Needs, Moral Demands and Moral Theory

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In this article we argue that the concept of need is as vital for moral theory as it is for moral life. In II we analyse need and its normativity in public and private moral practice. In III we describe simple cases which exemplify the moral demandingness of needs, and argue that the significance of simple cases for moral theory is obscured by the emphasis in moral philosophy on unusual cases. In IV we argue that moral theories are inadequate if they cannot describe simple needs-meeting cases. We argue that the elimination or reduction of need to other concepts such as value, duty, virtue or care is unsatisfactory, in which case moral theories that make those concepts fundamental will have to be revised. In conclusion, we suggest that if moral theories cannot be revised to accommodate needs, they may have to be replaced with a fully needs-based theory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Needs are everywhere. Simple cases, in which a moral agent meets a need, are the bread and butter of everyday moral practice. A baby is hungry. Someone notices, and feeds it. A new parent needs sleep. Someone notices, and cares for their child so they can get some. A fellow-worker is overwhelmed. Someone notices, and takes over some of the burden. Moral agents – that is, all of us – are taught to recognize and respond to needs from an early age. Most of us are so good at it that we do it automatically, without thinking. Needs are very salient in moral practice. But in moral theory, little is said about them. The great moral philosophers of our tradition, such as Aristotle, Hume, Kant and Mill, hardly mention need, let alone treat it as necessary to explain moral practice. Instead, they treat the concepts of virtue, duty, sympathy and value as necessary and sufficient to explain it. Those who ignore the concept of need must think either that needs are not morally important, or that anything morally important about need can be captured by other concepts. We think this is a mistake. We think the concept of need should be as central in moral theory as actual needs are in moral practice. In this article we make a start on saying why.

We explicate the concept of a morally important need in Section II. In Section III, we describe the simple case of a moral agent encountering...
a need which displays the way needs function as moral demands most clearly. Simple cases are a very common kind of moral context. It follows that any adequate moral theory needs to capture the moral importance of needs in such contexts. In Section IV we argue that popular contemporary moral theories, whether value-based, rule-based, virtue-based or care-based, often fail to capture the moral importance of needs. If a moral theory does not capture the moral importance of needs in simple cases, we argue in conclusion, it should be revised or rejected.

II. THE CONCEPT OF A MORALLY IMPORTANT NEED

In ethics as elsewhere, the concept of need is the concept of a requirement. It is part of the grammar of the word, that it makes sense to ask ‘what for?’ about any need. The answer gives the end for which the need is a necessary condition. For example: ‘I need 20p’ ‘What for?’ ‘I can’t make a phone call without it.’ ‘I need water.’ ‘What for?’ ‘I can’t live without it.’ The ‘what for?’ question distinguishes contingent from non-contingent needs. Contingent needs are requirements for contingent ends, which the needing being might or might not have (like the phone call). Non-contingent needs, by contrast, are necessary conditions for non-contingent aims that the needing being could not but have (like life). Needs-theorists offer various concepts as candidate non-contingent ends, for example agency, life, flourishing or avoidance of harm.1

The mark of the moral importance of non-contingent needs in ethics is that the needing being simply cannot go on unless its need is met. It is no exaggeration to say that in a state of non-contingent need, the very existence of the needing being as we know it is at stake. It is this feature that gives the concept of non-contingent need its unique moral importance. Non-contingent needs are uniquely grave in their connection with fundamental features of the needing being, and uniquely urgent in the way they demand helping action lest the needing being cease to function or even to exist. Non-contingent needs impose moral demands on moral agents, in the sense that moral agents characteristically take themselves to be morally obliged to act to meet

such needs. Contingent needs are not taken to be intrinsically morally demanding in this way.

Making the distinction between non-contingent needs and everything else (contingent needs, or desires, interests, etc.) is the mark of moral relationship in practice. The moral agent sifts what the patient of their action requires in order to go on, from what they need for some contingent purpose, or what they might like, or what might increase their well-being, capability or holdings of goods. And moral agents take themselves to be morally obliged to meet the non-contingent need. They may, morally permissibly, also meet contingent needs, or satisfy desires, or otherwise benefit the patient in other ways. Such acts may even be morally good, i.e. supererogatory. But they are not morally required. What we take to be morally required of us, is that we should meet the non-contingent needs of those who feature in our lives. Failure in this is morally blameworthy; success morally praiseworthy.

