non-arbitrarily specifying a sufficiency level on a scale of well-being. This thesis takes this difficulty and this problem as an opportunity to investigate deeper problems with the quantifying approach. One line of inquiry pursued is whether a theory of needs could solve the Threshold Problem. To this end existing theories of needs are surveyed, but found wanting. The central element of the thesis, however, is a critique of the quantifying account of well-being emerging from a discussion of value incommensurability—which in turn provides resources for the development of an account of the structure of well-being. This account presents a new theory of needs, and analyses well-being *in terms* of needs. It avoids the Threshold Problem, because well-being is no longer a level at which a person is, nor an amount of anything they have. Rather, both having enough and being well are to have everything one needs.

*In loving memory of*  
*Charlotte Elizabeth Coursier*  
*(1988-2013)*

*... though she'd no doubt shred my arguments.*



## Preface

Given that this thesis is about well-being, it might seem odd that it begins where it does: with a discussion of Sufficiency, the view that it matters that people have enough. This view has recently been advanced, most notably by Harry Frankfurt, as a purportedly superior alternative to taking a direct concern with distributional equality. My interest in Sufficiency here does not, however, directly concern how it might fare in debates in political philosophy. It concerns rather how prevailing thought about well-being—in terms of *amounts* and *levels*—struggles even to make sense of the idea of having enough. This quantifying mode of thinking about well-being has deep roots, and informs and coheres with massively influential approaches to choice and rationality that appear to many to offer great explanatory benefits. They also promise to supply perhaps indispensably determinate guidance in practical decision situations, personal and political. Criticisms of aspects of views of this type are also common, especially in connection with applications in ethical theories such as utilitarianism; however, although there are many arguments that it faces limitations, or should be constrained, there is not really any systematic alternative picture. The task here is to supply the beginnings of such an alternative system.

Given the structure the thesis takes, the title's ordering of topics might also appear strange, listing first incommensurability, needs, then sufficiency. The rationale is that in fact the position on incommensurability I defend is most central to the argument, its most important element. In turn, the theory of needs it supports, though important as it is in enabling us to understand Sufficiency, is in fact the source of the most interesting ideas about well-being. Indeed, I argue that we should think about well-being *in terms of* needs. Sufficiency organises the dialectic, but its most important function is that of providing a way into the other topics and the broader project of

undermining the quantifying approach to well-being. The inability of this prevailing approach to account for sufficiency is a revealing flaw symptomatic of the underlying illness I attempt to treat.

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*B.F.*

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# 1

## **Introduction:**

### **The Problem of Sufficiency and Well-Being**

#### **1.1 Introduction to Sufficiency**

Broadly construed, what I will call Sufficiency is the view that it matters greatly that people have enough, in some sense, and that ensuring people have enough should be a guiding principle in the political distribution of social resources. Given this orientation, we might elaborate the notion as Resource Sufficiency, the view that it is important that people have enough of those social resources available for distribution. We can understand social resources to include not just material goods but also the realisation of certain personal and environmental conditions. 'Enough' we can understand as referring to some yet-to-be-determined finite amount of these resources, and extent to which these conditions are realised. We might alternatively develop Sufficiency as the claim that it is important that people have sufficient well-being. This Well-being Sufficiency might be attractive if we think that it is possible for governments to assess and promote people's well-being more directly. Another reason to take an interest in Well-being Sufficiency, especially important to the present project, is to understand what it is for a person to have enough in a way that is ethically significant primarily for themselves—and with whatever moral or political obligations others may have towards them being derived from this primarily personal understanding. Central to the method I adopt here is indeed to focus in the first instance upon what matters to individuals, regarding this as a vital precursor to any attempt to formulate moral and political principles relating to people's well-being.

This approach differs from most discussion of Sufficiency, which focuses directly upon variations of moral and political requirements different types of this view

might require. For example, there is the question of whether we should assign priority to allowing as many people as possible to reach the sufficiency standard or seek instead to benefit those furthest from it.<sup>1</sup> I will not discuss such questions at all. The organising problematic here is rather to overcome a foundational suspicion that the very idea of Sufficiency is confused, which I believe rests in large part upon an inkling that it faces what I will call the Threshold Problem. This is the problem of being able to say *how much* is enough, or ‘where’ the threshold of sufficiency ‘lies’. The problem is not posed as a genuine question; those who might do so would rather be expressing deep scepticism about the possibility that ‘enough’ could denote any especially ethically significant state of attainment. In turn, this scepticism arises, I believe, out of the tremendously prevalent idea that we can think about how well-off a person is in quantitative terms: call this Q. This is the view according to which a person’s well-being can be reduced to and represented by a single magnitude. Applied to Sufficiency, enough would refer to a threshold designating some especially significant ‘level’ this magnitude may reach. This first chapter examines Resource and Well-being Sufficiency, the challenge this Threshold Problem presents to them, and the underlying quantifying conception of well-being.

Next, in Chapter Two I consider one initially promising approach to Sufficiency: taking the state of sufficiency to be that in which a person has everything they need. I show that existing theories of need do not manage to overcome the Threshold Problem. In the remaining chapters, I do not, however, argue that there is a solution to it, so much as showing that it can be avoided—by abandoning the Q conception of well-being underlying and informing it. The strategy has two stages. In Chapter Three I undermine the Q by showing, through a discussion of value incommensurability, that it is not mandatory. Q is so pervasive that a non-quantifying conception of value and practical reason is apparently quite literally unthinkable to some—but I attempt to show how we can begin to understand such a mode of thought. Chapter Four develops the emerging ideas into a new account of well-being, and presents important respects

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Paula Casal’s (2007) survey of such debates. Liam Shields (2012) also provides a good summary of common ‘sufficientarian’ claims.

in which it is more plausible than Q. This involves advancing a eudaimonistic theory of needs, on which doing well in life is to be pursuing and satisfying one's disparate needs, a state irreducible to a single level or magnitude. Conceiving what it is for a person to be doing well alters how we understand Sufficiency. Doing so makes it possible to supply determinate conditions for having enough: it is having all that one needs.

For now let us expand the basic view of Sufficiency and the challenge it faces.

### 1.2 Satiability and Sufficiency

Assuming that it matters that *everyone* has enough, Sufficiency implies the principle 'Everyone should have enough'. This is a satiable principle, in the sense in which Joseph Raz distinguishes satiable and insatiable principles. Satiabile principles impose "demands [that] ... can be completely met", whereas an insatiable principle is "one which it is always possible in principle to satisfy to a higher degree". For instance, "Everyone should have as much pleasure as they can enjoy" is an insatiable principle (1986, 235-6). Someone might object that if at any given point in time someone is experiencing as much pleasure as they can enjoy then that person is completely meeting the principle's demands. What distinguishes it as insatiable, however, is implied by the qualification "in principle": there is no maximum 'built into' it, and its application is constrained only by present contingencies. In contrast, it is possible to satisfy a satiable principle such as 'Everyone should have enough' and still have resources left over—a certain amount is required, but only so much, even as the available stock of resources might change over time.

The standard of sufficiency need not define a *limit*—in the sense of a point at which it is not possible to be in a better state. As Harry Frankfurt observes while discussing the version of Sufficiency he proposes, it does not follow from "a certain requirement or standard ha[ving] been met" that a superior state not could not be reached (1987: 37). This is because having enough may not be the only thing that matters, and, if so, it will remain possible to enjoy other benefits over and above those attainments the principle of sufficiency requires. This would not rule out the possibility

that on the best account of Sufficiency the standard is also a limit; simply that we must not assume that it will be.<sup>2</sup>

We can see that associated with satiable principles are satiable conditions—for instance, ‘having enough’ is one such condition, but ‘enjoying pleasure’ is not. The difference is that when one is in a satiable condition one is in it *definitively*, we might say, such that all conditions in which people are in it are equal; whereas people can be in insatiable conditions to varying degrees and there is no upper bound inherent to the condition on the degree to which they can fulfil it.

Arriving at a normatively compelling account of what it is to have enough will be to find satiable conditions that are in themselves especially ethically significant for people to attain. By ‘in themselves’ I mean that meeting the conditions must have final importance, mattering in a way that is not a precondition for anything else. That is, they must be important ‘final ends’. The reason for this can be seen by considering that there are many conditions people could attain that do not matter at all, are trivial, or that are bad—and that we can determine what preconditions are sufficient for their attainment. For sufficiency to matter it has to represent what is enough for a condition constituting a final end that actually matters.<sup>3</sup> Having enough in the sense concerning us here would then be to have that which is sufficient to be in such conditions, and one task of this thesis is to identify what these could be.

### 1.3 Types of Sufficiency and the Threshold Problem

#### 1.3.1 Resource Sufficiency

As I have indicated, a common and influential way of understanding what ‘enough’ might be—and which leads to the Threshold Problem—is to think of it as an especially morally salient ‘level’. This idea of a ‘level’ most obviously suggests that we are talking about something of which a person has an *amount* or *quantity*. Thinking in amount-terms does certainly appear to make sense in the case of resources—we can have

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<sup>2</sup> Note that even if, as it happened, the point of say, sufficient well-being, *were* a limit and it were impossible to have more than enough *well-being*, we could still readily allow that one can have more than enough *resources*; superfluous to those necessary for reaching that standard and limit. (But also: having more resources wouldn’t count as a benefit unless there were something the resources were *for*.)

<sup>3</sup> More on this later.

concrete things in greater and smaller amounts. Even talk of levels or amounts of resources is not entirely straightforward, however; so in order to see how the Threshold Problem applies to Resource Sufficiency let us consider what that might mean.

The first thing to note is that if we want to be able to represent a person's *overall* level of resources we would need a homogeneous unit or amount; yet resources are not homogeneous. Someone might propose representing a person's overall level of resources by an amount of money (of a particular currency), since that is homogeneous. Yet the monetary value of a person's resources is *at best* a highly imperfect proxy for them—it is plausible that a person's resources include goods and other inputs which may not have monetary values, or which may be over- or under-priced. Moreover, the buying power of given amounts of money changes more or less arbitrarily: in cases of specific goods due to imbalances of market power, and; more generally due to rises and falls with inflation, deflation, and foreign-exchange-rate fluctuations. Fundamentally, too, market prices depend entirely on subjective preferences, and hence will very often deviate from objective values if there are such. This is without even considering whether there are things whose value could never be represented by a price. Yet whatever the imperfections of resources' actual monetary valuations, we might nonetheless think that the true values of various qualitatively different resources could be represented by magnitudes of a single 'currency of true value'. This could be artificially constructed, or otherwise (representing 'intrinsic value' perhaps), but in either case reflecting all resources' relative importance—with the amount of this currency a person commanded representing their overall level of resources. These would be their true values at a particular time, since they would vary depending upon how much of them a person had and how much of them they needed. Alternatively, one might entirely reject this whole idea of attempting to represent a person's overall level of resources as misguided—considering instead that we can only sensibly talk about the levels of particular kinds of resources they command. Resource Sufficiency might invoke either, claiming that having enough is to have a particular overall level of resources represented by some currency; or, that having enough is to

have a particular amount of each of various kinds of resources. The Threshold Problem as Resource Sufficiency faces it is to say what determines these resource-levels.

The obvious way for Resource Sufficiency to attempt to solve the Threshold Problem is to advert to what the resources are *for*. It is anyway implausible that some amount or level of resources should matter in its own right. The notion itself of a resource is that of a thing valuable because it is useful for further purposes—and this becomes especially apparent when we consider why, as above, the values of resources might vary across times and individuals. This is far from ruling out the possibility of there being valuable conditions, concretely specified, that matter in their own right—simply that in that case we might no longer be dealing with *Resource Sufficiency*. Frankfurt says of his version of Resource Sufficiency that having enough is to have enough “for a good life” (1999, 146), and this seems like an attractive enough way of fixing the threshold level, since our interest in Sufficiency generally derives from a concern with how well-off people are. This seems like a normatively compelling end. That our interest is so is evident in the way we are inclined to adjust the boundaries of what count as resources: alongside useful material goods we are apt to include things such as abilities and virtues (internal resources) as well as certain beneficial environmental conditions—and in short, *whatever* inputs tend to contribute to making people better off. Later we will nonetheless consider whether we might be concerned that people have enough resources for other ends.

### 1.3.2 Well-being and Sufficiency

We ought to set Resource Sufficiency aside for now, then, and instead consider Well-being Sufficiency, for two reasons which will take some unpacking. The first is that it is widely disputed that having a good life is a satiable condition. The second is that besides well-being, there is no other plausibly ethically salient end for which we might be concerned to ensure people have sufficient resources to achieve.

Taking the first, a sceptic about Sufficiency will be dissatisfied with Frankfurt’s response, and will press the question of *how good* a good life has to be. They will reject the notion that the condition ‘having a good life’ is satiable and claim that it is instead

much more plausibly insatiable; that well-being is a variable state that a person's life can possess or exhibit simply to lesser and greater extents, with neither privileged levels of possession, nor a necessary upper limit to which it can be possessed. In this view, any given person's well-being falls on a scale, which may be either a continuous absolute scale or an ordinal scale.<sup>4</sup> It is worth explaining the properties of each kind of scale at some length since, although tedious, it will save detailing them again at later points. Taking first an absolute continuous scale: if a person's well-being could be represented on this kind of scale it would figure as a single real-numbered magnitude. It is its measures being real-numbered that makes the scale continuous, which means that they can be non-integers as well as integers—7.13, say. However, the units do not matter. It is just that, for any two states of well-being—represented by whichever real numbers we assign to them expressing the same ratio of their values—, the scale is such that there could, in principle, be an infinite number of states between them. Valuable goods actually being discrete, however, the world may impose limits on how many inter-mediate gradations are physically possible. The scale is absolute because built into it is a point of zero well-being, with all other positive states of well-being being distances from that point. This, together with the scale's being continuous, imply that we can compare proportionally *how much* well-being any two people have: we can say that person A has twice as much as person B, and we could mark them against the scale as respectively 1 and 2, or 2.5 and 5, or 50 and 100—again, it does not matter which units are chosen, just that well-being levels are proportional to each in the same way that trees' heights are proportions of each other whether we measure them in metres or feet.

An ordinal scale of well-being is simply a ranking of states of life<sup>5</sup> in order of their betterness, the ordinal numbers being 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and so on. As in any ranking, such as a league table, any number of things may of course be equally ranked. Unlike the absolute scale I just presented, an ordinal scale is discrete, which means that there

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<sup>4</sup> There is a third type of scale—a cardinal scale, which is continuous but has no zero—but it is not directly relevant here. I will say something about it in Chapter Three.

<sup>5</sup> Alternatively: entire lives. But I am not especially concerned whether we are talking about present as opposed to whole-life well-being at this point.



are no values in between its ranks, between 2nd and 3rd for instance (differing from the real numbers in this way exactly as the natural numbers [1, 2, 3, ...] do). This kind of scale does not need to have a zero or a maximum—we can simply assess whether certain states are better than others without having to assume any absolutely worst or best state. Both the continuous absolute and the ordinal scale should be construed as representing degrees of objective well-being and not as based on subjective preferences. Again, each type of scale also represents well-being as an insatiable condition because neither assumes there to be any upper limit or fundamentally qualitatively distinct levels.

Thinking about well-being as a variable, insatiable property representable by either such scale, one would naturally conceive of sufficiency as a threshold level, described by a line drawn across the scale at some point.<sup>6</sup> The Threshold Problem for Well-being Sufficiency is then that of determining ‘where’ on the scale we should draw this special level. This way of picturing things, and this purported problem, is well-represented in some of Richard Arneson's work, where he expresses the problem as follows:

The core of my objection against sufficiency is that it demands discontinuity, a jump in our moral response, in an area where no basis for this discontinuity can be found. (2002: 194)

Elsewhere, he asserts, specifically with reference to a continuous scale:

There is no way that the sufficiency level, wherever we place it on the smooth continuum that marks improvements in a person's well-being, can be reasonably viewed as of such transcendent moral urgency as [...] sufficiency implies. (2006, 28)<sup>7</sup>

In summary, the problem is that of “specifying the sufficiency threshold in a nonarbitrary way” (Arneson 2002: 187).

While this appears to be a significant challenge *given* the view that well-being is variable and insatiable, we might wonder why we should take that view. A powerful

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<sup>6</sup> Whereas this could be *anywhere* on the continuous scale, of course on the ordinal scale such a line could be drawn only at some ordinal level.