How can a non-contingent need be a moral demand – how is it normative? It is commonly thought that moral normativity is a mysterious phenomenon, which demands great philosophical ingenuity if we are to escape the horns of the dilemma described by Anscombe in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’: either norms are supernatural, in which case how they get into the natural world is a mystery; or they are just parts of nature grinding on, in which case their normativity is illusory, for they are merely causal. But in fact, once we see it correctly, the question of how needs impose moral demands is no more challenging or mysterious than the question: How can a piece of wood with this shape in this position impose chess demands? A piece of wood has unpuzzling normative properties within the practice of chess which constrain what chess-players may do. Just so, we suggest, non-contingent needs have normative properties within moral practice which constrain what moral agents may do. In practice, things in the world – a piece of wood, some apparatus, a need – guide agents in a particular skilled activity – playing chess, doing science, or acting morally. So needs are moral demands for moral agents in the sense that the actions of moral agents are guided by them.

The normativity claimed for non-contingent needs in moral practice here is prima facie or pro tanto normativity. It is defeasible by other considerations in actual contexts. Just as the chess-player may be obliged to ignore the pressure to move his knight, and obliged to respond instead to a different chess norm (the pressure to move his king, say), or to a non-chess norm (the pressure to attend to the health of a member of the audience who collapses, say), so the moral agent may be obliged to ignore the pressure to meet one non-contingent need, and obliged to respond instead to a different moral norm (the pressure to meet a more urgent non-contingent need, say), or to a non-moral
norm (the pressure to complete an important scientific experiment, say).

The normativity claimed here for needs in moral practice is also ‘hypothetical’, in the sense that it depends on something contingent (although not hypothetical in the original Humean sense, of depending on either self-interest or desire). It depends on our participation in moral practice. Just as chess norms oblige only if you are playing chess (which you could choose not to), so needs only oblige if you are engaged in moral activity (which you could choose not to). This contrasts with the Kantian account of moral norms as ‘categorical’, that is, as independent of anything contingent. On that account, moral norms depend on our being rational agents (which we cannot choose not to be).

A perspicuous way of describing moral practice might be: Moral agents use the concept of need to guide them in distinguishing between the help-requiring and the help-neutral states of the things with which they share their life. This way of understanding needs may derive support from a naturalistic, genealogical approach in epistemology, which has been more recently explored in political philosophy. In this approach, a concept is explicated by asking ‘Why would such a concept have evolved amongst creatures like us in a world like this?’ If we ask this about non-contingent need, contrasted with mere ability to benefit, we are led to explore an answer in terms of the limitations on moral agency. It is a fact of moral life that we cannot do everything that it would be good to do. Because of this, we need a way of distinguishing help-requiring from help-neutral states of things – a way of distinguishing morally obligating facts about the world from facts which merely provide options and possibilities for action. It is plausible that the concept of non-contingent need has evolved to mark this important difference for us.

Some refinements must be added to this picture of moral practice as needs-meeting practice. The first is that moral agents take the non-contingent needs of only some beings to be moral demands – only the needs of beings with which they are in moral relationship. Moral relationships are varied and complex, involving connections and constraints of many different kinds (shared kinship, history, environment, practice, for example). But wherever a moral relationship is held to obtain, there we will find moral agents taking

\[2\] Edward Craig, ‘The Practical Explication of Knowledge’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 87 (1986), asks the question about knowledge (contrasted with mere belief), and explores an answer in terms of reliable truth-tracking; Melissa Lane, ‘Political Authority’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100 (1999), drawing on Craig, asks the same question about political authority (contrasted with mere power).

\[3\] The concept of a morally obligating relationship is discussed in more detail in Soran Reader, ‘Distance, Relationship and Moral Obligation’, *The Monist* 86 (2003).
non-contingent needs to be moral demands. Taking someone’s needs to be morally demanding is simply part of what it means to be in moral relationship with them. Thus, the non-contingent needs of persons I encounter, those of my children, my friends, my colleagues, and my neighbours, are all moral demands for me. But the non-contingent needs of inanimate objects, distant strangers, animals and plants are not moral demands for me, because the concept of moral relationship does not include the modest connections we have with such things.