<sup>7</sup> Arneson is here referring specifically to what he calls “strict sufficiency”, the view that bringing people to the sufficiency level should have lexical priority—but concludes the same about all ways any particular ‘level’ might have special ethical significance.

reason many do so is the plausibility of thinking that, for any given state of well-being, it is always possible to make it incrementally better or incrementally worse, and that there are no necessary limits to how far we can go in either direction. Whatever are the good things in life, there does not seem to be any reason built into the *very idea* of them being good that I could not always have them to a greater or lesser extent.<sup>8</sup> Another thing to point out—far from a reason in favour of the view, but an observation—is that levels- and amounts-talk can be found almost everywhere people discuss well-being in philosophy and other moral and political contexts. And it does not seem to be merely figurative; appeal to such thinking often does philosophical heavy lifting: consider the entire field of population ethics, or simply the general, common idea that even when we are not comparing extremely well-off people with others who are very poorly off, people can be differentially well-off *overall*. As Arneson notes, if for example we are to have a hope of comparing different people's well-being for moral and political purposes, then we seem to require a measure of it capable of "integrat[ing] the value of various goods that we find significant in a human life" (*ibid.*). People can be well-off to different degrees in all manner of specific attainments, but for moral and political purposes it seems to many that we need to invoke levels and amounts in order to decide who is better off overall than whom. We might find it impossible to do without such thinking.

Intrapersonally, already, we seem to be able to balance and substitute some valuable things with, and by, very different valuable things—and indeed, as we saw when attempting to arrive at an overall measure of a person's resources, we needed to appeal to a currency. Well-being supplies exactly that currency apparently necessary to assess the worth of different amounts of resources people have: so long as the well-being output or purpose the resources serve can be quantified, different input-resource bundles of varying quantities and qualities can be compared by how much well-being output they yield. In classical utilitarianism, hedonistically conceived utility satisfies this purpose, its intensity and how long it is sustained supplying the measure of the

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<sup>8</sup> Seen this way, the continuous and the ordinal conceptions of well-being come to depict, at the limit, the same view (as the increments tend to being infinitely small).

value of *all* things. In T. M. Scanlon's view, our thinking about well-being is still under "the shadow of hedonism": the sense prevails that "although hedonism is false there must be some other notion that plays the same role" (1998, 136-7). Short of hedonism, or a single Moorean non-natural property 'goodness' (1903), pluralists recognising distinct types goods are also commonly apt to think we can still weigh qualities against quantities at various rates to arrive at single overall measures—without, somehow, invoking any monistic "super-value" (Griffin 1986, 90). So pervasive is this sense that when we talk about weighing up and trading off alternatives we do not tend to notice the connotation such phrases have of reducing the values of highly diverse things and purposes to quantities of some single measure, the different amounts of which we balance against each other. We should not exaggerate, of course: if 'weighing' and simply 'choosing' or 'deciding' come to be regarded as truly synonymous, then they could equally be applied without any background assumption that the values are calculable. Nonetheless, the influence of such thought is unmistakable in these effects on our language.

Equally important, perhaps, is moreover the absence of any adequate, similarly well-worked-out and powerful alternative account of the structure of well-being to Q—one that could account for our ability to compare highly disparate goods and purposes, and, for that matter, underwrite the notion of sufficiency. Some argue that the comparability and substitutability of some valuable things are constrained by their being so important that they take lexical priority over lesser values—and this indeed represents a different way of thinking. However, whilst there does seem to be something right about the insistence that some things are inviolable and non-substitutable—a matter of primary concern in Chapter Three—lexical notions do not represent any serious alternative. Whether or not their rigidity is undeserving of the summary dismissals they often receive,<sup>9</sup> these at best constrain the quantifying mode,<sup>10</sup> and entirely lack its generality as a conception of the structure of value and well-being. Several authors have taken another route in adapting Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*, the

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<sup>9</sup> For a good example, see Broome (2004, 24-5, 28-9).

<sup>10</sup> Compare Robert Nozick's view of "side constraints" (1974, 29).

faculty of practical wisdom the wise and virtuous judge possesses, to give a non-quantificational account of how we choose between qualitatively disparate goods (*e.g.*, Wiggins 1987; 1997). However, by its very nature it remains mysterious upon what basis the judge could balance different concerns, and it provides no guidance independently of the particular verdicts of such a judge—nor, perhaps more fatally, for identifying the presence of practical wisdom and hence for deciding who to regard as such a judge (Mason 2011). In making a virtue of supplying no principles, the *phronesis* account wilfully chooses not to solve problems such as the Threshold Problem.

For the purpose of articulating Sufficiency, we might suggest retaining the idea of well-being as variably attainable, but suppose that there is some maximum. Again, however, there is neither any notion of a maximum *built into* Q, nor any resources internal to it that suggest how we might derive one. Limits to, constraints, discontinuities, and end-points on the scale can only ever be exogenous additions. It is certainly plausible that, with respect to some standards of sufficiency, people can be variably close to or far from having enough, and progress or partial attainment can be quantified. Such limited quantification is unobjectionable, and is not a concession to Q. To foreshadow quite heavily: this might be because, rather than the scale coming first, with a standard of sufficiency overlaid, imposed upon it exogenously, it might be that the satiable condition comes first, with a partial scale *derived* from it. The important thing to note is, again, that a standard of sufficiency, maximal or otherwise, cannot simply be a quantity.

## **1.4 First attempts to evade the Threshold Problem**

### 1.4.1 Possible alternatives to well-being for Resource Sufficiency

With well-being looking unpromising, we might consider Resource Sufficiency anew and look for some other satiable conditions besides ‘having a good life’ for which people might require sufficient resources. Since our interest lies in normatively compelling factors, we might turn to moral considerations—requirements, or motives such as compassion or beneficence: having enough might then be to have as many resources as others are obliged to give. Roger Crisp comes close to this proposal, where

he writes that, “The compassion of the impartial spectator [...] enables us to identify individuals’ entitlements to welfare-enhancing goods” (2003, 757). However, the problem with any proposal that lets moral obligations determine sufficiency is that it has things backwards. It is implausible that what counts as sufficiency depends upon others’ responses, and not rather that in the first instance it is the interests of the person whose plight demands response that determines the proper extent of the response. Indeed, in his later comments it becomes clear that Crisp does believe that insufficiency is defined primarily by a person’s lack (*ibid.*, 761-2), and with the impartial spectator’s compassion presumably then playing a merely heuristic role. It could of course happen that person A’s response to person B’s lack might not be *fully* determined by that lack—it could be constrained by countervailing requirements and/or prerogatives (*cf.* Cullity 2004, 17ff). However, these seem nonetheless to be constraints upon how strictly A is obliged to assist B in gaining enough, rather than to set the limits of what sufficiency constitutes.

Perhaps the demands of justice specify a normatively salient sufficiency threshold. Philosophers such as Michael Walzer (1983) and Elizabeth Anderson (1999) have argued that justice requires that people have sufficient resources for having equal standing and capacity for participation in a democratic society. Now, these could indeed define one part of a full political account of Sufficiency. Yet the problem with this approach is that it is insufficiently general for our purposes. Justice is, of course, not all that matters. In a fairly formal sense we can indeed assimilate the importance of justice to well-being: if justice does indeed matter, then it is as better for a person (for everyone) to live in a just society, in a just world, than otherwise. This may seem to misinterpret such demands of justice along consequentialist lines. However, its purpose is to reflect the observation that justice is a condition that, while (perhaps) satiable, can be incompletely attained, and cannot plausibly be thought to take absolute precedence over other life-enhancing goods. It may indeed have a very special importance, but as Rawls notably acknowledges, when it is not possible to completely fulfil even the basic requirements of justice (the extension of the basic liberties to all and the meeting of basic needs, in his theory), then the grounds of these must be

reckoned as being distributed in the same way as other life-enhancing goods (primary goods, for him). In such circumstances we might consequently be justified in exchanging liberties required by justice for improved material provision and growth (1999, 55, 132, 263-7)—there is clearly, then, no *radical* discontinuity between these. The role of justice is one amongst other goods that improves lives, albeit one usually enjoying a special priority.

It is Well-being Sufficiency that I will pursue here rather than Resource Sufficiency, on an understanding of well-being so expansive as to effectively assimilate all values.<sup>11</sup> Yet it is not supposed to be, metaphysically, a unitary value; as I understand it here, it rather describes the class of all the plural things that matter in people's lives (*cf.* Mason 2011), denoting neither any single nor disjunctive property. It might immediately be objected that collapsing all values into well-being renders it trivial—and that it is unclear what significance it can have if all substance has been stripped from it.

But the apparent triviality is deliberate. First, the conception is eudaimonistic, in the sense that it intends to take account of how *all* the things that matter to a person must be fitted together in their life, and how they together determine what it is for it to go well. Second, the formality owes to the fact that the thesis advanced here is (mostly) not a substantial one: it is rather about the *structure* of what matters in people's lives, where this could be variously substantially filled out. Among others, one motivation for this structural approach is that there is not even any reason here to insist that there are any universal ways it is best for people to live. It is common for moral philosophers to assume that morality and other values are both objective and universal (indeed, some seem to take these to be synonyms), but there is no reason to commit here to the universality of objective values. We can think that there are facts about what matters to different people, and so in a sense a Parfit-style objective list (1984, Appendix I) corresponds to each of them, but allow people's lists potentially to be idiosyncratic. The main ideas advanced here concern only how the items on those lists are structured.

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<sup>11</sup> Taking a hugely encompassing view of well-being is something I share with "axiological" proponents of Q, such as Broome (1991).

### 1.4.2 Adding substance to well-being

Another motivation for the structural approach is that merely appealing to richer substance is incapable of supplying satiable conditions for Well-being Sufficiency. We can take some suggestions from some historically salient examples Raymond Geuss describes: the virtuous life (often in the “bourgeois” sense—the conventional life); the heroic life “life devoted to large-scale achievement”; the happy life of subjective contentment; the life of authenticity, and; the aestheticised or stylised life (2005, 90-3). We might add the ‘autonomous life’ either as a separate entry on this list, or as possibly as a potentially valuable element of certain other more specified lives. It is plausible, and we have a hazy idea how it would work, that there is a degree to which one could sufficiently live up to each of these ideals. However, it is difficult to spell out, since merely to say that large-scale achievement, or authenticity is good builds in no notion of satiability. Simply indicating that things such as these are good does not foreclose interpretation by way of Q: with the unrestricted possibility of incremental improvement. The notion of the happy life is a case in point, clearly wide open to an insatiable hedonistic reading. In the case of the virtuous life, it is admittedly clearly possible on some accounts to be perfectly virtuous (or perfectly conventional). But this is because we have a good rough idea of the structure of moral requirements, and of how they demand only so much. Moreover, as with justice this is presumably neither the only satiable condition it matters that one attain, nor is it indubitable that it must not at times be balanced against other worthy purposes.

To illustrate how this point plays out, take Frankfurt’s claim that one has enough resources for the good-enough life when one’s “prospects [...] [are] good enough to ensure a life that includes many genuinely valuable elements and that people who are both sensitive and reasonable find deeply satisfying” (1999, 147-8). Let us read this as claiming that, ultimately, being deeply satisfied with one’s life is really a basic good-making property of a life. The problem with this proposal is that, satisfaction surely coming in different degrees, it provides no explanation for why ‘deep’ here should mean anything more than ‘very’, or ‘greatly’. It might appear that we have an intuitive sense that the satisfaction to be had from, say, eating an ice-cream



is of a different order from that to be had upon completing a Master's thesis; and that the latter might be said to be deep, while the former we would regard relatively trivial or simple. Such is the kind of intuition on which Frankfurt is trading. However, he does nothing to explain why this should be so—which is also necessary in order to respond to the competing suspicion that what makes satisfaction deep in the former case but not in the latter is just that the former is a *very high degree* of satisfaction. For Frankfurt, then, the Threshold Problem—*redux*—would be that of saying just *how deep* one's satisfaction with one's life must be before it is sufficiently good; of what 'level' of depth could possibly be significant enough that the reason we have to be 'deeply' satisfied runs out. We need an account of the structure of the kind of condition 'depth' is intended to evoke.<sup>12</sup> Appeal to different substantial values will not itself meet the challenge the Threshold Problem presents.

### 1.5 Summary

In this introductory chapter I have described the connection between Sufficiency and satiability, Resource and Well-being Sufficiency, the Threshold Problem, the quantificational conception of well-being, and some associated types of well-being scale available. I have advocated focusing upon Well-being Sufficiency on the grounds of the eudaimonistic approach I take to well-being and values generally—which will develop as we progress and, I hope, eventually be seen to come into its own. I have tried to evoke Q's real appeal, the hold it has on our thinking, and I have indicated the apparent difficulties we face in departing from it—not least because it is not entirely clear how to proceed. I have nonetheless concluded that in order to do so we must find a structural alternative to that mode, and that appeal to merely substantially different accounts of well-being will not work. Whatever mere substance(s) we point to, the proponent of Q can demand an account of how better to view it than as something of which we can always simply have more or less, our attainment of the weighted sum of whatever good-making properties of lives we favour placed somewhere on an

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<sup>12</sup> Concerning Frankfurt's choice of condition here: I would in any case expect that deep satisfaction is what is appropriate when one has attained enough, not that deep satisfaction determines what enough *is*.



indefinitely extended scale of well-being. Failing a structural alternative there is no room here for the idea that whatever someone might claim to constitute sufficiency could be anything more than an arbitrary, indefensible level.

Chapter Two begins to take up the proposal that we can develop such an alternative by linking sufficiency with *needs*—an idea Frankfurt gestures towards (1999, 149), and which Crisp explicitly mentions but discards as unworkable (2006, 158). There are several reasons why needs might promise to offer a way forward. One is that necessity and sufficiency are allied logical concepts: it is plausible that having enough is to have everything one needs. The idea of a need also intuitively suggests something satiable, that is moreover at least a potentially normatively compelling standard too. We might even have cause to hope that needs offer a genuinely alternative way of looking at well-being, being perhaps not mere bearers of value but importing a degree of inherent structure.

Besides exploring the concept of needs, the following chapter is in part an extended elucidation of the Threshold Problem as it applies in special cases, and a continued elaboration of the approach to well-being I take. This is so because the accounts of needs we will consider do not succeed. However, it is nonetheless an essential precursor to the solution developed in the chapters following, since adequately grounding the new conception of needs I will develop demands a critique of existing theories.

## 2

### Needs I:

#### Extant Theories of Needs and their Problems

We have to find some mode of deliberation about values that sees them as they fit into particular lives. The manifestation of these objective values in particular lives is the deepest measure of value.

— James Griffin (1986, 55)

##### 2.1 The bare idea of need

Here is one obvious and uncontroversial sense in which a person can be said to need something: if there is some *a* that is a necessary precondition for some aim or purpose *b* that a person has. However, purposes can be trivial, worthless, or wicked. This being the case, and supposing that *a* is not itself *inherently* valuable, any normative necessity *a* possesses must be hypothetical—that is, conditional—upon the normative necessity of *b*. But of course, in order for anyone to need anything in a normatively compelling sense, the chain has to end somewhere; for an interesting account of needs there must be another sense in which things can be needed. We can call the second sense categorical, or absolute, necessity, defined negatively as that which is normatively necessary not for any further purpose.<sup>13</sup> More positively, we can say with Aristotle that this kind of necessity attaches to ends that are worthy of choice on their own account, or for their own sake, and not for the sake of anything else (Aristotle 2011, 1097b). Now, any normative necessity a hypothetical need may have is derivative, inherited from the end for which it is ultimately necessary, when that end is a categorical need. It appears, then, that any normatively salient claim that a person needs some *a* (where *a* is not itself categorically necessary) will exploit both the non-normative necessity of *a*

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<sup>13</sup> This is to use the same terms as David Wiggins (1987, 10), but to forgo adopting his positive, harm-based definition of the notion.

as necessary precondition *and* the categorical necessity of some final end *b* for which *a* is such a precondition. There may be many intervening links, but each link in such a chain inherits any normatively significant necessity it has from the categorically necessary final end(s) it ultimately serves. It should also be noted that it is possible for a single item, state, or other ‘thing’ to be at once a categorically necessary final end, choice-worthy on its own account, *as well as* a necessary means to some other categorically necessary final end(s). Lastly, since attaining a given end will typically have multiple preconditions, in multiple combinations, in place of *a* will usually be a set of alternative sets of necessary preconditions on *b*, a person needing to fulfil only one of which in order to attain *b*.

One familiar kind of categorically necessary end is the object of a moral requirement: if in some given circumstances morality requires that a person pursue end *b*, then it is categorically necessary that they pursue it. If *a* is hypothetically necessary for *b*, the person must pursue *a* because they must do whatever *b* requires. Our question here, however, is whether there are not only things people need to do for others, but things which they categorically need for themselves. For this to be the case there must be things which are in some more personal way indispensable, unforgoable, unforsakeable, or something similar.<sup>14</sup> This chapter canvasses several extant proposals for what such ends might be. Such proposals commonly understand categorical need as that which is necessary to avoid harm, an idea we will consider at length and finally reject (§2.3). Whether independently of the harm definition, or as supplying content to the notion of harm, we will also discuss categorical need understood as that which a biologically derived notion of flourishing requires, and as socially determined (§2.4). As substantial accounts they might appear unpromising, given Chapter One’s conclusion that what we actually require is an alternative way of thinking about well-being’s structure. But let us see whether this apparently richer structure they import from the concept of need can help. First, however, the following section addresses

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<sup>14</sup> I take these terms from Garrett Thomson (1987) and Wiggins (1987).

some initial concerns about focusing on needs, and sets out some parameters for our approach.

## 2.2 Initial suspicions and preliminaries

### 2.2.1 Desire and value

Justification by necessity (of a goal, and of the means to it) is one of the most common—and most commonly abused—forms of justification offered. One might ask: what has ‘necessity’ got to do with justification? The ‘necessity’ of the goal is very likely the suspicious term of the argument. But in *form* it is sound enough. (Anscombe 1981, 145)

As Elizabeth Anscombe here observes, some might accept the cogency of the hypothetical form of need, but doubt that there are any categorically, normatively necessary ends. David Wiggins relates an economist once asking him, “What do you mean by a need? Is a need just something you want, but aren’t prepared to pay for?” (1987, 5)—a question that implicitly contains two related suspicions. The first is that people’s interests are ultimately constituted solely by what they desire. Such wants are highly contingent, variable, and often transient. But more than this, if ends are ends simply because they are desired, then there is no place for ends such as categorical needs that are especially normatively significant: a mere desire for bread and a desire for a Michelin-starred restaurant meal are on a par, normatively speaking. Of course, in certain conditions, say if one is without food at all, and without the means to buy the latter, the former is very likely to appear more urgent to one (‘stronger’, or higher-ranked in order of preference, or some such). But neither is of any greater importance *as such*—there is no independent evaluative standpoint. The second suspicion is that the explanation for why needs-claims are nonetheless ubiquitous is that they merely confer upon people’s desires powerful rhetorical force, and are a form of special pleading of *illusory* normative significance.

Taking these out of order, the problem with the second suspicion is that a much better explanation for this rhetorical force is that it trades on the possibility that people can, in fact, need things in a normatively compelling sense. It is much more plausible that a legitimate pre-existing concept has been co-opted, and adapted often for purely

rhetorical purposes, rather than that it was invented purely for such. This allows, of course, that people can also illegitimately claim that they need things that, really, they do not. Yet this does nothing to diminish legitimate claims. It is of course another question whether the legitimate concept of a normatively compelling need succeeds in latching onto anything in reality, but that is one this project attempts eventually to help answer.

The problem with the first suspicion is that dispensing with needs altogether has graver consequences than Wiggins' economist might perhaps have realised. As claimed in the previous section, no needs-claims of the mere necessary-precondition form can be normatively compelling unless the ultimate end is categorically necessary—which simple desires on all accounts lack. In consequence, if needs-claims *never* have any normative force, then their normativity threatens to fall out of the picture entirely. Now, in the case of people's personal ends more generally, if they are all simply the objects of whatever contingent unreflective desires they happen to have, then there is no sense in which a person must or should do anything for themselves at all. There is then no space left for non-instrumental practical rationality if following one whim can ultimately never be any rationally worthier of choice than following any other. Regarding others, if others' interests are likewise all simple desires, there can be nothing a person must, should, or need to do for them. Although highly unorthodox, I wish to claim that we cannot really separate out the concept of genuine needs from the concept of normative requirements generally—they co-extend, stand and fall together, and anything we *must* do or have (ethically, or otherwise) is a need for us. Seen in this way, it is even plausible that when uttered normatively the terms 'must', 'ought', and 'need' each refer to the same concept of something that is a demand of practical reason (whether intra- or interpersonal). The point is intimately related to the eudaimonistic view of well-being I have already hinted at, and will expand upon in §2.2.3. This might seem an extraordinary and unpromising suggestion; however, on the contrary, it will eventually prove to be fruitful. If a person's needs comprise what they are required to do generally, it follows we must have needs if we are to avoid a state of nihilism about

ethical normativity in general.<sup>15</sup> It might perhaps be said, 'But of course we must not, failing unusual circumstances, allow others to *die!*' That would indeed be a concession to the proponent of needs as presented here—for *if* we think others must live surely we ourselves need to live too. The way might then be open to admitting further needs, since it would be strange if people must live and yet have nothing further they need to do and have.

Of course, instead of reducing values to subjective desires, another way one might try to do away with needs is by sticking with a Q-type view of—objective—value discussed in the previous chapter. Yet, to the extent that views of this kind are not purely descriptive, and claim to have some normative force, *even they* cannot avoid admitting the idea of need: according to them, the single need people have, their one categorical end for which all else is necessary, is to always pursue the greatest well-being or utility, or the highest objectively ranked end open to them. Once we recognise this, however, the pressing question is whether such reductive descriptions of what we need are adequate. Do people really only have one fundamental need? Perhaps we can analyse what it means for certain things to be more valuable or better than others in a way that preserves the idea that people have various, unreduced and specific, categorically necessary ends. Perhaps self- and other-regarding values have a little more structure than their simply being aggregated or ranked. Chapter 3 especially, on incommensurability, will explore these possibilities. The main point for now is that, failing the admission of ethical nihilism, the very *notion* of categorical need cannot coherently be discounted at the outset.

### 2.2.2 Relativity

A different kind of worry about certain theories of needs is that if they are non-reductive they might fail to account for the apparently vast diversity of people's needs across individuals and cultures. One response would be to observe that such apparent diversity is less than it appears: that is to say, historically and culturally specific methods of attaining different concrete ends are all ways of meeting more generally

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<sup>15</sup> This is to do adapt and extend to my approach to needs Christine Korsgaard's line of argument in her discussion of hypothetical imperatives (2008, Ch. 1).

specified universal human needs. Food and shelter might be (intermediate, that is, non-final) needs all people have, even if there is variation in how, specifically and concretely, people meet them—with rice, wheat, or fish; timber, concrete, or bricks. Someone making this reply might expect, then, that we can capture them all with a sufficiently general list of universal human needs. For example, Martha Nussbaum has proposed that people need to have the “central human capabilities” to: live a life; be in good bodily health; enjoy bodily integrity; cultivate their senses, imagination, and thought; emotionally develop; effectively use their practical reason; maintain affiliation and involvement with others on a basis of fundamental equality; relate to other species; play, and; have control over their environment (political and material) (1999, 78-80).<sup>16</sup> Others ambitiously seek to derive all intermediate and culturally specific needs from much more general purportedly universal fundamental needs for autonomy and social participation (Doyal and Gough 1991). However, we ought to take seriously the worry that there could be even more diversity than even a highly general list of needs could possibly capture.

This worry suggests a need to balance the plurality of non-reductive accounts whilst retaining some degree of the generality of reductive ones. We might need to be prepared to account for more variation in people’s needs than non-reductive accounts typically allow. I do not mean to dismiss such attempts off-hand—gesturing at these is simply to illustrate a potential concern. As we will find, some of the accounts we discuss in this chapter appear too rigid, or are relativised to the wrong factors, the result of each of which is that they often fail to account for what strongly appears to be genuine variation.

### 2.2.3 What people really need

If we could arrive at an adequate theory of needs it would have obvious moral and political relevance, and some theorists explicitly state that their interest is political.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> These are merely labels, each referring to a detailed set of attainments and abilities, but we don’t need to assess these or Nussbaum’s theory generally here. Capability-theorists do not like the language of needs, because it suggests that the needy are passive recipients, when in fact we do better to think of ourselves as *enabling* them to live their own lives. However, I think such theories’ central claim remains that people *need* to have these capabilities.

<sup>17</sup> Compare Scanlon’s observation that proposed standards of well-being are often “supposed to measure

Wiggins seeks to isolate “a priority principle about true needs that is either an inchoate political principle (a principle of social justice) or nothing” (1987, 25). David Miller wants to “understand ‘to each according to his needs’ in a way that at least potentially qualifies it to serve as a principle of justice” (1999, 204). Similarly, a theory can be more readily put into practice—‘operationalised’—if it draws up a list of fairly specific attainments that it asserts people need. Such anxiety to orient theories of needs towards practice is understandable. However, as when we theorise about well-being generally, we must avoid the distortion of our enquiry’s object that can arise if we formulate our account of it already with a quite specific notion of what we believe its political role will be (Scanlon 1993). This might occur if, for instance, what we seek is a direct metric for distribution, and we shoehorn the concept of need to fit our requirement. The specific worry is that, presumably, a political theory of need will assume that what count as needs are (something like) certain especially important goods it is the role of fellow citizens at large, through the state, to secure for each other. However, such a conception will unfailingly fall short of a full specification of what any particular individual needs to live a good life—not least because many things people need, unlike paradigmatic resources, can only tentatively be ‘distributed’ (consider *affection*, if that is something some particular person needs). This is not to deprecate the need for theories more directly applicable to moral and political problems—only to point out that if our interest in needs derives from a concern with people’s well-being, our account ought to aim to describe needs in terms of how they really matter to individual people’s well-being, disregarding at this stage how easily measurable or directly applicable those needs turn out to be. The proper role of more politically oriented theory related to needs would then be to say which subset of the things people need are of political concern, and how we ought to respond to these. We can nonetheless be confident that getting the pre-political picture right can only make any later account of needs’ political relevance more accurate.

This distinction notwithstanding, in the foregoing discussion I have slid

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only those aspects of a life that, according to the theories in question, it is the responsibility of basic social institutions to provide for” (1998, 110).



between talk of what people need and what they need to do, both for themselves and others. This relates to the claim that there is no important distinction between needs and other normative concepts importing the notion of necessity (must, ought, required, and so on). What people really need in the normatively compelling sense we are interested in is whatever it is necessary for them to have and to do in order to live well. Living well is not necessarily the same as well-being as typically narrowly construed—construed, for instance, as a state of physical and mental health, or slightly less narrowly as also including success in prudential goals (but in either case as *excluding* success in other-regarding goals). We might adopt a narrow notion of well-being if, for moral and political purposes, we wish to avoid double-counting people’s interests—when a given interest figures in what matters both to the person it directly concerns as well as to another person to whom the first person’s welfare matters. Yet what really matters to individuals is their living well, or *eudaimonia*—*whatever that entails*—, but which typically includes both their true self-regarding and other-regarding interests. As I am approaching the concept of need, a person’s moral and prudential needs are equally ends either they *must* pursue, or things necessary for that pursuit, and there can therefore be no fundamentally significant division between them (*cf.* Williams 1985, 49-53; Raz 1987, 313-20). It therefore makes no sense for others considering a person’s needs always to privilege those designated prudential or exclude their other-regarding ones. I am not benefited—it isn’t better for me—if I receive something that comes at great expense from someone I care about. So a theory of a person’s true needs, ahead of any political or moral concern for how others might seek to (help them to) meet them, will be whatever they need in order to do what they must do in order to live well. In order for people’s needs to be normatively compelling for others who might assist them, needs must be normatively compelling for those people themselves.<sup>18</sup> If we are interested in people’s needs out of concern for what is best for them then our conception of needs must reflect this.

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<sup>18</sup> To avoid any misunderstanding this is not compulsion in the sense that such considerations *actually* compel.

Yet we are not assuming that the normative necessity of something entails that it is best or choice-worthiest all things considered—and hence that there cannot be clashes between the things one needs. There can indeed, and not only between one’s self-regarding and other-regarding needs. Needs of all kinds can pull us in different directions; their categorical necessity, the inescapability essential to them, simply appears in how the distinct demands they impose are not conditional upon any other considerations, including what else one might need. We will discuss this matter at length in the next chapter in relation to incommensurability.

### **2.3. The avoidance of harm as a categorical need**

#### 2.3.1 What is harm?

Philosophical proponents of needs have most commonly followed Joel Feinberg in making the substantial claim that categorical needs are those things necessary to avoid *harm* (1973, 111).<sup>19</sup> It is thought that we understand roughly what it is for someone to be harmed, and that avoiding harm is a morally “unimpeachable” end uniquely suitable for generating the special normative demand a categorical need implies. Avoiding harm also connotes the urgency and “overriding priority” genuine claims of need can possess (Thomson 1987, i). The need to avoid harm moreover has good claim to be suitably inescapable, since we might expect harm to be linked to aspects of the way we are that we cannot change. Whatever we do, we will always be harmed if we go without food, for instance (*ibid.*, 25-7). Take the case of Alison, who wants an ice-cream because she is thinking about how good one will taste; and of Brendan, who needs a proper meal because he is seriously malnourished. It is natural to say that Alison will be unharmed if she does not get an ice-cream, and that Brendan will be harmed if he does not get food. Obviously Brendan *must* have food, as soon as possible, and that this can give us strong reason to aid him in clear preference to going over to the kiosk with Alison. Needs theorists tend to suppose that it is the role of harm here that can explain why Brendan needs food but Alison does not need an ice-cream.

However, invoking harm does not in fact help us to make any progress towards an adequate account of categorical needs. The trouble begins when we consider what

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<sup>19</sup> These include David Miller (1976), Thomson (1987), and Wiggins (1987).

exactly it is that 'harm' means. Brad Hooker distinguishes four possible definitions:

- (i) Harm could be understood as a *reduction* of welfare, such that *y* is harmed if and only if *y*'s welfare is less than it was right before the harm.
- (ii) Harm could be understood in a counterfactual way: an event *e* harmed *y* if and only if *e*'s not occurring would have left *y* better off than *y* was in fact left because of *e*'s occurrence.
- (iii) Harm could be understood in a *highly moralized way*, as in *y* is harmed if and only if *y* is wronged.
- (iv) Harm could be defined in terms of reduction of welfare below a certain threshold, *e.g.*, the threshold for a decent human life. (Hooker 2008, 186)

Hooker argues that none of these but the last is adequate for the task needs-theorists want harm to serve. Let us consider each of them in turn. Hooker's conclusion is very nearly correct. He gives us decisive reasons to reject the first three definitions of harm, and there is no good alternative to an understanding of harm very close to the threshold view.

However, we should reject some of Hooker's reasons for ruling out certain of these definitions, and in doing so our discussion will also serve to illustrate some common pre-conceived notions about what needs problematically colouring the discussion.

### 2.3.2 Highly moralised understandings

The understanding of harm as conceptually linked with being wronged, (iii), is the one we can most simply dispense with. One such link could be: if *y* is wronged, then *y* is harmed. On many understandings of well-being, this is false. Hooker considers it a definite possibility that, if breaking a promise to someone happens to greatly benefit them in some way, then this person is wronged but not harmed (*ibid.*, 188-9). Others with different conceptions of well-being might not consider that nearly so obvious; however, even if, contra Hooker, people are harmed whenever they are wronged, this would still not help us with our account of needs, because the account would remain uninformative. First, leaving wrong totally unspecified would mean our conception of need would differ depending upon what moral theory we adopted; yet the kind of theory of needs sought is supposed to operate at the level of fundamental values, and

help us to spell out at least part of what is wrong and unjust in the first place. Second, and more importantly, on any plausible conception of need we need things besides not being wronged, things with which no one jointly or severally is obliged to provide us: this will be so for anything people need but are themselves responsible for getting. This being the case, this moralised notion of harm would at best be incomplete, failing to specify what else constitutes harm. Moreover, we might expect that it is the ‘what else’ that would illuminate most (if not all) of what the wrongdoing is in the first place.

Here is another kind of link between harm and wrong: if *y* is harmed, *y* is wronged. More than unhelpful, this is plainly false, since as Hooker observes, “We are sometimes harmed by acts of nature, but they do not wrong us” (*ibid.*).

### 2.3.3 The reduction in welfare and counterfactual accounts

Hooker presents three arguments against the reduction in welfare definition of harm, and two against the counterfactual account. It will be useful to take his cases against the two accounts together, because two of the former arguments and both of the latter ones are very similar, and suffer the same defects.

One sound argument against the reduction in welfare view defeats the idea that avoiding *reductions* is what matters. The point is simple: often people need things that they lack and require in order to get *better*. For instance, someone might have a health condition that disables them in a way that is uncomfortable and prevents them from engaging in certain valuable activities, but which will not get any worse. In such a case, it is highly plausible that the person might need a treatment for this condition that will improve their situation. This is a good reason to reject the reduction in welfare definition of harm.

However, Hooker’s remaining two sets of similar arguments are problematic. In one set, Hooker presents an argument against each view as a *reductio*. Against the reduction in welfare understanding:

P1r Needs are what a person must have to avoid being harmed.