Second, moral agents do not take all the non-contingent needs of those with whom they are in moral relationship to be morally demanding. Recall that non-contingent needs refer to non-contingent aims, like agency, life, harm-avoidance, flourishing or existence. Sometimes such aims are not taken to place moral demands on moral agents. For example, the ongoing agency, life, harm-avoidance or flourishing of a wicked being will not normally be treated as a moral demand. I may need all sorts of help in order to carry on as a child-abuser, but moral agents connected to me may not take these needs to be morally demanding. Similarly, short-lived non-contingent needs, such as the requirements for continuing the operatic diva phase of a teenager's life, are not usually taken to be very demanding by those around the diva.

The normativity of need works differently in public than in private morality. Public morality includes political theory and development ethics. In public morality, not all non-contingent needs count as moral demands. Because it is general, needs-based public policy for any constituency must take to be normative only those non-contingent needs that are shared by the whole constituency. This means that the requirements for agency, life, flourishing or harm that are relevant to public policy are those shared by the entire constituency. These general, shared requirements are called ‘basic’ needs: requirements of (say) a member of this species, or a member of this community. This explains the prominence in needs-based political theory and development ethics of talk of ‘basic needs’. Basic needs are requirements for physical survival as a biological human being, like water, food, shelter and safety. The concept of a basic human need is now generally extended to include requirements for a decent human life which go beyond physical survival, such as education, privacy, freedom. Such needs are combined

4 These points about policy hold however grand or mundane the policy in question is. We might, with John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), Thomas Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), and Martha Nussbaum ‘The Future of Liberal Feminism’, APA Presidential Address, 2000, p. 12, be ‘designing the basic structure of society’, or we might just be deciding a strategy for the distribution of prizes at the end of the school year. In both cases, we are dealing with a group (generality), and we aim to formulate policy in advance of contexts where it will be applied.
into lists, and are held to be intrinsically demanding, rather than simply being that which we in fact use as morally demanding in our practices as they are, as in our practice-based account.\(^5\) Public morality focuses on universal, basic needs, and specifies those needs in advance of actual cases in policy. The way needs are used in public policy does not distort the normativity of needs. This is one way it can work. But nevertheless, we think it may have blinded us to the different way it works in private morality.

In private morality, moral agents use only the more elementary distinction, between non-contingent needs, which they take to be help-requiring, and contingent ones, which they typically take to be help-neutral. The distinction between a basic non-contingent need and a more idiosyncratic need does not amount to the difference between a morally demanding need and a morally negligible one in private morality. Moral demands in private morality refer to requirements for \textit{this} individual. For example, my need to go rowing on the nearest river is not a universal need – it is not a need that everyone has. Nor is it a basic need – it is not a requirement for me just \textit{qua} human being. Nevertheless, so long as it is something I genuinely need to do in order to go on as this individual person, such a need places moral demands on those with whom I share my life. ‘Basic’ needs (e.g. for water) are still normative in private contexts. But private morality adds a layer of sensibility for which, in addition to basic needs, a unique individual need (e.g. to finish your paper) may be just as demanding.

The details of our particular identities show needs which are not shared with everyone. These may be fixed, or vary depending on the context. In different contexts, the same person may need to struggle on alone or to be helped; to be protected from the truth or to be told; to be encouraged to take exercise or be left slumped on the sofa. In the same context, different people will need different things. This complex variability might be thought to undermine the claim that there are moral facts about individual needs which can be objectively known. We draw on particularism to show why we think this is mistaken. We cannot specify individual needs in general and in advance, nor say what their relative moral weight will be. And even if we give a moral weight to a need here, this is not enough to determine the weight it must be given elsewhere. But from a particularist perspective, this strong context-dependence does not entail that there are no facts about needs in actual cases.