P2r Harm is reduction from an immediately prior higher level of welfare.

C1r Needs are what a person must have in order to avoid reduction

from an immediately higher level of welfare.

- P3r There is a huge variation in people's welfare levels, even within a single society.
- C2 Even within a single society, there is a huge variation in needs, in line with the variation in levels of welfare. (*ibid.*, 187)

Against the counterfactual understanding:

- P1c A person *y* needs *x* if and only if *y* must have *x* to avoid harm.
- P2c *Y*'s not getting *x* harms *y* if and only if *y*'s not getting *x* leaves *y* worse off than *y* would be left if *y* got *x*.
- C1c Needs are what a person must have in order to avoid being left worse off than she would have been if she had gotten the needed items.
- P3c Even within a single society, because of the huge variation in levels of welfare, there is a huge variation in what a person must have in order to avoid being left worse off than he or she would have been.
- C2 Even within a single society, there is a huge variation in needs, in line with the variation in levels of welfare. (*ibid.*, 188)

P1r and P2r comprise the harm view of needs and the reduction in welfare view of harm, P3r is indisputable—Hooker compares his own and Bill Gates' welfare—and C1r and C2 each obviously follow. P1c and P2c comprise the harm view of needs and the counterfactual account of harm, P3c is obvious, and C1c and C2 follow. The arguments are valid.<sup>20</sup> What is incorrect is Hooker's claim that C2 tells against a view of needs on the grounds that it "will be unattractive to needs theorists and is anyway implausible" (*ibid.*).

Hooker's verdict relies on assumptions about needs foreshadowed in §§2.2.2-2.2.3 that we ought to reject. Those who are committed to developing theories of needs *directly* applicable to political-philosophical and policy problems will indeed find C2 unacceptable. For the purpose of making the extent to which different people's needs are met directly comparable, it would indeed be most convenient if needs were universal. Hooker, too, appears to take it for granted that what a needs-theorist should be offering is an account of which things *all* people need. Yet that is a substantial and non-obvious assumption. For it to be non-accidentally true, it would have to be the case that, for all the things we categorically need, we need them in virtue of something

<sup>20</sup> Though we will of course later come to reject thinking about welfare in terms of 'levels'.

all people share. Candidates we will consider, and reject, in §2.4 include species membership and membership of the same society. It will eventually be seen that we should not assume that everyone's categorical needs are all fundamentally the same. It might be thought that we must make this assumption if needs are going to turn out to be objective. However, as suggested in §1.4.1, objectivity and universality are not the same thing. We will most clearly see this in the course of developing the positive account of needs in Chapter Four. For now, let us not speak too soon by supposing that a theory of non-universal needs will lack moral and political relevance.

Hooker's other problematic set of arguments against defining harm either as a reduction in welfare or according to the counterfactual account turn on the plausibility of the idea that the rich have everything they need. Actually, the arguments themselves are acceptable:

As against the counterfactual view, Hooker points out that the rich surely do not need all of their income and wealth—and this is extremely plausible. We do indeed want to be able to say that there are people who have more than they need, and that losses they accrue that do not take them below the point of lacking what they need do not count as harm. This modest conclusion provides sufficient reason for us to reject the counterfactual account.

As against the reduction in welfare account, Hooker points out that “there are plenty of reductions in welfare that don't involve needs”, and this is likewise a sufficient reason to reject *this* account.

It is the example with which Hooker illustrates the point against the reduction in welfare account that I think is outrageous:

Suppose Bill Gates has vastly more than he needs, both materially and otherwise. Then he loses one of his most loved friends. His welfare is thus reduced. But this reduction in no way takes him below the threshold of need satisfaction. So, if harm is understood as reduction in welfare, then being harmed is not a sufficient condition for having unmet needs. (*ibid.*, 187)

Given the premise that, in losing his friend Gates suffers a “reduction [that] in no way takes him below the threshold of need satisfaction”, the example does appear to

succeed in rebutting the reduction in welfare account. Yet it also seems vaguely incoherent, since that premise casts doubt on the characterisation of the friend as being extremely dear to him. Unless Gates loves his friends in such a way that the loss of one of them is a trivial loss then saying “[his] welfare is thus reduced” puts it rather mildly!—as if all his riches could simply make up for that loss. We should resist the apparent insinuation that since Gates is so rich, he clearly fails to lose something he needs when he loses one of his most loved friends. Here is another example: suppose I help an extremely rich but geriatric, doddering old person to cross a very busy road. I see no problem in the thought that this person might genuinely need my help. Someone might respond by speculating that this person is probably on their way to the bank, or some board meeting: in this way casting doubt on the necessity of their goal, as we saw Anscombe note is common. Now, it is true that they might not need to possess, and continue to make, so much money. Yet they still need to live a good life. So by genuine I mean not purely instrumentally, but as something that together with other prerequisites contributes to their satisfying their categorical needs. Besides a certain amount of wealth there are other things they need in order to do so—perhaps they are visiting their granddaughter in the hospital across that road, in which she has just given birth.

Assuming that a person who is rich *must* have everything they needs betrays one or both of two problematic approaches to needs and well-being. One is the familiar one that imagines, implicitly or otherwise, that all that is good in people’s lives can be reduced to a magnitude plottable along a single dimension. Yet it is so widely recognised that a person might have vastly more than what they need *in some respect*, whilst lacking it in others, that it has been a literary trope since the legend of King Midas. Alternatively, or in combination, the assumption may also be a consequence of again looking at the idea of need through political lenses. The rich may “hav[e] [no] unmet needs” in the sense that they have everything, more than enough, indeed, of the resources that members of society are mutually responsible for ensuring they each have. But this does not mean they necessarily have everything they truly, categorically need over and above that. The Bill Gates of Hooker’s example may *begin* with

everything he needs “materially and otherwise”, but when he loses a genuinely dearly beloved friend that surely constitutes a blow to his “otherwise” needs.

Despite these defects in how Hooker’s approach to the concept of needs, he provides sufficient reason to reject understandings of harm (i) and (ii). If need is understood as the avoidance of harm, people can lack what they need, and they therefore must have an ‘increase in welfare’ to have what they need, then this entails that (i) the reduction in welfare account of harm is false. The observation that there are clearly losses that do not count as harm is also a decisive point against both the reduction in welfare and (ii) the counterfactual accounts.

#### 2.3.4 The threshold view

Hooker is almost correct to claim that the three understandings of harm discussed in the foregoing sections exhaust the alternatives to the remaining understanding he offers, (iv)—being harmed as being to be taken below some threshold. I think we should make two small modifications to it, however. First, Hooker says being harmed is being *taken* below the threshold, and it seems right that harm should be something active, a process. However, this does not seem to be the only relevant activity with respect to the threshold: I think one is also harmed if there is someone or something preventing one from moving above the threshold. This is, of course, unlike the situation in which one might easily move above the threshold, but one simply does not—where it is not plausible that one is harmed. While in (iv) we can see Hooker importing what is right about the reduction in welfare understanding, this modification imports what is right in the counterfactual account. In both of those cases what is missing is the notion of the threshold.

Second, the implication of a ‘threshold’ is worrying, if we want to avoid a scalar account of well-being. However, we can easily reformulate the threshold understanding in non-scalar terms, concluding that harm must consist in being prevented from meeting some important criterion<sup>21</sup>—consonant with last chapter’s discussion, such a criterion could be a satiable condition instead of a level on the scale of an insatiable condition.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Thomson (1987, 93), whose understanding of harm has this feature.



Hooker argues that a theory of needs cannot actually stand upon or be illuminated by, any independent conception of harm. ‘Harm’, he argues, is not actually doing any work here, since “defining needs *directly* in terms of a threshold—by omitting an otiose reference to harm—is clearer and more promising” (*ibid.*, 189; cf. Griffin 1986, 45). While I also think a direct specification of needs is more promising, if being harmed requires that one actually be acted upon or impeded, implicating harm actually slightly falsifies our view of needs—that is, if we want to allow that someone can lack what they need even if there is nothing preventing them from getting it.

In any case, the next section takes the direct route. Given the previous chapter’s discussion, it might well have seemed more natural to us in the first place to identify directly what kind of satiable conditions can constitute categorical needs. Moreover, if needs supply important criteria of the right sort, it could turn out that the order of explanation is the other way around, and that we should understand harm as losing or being denied what one needs. While most of the possible criteria for categorical need to be considered are roposed as explanations of what harm is, they are nonetheless perfectly adaptable to the direct approach of defining criteria for need.

## **2.4. Criteria for categorical need**

### 2.4.1 A biological specification

When we consider which ends *must* be achieved or attained one possibility is that these are biologically determined human functions. Wiggins notes that one definition of ‘that which is necessary’ that Aristotle offers in *Metaphysics* V is:

that without which, as a joint cause, it is not possible to live, as for instance breathing and nourishment are necessary for an animal, because it is incapable of existing without them. (cited 1987, 25)

This would set the level of categorical need at that which is necessary to survive: having adequate nutrition, hydration, rest, being the right temperature, and so on. Though survival is important, our needs theory would be unattractive if it said that what people need is only that which allows them to barely function. We might think it is nonetheless possible to understand an organism’s living according to its biologically given function in a far less restrictive way: we might, with Anscombe, take it to mean

*flourishing*. What an organism needs is a set of certain environmental conditions—and “that it won’t flourish unless it has it” (Anscombe 1958: 7).

We might be optimistic about this sort of account if, like Anscombe, we are confident that we can say what non-human organisms need:

in the case of a plant, let us say, the inference from “is” [that is, what the plant is] to “needs” [that is, what it needs] is certainly not in the least dubious. It is interesting and worth examining; but not in the least fishy.” (*ibid.*)

However, this is really a highly dubious notion, even in the case of a plant.<sup>22</sup> One thing we cannot appeal to is that which is species-normal: normality refers to just what happens to typically obtain. What normally obtains in the case of an organism depends on the conditions in which organisms such as it normally find themselves. But now change the conditions in such a way that an organism develops differently. Suppose such conditions persist and prevail—what is normal changes. There is now the question of whether the way the organism develops is now worse, of whether there is now something wrong with the organism. Yet in order make any such claims, we must say there was something good about the conditions before the change (over and above their normality), something about these conditions that makes them especially good in a way that they constitute what the organism needs. Moreover, an organism can flourish to varying extents. There are, as Aristotle says, determinate preconditions for the organism’s continuing to *exist* in roughly the same form (that is, survive). However, this would imply a very minimal degree of flourishing. At the other end of the spectrum, in a greenhouse with a great deal of artificial light, fertiliser, and hydroponic watering, a plant may flourish to a far greater degree than it could in the wild. With normality ruled out, it is hard to see why we should find any special discontinuity along the range from barely surviving to unnaturally lush.

It appears even worse in the case case of human beings. Although appeal to human flourishing might presumably be intended to form a crucial explanatory part of

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<sup>22</sup> Although Anscombe thinks the needs of plants are unproblematic, she should not be taken as thinking that human needs can also be given any straightforwardly biological underpinning. She thinks we so far lack any good account of human flourishing and are far from gaining one (1958: 18).

an account of well-being, the question of what it is for human beings to flourish sounds suspiciously similar to the question of what it is for them to live well. We saw that the problem with answering the well-being question is that the goodness of a life appears to be a variable property, and we have been so far unable to pin down any cut-off or other discontinuity. Yet appeal to human flourishing suffers from exactly the same problem, since greater and lesser degrees of flourishing are possible. Health comes in different degrees. If being physically fit is part of our natural function, it is unclear how strong, how flexible we must be, how fast, how far we should be able run, how large our lung capacity should be, how well we can balance—and consequently how much of our lives we should spend training these capacities. If mental acuity is another part, there are exactly similar problems.<sup>23</sup> There is additionally the question of how to assess how *long* we need to live (Miller 1999, 208). Biological criteria do not appear to supply answers to any of these, unless the threshold is set at the maximum possible—yet even that maximum might be stretched by technological improvements. Biology seems to set at most constraints on the extent to which it is possible for us develop our capacities in whichever ways we are concerned to develop them.

In both the case of the plant and of the human being, some kind of natural teleology would be required in order for any particular degree of flourishing to be privileged as such. Though there is a sense in which the theory to be later developed in Chapter Four is teleological, needs-theorists have not typically displayed any willingness to seriously link human needs to biology. Their goal is usually not metaphysical, but rather to develop an account of some morally and politically acceptable minimum, and it is that which we will now consider.

## 2.4.2 Society and needs

### *2.4.2.1 Rationale*

Needs-theorists are typically concerned to set the threshold of need not too low and not too high. On the one hand they want an account generating needs that impose significant moral and political demands beyond what is necessary barely to subsist. On

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<sup>23</sup> The question would also always remain of how we ought to divide our scarce time between physical and mental training.

the other hand, they are anxious not to allow such demands to go too far: they cannot be allowed to become “voracious”, such as if a need for health were interpreted as requiring resources sufficient to cure every illness (Hooker 2008, 190).<sup>24</sup> Even were we to divert ever-increasing portions of social resources towards this end, this would clearly remain an impossible and undesirable demand to meet, especially bearing in mind the difficulty in keeping pace with geriatric bodies’ accelerating deterioration. And we face the question not just of how much health we need, but also of how much clothing, shelter, and such we need; and in today’s society, how many gadgets, appliances, utilities, and at what standards of quality, we need. Amongst other motivations, in order to forge the middle path between insatiability and subsistence, contemporary proponents of needs advocate relativising them to certain prevailing social circumstances. Wiggins proposes two relativisations:

1. What counts as a need is an “essentially contestable matter, and is to some extent relative to a culture, even to some people’s conceptions of suffering, wretchedness and harm” (1987, 11).
2. A categorically needs  $x = x$  is categorically necessary for A “relative to the circumstances  $c$  obtaining at  $t$ ” (*ibid.*, 13).<sup>25</sup> ( $t$  being the time at which A is claimed to need  $x$ .)

Let us consider these in order.

#### 2.4.2.2 Social norms

Similarly to Wiggins, Miller thinks needs must be based upon “shared social norms [...] a shared conception of the range of activities that together make up a normal human life” (1999, 210). The idea is that we can include things over and above survival needs that people in a particular society in some way ‘take for granted’ to figure among their needs. Wiggins quotes Adam Smith explaining how he conceives of needs:

By necessities I understand not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people even of the lowest rank to be without. (*The Wealth of Nations*, V.2.2, cited Wiggins 1987, 26)

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Véronique Munoz-Dardé’s (2013) discussion of this issue.

<sup>25</sup> Wiggins’ suggestion is in fact to relativise *harm*; but, given harm’s redundancy, nothing is lost in these glosses.

The customary needs in his society, Smith thought, included linen shirts and leather shoes. And indeed, Miller follows Smith in setting the threshold of need at that which is necessary for people to lead a minimally decent life in their society (*loc. cit.*). (Wiggins' minimum is also [in part] socially determined, but depends upon other factors besides avoiding shame.) Such a relativisation would have the benefits of at once allowing needs to reach further than survival needs, as well as allowing for what is needed to have changed over time, and for intermediate, concrete needs to vary across societies (*cf.* §2.2.2). There is a large question, however, about the precise way in which needs plausibly depend on social customs. The view that Miller and Wiggins favour is that what people need closely tracks such mores. Society regards lacking linen shirts and leather shoes as shameful, therefore people need those items. A different view seems more likely, however; namely that despite the influence of social mores need is an individual matter. An individual needs linen shirts and leather shoes, categorically, because avoiding shame, in itself, is something that matters to her. Social mores will undoubtedly have had profound influence; yet that it matters to the individual in question is primary.<sup>26</sup> Another way in which the effect of social mores is indirect is evident in how Miller claims that his account helps to show *how* people can be harmed by “social impediments such as those highlighted by Smith” as well as by lacking survival needs. As he elaborates, “if one cannot enter public space without shame, a whole range of activities from work to recreation to political participation will be inaccessible, or accessible only on pain of great discomfort” (*loc. cit.*). For similar reasons, today we could say that a computer is necessary for children growing up—since being able to use one is essential for computer-based classwork and, looking further ahead, in very many lines of work. Many children would probably also be ashamed to lack a computer, and even if they were not, its being regarded as shameful could impose other disadvantages. But in both of these cases, unless avoiding shame is a categorical need for the person in question, the effect of social mores remains purely that of presenting impediments to achieving what matters to the people faced with

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<sup>26</sup> To avoid confusion, by the phrase ‘something matters to someone’ I mean that it matters objectively to them, not ever merely that it is something they subjectively value or care about. This does not foreclose the possibility, of course, that subjective states of mind can matter objectively.

them. Avoiding being regarded as shameful, *unless* that actually matters to the individual, may well be instrumentally salient, but does not itself constitute a categorical need for that person.