\(^5\) See Sabina Alkire, ‘Dimensions of Human Development’, \textit{World Bank} (2000), for a discussion of the phenomenon of lists of needs, and an attempt to synthesize them into a single list which will be more useful in guiding needs-meeting policy for work in human development.
On the contrary, moral experience reveals the very facts we seek. It is normally clear in actual cases which needs constitute moral demands for whom, and why. In knowing particular needing beings well (as kinds and individuals), moral agents can know what they need. And they can be as sure about that, as they can about anything. 'She needs some rest' can be as clear and distinct an idea as the Moorean certainty, 'This is a hand'. Moral agents acquire highly specific information about the particular needs of those they know. This knowledge is acquired in multiple diverse ways in the course of sharing life with them and being morally responsible in relation to them. It is a combination of knowledge of the needing being, which is analogous to knowledge of persons or acquaintance knowledge, and knowledge of how best to meet needs, which is analogous to knowledge how, or skills-knowledge. Propositional knowledge is not required.

To sum up this section, the concept of a need is that of a requirement. A non-contingent need is a requirement for a non-contingent end such as agency, flourishing, life, or avoidance of harm. Non-contingent needs are normative in being what moral agents use in moral practice to guide their actions. Needs-based public ethics focuses on non-contingent needs shared by a constituency (e.g. all human beings), called ‘basic’ needs. Because they are general and abstract, basic needs can be specified in advance, in ‘lists’, and held to be intrinsically normative, independent of context. It is often thought that the difference between a basic and a non-basic need is the difference between a normative need and a non-normative one. Attention to private ethical practice shows this may be a mistake. In private ethics, individual non-contingent needs are also moral demands, but need not be basic. Such needs are context-dependent, but particularist insights show how this does not undermine the claim that there are objective moral facts about them.

III. SIMPLE CASES

For a context to be a moral one, two features must be present: a moral agent, and a patient (in the minimal Aristotelian sense of that on which the agent acts). For a moral context to be a simple one, there must be just one agent and one patient (the agent can also be the patient: we routinely act on ourselves in moral ways). Simple contexts, by definition, can only arise in private morality. A moral agent meeting a needing being is an especially clear and central case of a simple moral context. We think simple needs-meeting contexts are paradigms: they display very clearly what a moral demand is. Examples include the hungry baby, the exhausted parent and the overwhelmed colleague with whom this article began. Simple encounters with such needs are a measuring rod against which the moral demandingness of other
things can be measured. If you do not see that the need constitutes a moral demand in such cases, what we will probably say is not that we need a better argument to prove the moral importance of needs, but rather that you have not yet mastered normal moral practice. The demandingness of needs may be even clearer in dramatic examples, such as Peter Singer’s example of a passer-by having to retrieve a drowning infant from a pond. As Bernard Williams suggested long ago, the ability to grasp the moral importance of needs is crucial for the development of moral agency: with this ability in place, amoralism is impossible; without it, it may yet gain a foothold. Someone who does not understand that non-contingent needs impose moral demands does not understand what it is to be a moral agent.

Simple cases are paradigmatic in several ways. We have argued elsewhere that they are prior in moral learning, psychologically direct, explanatorily complete, epistemologically prior, and conceptually prior. But as well as being paradigms which show what a moral demand is, simple need contexts are also very common – so common, we think, that they are statistically normal. We hardly get through a day without coming across needs, and responding to them more or less well. Needs-meeting is the daily bread of moral practice, as it were, and it contrasts with the*haute cuisine* puzzles that dominate philosophical discussion. Philosophical puzzles which focus on dramatic choices mislead us here. Ordinary moral practice does not involve dealing with trolley problems, or saving the world, or deciding what sort of person to be. It does not typically involve deciding between conflicting demands of self-interest and altruism, either.

We are social animals, embedded in moral practice. We encounter needs, and normally meet them. Sometimes our own needs, sometimes those of others. If I see that you are hungry, I offer you something to eat. In such simple cases I do not do any weighing up. When life is going well, conflicts are rare, and simple cases are the norm. To do well as a moral agent, I must simply meet the needs of those around me. Perhaps the sheer painfulness and intractability of some complex cases has blinded us to the abundance of simple ones, and made us forget the bedrock of moral knowledge that our facility with simple cases reveals.