Miller cites another way in which he thinks needs depend on society:

[In order] to ground claims of *justice* made against other people, [...] [one's] aims and ambitions have first to be *validated* to other members of the relevant community before they will count the needs that arise from those aims and ambitions as imposing obligations on them to provide resources. (*ibid.*, 209-10)

We can see this as a way of at once heading off both the idea that mere wants can generate needs (§2.2.1) and the perceived threat of voraciousness—as well as a rationale for the idea, that what should be considered people's needs will have the same, socially constituted basis. Miller here takes up a point of Scanlon's, when Scanlon argues that the simple fact that someone desires and chooses to forego food in order to pursue some other project does not thereby entail that they have a stronger or equal claim for help with the project than to the food (Scanlon 1975: 659-60; Miller 1999, 211). Both deploy as their example a religious ascetic—in Scanlon's case, someone “build[ing] a monument to his god” (Scanlon *loc. cit.*). As Miller elaborates, “someone's preferences, no matter how strong, cannot ground claims of need [...] The strength of his desire cannot impose obligations of justice on others, given that they do not regard the unavailability of the [things he claims to need] as harmful” (*ibid.*, 211). He draws an analogy to a case in which his college provides funding specifically for him to buy computer equipment, but of which he requires only a small part. He considers that, although “[h]e might try to argue that the balance should be paid to [him] in cash to help [him] to pursue [his] passion for yachting”, that claim would be illegitimate, since “the allowance is given because academics need computers; it is given to meet that need, which is related to the purpose of the community” (*ibid.*, 211-2). This is no doubt correct, since such a claim will be ruled out by obligations to the institution, as well as for the reason that it is not, and should not be, the role of the college to provide for people's well-being in general—that is the role of other institutions better equipped to do so. However, this analogy fails to show that a person cannot need something it is

not the role of any institution to provide. We can make the same point as Scanlon (1998, 110, 136), that while for the political purpose of making interpersonal comparisons we might aim for such a constricted conception of a person's well-being and needs, individuals have little use for such an idea in their own deliberations about what matters (*cf.* also Griffin 1986, 45-6). In light of this, while there might often be pragmatic reasons of policy to adopt a more standardised metric, we cannot seriously believe that the real value of a person's life can be estimated in terms of that. John Rawls, for instance, recognises this when he advances "primary goods" as the measure of social and political advantage but stops short of saying that they measure people's well-being—that, in his system, depends in large part upon their comprehensive doctrine (1999, 80-1).

The cases of the ascetic and the academic sailor each trade upon the reader's anticipated suspicion that what they are opting for is not *really* worthwhile; that it is based upon a mere preference that lacks the support of good reasons. So on the face of it, the claim is not that the idiosyncrasy of certain of people's aims is enough to render them illegitimate; it is Scanlon's well-founded claim that the concern we accord different human interests should depend on objective reasons, or 'true interests' we might say. The prospect of objectivity is indeed a great attraction of an emphasis on needs (Griffin 1986, 42).<sup>27</sup> Yet Miller's—and Scanlon's—choice of aims that are deliberately implausible candidates for needs could skew our conclusions. We should not assume that more plausible but still highly unusual ends could not be categorically needed. Indeed Scanlon himself seems open to the idea that idiosyncratic goals *can* be chosen for sound reasons, and that we can recognise them once we imaginatively try to bring them under familiar categories:

Even if the goods in question are quite foreign to us and of no value in our society we can understand why they are of value to someone else if we can bring the reasons for their desirability under familiar general categories. (Scanlon 1975: 660)

Here is the kind of example we might consider, based on one of Scanlon's own: though

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<sup>27</sup> Miller (1999, 209), for one, disavows his earlier account of needs that defines them as those things necessary for a person to carry out her individual life plan (1976, 133-4)—for the reason that a person's consciously adopted aims are too subjective to ground serious normative claims about a person's well-being.



we might be unable to see any attraction whatsoever in someone else's particular religious, spiritual, artistic, or philosophical pursuit, we can nonetheless understand how "religion or something like it [can] ha[ve] a central place" in a person's life (*ibid.*: 666) if we think about what kinds of things make our own lives meaningful.

Even more problematic for Miller and Wiggins is that a complaint against needs-claims apparently based upon mere preferences can only be cogent if it does actually appeal to an objective standard of need that these fall short of. And yet both preferences and the basis upon which Miller would have an individual's aims "validated" are subjective—that basis being what people "regard" as needs (the "climate of opinion", in Wiggins' phrase [1987, 48]). Indeed, the idea that people's needs (politically considered) are all the same<sup>28</sup> would imply that the idiosyncrasy of a needs-claim is indeed inseparable from its being ruled out—if it fails to conform to the social conception of need. Wiggins goes so far as to say that it is only through a society's "enlarg[ing] its sympathies" and "constru[ing] 'vital interests' more generously" that certain things disabled (or, differently abled) people might require will count as needs. Yet it is implausible that anything anyone truly categorically needs could depend upon whatever social morality happens to prevail. In order to supply the normative force proper to categorical needs, for either the people who have them, or for others who might aid them, needs would have to be construed along more objective—and, as I have contended, individualistic—lines than this. So we are right to reject, as James Griffin does, the idea that needs could depend upon "accidental social changes that have no obvious moral significance" (Griffin 1986, 44).

There is an extent to which I have been arguing at cross-purposes to Miller and Wiggins, and I agree that some of the factors they cite may have great relevance to the political practicalities of determining *which* needs to meet and how to go about doing so. However, it is a mistake to go further than that, and allow those factors to infect our conception of what even constitutes needs.

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<sup>28</sup> With the necessary rider that they can be filled out differently in concrete terms: *e.g.*, a common need for some degree of health that implies that different amounts of resources are spent on people depending on how sick they are (Miller 1999, 211).



### 2.4.2.3 *Impossible necessities*

Let us take now Wiggins' second relativisation, to circumstances. To flesh out which circumstances he means, Wiggins writes that that one can only need things at time  $t$

that (i) are economically or technologically realistically conceivable, given the actual state of things at  $t$ , and (ii) do not involve us in morally (or otherwise unacceptable acts or interventions in the arrangements of human society or whatever, and (iii) can be envisaged without our envisaging ourselves tolerating what we do not have to tolerate. (1986, 12)

We can summarise these as being the constraints of *technical* and *moral* possibility. Once more, Wiggins thinks these constraints are necessary because, as Hooker puts it, he “wants an analysis of needs such that they turn out to be morally compelling” (Hooker 2008, 185-6), and they could not be if people could need things no one could possibly give them, or that would require acting immorally or permitting immorality. The implausibility of these constraints again derives from the implausibility of thinking that such an analysis represents what people really need. If I were lost at sea then I would truly categorically need to be rescued, irrespective of whether anyone were able or morally obliged to assist me. Certainly, needs often provide moral reasons for others to assist, and my need for rescue would likely provide a moral reason for someone to rescue me if they could. However, that I have such a need does not depend upon anyone being suitably placed or obliged to meet it. Similarly, a person does not stop needing to avoid some grievous injury simply because there is no morally conscionable means by which they can. This is to repeat a claim from §2.2.3, to be defended in the next chapter, that if someone categorically needs something this does not entail that that need wins out. It seems rather, then, that it is simply deliberative salience needs have that is ever constrained by these relativisations. The reason Wiggins wants to inextricably link need and obligation is that he wants it to be impossible for genuine needs to be legitimately ignored or overridden. But perhaps we could instead settle for genuine needs always trumping non-needs, without necessarily overriding other needs with which they clash.

## 2.5 Upshot

So far in this chapter, we have begun to investigate the idea of categorical needs. We have rejected on the basis of its redundancy the idea that what people categorically need is to avoid harm. Far from helping us to address Sufficiency's Threshold Problem, a biological account of need faces the analogous and possibly even less tractable problem of non-arbitrarily determining to what extent an organism needs to flourish. In the case of proposals that need is socially or politically determined, the concern to make needs directly applicable and directly linked to moral and political obligation actually undermines their claim to be genuinely normatively salient considerations. Many of the objections to these latter accounts derive from the idea I have proposed that the things people categorically need are the things that really matter to them—and that is that their lives go well.

So this eudaimonistic approach to needs I have taken—while, I believe essential to their being normatively compelling—has undermined certain proposed criteria, or determinants of a threshold, for need. Yet it might also appear to undermine the very idea that needs could define any satiable condition whatsoever—a consequence that would appal supporters of needs, given that it negates much of needs' appeal. That this appears to be the case can be illustrated by considering how it can often be entirely reasonable for people to forgo or neglect, to some degree, to satisfy what are commonly designated 'basic needs'—in favour of other purposes they regard more important. In an example from Griffin,

A group of scholars may, with full understanding, prefer an extension to their library to exercise equipment for their health. (Griffin 1986, 45)

With eyes wide open, the scholars may prefer a few more books to a few extra weeks' longevity. (*ibid.*, 52)

Other common examples are instances of moral sacrifice, such as a soldier who dives on a grenade in order to shield his comrades. Each of these examples illustrates, I believe, a phenomenon recognisable even in more prosaic ethical experience. These kinds of cases are typically deployed to demonstrate the implausibility of the idea that 'basic needs' are necessarily more important than other interests. However, they present a different problem for the present project, since on the approach to needs I

have been taking, both the things sacrificed or forgone *and* the purposes regarded more important (rightly, let us assume) constitute needs for the people concerned. We might for the moment call the former ‘lower needs’ and the latter ‘higher needs’. Yet, while these higher needs can clearly sometimes win out over the lower ones, they might not *necessarily* take priority. Equally, although it is natural to say that we need (some degree of) health, it seems wrong to allow ‘lower needs’ such as health to trump all other human interests—as when we considered the possibility of needs’ voraciousness. In consequence, as Griffin eloquently puts it:

It seems impossible to form any estimate of how important [a] need is without appeal to the same standard that gives us the value of [a] mere desire—namely, how each affects the overall quality of life. And there seems to be no criterion by which to decide whether the demands of health are fully met, no matter how minimal we think these demands are, without seeing what else [...] people value and how greatly they value them—in short by seeing how all the competing options affect the overall quality of life. (1986, 52)

We might think, then, that there can be no alternative to viewing what we do in all such cases as ‘trading-off’, as talk of ‘weighing up’ the costs and benefits of different courses of action suggests—in other words, calculating in a way that regards value in quantitative terms. If this is so, then needs would lose almost all theoretical interest. They would amount to nothing more than differentially weighted bearers of more abstractly specified value or well-being, and hence fail to supply an alternative to Q. All apparent cases of distinct ends irreducible to that of gaining abstract value (choosing the options open to us that are highest-ranked in terms of abstract betterness) would be illusory. Introducing the notion of categorical need and arguing for its indispensability will have counted for nothing, since our situation would remain that of categorically needing to do nothing with any richer content than to live well. And so the unanswered question once again would loom, ‘How well?’

It is the purpose of the next chapter, about incommensurability, to begin to argue that we *might*, nonetheless, able reject Q and avoid this predicament. But it requires tackling that conception head on.

### 3

## Incommensurability

One of the beauties of formal logic is how precisely it keeps silent at this point and leaves us free to find our own salvation—the thing we do by thinking further about what matters most and how to make our peace with the claim we decide not to satisfy.

— David Wiggins (2006, 14)

### 3.1 What is incommensurability?

It has often been claimed that certain things—such as people and other entities or objects of special importance—are incommensurable in value both with each other, and with other things lacking such special importance—such as material goods that are beneficial yet unnecessary.<sup>29</sup> Two things are incommensurable, I will say, if there is no single scale with which the value of both could in all respects be measured or represented. If there are any such incommensurables, then, there cannot be a universal scale of value. Value is not necessarily reducible to magnitudes in a single dimension, and—moreover—Q cannot be. Universally applicable. The idea is intended to capture the kind of language and thinking we use when we describe some things as being of ‘incomparable value’, ‘priceless’, or ‘infinitely precious’, and an early example of the idea can be found in Kant’s *Groundwork*:

In the kingdom of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. What has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity. (1998 [1785], 4:434)

Such a distinction is denied by universally commensurating, especially consequentialist, modes of thought, and thus the commonly purported significance

<sup>29</sup> The most commonly discussed example is that of a comparison between friendship (something with special importance) and money (something without special importance)—but implicating money is problematic in a way I will explain below.

incommensurability has is that it would block these modes' implication that all valuable things are *fungible* (cf. Raz 1986, 357-8). One particular candidate for incommensurables, for example, would be people's lives. If they are incommensurable, then, in certain cases, if it is justified in certain cases to choose to save the one over the many, then this cannot be because the sacrifice has been somehow made up by a greater amount of some common value gained; there must be some other reason. Call the position that there are at least some incommensurables Incommensurability.

However, if incommensurability's existence, at least if it were widespread, could defeat an alleged defect of consequentialism, it might also seem this would come at the cost of at once voiding one of Q's great merits (where consequentialism is one kind of theory that deploys it): that of supplying a rational basis for choice. This feature has seemed especially meritable to many in its ability to arbitrate choices even in conditions in which things we might otherwise regard 'priceless' are unavoidably in the balance. If lives are so precious, and we ought sometimes to save the one over the many, how could this be so without Q? Joseph Raz's definition of incommensurability makes clear the apparent difficulty with departing from such conceptions of rational choice. He uses the terms "incomparable and incommensurate interchangeably" (though I will distinguish them) to describe "valuable options" of which "it is neither true that one is better than the other nor true that they are of equal value" (Raz 1986, 322). There is no obvious account of how we should choose when incommensurables are in the balance, and we might be led to conclude that our "decision process would necessarily be arbitrary" (Regan 1989: 1063). If they were at least equally good—say, in a consequentialist's view, if each outcome would have equal-magnitude aggregate value—then it would be rational to choose either. Yet Raz writes that "if two options are incommensurate then reason has no judgment to make concerning their relative value. Saying they are of equal value is passing a judgment about their relative value, whereas saying that they are incommensurate does not" (1986, 324).

I take sheer bafflement at these results to lie at the heart of critics' opposition to Incommensurability. My aim here is to show how such obscurity can be overcome without abandoning the idea that some things can be incomparable or

incommensurable in some sense. The goal is the relatively modest one not of proving that incommensurability exists, but of refining our notion of it into a more coherent and plausible form. Proof is in any case a rare thing in ethics. If we accept Incommensurability, this will not be because of any demonstration that it follows from indubitable premises, but because it coheres with our broader ethical thought.

There are many serious sources of confusion in discussion surrounding incommensurability. First, there is inadequate clarity as to what incommensurability even is, and I address this in the section immediately following first by defining and distinguishing different notions of commensurability and comparability, and in the section after that disambiguating the confusing term 'options'. There I also distinguish choice-worthiness (applying to the courses of action open to one) from value (applying to the things that are involved in the choice-situation). These distinctions between and within the older idea of incommensurability and the newer one of incomparability allow us to arrive at a clearer picture of how those two notions relate to one another. Moreover, I will demonstrate that my interpretation of the concept can make what is going on in various examples of choice-situations purportedly involving incommensurability intelligible. As will become clear, the major proposal is that rational choice between incommensurables is not incoherent as some seem to think; it demands just that it must proceed on the basis of considerations other than comparisons of things in terms of *quantitatively conceived* value. In itself, incommensurability does not present a barrier to rational choice. It does require an alternative mode of rational choice, and it is not as yet clear exactly what that would look like, but looking at certain examples we can begin to understand how it might work.

For the purposes of the wider project, the account provides a basis for the theory of needs and sufficiency roughly sketched in Chapter 4. Understanding incommensurability in the proposed manner will demonstrate that conceiving of well-being in quantitative terms does not seem to be mandatory. It looks possible, therefore, to hold a eudaimonistic conception of needs upon which needs are not reducible to abstract value.

### 3.2 Incommensurability and incomparability

Contemporary discussion focuses overwhelmingly upon a notion of ‘incomparability’ along the same lines as Raz’s definition of incommensurability/incomparability—though influentially augmented by Ruth Chang in this way: a judgement that options are comparable or incomparable must always be made with reference to a “covering value”, some respect in which they are valuable relative to which options’ values are compared (Chang 1997b, 6).<sup>30</sup> Chang contrasts this incomparability with what she understands by ‘incommensurability’: the situation in which “items [under comparison] cannot be precisely measured by some common scale of units of value” (*ibid.*, 2). While Chang asserts that commensurability requires cardinal ranking of options, she claims that all that is required for comparability is that options be ordinally rankable with respect to some covering value; that is, in order of better and worse, without any need to specify *by how much* options are better or worse relative to others (*ibid.*, 1-2). She moreover regards her ‘incommensurability’ relatively inconsequential, setting it aside in favour of incomparability. Her project involves casting doubt upon Incomparability, the view that there are cases in which, even with a covering value specified, ‘options’ cannot be ordinally ranked with respect to it—which she takes Raz amongst others to defend.