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6 Clearer to analytic moral philosophers whose moral sensibilities have been blunted by a diet of violent and ugly examples, anyway. See Michael Stocker, ‘The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories’, *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976), for a discussion of the problems which the use of cruel and unusual examples can cause for moral thought. See Peter Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence and Morality’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972).


To sum up this section, the way needs are moral demands in moral practice is most plainly seen in the simple case of a moral agent meeting a need. Such cases are paradigmatic of the way moral demands work in many ways. They are also common, to the point of being the normal case. The difficulties presented by complex, conflicted cases, and the fact that philosophers have focused disproportionately on them, have obscured the central importance of needs-meeting simple cases.

IV. SIMPLE CASES AND MORAL THEORY

A central thesis of this article is that an adequate moral theory must be able to account for simple cases of a moral agent responding to a need. Moral theories which fail to capture the way we use needs as moral demands in normal moral practice are inadequate, and must be revised or rejected. Three types of ethical theory are popular in contemporary analytical moral philosophy: consequentialist theories, which are value-based; deontological theories, which are rule-based; and virtue theories, which are character-based. There is debate about whether these theories are actually rivals. Nevertheless, there is broad agreement about the range of basic or ‘thin’ concepts a moral theory should use, and an assumption that the concept of need is not among them. A plausible contemporary list might include the following among its thin concepts: good, bad, value, right, wrong, rule, normativity, sympathy and virtue. Debates in normative ethical theory can then quite fruitfully be seen as debates about which of these concepts are fundamental, and which are derivative.

We want to challenge the assumption that theories relying on these concepts can adequately account for our moral practice. One important but neglected job a moral theory has to do, in our view, is to capture the morally significant features of simple cases of moral agents responding to needs. The concepts used in the popular moral theories are insufficient, we think, for this task. If we are right, it follows that the concept of need must be given a more fundamental role in such theories. We develop our argument by picking out some central concepts and claims from the popular theories, against which to test our hypothesis that the importance of needs in simple cases is

9 It has been suggested that they might more accurately be seen as different ‘methods’, each of which emphasizes a different aspect of the moral life which is more important than others in some contexts, or different descriptive ‘lenses’ through which the moral life can be viewed. See for example Marcia Baron, Philip Pettit and Michael Slote (eds.), Three Methods of Ethics (Oxford, 1997) and Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit, ‘Moral Functionalism and Moral Motivation’, Philosophical Quarterly 45 (1995).

10 We owe the term ‘thin’ to Bernard Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (London, 1985). A ‘thin’ concept is general, and has little empirical content; a ‘thick’ concept has much.
not adequately captured by these theories as they stand. We do not engage with any of these theories in enough detail to establish that they should be rejected because they ignore needs; but we trust we say enough to establish the more modest conclusion, that they should be revised to include the concept of need among the array of fundamental thin moral concepts on which they draw.

At the heart of consequentialism is the thought that the rational response to value or good is to promote it. An act is right to the extent that it promotes value. At the heart of deontology is the idea that the rightness of actions is independent of whether or not they promote value, and is determined rather by the action’s conformity with a moral rule. What determines what is right is the relevant rational principle. At the heart of virtue ethics is the idea of the virtuous person, who is the reference-point of judgements about what is good or right. Right action is, or aims to be, what the virtuous person does. To the extent that any version of these theories, however novel or sophisticated, is committed to these central claims, it will face the problems we now describe in accounting for simple cases.

When defenders of one of these theories seek to account for a simple need case, they face a dilemma. First horn: They may eliminate the concept of need, denying that it plays any ethical role. They would have to argue that, contrary to appearances, in a simple case the good moral agent is concerned to promote value, or respect rights, or express virtues, not to meet needs. Second horn: They may reduce the concept of need, allowing that it is an important concept in folk moral talk, but arguing that everything about it can be captured as well or better by a favoured concept in their theory.

On the first eliminative horn, the theorist must claim that even in simple cases reference to needs is unnecessary. Talk of value, rules or virtues should replace it, if not in actual deliberations (where the habit of speaking of needs as moral demands is too entrenched), then at least in philosophical moral explanations. The needs-theorist can respond in a way that draws on ordinary moral experience, as it constrains moral theory. First, as a matter of empirical fact, in simple cases, moral agents do not ask themselves what would promote value, or seek a moral rule, or wonder what virtue would involve here. For examples, think of the hungry baby, or Singer’s drowning toddler. In such cases, good moral agents focus on the need. Other considerations play no role. The claim that ordinary moral talk is out of touch with reality is implausible.