We do not need to take a position on Incomparability, but it will be helpful to discuss Chang’s account of it. One reason is that her distinction is misleading, as she overlooks genuine incommensurability entirely. More importantly, we can even deploy some of what she says about incomparability to help explain incommensurability. To begin, we do better to draw the following four-way distinction:

- (i) *Ordinal Commensurability*. The values of  $a$  and  $b$  are ordinally commensurable if they can be placed upon a universal ordinal scale of value. The scale being universal, it in fact follows that for all valuable things  $x$  and  $y$ ,  $x$  and  $y$  are ordinally commensurable.

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<sup>30</sup> Along with some other authors, Chang also allows that besides *better than*, *worse than*, and *equal to* there may be further value relations such as *roughly equal to* and *on par with* (see Chang 1997b, 2002; Griffin 1986; Hurka 1996; Parfit 1986). Incomparability obtains when no such “positive value relation” of any of these kinds holds between the options.

- (ii) *Continuous Commensurability*. The values of  $a$  and  $b$  are continuously commensurable if they can be placed upon a universal continuous and absolute scale of value. The scale being universal, it in fact follows that for all valuable things  $x$  and  $y$ ,  $x$  and  $y$  are continuously commensurable.
- (iii) *Ordinal Comparability*. The values of  $a$  and  $b$  are ordinally comparable if they can both be placed upon an ordinal scale of value-with-respect-to- $C$ , where  $C$  is some covering value. That is, if they can be ordinally ranked by how good a  $C$  they are, how well they exhibit  $C$ -ness, how far they promote  $C$ , or some such.
- (iv) *Continuous Comparability*. The values of  $a$  and  $b$  are continuously comparable if they can both be placed upon an absolute continuous scale of value-with-respect-to- $C$ , where  $C$  is some covering value. Such a scale places  $a$  and  $b$  not merely in order of which better constitutes, exhibits, promotes, *etc.*  $C$ , but moreover represents by real-numbered magnitudes *to what extent* they do so.

Chang's interest is in (iii); what she designates 'incommensurability' approximates (iv).<sup>31</sup> Now, Broome (2004) is someone who holds (i), claiming that all things are rankable in terms of abstract betterness. This is something Chang, on the face of it, denies, since in her view betterness is not itself a covering value, but rather always a relation between things with respect to such a value, and that "some value must always be implicit for there to be any comparison to be understood" (1997, 6). However, we could redescribe Broome's view (though he would not be sympathetic), and understand commensurability generally as a species of comparability where the

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<sup>31</sup> In her specification of 'incommensurability' she actually refers to a scale I have not described in the text. A cardinal scale is a scale that, like the absolute scale is continuous (*i.e.*, real-valued); the difference being that it builds in no absolute zero-point, and its measures do not represent distances from such. Such a scale renders the values of things able to be placed upon it commensurable (or comparable) in a rather more oblique way than either the absolute or ordinal scale: the ratios of the differences between the measures of the items placed upon it represent those items' relative values. As I understand it, however, whenever we 'zero' an erstwhile cardinal scale, identifying some state, attainment, or such as our point of reference, it becomes entirely equivalent to an absolute continuous scale. For this reason, and to avoid many unnecessary technicalities, I do not discuss commensurability and comparability in cardinal terms here. My grasp of this particular matter, supposing it is such, I have gained through comparison of John Weymark (1991) and Broome (2004).



covering value is simply generalised abstract value itself. If there were such a value, then all valuable things would be *continuously* comparable with respect to it if that value took the form of something that inheres in or is exhibited by valuable things in amounts representable by real-valued magnitudes. Things would only be *ordinally* comparable with respect to it if all valuable things could only be ordinally ranked in terms of how valuable they were in generalised abstract terms. ‘Continuous Commensurability’ and ‘Ordinal Commensurability’ are, however, a more convenient terms to use than always having to describe things in comparability-terms—it would be clumsy always having to refer to ‘the covering value of generalised, abstract value’.

If all valuable things were continually commensurable, this would imply that there is a *currency of value*. This currency could be backed by a kind of metaphysical gold standard if it corresponded to some kind of monistic substantial intrinsic value inhering in all valuable things in different amounts. Shrinking from such extravagance, for there alternatively to be a plurality of more ontologically respectable values that are at once nonetheless all continually commensurable, then a fiat currency supplying the measure of all valuable things could be constructed—as determined by the exchange rates at which it was supposed that all of the various more concrete values could ‘trade off’. Either such currency could support what we can follow Griffin in calling the “totting-up conception” of value-comparison and choice—according to which the rational choice is that option which tots up the most generalised, abstract value (1986, 340). Incommensurability implies that there is neither a currency of value of either sort, nor simply generalised abstract value in a form that would permit only ordinal comparison. That is to say that (i) and (ii) are false.

Chang calls absence of any appropriate covering value “non-comparability”, a “formal failure of comparability”, not a case of incomparability (*ibid.*, 29), and she is not interested in these.<sup>32</sup> While, as I have said, Commensurability (of either type) can be viewed as a species of Comparability (of the corresponding type), *Incommensurability* as I define it would, in Chang’s terms, represent only a formal failure of comparability

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<sup>32</sup> She believes there *are* no interesting cases of it, for reasons there is no need to explain here. I hope this chapter suggests that there is at least one *very* interesting case.

with respect to generalised abstract value (such value would be unavailable since it does not exist). So, Incommensurability does not negate (iii) and (iv). Far from opposing Chang's project of casting doubt on Incomparability, we can allow with her that there may be no cases in which, given a chosen covering value, two things fail to be either better than, worse than or equal to each other. That is simply not of interest here. Equally, Chang is not interested in Incommensurability. Although an interest in Incommensurability and Chang's interests are in one respect related to each other, they are in another orthogonal. As mentioned above, though, we can make use of some elements of her account below.

### **3.3 Choice between incommensurables**

#### 3.3.1 Distinguishing choice-worthiness from value

The central problem for Raz and other proponents of Incommensurability (as I will interpret Raz) is that of reconciling two countervailing concerns we have. On the one hand, many of us, at least, want to be able to account for the special something that urges us to consider certain things non-exchangeable, non-substitutable, and which gives adequate account of the language of 'incomparable value' and 'pricelessness'. On the other hand, as David Wiggins explains very well, we want to avoid

predict[ing] that every choice from a set of incommensurables represents a real dilemma or a case where the idea of the right practical choice is problematic. [...] This nonprediction counts positively in [...] favour [of an account] because, in given particular contexts, with varying senses of loss, we can and regularly do make such choices. (This is not to say that we always can.) (1997, 56)

We do not, therefore, wish to "slide from emphasis to hyperbole [...] [by] reach[ing] for the powerful language of incomparability and trumping", as Griffin remarks (1986, 91)—if that would preclude rational choice between incommensurables altogether. Nor the "overkill" of regarding certain incommensurables as taking absolute lexical priority (Chang 2001, 56)—if that would lead to an implausible absolutism about which choices in difficult circumstances reason permits.

If we look again at Raz's claim that "it is neither true that one is better than the other nor true that they are of equal value" (1986, 322) when "valuable options" are

incommensurable, then we can easily see how the above concerns might lead us to believe that there cannot be such a thing. We are then focusing upon our apparently universal ability to make practical choices: it does seem we are indeed always able to ordinally rank alternatives in terms of choice-worthiness (rational preferability) when we have to. If some choices open to us are equally rationally eligible (as Raz says some choices between incommensurables are), and therefore neither is uniquely correct, how could they avoid being by definition equally worthy of choice?

Such confusion arises from the framing of positions and examples by Raz and many other authors as choices between ‘options’—which is ambiguous between *courses of action* open to us in choice-situations and the *values of the items/people/entities* (‘things’) involved in them.<sup>33</sup> A central proposal of this chapter is that Incommensurability is best understood as in the first instance a thesis about those values, rather than, and as distinct from, the choice-worthiness of courses of action. If this distinction is observed, I suggest, supporters of Incommensurability can happily accept what we might call Ordinalism, the idea that *courses of action* can always be ordinally ranked by choice-worthiness.

### 3.3.2 The irrelevance of ordinalism

As we have seen, Incommensurability implies the unavailability of the conception of the structure of value according to which the value of all things corresponds to how much of some value-currency they are worth (Continuous Commensurability). It follows that it would also invalidate the totting-up mode of value-comparison necessary to establish schedules of prices for everything, *rates* at which their values trade-off.<sup>34</sup> It also denies that most things can be ranked as *flatly* better, worse, and equally valuable (Ordinal Commensurability). Yet as I have said it does not deny Ordinalism, the claim that courses of action cannot be ordinally ranked by choice-worthiness. This is because Ordinalism does not itself supply any explanation of comparison and choice—since it is one thing to say that courses of action can be

<sup>33</sup> Among the latter we might also include the merits of the different ways in which states of affairs are brought about.

<sup>34</sup> Notice how the phrase ‘trade-off’ is ambiguous between simply choosing one thing over another (or being able to), and exchanging things at a rate representative of the things’ relative values. Observing the possibility of incommensurability we see the importance of not conflating these two senses.

ordinally ranked, and another to say *what underpins* that ranking. The situation is connected to that “in formal utility theory,” in which, as Gerald Gaus explains, “[ordinal] ‘utility’ is not itself a sort of value, but simply a representation of one’s orderings of options [preferences] based on one’s *underlying values, ends, and principles*”, and that it “does not imply any specific value or moral theory, but presupposes *that an agent employs one* and so can rank options (Gaus 2008, 65; my emphases). Similarly, as Raz observes, “The fact of choice,” and, we should add, *ranking*, “does not reveal why it was made” (1986, 338).

One thing this means is that Ordinalism clearly does not imply rates of trade-off for the values of all things involved in choices—that requires Continuous Commensurability. Moreover, neither does an ordinal ranking of the choices open to us by choice-worthiness necessarily represent an ordinal ranking of the *values* of things involved. Indeed, I believe that Incommensurability implicitly presupposes this point that the basis for judgements about the relative choice-worthiness of courses of action may be other than a relative *valuation* (in absolute-continuous or ordinal terms) of the objects/entities/actions involved. Pointing out this conceptual space between ordinal ranking of choice-worthiness and valuation provokes significant questions. First, about what there is to the value of things that underlies the choice-worthiness of the circumstances in which they figure if not a quantity of abstract value they yield. Second, if indeed some courses of action to be chosen between *are* rankable, about how the manner in which they can be ranked is affected by the values of the things involved being incommensurable. Encapsulating both these concerns, it seems, is that of: how *do* we compare and choose courses of action if not by totting up values and choosing the greater pile? The next proposal is that this reorientation of Incommensurability, together with a new proposal for how Chang’s covering values can be deployed, also supplies the beginnings of an account of the structure of value underlying ordinal rankings of rational choice-worthiness—which as I will show in §3.4 can help us to explain certain concrete cases Raz claims involve incomparability.

### 3.3.3 Comparable choices, incomparable values

To begin, we can take Chang's analysis of comparison, and consider what a covering value (with respect to which courses of actions are ranked) could be doing if it is not commensurating the values of the things involved. Now, as we saw in §3.2 Chang does not wish to allow that betterness/worseness, period, is a covering value. As I will adapt her covering-value analysis, this is so because what it means to compare courses of action with respect to a covering value is to evaluate them with respect to *but one given end or purpose*.<sup>35</sup> This, then, is the reason that ordinal ranking of courses of action by choice-worthiness with respect to a given covering value does not even necessarily deliver an ordinal ranking of values. The point is elegantly drawn out by Wiggins when he writes, "Whereas the verdicts of practical choice must often sacrifice something,"—because, I would say, pursuing one end typically comes at the cost of other ends—"pure evaluation [...] need not lose or obliterate anything. Everything can register" (1997, 56). On the one hand, in concrete practical choice situations, what it seems we do is evaluate possible sets of things<sup>36</sup> with respect to the particular ways in which they can be expected to further *a given end* (or combination of ends) *in the situation at hand*. On the other hand, we can understand judgements of value-as-distinguished-from-choice-worthiness, in Wiggins' illuminating sense of "pure evaluation", as *not* being relativised to a particular end in that way. Yet neither is there any need to take such value as being entirely separate from, and unrelated to, choice. Rather, such purely evaluative judgements are assessments encompassing *all* of the many and separate ways—abstracting from whatever choice situation(s) we might actually encounter it—in which a thing might serve worthy ends or purposes and/or be intelligibly a valuable end in itself.

All this being the case, the alternatives in a choice situation cannot be commensurated whenever there is no single end that is *all* that matters in that

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<sup>35</sup> It might seem there is another possibility: comparison of things as being a better/worse 'as an X'. Now, whilst this seems an appropriate alternative for things which are of purely final intrinsic value (that is, value that is not for any further end), what it is for everything else to be a better or worse X will be whatever it is to better or worse further the end the fulfilment of which is what makes Xs valuable.

<sup>36</sup> Remember how inclusive this is: material objects, people, and even actions and qualitative features impinged upon can figure as 'things' different courses of action might realise.

situation, things' differential contribution to which (instrumental or constitutive) would represent all that is valuable about them. In such cases, rather than there being a single-dimension reason to optimally further a given end (for example, in business decisions where the only goal of the venture is to turn the greatest profit<sup>37</sup>), some of the things involved constitute or contribute towards distinct, irreducible sources of value, of reasons for action. Moving beyond any individual case, unless there is a single ultimate end or value to which the values of *all* things in *all* situations can be reduced and in terms of which stated, cases in which the standard of comparison is entirely uncontentious will be extremely prevalent. It would be relatively rare that in our choices we would consider only one end to the total exclusion of others. Even given Incommensurability and multiple sources of value, however, we continue to be able to compare and rank alternatives with respect to particular ends. Sometimes, moreover, particular ends may take overriding precedence.

### 3.4 Comparability and commensurability in concrete cases

Raz elaborates several cases of different varieties which he claims exhibit incommensurability. In response, his critics argue that postulating such makes it puzzling in the extreme how it is that we do seem to be able to make rational choices in the examples given. They claim that plausibly explaining these requires that we deny that there is any incommensurability. As I have suggested, much confusion derives from a failure to observe all of the distinctions drawn in the foregoing sections; however, I will refrain from immediately trying to use these to clarify Raz's examples at this point. Rather, for the dialectical purpose of explaining both how the puzzlement arises, *and* how to overcome it, I will revert initially to describing cases in terms of what I will call for short Raz-incommensurability: an ambiguity-preserving term describing simply, as Raz's definition does, the situation in which the ordinal rankability of 'options' fails.

Spoiler: I will go on to argue that Raz's definition is best interpreted precisely as the denial of Ordinal Commensurability as I have defined it. (From this, by the way, the denial of Continuous Commensurability follows.) It does not follow from this that

<sup>37</sup> Although it is unlikely even that most business-people are so narrowly focused as this.

we cannot regard *courses of action* as better than others, only that, as Wiggins asserts follows from Incommensurability, “there is no uncontentious choice of standard of comparison” (1997, 55). There *would* be such an uncontentious standard of both choice and value if we could simply arrive at an assessment of the aggregate value realised by the outcome of each alternative, and choose according to whichever is the higher. This is quite a constructive interpretation of Raz; however, support for it can be found, among other places, where he writes:

It is crucial to avoid the misleading picture of there being something, enigmatically known as ‘value’, the quantity of which is increased by people having rewarding friendships, enriching occupations, etc. There are only people, with their relationships, careers, interests, etc. (1986, 344)

The general point to be made as we consider Raz’s examples is that rational choice is always possible, Incommensurability notwithstanding, on the basis of comparisons with respect to covering values *other than* that of any representation of the ‘value’, period, of the things involved. How exactly such choices in certain contexts can be intelligible will be illustrated along the way.

#### 3.4.1 Case one: careers and comprehensive goals

One kind of example Raz claims is a choice between incommensurables is that between careers, say if a person faces a choice between options one of which “will irrevocably commit him to a career in law, the other will irrevocably commit him to a career as a clarinetist”—to which he is moreover equally suited and in which he is equally likely to be successful (1986, 332). Raz thinks that there is no basis for regarding choices between such careers, as well as between other pursuits (*e.g.*, personal projects, hobbies), intrinsically better than the other, and that “the only reason to prefer one option to another from the point of view of the agent’s well-being is his chance of succeeding in [them],” including how content they will make her (*ibid.*, 343-4). However, neither is it the case that such career options are of *equal* value; rather, they are Raz-incommensurable.

One problem arises when we consider allegedly Raz-incommensurable choice-situations with ones in which Raz would say that there *is* a better choice of career to be



made: when one offers better prospects for success or contentment. On the one hand, Raz denies that career choices are equally good when the prospects they offer are balanced. Yet on the other hand, a minor yet unmistakable difference in such prospects is enough to make a choice no longer Raz-incommensurable with, but indeed better than, the other. We might then wonder how, on Raz's account, they do not either in the latter case remain nonetheless Raz-incommensurable, or else instead have been equally good options in the first place and, hence, rankable all along.

Observing the distinction between value and choice-worthiness allows us to explain that choosing a career as best for oneself does not deliver any judgement that it is of superior intrinsic value to other people's careers. Due to Incommensurability, neither is intrinsically better than another since each serves and is constituted by disparate, irreducible ends; there is no single end to which they both contribute, and which is a measure of their value, period. Nonetheless, the careers are nonetheless rankable by choice-worthiness, and a choice made accordingly, with respect to other covering values; namely, which offers better prospects for success and satisfaction in one's individual case. There is one objection one might make here, not to Incommensurability, but about the details of the case: one might contend that the values of the careers can indeed be compared and ranked with respect to the covering value 'good career'—the suggestion being perhaps that the value of a career does reduce entirely to the extent that it is satisfactory and offers the chance of success. As against this suggestion, however, as most people regard their comprehensive goals the value of achieving or furthering them lies not in their providing satisfaction and the occasion to succeed. Satisfaction is not the end, but is rather something taken *in* the achieving or furthering of something independently significant. Many of us, at least, therefore cannot regard them as being placed even on the same scale of value-as-a-career.

There is another question concerning why choosing between careers should be significant we will put aside until §3.4.3.



### 3.4.2 Case two: love over gold

Raz claims that it is constitutive of friendship that it is incommensurable with money:

Only those who hold the view that friendship is neither better than nor worse than money, but is simply not comparable to money or other commodities are *capable* of having friends. Similarly only those who would not even consider exchanges of money for friendship are capable of having friends. (Raz 1986, 352)

Nonetheless, in order to be a friend, Raz argues, if we were offered the option of receiving some amount of money in exchange for terminating the friendship we must always choose the friendship over the money (any amount of it). The puzzle immediately thrown up by this case, then, is that of why Incommensurability is what explains the latter, and why it is not much more plausible that friendship and money are indeed comparable, only in a special way: that friendship is “emphatically better” on account of its “higher status” (Chang 1997b, 20-1); or perhaps more ‘valuable’—better than—any amount of money (Regan 1989: 1058-9). Raz acknowledges that, “Since it is a reasoned preference for one option over another it looks like a ranking, like judging friendship to be more valuable than money” (1986, 352). Yet he argues that the constitutive features of friendship and other relationships block this: for instance, whilst we would not relinquish a friend or a child for money, neither would we buy one. Moreover, if our reasons for refusing such exchanges turned on ranking such relationships over money in value, then we would condemn those who only have relations with people falling short of constituting friendship—yet he claims that we do not (*ibid.*, 352).

Something else to be reconciled with this alleged “constitutive incommensurability”, and which Raz recognises, is that we do not give valuable relations absolute precedence over money: he gives the example of someone leaving their spouse for a month purely in order to earn money in another city (1986, 348-9). This is puzzling because, as Regan writes, “It is easy to get the impression that the constitutive incommensurability of friendship and money forbids a friend from ever sacrificing companionship for money” (Regan 1989: 1071).

Distinguishing choice-worthiness from value allows us to understand how relationships and money can be incommensurable and yet nonetheless particular choices between them may in certain situations be rationally required or permitted. However, the first thing to note is that, as several authors have pointed out, the status of the value of money is not so clear-cut: while it is true that money itself has merely instrumental value as an exchange medium, it can nonetheless be especially important *that someone has* a certain amount of money—say if that amount is necessary for purchasing things that are especially important (on money compare, *e.g.*, Griffin 1977: 52; Regan 1989: 1070-1). Chang writes that one might choose a million dollars over a friendship if that is how much a life-saving operation for one’s mother costs (2001: 36). We should, therefore, do better to concentrate upon whatever the money would be *for*. At this juncture I will reintroduce the notion of needs, relatively unanalysed at this stage, but the way I will develop it—definitively in the subsequent chapter—will emerge out of the role it appears to play in these applications of incommensurability. If some amount of money is important then that is because it is the necessary means to an important end. Moreover, as I argued in Chapter Two, in order for this hypothetically necessary means to have normative significance then the importance of that end must take the form of its being itself categorically necessary and/or a yet further necessary precondition for a final end (or ends) that is categorically necessary. Of course money may be used for ends that are ephemeral, superfluous (inessential luxuries, perhaps), but it is also possible for choices that on the surface involve only money on the one side may in fact involve these things one categorically needs.

The second thing to note is that categorical needs, which I have argued include the obligations relationships impose, moral requirements more generally, as well as the more personal ends that matter to us and often succeed in imposing overarching direction on our lives, all supply non-comparative criteria for choice.<sup>38</sup> What is distinctive of such requirements is that they are not conditional upon any comparison of alternatives open to one—that they are categorical entails that there is a sense in

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<sup>38</sup> For the term ‘non-comparative criteria’ and a discussion of some of these in the moral case, see Mark Reiff (2014: 358).

which the demands they impose are absolute. This is how upholding a friendship is incommensurable in value with whatever money can buy—as well as, it must be added, with other friendships—and yet, it can guide how courses of action are ranked by choice-worthiness.

This is not to say such criteria are absolute in the sense that neglecting to follow them is never the best thing to do, however. Going away to work in another city is a case in point. Now, Raz adduces the difference between this case and that of refusing to trade a friendship for money so:

the symbolic significance of the fact that one cannot trade companionship for naked money but one can for a job is that while companionship is not up for sale, it is but one ingredient in a complex pattern of life including work. (1986, 349)

Moreover, whereas a “naked” exchange of money offered for companionship implies that a price is put upon it, and that it is hence fungible, replaceable, going away for work has no such symbolic significance: there is for instance an awareness of the motives behind the decision to go away, which are not understood to involve any lack of commitment to the relationship (Raz 1986, 349). However, whilst the symbolic difference from the case of “nakedly” exchanging money *may* be significant, the distinction between needs and non-needs is what appears to do more work. Needs must not be traded away for any amount (or at any *rate*) of non-needs for the reason that, whereas the latter are fungible and relatively trivial, no amount of them can make up for a loss of the former (that feature is part of what makes the former needs—they are necessary). The reason for this is that there is nothing separate from the need (no value-currency) in terms of which it could be made up. For one’s relationship to be preserved, what one’s partner would have to understand is that one *needs* to do as one does. Work is indeed a necessary part of life, but it is significant that Raz specifies that the job in another city is one the person does not like (1986, 348), and so must be purely for the purpose of earning the money. In the background, then, must be the suggestion that the money is needed to buy things that are themselves necessary, either categorically, or as preconditions for categorical needs. Maintaining meaningful relationships is a categorical need for us, and cannot be traded-off against non-needs,

but there are other things we also need. If the the only reason for which one earned the money in another city were to buy trivialities we would we be much less inclined to agree that one acted rightly, whatever the difference in symbolic significance from a “naked” exchange. Another way in which it would be intelligible for someone to, say, permanently move away from friends and family to work, would be if it were not for the money, but in order to pursue one’s calling—an occupation one not only likes, but which is itself something one with good reason believes one needs to do. Distinguishing choice-worthiness from value allows us to see that when we choose in the foregoing cases we are not ‘valuing’ our relationships above or below other needs and relationships we have. Rather, as Elizabeth Anderson puts it well:

Both are valuable—not more or less but in different *ways*. When we must choose between them, the basis of choice is not a judgment telling us which is more valuable but a judgment telling us how best to reconcile the expressive demands of the different kinds of concern we owe to and have for them. In the cases at hand, the bases of choice are principles of obligation, not a principle of optimization. (Anderson 1997, 103)

The way in which one values a relationship is by willingly (lovingly, even) meeting the non-comparative requirements it imposes, not placing it upon any scale of value. However, I want to move beyond the suggestion that it is only principles of obligation that give rise to this effect, but rather that all of, or at least the most important, values in our lives are likewise structured by necessary demands.

#### 3.4.3 Dilemmas and the significance of choice

One last complication to note about the examples above is that one is neither forgoing relationships themselves nor choosing one *person* over another or something else—only *time* spent with the people in them (Reiff 2014: 259). Nonetheless, if one *were* in a situation in which one were forced to choose between courses of action that would each amount to a breach of a relationship, a betrayal of a friend, or something that would require totally abandoning a life goal one needs to pursue—*then* we might be in the domain of the dilemma, or at least the tragic choice. Incommensurability is indeed what makes tragic and dilemmic choices possible. On the universal commensuration and totting-up conception of value and choice, it remains true that, as economics loves

to remind us, all choices have costs—namely, whatever alternative opportunities our decisions foreclose. On that conception, however, although in *a sense* we always forgo some amount of value even when we choose the best (or equal best) alternative, when one chooses best one nonetheless cannot fail to remain true to the single fundamental end of promoting the greatest amount of homogeneous value. Conversely, if Incommensurability is true, then there are distinct, multiple ends—“various values making autonomous, mutually irreducible demands upon us” (Wiggins 1997, 64)—and there can arise in a more significant sense cases in which something must be forgone. These are those in which, and because, it is not possible to meet the distinct demands or requirements such ends impose—at least one of one’s *needs* must be forsaken. There can still be demands that take precedence over others, and so we can still answer what Martha Nussbaum calls the “obvious question”—that of ranking courses of action and deciding which is best to take: even when a tie obtains the answer to that question is that they are equally worthy—or unworthy—of choice; there is no reason here to think that *courses of action* cannot always be rankable. However, in situations in which it is unavoidable not merely that something must be forgone, but that something must be forsaken, we also face the face the “tragic question”—which “registers not the difficulty of solving the obvious question but a distinct difficulty: the fact that all the possible answers to the obvious question, including the best one, are bad, involving serious moral wrongdoing. In that sense, there is no ‘right answer’” (2000: 1007). This is not to say that there is no right answer to obvious question—but rather that the tragic question makes that answer very far from obvious. Clearly, Nussbaum’s distinction between these two questions maps onto that between choice-worthiness and value—though again, I would say, the tragic question can arise not only in cases involving moral necessity, but in any case in which a categorical need of any kind must be forgone.

My treatment of Incommensurability’s role in producing dilemmas allows us to solve a puzzle Raz considers, his response to which his critics have attacked: that of how choices between incommensurable comprehensive goals could be significant. *Were* it the case that career options are equal in value, or “as good as the other,” Raz

writes, reason would be “indifferent which action we take”. Conversely, however, “incomparability does not ensure equality of merit and demerit. It does not mean indifference. It marks [merely] the inability of reason to guide our action, not the insignificance of our choice” (Raz 1986, 334, my interpolation). Thus, the incommensurability of a choice between options that will have radically different, yet incomparable, consequences for one’s life is not something that can prevent it from being a momentous decision that one will rightly care very much about (*ibid.*, 332-4). In response, Donald Regan has questioned the plausibility of Raz’s view here, asking,

But what am I doing when I agonize over [a] choice between [...] [incomparable] alternatives? [...] Where reason cannot guide there is no room for practical reasoning. If there is no room for practical reasoning, should I not just flip a coin and get it over with? (Regan 1989: 1062)

We are now in a position to see what is wrong with Regan’s response. Although clearly short of tragic, there is a question to be distinguished from the “obvious question” of which career one should choose. That is the sensitivity to the fact that there is unavoidably some goal we acknowledge to be worth spending a life pursuing, something important that might have been, that might have meaningfully compelled the direction of almost one’s entire life, and yet which will not. Just as in moral dilemmas, there is no possibility that the choice could be made lightly, and that deciding flippantly on the basis of a coin-toss would be inappropriate.<sup>39</sup>

### 3.5 Concluding remarks

This chapter has shown that clarifying our concepts and distinguishing value from choice-worthiness remove the major obstacle to Incommensurability: showing how rational choice between incommensurables is intelligible. Having highlighted certain ambiguities, we might even hope for a partial reconciliation between the standpoints of incommensurabilists and their critics—we can say at once that certain things are incommensurable in value *and* that the choices in which they figure are comparable and ordinally rankable. However, two important limitations must be acknowledged. First, although Raz’s views have been a focus of discussion, the aim has not been to defend

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<sup>39</sup> I do actually think tossing a coin *could* be appropriate if one took the right attitude toward it, however: say, if one regarded it as an extremely fateful moment.

Raz, except to the extent that an interpretation in terms of the proposals has helped to advanced them. I am not certain that this interpretation is correct, and moreover, if it is then he has made the claims I have proposed on his behalf insufficiently clear. Second, as I claimed at the outset, and as both Raz and certain of his critics (Regan 1989) agree, there is no question of *proof* that incommensurability exists. Our acceptance or rejection of it will depend upon whether it is consistent with our broader understanding both of how our values are structured and of the way we practically reason. What is offered here, then, is an attempt to show how incommensurability, suitably construed, can cohere with certain important features of that understanding. In the next chapter I sketch a broader account of well-being that draws on what we learn of incommensurability.

## 4

### Needs II:

### The Structure of Well-Being

#### 4.1 Introduction

Well-being has a structure. The question is what that is. According to Q it is extremely simple, taking the form of a homogeneous (fiat) stuff—whatever that entails. The alternative sketched here is of a different kind, one that in Raz’s words makes central the idea that “human goals [...] are commonly nested within hierarchical structures” (1986, 292). In order to draw out the account it will be helpful to begin by outlining Rawls’ account of a person’s good, as that which is involved in carrying out a “rational plan of life” (1999, 79-80, 358-9).<sup>40</sup> The reason for choosing Rawls’ are that his is a respectable hierarchical precursor described in enough detail to permit elaboration of the proposed view by way of contrast. There are indeed substantial differences here, most significantly that on this new account the hierarchy is organised by relations of necessity. The emphasis here is on ‘proposal’—rather than aiming to decisively establish the account, the hope is that can gain plausibility from how it coheres with our ethical experience, shows that Q is not mandatory, and allows us to avoid the Threshold Problem. The goal is largely constructive, rather than critical.

#### 4.2 Rawls’ theory of the rational plan

The starting-point Rawls takes is to follow what he sees as the overwhelmingly historically prevalent idea of defining goodness as that which someone would choose under conditions of full rationality with all relevant knowledge (*ibid.*, 350-1, 358-9). A person’s aims or goals are then Rawls’ focus—not meaning by this, however, her actual

<sup>40</sup> Rawls himself claims to follow Josiah Royce’s (1908) treatment (cited at 1999, 358n).



subjective wishes and desires, but rather the desires of her idealised rational counterpart. What is good for a given person will vary depending upon “the conditions that confront [her]” (*ibid.*, 80). Yet what is not only good but best is that which is rational not only in the present, with respect to her present goals, but with respect to all other goals it is rational for her to have now and in the future: hence she draws up a plan, a “system of aims”, “a family of interrelated desires [which] can be satisfied in an effective and harmonious manner” (*ibid.*, 350-1, 360). Of all of the available candidate plans of life for which it might be good for others to pursue, a person chooses hers by a process of elimination, “rejecting other plans that are either less likely to succeed or do not provide such an inclusive attainment of aims” (*ibid.*, 80). On Rawls’ account, then, a hierarchical structure arises largely as a result of a person’s “scheduling” her pursuit of her rational ends so that it takes the coherent form of a plan she can reasonably expect to be able to successfully prosecute (*ibid.*).

Especially important for Rawls is the relation over time between a person’s more general and her more specific plans: a person’s highly general goals are overarching and more permanent; below these are various and interconnected sub-plans relating to fulfilling, or making progress towards fulfilling, these general goals in particular circumstances. These latter sub-plans may be more or less schematic or indeterminate ahead of detailed knowledge of what, in those particular circumstances, will achieve the higher goal they subserve. Rawls’ example here is that of the desire to be nourished, a general goal one is likely to have over the entire course of one’s life, but one which one can achieve differently at different times (*ibid.*, 360). Similarly, Raz emphasises in his account that the importance of particular, immediate goals depends mostly upon the importance of the overarching, comprehensive goals to which they contribute, and also upon the extent to which they contribute and are necessary for achieving those larger goals (1986, 292).