But the theorist could allow that moral agents actually do not reflect on value, rules or virtue in simple cases, and nevertheless insist that it would be no bad thing if they did. The needs-theorist rejects this, too. Reflection on value, rules or virtue is inappropriate for simple
cases. What can justify involving complex abstract concepts in moral reflections, when you have a clear instance of a concrete concept – a non-contingent need – right in front of you? Only a paranoid scepticism could mandate checking in every case however simple that other, special considerations were not playing a role. We could not recommend this for everyday contexts – moral agency would be paralysed if we did. Think what a recipient of your help would make of you, if you explained your help in terms of value-promotion, or some rule or some virtuous example. They would find such explanations odd, if not offensive. Such explanations, in simple cases, fail to capture the moral aspect of your helping, which is best captured by saying: the reason is the need.

Of course, we should not confuse a manner of deliberation with attention to the morally right kind of reason. A moral agent could excel at calculating value, finding rules, or seeing what virtue would be here, and do this instantly and effortlessly as they encountered the needing other. Our objection, then, must be not that the consequentialist, deontological or virtue-ethical agent fails in spontaneity, but that his reflections are directed at the wrong objects. Values, rules and virtues are not – morally – the right things to be thinking about when you are faced with a needy person. In simple cases, the need is the (only) morally right object of concern.11

The concept of need occupies a unique, essential position in capturing what is morally demanding in the context. A well-known example helps to make the point.12 A deontologically minded person goes to visit a friend in hospital because this is his duty. The virtue theorist then draws our attention to another kind of friend, one who goes to visit the sick friend because she wants to, and does this cheerfully out of concern for the friend.13 We are meant to prefer the second friend’s actions. What is striking, from the perspective of this article, is that in discussions of this example, there is no talk of what the sick patient needs. Maybe her condition requires that she not be visited; maybe she needs a last drink of her favourite tipple now far more than a visit; maybe she needs to be alone, rather than having to put on a brave face for well-wishers. No adequate moral response can be reached until we know about her needs. In the example, we should proceed by asking the patient, or her immediate carers, or others who have seen her recently: What does she need from me? We should do this, rather than trying to

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12 We also discuss this example in Brock and Reader, ‘Needs-Centered Ethics’.

13 Michael Stocker, Valuing Emotions (Cambridge, 1996). Christine Korsgaard, The Sources of Normativity (Cambridge, 1996), argues that this example misreads Kant. This may be right – our point about the needs-blindness of both approaches is unaffected.
work out a priori what kinds of motivation are more morally desirable in a visitor. Our sense of what would maximize her well-being, or of duty or of benevolence, should be set aside, as we focus on the pressing moral question of what our friend most needs from us.

What of the second reductive horn of the dilemma? The moral theorist can claim that in simple cases talk of needs is just homely shorthand for talk of values, rules or virtues. According to this response, needs-talk is ‘folk’ moral theory, the entities of which are reducible to those of ‘scientific’ moral theories such as consequentialism, deontology or virtue ethics. Needs-talk is actually value, rule or virtue talk, ‘underneath’. How can the needs-theorist respond? It may be that we do not need to respond. A metaphor will illustrate this. In discussing how best to map a region, one does not need to claim that water features cannot be described using terminology usually used to describe rock-formations, to make the point that water features usually are not, need not be, and become less clear to us when they are so described.

If the mainstream moral theorist responds that maps can have many different purposes, and that the mapping done by moral theories has the explanatory purpose of revealing underlying structure, how can we reply? We think that the map of a moral theory cannot be very different from the ordinary workaday maps of folk moral practice, without begging the question of whether it is still moral practice that they map. And a reinforcement is available, too: Needs are part of an underlying structure in which reductionists are generally very interested. Needs are a part of the world that is independent of us, as can be seen from the perspective of science. Any theoretical map which both eliminates the entities of folk moral practice and denies the moral significance of a clearly delineable natural category – need – will be doubly divorced from moral reality.

Value-based, rule-based and character-based theories have to make use of the concept of need as fundamental, irreducible and morally important, if they are to account for the simple needs-meeting moral contexts that are the bread and butter of everyday moral life. Needs-talk cannot be eliminated, nor reduced to talk of values, rules or virtues. This does not yet mean that the popular theories must be rejected because they misdescribe simple cases. But it does at least establish that they must be modified. An adequate consequentialist moral theory, from the perspective of these arguments, will then be one which recognizes the centrality of needs-meeting in moral practice, and a good consequentialist theory will be one which argues for the relative primacy of needs-meeting as a value compared to other kinds of value-promotion. One example of a moral theory of the latter type might be the needs-based account of utilitarianism defended by
David Braybrooke. An adequate deontological theory, similarly, will be one which recognizes the importance of principles giving moral priority to the meeting of needs. One example of deontological theory developed in this way might be Onora O’Neill’s contribution to Gillian Brock’s *Necessary Goods*. An adequate virtue ethics will describe the centrality for a developed moral character of the ability to recognize and respond appropriately to the needs of those around the virtuous agent. Hints of a pluralist approach to virtue which might accommodate the importance of needs-meeting can be found in Christine Swanton’s ‘Virtue Ethics, Value-centredness and Consequentialism’.

Defenders of the popular moral theories might resist our proposal that need must be made central, objecting that our so-called ‘simple case’ is an artificial construct which stipulates away all the other notions that are ‘really’ doing the moral work. There are no real simple cases, they might argue – just cases where values, virtues and duties are presupposed as we focus on the need. Our ‘simplicity’ is an illusion. An analogy may help to show why the way we use the simple case is not vulnerable to this objection. In science, in the conduct of experiments a ‘shield’ is used to ‘bracket’ the rest of nature away, so that the nature of the objects of concern in the experiment may be most clearly revealed through being unimpeded by interference. We think the simple case works in an analogous way in ethics; the rest of the (moral) world is bracketed, so that we can see most clearly how needs are moral demands for moral agents in normal moral practice. But, as the analogy shows, this ‘bracketing’ is less an artificial exclusion than a combination of setting aside and taking for granted. Every scientific experiment relies of the universe having the nature it has, the laws of physics staying the same. Similarly, the simple case presupposes the facts of moral agency, value, virtue, duty and moral relationship. But in neither case does the ‘bracketing’ undermine the theorist’s claim, that in this context, the nature and role of something is revealed.

The church of dissenters from the major popular moral theories we have just discussed is a broad one. It includes neo-intuitionists such as David McNaughton; particularists such as John McDowell and Jonathan Dancy; care-theorists such as Carole Gilligan, Nel Noddings and Eva Kittay; postmodernists such as Richard Rorty; contingency...
Have any dissents from the popular moral theories already captured the moral importance of need in simple cases that we have described? Some of our argument has drawn on the insights of one dissent from mainstream theory, particularism. We take from particularism the thought that the fact that we cannot give moral rules, and say in advance what the moral facts will be, does not imply that there is no moral fact. On the contrary, the facts about the moral demandingness of needs are robustly fixed by features of the actual context. The further particularist claim, that moral rules cannot or need not ever be formulated, is no part of our view.

We can discuss only one other example here. It has been suggested that the ethics of care can comprehend the insights of a needs-centred approach. We question whether it can. Care-theorists make the concepts of vulnerability and care fundamental to ethics. They are right to be concerned (as defenders of dialogical ethics are, too) that the state of the needing other is ignored in mainstream moral theory. But they propose the wrong solution to this problem. They invoke a particular affective attitude, care, which is close in character to Humean ‘sympathy’, supposing that this captures the essence of an appropriate moral response to a needing being. From a needs-centred perspective, this is a mistake. On a needs-centred view, what matters for moral agency is that needs should be recognized and met. How the agent feels when he does this is unimportant. If the care theorist responds that in her view feeling is less important than relationship – a concept on which we also rely – our reply, as to virtue ethics above, is that moral relationship is part of the background that must be there for any moral theory to be possible. Yes, relationship must be presupposed for moral agency to get started; nevertheless, in simple cases what is morally salient is the need. Any theoretical emphasis on facts about the agent – whether attitudes, feelings or relationships – obscures this simple and significant fact about the way moral practice works.