### 4.3 The account

#### 4.3.1 Eudaimonia

On the view I propose here, a person's categorical needs—what they ultimately need to do, have, be—relate to all of the things that matters to them. That is to say, they relate not only to the projects they have that affect no one but themselves (there are probably few of these anyway), but also comprise the demands imposed by their relations to others. Rather than individual interests narrowly conceived, only living well *whatever that involves* can be normatively compelling for the person whose life it is (§2.2.3). This will certainly not be limited to some subset (e.g., 'self-regarding' interests) of the demands imposed upon them. As it happens, although the view is in one way diametrically opposed to Q, a significant commonality is that living well here is similar in its scope to abstract 'utility'.

Also on the proposed view, everything that matters to a person enters into their life in the form of necessary requirements. A person's well-being then includes how well they satisfy those. Actually, however, since this is all active, 'well-living' or 'doing well' are better terms than the passive state 'well-being' suggests. To do well is to live in the ways that the things that matter to one require, not to accumulate a level of anything.

In adopting this eudaimonistic orientation,

1. We do not suppose that a person's ethical life is fundamentally fragmented. This enables us to make progress by investigating a possible unifying general structure.
2. That general structure can then be filled out with the hierarchy of categorical needs and their prerequisites that living well with respect to what matters to one implicates.

#### 4.3.2 Mattering

One difference between Rawls' theory of the rational plan and this account is that it does not commit itself to any particular account of why the things that matter to people do so. Neither is there a strong role for rationality as in Rawls'. Without making

significant metaethical claims, all that is necessary is the supposition that, as a matter of fact, there are things which matter to people. The strong similarity with Rawls' view lies in our maintaining that even without any "thick" substantive conception of the good we can still "suppose that [people's] conceptions of the good have a certain structure" (1999, 349). Actually, on the new account a person's *conception* of their good is not primary. A person neither necessarily apprehends all the things that matter to them; yet nor are those things typically entirely distinct from their consciously adopted goals.

A more significant difference is that a hierarchical structure derives not from a distinction between general or comprehensive and specific or immediate goals or plans, but rather from what one *needs* in order to attain what matters to one—though one's categorical needs do play a similarly organising role to comprehensive goals. What a person needs to do, have, and be is organised by the requirements their categorical needs impose upon them, and the necessary preconditions that must be secured in order to achieve them. Another similarity relates to general goals and specific plans as they figure in Rawls' view: while on the new account a person's categorical needs are more or less rigid, the merely precondition-needs they require can be freely substituted and reorganised as circumstances change. Furthermore, there is a place for scheduling in the following sense: a person's attainments and actions must be scheduled according to what is necessary for, and hence must be in place before, what. As in Rawls' view, time plays an important role in my account, in the way in which doing well is prospective: as explained below, it is often not the case that a person must succeed in fulfilling all of the requirements their categorical needs impose in the present, only that their prospects of prosecuting them are good.

#### 4.3.3 Doing well as a binary notion

We assess how well a person's life is going by surveying whether their categorical needs are satisfied or unsatisfied. We cannot, however, summarise their well-being in the form of a single quantity or extent. It is not, for instance, *how many* of her needs are satisfied. Nor can it be understood as being somehow the 'balance' of her satisfied over her unsatisfied needs. A person is rather simply doing well or not doing well. A person

is doing well if either all of her several categorical needs are satisfied *or* (more likely) are at least making good progress towards being satisfied, in the sense that it can reasonably be expected that those *will* at some point in their life be satisfied. A person is not doing well if some of their categorical needs are unsatisfied *and* that it is reasonable to expect that these same categorical needs *will not* be satisfied. Neither of these represents a degree or quantity, but a set of satiable conditions, and there is a separate question corresponding to each of these several conditions as to whether it is (on the way to one day being) satisfied—to which we can give a definitively affirmative or negative answer. There is likewise either a definitively negative or positive answer to the encompassing question, ‘Are they doing well?’.

If someone says that they or another person is doing ‘mostly’ well, we need not interpret them in terms of Q. Doing well is a binary notion, with no question of *how many* of their needs are met or not. Consider yourself describing yourself or a friend as doing mostly well or not very well, or doing more or less well. We do not really imagine ourselves or the other person being at some level. More likely there is some uncertainty or indeterminacy as to whether some number, one or more, of her categorical needs are or can be expected to be satisfied. This will be so if there is uncertainty or indeterminacy as to whether there is some number of the precondition needs for these that are, *and* can reasonably be expected to be, left unsatisfied. ‘How well’ someone is we can understand as expressing a degree of confidence, not a level.

#### 4.3.4 Sufficiency

With these elements, we can say that to have enough is to have all of the preconditions met for being in the satiable condition of doing well. The Threshold Problem is avoided because to doing well is not to be on any level. Doing well is understood in terms of needs, and needs are not defined by an amount of anything.

### **4.4 Potential objections**

#### 4.4.1 The threat of insatiability

We can anticipate two threats to the idea that the proposed account of eudaimonic needs account of well-being supplies a condition of doing well that is satiable. The first

might arise out of the speculation or expectation that a person might develop new needs over time—for instance, if as soon as one categorical need is satisfied others always sprang up and remained unsatisfied. (This latter thought would be to adapt Schopenhauer’s view that this is what occurs with desires.<sup>41</sup>) If one develops new needs over time, it might be thought, it does not seem that doing well could be a satiable condition. This would be a mistake, however. It is neither better nor worse that one has more rather than fewer needs—there is no external perspective from which to evaluate this; no number of needs one needs to have. For any given set of needs it is always possible for them to be definitively satisfied. It is right that our needs may change, and that they might be differentially satisfied at different times. But in order to get clear on this matter we have to take into account how certain of our categorical needs structure our lives, as overarching goals do in Rawls’ and Raz’s accounts. Even if there are some or even many of our needs remaining unsatisfied, our lives are successful and on the way to being successful in the respects that the categorical needs we do satisfy are satisfied, and that we are making good progress towards others.

#### 4.4.2 Pleasures and pains

##### *4.4.2.1 Pleasures*

Another threat comes from the direction of pleasure. Someone might grant that only *most* or *a part* of a person’s well-being is comprised by the satiable conditions of satisfied categorical needs, on the grounds that another component of well-being is pleasure—and that this is insatiable. The claim would be that, whatever else one has, it is better always to have more pleasures.

It may be that pleasures are ends worth pursuing for their own sakes, and that it is entirely reasonable to do so whenever this does not prevent one from meeting the demands one’s categorical needs impose. However, only a certain number and variety of pleasures are *necessary*, and without which one cannot be well. Pleasures can be necessary as preconditions and/or categorically. It is likely that a certain number and variety of pleasures are necessary as preconditions for mental health, relaxation,

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<sup>41</sup> He thought that, unsatisfied desires being painful, this result means that happiness—at best the avoidance of suffering in his view—is impossible.

release, avoiding being dull, and such. It is also plausible that people categorically need a certain number and variety of pleasures, and that there could be a determinate threshold, perhaps vague, imposed by different people's psychological make-ups, determining how much this is. However, nothing much depends on this.

If pleasure in excess of what one needs can be worthwhile, an interesting result, then, is that pleasurable things can be good without mattering. Curiously the situation bears striking resemblance to Frankfurt's position on this issue. Frankfurt writes:

What is worth having or worth doing for its own sake may nonetheless be worth very little. It may therefore be quite reasonable for a person to desire as final ends, entirely for the sake of their intrinsic or noninstrumental value, many things that he does not regard as being at all important to him.

For instance, there are numerous quite trivial pleasures that we seek exclusively for their intrinsic value, but that we do not truly care about at all. When I want an ice cream cone, I want it simply for the pleasure of eating it. The pleasure is not a means to anything else; it is an end that I desire for its own sake alone. However, this hardly implies that I care about eating the ice cream. (Frankfurt 2004, 13-4)

It seems that the same might apply in the present account, only in different terms—the important result will be that the ice-cream does not *matter*. Things may matter to us that we do not actually (occurrently) care about, and there are often things we care about that do not matter. The reason the ice-cream is “worth little” is that it is unnecessary.

I think it is important also to note that much that is pleasurable is neither pleasure taken as either an end (necessary or in excess of what one needs) nor means to other needs—but rather the *satisfaction* accompanying and connected with meeting the requirements one's categorical needs impose. It is this that has the character of deep satisfaction (*cf.* §§1.4.2 and 3.4.1). We might nonetheless say that for it to really be valuable it has to be, so to speak, veridical satisfaction—since what gives it sense, and what remains the standard for our satisfaction to be vindicated, is that the ends in which we take satisfaction are categorically necessary; that they matter.

#### 4.4.2.2 Pains

Pain is almost always something a person needs not to experience. Firstly, it usually registers damage to the body or mind, and insofar as bodily and mental health are necessary preconditions one needs to avoid pain in order to satisfy the demands of one's categorical needs. Secondly, it is plausible that it is usually also amongst a person's categorical needs not to experience pain.

Pains and discomforts may be necessary preconditions for certain of one's categorical needs. It may be 'worth it' to go through a certain painful experience in order to reach what is on the other side—it may be amongst the pains a person categorically needs not to experience, and yet nonetheless be contingently a necessary precondition to something else that is categorically needed. It is necessary *contingent upon* the circumstances being the way they are. We should, however, also allow that there may be unusual circumstances in which pain is inseparable from something somebody categorically needs. We should not rule out the possibility, for example, that a person with masochistic sexual tastes may need pain for their sexual satisfaction, and that this satisfaction may be something they categorically need. In cases of this type, depending on the details, pain may be either a non-substitutable but non-final necessary precondition for the attainment of the end (in the sense that there is no substitute for it), or itself a categorical need, inseparable from the end.

#### 4.4.3 Occurrent and life-time needs

These topics provoke the question of whether the account of well-being is a whole-life or present-time view. Actually, both whole-life and present-time well-being are representable within the account.

On the one hand, if certain amounts of pains and pleasures and/or degrees of mental and bodily health are categorical needs in the present—as is plausible—then these may constitute what we may call 'occurrent needs'. These may also include processes, relationships, and other extended activities that one categorically needs to be 'functioning' in the present. If, for example, a relationship has for at least the present broken down, or more decisively if one is grieving, then one's occurrent needs may be

unfulfilled.

On the other hand, projects and processes over an extended period of time that do not need to be achieved in the present but only eventually, we can call 'life-time needs'. In the relationship case, the relationship may also constitute a fulfilled life-time need even despite non-functioning periods—if it never breaks down completely, or, if it does, is at least is not entirely cause for regret. Life-time needs are connected with success and failure in life. The fact that people's categorical needs are many and several implies that a blanket judgement that a person's life is a success or a failure is almost always false: one's successes and failures are several, and neither compensate for nor cancel out each other. This also means that life may be worth living even if a great many of one's needs are unmet. Equally, one might not need to live anymore, and 'die happy', being rightly satisfied that one has lived a life with many successes. However, although we categorically need to pursue our life-time categorical needs, our lives are not necessarily failures if we fail to accomplish them—sheer pursuit, even consciously quixotically at the limit, is perhaps one of the things people need. Yet even in such cases it is still the necessity of the end itself that pulls them on.

Both occurrent and life-time needs are important. The former determine whether any particular time is or was sufficiently pleasant, but it is the latter that determines the ways in which one's life can be expected to be, or has been, a success. One can have the latter met without the former, the former without the latter. One can not be doing well in the present if one lacks either.

#### 4.4.4 Mitigating opposition to 'higher' needs

Despite the anxiety on the part of proponents of needs we saw in Chapter Two to *confine* needs, the idea that the ends that really matter to person's well-being are not restricted to their basic needs should not be terribly controversial. A famous and hugely influential precedent, moreover building in some degree of structure, is Abraham Maslow's theory of a "hierarchy of needs", according to which people's needs are of several types that are variously 'higher' and 'lower', ranging from "physiological", "safety", "belongingness", and "love" needs, though to "esteem",



“self-actualization”, and “self-transcendence” needs (1943). It should be admitted that the term ‘needs’ is commonly interpreted differently, somewhat perversely, in psychology as meaning something like ‘drives’. Maslow indeed propounded his theory in a paper entitled “A Theory of Human Motivation”—yet motivation is not essential to need, and neither does one need everything that motivates one (Thomson 1987). It is plausible, though, that the psychological usage of the term imports something of the ethical conception current in society and discussed in philosophy, and that the wide acceptance of the idea that people have ‘higher’ needs does not depend upon the peculiar definition of ‘needs’ psychologists have used. Miller (1976, ch. 4), despite later repudiating the idea (1999, 209), has also advanced an expansive theory of needs encompassing all of the necessary preconditions for the quite high-order ends one pursues as part of a plan of life.

#### 4.4.5 Others’ needs included amongst these

It is possible that many would object to the eudaimonistic idea that other-regarding requirements can be said to figure amongst a person’s needs. In reply, there is evidence that the highly individualistic idea of needs, that excludes what we need to do for others, is parochial to Western culture. As Julia Tao and Glenn Drover document, a Chinese Confucian understanding of needs places most weight on relationships and the demands of social roles: “Primarily, it emphasizes human relatedness, the interconnectedness of needs, and the reciprocal nature of obligation rather than physical health and autonomy” (1997: 21). Refraining from importing any particular substantive conception of well-being, and in fact allowing that different things can, objectively, matter to different people, this is something to be accommodated in our theory. Other-regarding requirements should be allowed to figure amongst people’s needs—even if, for some Westerners, they lack the paramount importance they have to someone to whom what matters aligns closely with the Confucian conception.

#### 4.5 Ethics and politics

Developing a thoroughgoing account of the political relevance of Sufficiency is the task of a different project. However, I can at least make some remarks about certain general consequences it might have.

Conceiving of Sufficiency in the terms of the eudaimonistic needs theory of doing well alters the distributive question it poses entirely. No longer is the situation imagined that we are distributing resources contributing to ‘well-being’ with respect to how far people are below or above any threshold. Having enough is an all-or-nothing matter, and if it matters that everyone has enough, then we ought to take means to ensure that this is so. Politically, what it is that a person actually has *enough* of must be the resources necessary for—as Frankfurt holds—living good life. By explaining how the good life is a satiable condition, my account of well-being can head off the question, ‘How good?’, and is therefore able to supply determinate conditions for what resources are enough for any particular person. However, the multiplicity of the different kinds of needs people have, as well as the multiplicity of any given person’s needs, implies that the distributional advice Sufficiency provides is very far from precise. This is realistic, however. Although it might be very convenient for policy purposes and interpersonal comparisons generally if we had a single reductive measure of how well a person is doing, that is a mirage. There is no substitute for identifying the specific ways in which people require certain resources and conditions in order live in the ways that the things that matter to them require.

It will be objected that I have not mentioned situations in which it is not possible for everyone to have enough—situations of scarcity that economists take as their chief concern, and to which quantificational modes of evaluation are most sensitive. There is indeed a response to this concern available, but before I explain it I need to make two observations on behalf of the proposed account. First, by advancing a *eudaimonistic* account of categorical needs, I have emphasised that living well is what matters. Yet what we categorically need need not be resource-intense—and in fact, as the cliché goes, the things that matter most cost little: family, friends, community, meaning, purpose. Moving away from the quantity view of well-being, we at once

move away from the idea that it is an ever-increasing function of resources and other inputs. The distributional question will be to a lesser degree about stocks of material goods so much as creating conditions in which people can best pursue and attain the kind of higher ends just mentioned—and certainly not actively undermining those conditions in the all-consuming pursuit of increases in material output (which in any case continues to fail to secure enough for those most lacking). The second observation is that it is not always so bad, entirely bad that is, if one is unable to meet *all* of these requirements—and, therefore, to have less than enough. It will not be so bad, so long as one's life is not entirely a failure—and, as I have suggested in §4.4.3, that is a difficult feat. It is not so bad if one only has enough to meet some of one's life-time categorical needs, because one's unmet categorical needs do not detract from the ones whose demands one *is* able to meet. By equal measure, however, those unmet needs' demands do not go away, and one continues not to do well if they are not met.

Here, now, is an at best suggestive response to the scarcity worry. If it matters to us that others (are able to) do well, then amongst our needs is the need to ensure that are—the need to help them to get enough of what is necessary for them to be able to pursue their categorical needs.<sup>42</sup> We cannot ourselves do well so long as they do not have what they need. The only way everyone can have enough might often be to *let go* or *revise* some of the most resource-intense projects we are set upon, the pursuit of which is amongst our categorical needs. This possibility has clear relevance not only to questions of fair distribution in the present, but also to environmental conservation and what we owe to future generations. How the account of well-being presented here would approach those issues, and of how malleable our categorical needs might be, are interesting problems for further investigation.

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<sup>42</sup> We could take into account Raz's observation that success, however, is something no one can provide for anyone else; success is necessarily something one achieves oneself (1994). This being the case, the best we could do, and the most we could be required to do, is to help others to be in a position from which they are able to achieve success.

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