Care-ethicists are right to think that needs are morally important. But from a needs-centred perspective, they are wrong to think that need is a relatively rare state amongst human beings, characterized by

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exceptional vulnerability and dependency. Care-theorists associate needs with particular phases or states of human life. Thus, the infant is held up as a central case of a being with morally important needs, as is the old person, the handicapped or sick person. In the ethics of care, everyone else is thought of as pretty much need-free – as free and independent beings, concerned mostly with things like autonomy, agency, the pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of harm.

The contrast with a needs-centred approach is striking here. On our account of what a need is, everything has them. To be is to have needs; to be a moral agent is to recognize this and to be responsive to it in appropriate contexts. A needs-centred approach does not limit us to making dependent or vulnerable phases of life morally central, as Nussbaum objects to Kittay’s proposals for a care-centred ethics. It simply recognizes what we ourselves are already committed to, when we distinguish between the help-requiring and help-neutral states of those around us. The emphasis in ethics of care on feeling or relationship, and unusual states of dependency, is the source of what we and others see as a sentimental and infantilizing tone in this approach in ethics. The ethics of care, in our view, can mislead us profoundly about what is important in the nature and objects of moral concern.

To sum up this section, moral theories which do not make the concept of need fundamental, to account for simple needs-meeting cases, must either eliminate the concept of need or reduce it to some other concept. Elimination is implausible; reduction is uneconomical and may be unethical. What is more, the actual reductions on offer (to value, duty, sympathy or virtue) seem unfit to capture the distinctive way in which needs constitute moral demands. We conclude that consequentialist, deontological and virtue ethical moral theories must be revised to give a fundamental place to the concept of need, if they are to account adequately for the bread and butter of our everyday moral lives, the simple meeting of needs. Our presupposition of a background of moral relationships in which values, duties, sympathies and virtues are all evident does not undermine our claim to be revealing something important when we focus on the needs as moral demands in simple cases. Among dissents against mainstream ethics, the ethics of care, in focusing excessively on vulnerability and sympathy, seems no more apt to capture the moral demandingness of needs in simple cases than mainstream theories.

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18 Noddings, Caring; Kittay, Love’s Labor; Martha Nussbaum, ‘The Future of Liberal Feminism’, APA Proceedings and Addresses (2000); and Alasdair MacIntyre, Dependent Rational Animals (London, 1999), amongst others, all assume that need has to do with exceptional vulnerability and dependency.
We have argued that the concept of need is as vital for moral theory as it is for moral practice. We did this first by exploring the concept of need, then by discussing the simple cases in which the moral demand presented by non-contingent needs is most clearly displayed. We used the evident normativity of needs in such cases, and the commonness of such cases, to argue that moral theories are inadequate if they cannot account for them. Specifically, they are inaccurate if they do not describe the moral importance of needs, and uneconomical if they try to capture what is morally important about needs by using other concepts. Our conclusion is that moral theories, whichever concepts they favour, need to say more about needs.

It may be necessary to go further than this. The concept of need is *sui generis*. It is not reducible to anything else. It is, to be sure, a relational concept, defined in terms of requirements for the ongoing being, life, agency, flourishing or avoidance of harm of the needing thing, in the context of a certain environment. But to know this about needs, one does not need to know about good, values, right, rules, virtue or sympathy. One just needs to know about the needing being. The distinctive idea of a need as a help-demanding state is at the heart of the thin concept of moral normativity. If this is right, it may be that a new kind of moral theory, replacing or supplementing the current value-, duty- and virtue-based theories, needs to be constructed if we are to understand our moral life fully. Even if the moral importance of needs can be glimpsed darkly somehow through the lens of other moral concepts in other moral theories, this may still obscure their distinctive moral appeal, which might be directly apprehended if we took a needs-based approach to moral theory, as we do to moral practice. We have argued that normative moral theories must be revised to include fundamental reference to the concept of need. But if such revisions prove insufficient, perhaps a new wholly needs-based moral theory will have to be constructed. We will explore this possibility in future work.19

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