

2008

The Minimally Good Human Life Account of Needs

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The Minimally Good Human Life Account of Needsⁱ

I. Introduction

There are many accounts of what people need perhaps because there are many reasons why one might want such an account. One reason one might want an account of needs is that needs are supposed to provide a plausible basis for what a decent society must enable its members to secure. Needs compete with welfare, opportunity, resource, and capability accounts of the currency of justice and there are many compelling arguments that a decent society must enable its members secure what they need (Pogge, 2002; Vallentyne, 2005; Alkire, 2002; Reader, 2006; Copp, 1998; Brock, 1998; Braybrooke, 1998).ⁱⁱ So, it is important to have an account of needs that might play the requisite role in answering the question “What must a good society enable its members to secure?” After all, if no account can play this role then we should presumably answer this question by referencing a different (i.e. welfare, opportunity, resource, or capability) alternative. And without some account, we cannot even begin to evaluate the proposition that a decent society must enable its members to secure what they need.

Some suggest that a needs account might have an advantage over at least the resourcist alternative because a decent society might have to enable different people to secure different things (Reader, 2006).ⁱⁱⁱ Some people (e.g. pregnant women) need much more food and water than others. Some (e.g. cancer victims) need more expensive medicines or health care. So, any good account of needs, that might help explain what a decent society must enable its members to secure, must accommodate differences in individuals’ needs. Differences that result, for instance, from differences in individual constitution and from the fact that individuals occupy different positions in society (Brock, 1998; Frankfurt, 1988). Ideally, a good account should capture all of the things each person needs without including anything someone does not need.

This paper will provide an account that can both (1) provide a plausible basis for what a decent society must enable its members to secure and (2) accommodate these individual differences in need. It will argue, however, that none of the most plausible alternative accounts of needs can fulfill these desiderata. More precisely, section II sketches what we can call the *minimally good human life* account of needs.

Section III argues that some of the best alternative accounts have unintuitive consequences and/or cannot fulfill the above desiderata. Section IV considers the practical implications of the minimally good human life account of needs and shows how it fulfills the desiderata for a good account mentioned above. Finally, section V draws conclusions and sums up.

II. *The Minimally Good Human Life Account of needs*

On the minimally good human life account, people need whatever enables them to live minimally good human lives.^{iv} Although a few theorists have suggested something along these lines, none has explained how it is possible to cash out the account or given the account any content (Anscombe, 1958; Author, 2006). We will start this project here.

Perfectionism

To illustrate how it is possible to cash out the minimally good human life account of needs and give the account some content one might appeal to a perfectionist theory. On perfectionist theories, the minimally good human life is one that develops the features that constitute or are central to human nature (Arneson, 1999, 120). Such theories are often developed via a two-stage processes. Their creators start with a broad account of what a minimally good life would be for animals as well as humans, if not all living things. Then, they arrive at an account of the minimally good *human* life by considering “the peculiarities of the human situation” (Kraut, 1994, 48). Perfectionist theories are so called to distinguish them from desire or preference based accounts of what a good life requires. Though, for present purposes it is, perhaps, unfortunate that perfectionist theories have their name. For, on such theories, the minimally good human life need not be perfect, but it should have some things of value or pleasure in it or have some significance. A human life completely devoid of significance and value, full of pain and suffering, is not even minimally good. Yet, a human life may not be minimally good and yet have some significant and valuable things in it. In other words, a minimally good life must be worth living, but a minimally good life for humans requires more than that.

To create a perfectionist theory, one might follow Richard Arneson, for instance, in fruitfully (mis)interpreting Thomas Hurka’s perfectionism as providing an account of the minimally good human life (Arneson, 1999). On this account, the minimally good human life includes the things “essential to humans and conditioned on their being living” (Hurka, 1993, 16).^v Hurka says, for instance, that practical reason is essential to a minimally good human life.^{vi} Alternately, one might modify Richard Kraut’s theory in “Desire

and the Human Good,” so that it suggests that to live a minimally good human life “one must love something, what one loves must be worth loving, and one must be related in the right way to what one loves” (Kraut, 1994, 44).^{vii}

On these perfectionist theories, whether or not one lives a minimally good human life is not a completely subjective matter. Rather, a minimally good human life must be choice-worthy and a life in which one can make some significant choices.^{viii} One must be free to shape one’s own life, whether or not one thinks one needs to be able to do so, to live a minimally good human life (Nussbaum, 2000, 72).^{ix} One must be able to live autonomously. On Arneson’s suggested adaptation of Hurka’s theory, for instance, the minimally good human life includes the kind of practical and theoretical reason that we will suggest is essential to autonomy since humans are not only physical objects but, more remarkably, living rational animals.^x Similarly, on Kraut’s theory, the minimally good human life requires making appropriate autonomous choices. We need to be able to reflect and evaluate to be related in the right way to the valuable things we love; our good is grounded “in our capacity for rational choice” (Kraut, 1994, 48). Autonomy may have more or less importance on different perfectionist theories. But because humans are essentially or distinctively autonomous creatures, any plausible perfectionist theory should support the conclusion that autonomy is essential to a minimally good human life. Or so we will argue. This will not only add some content to the minimally good human life account of needs but it will illustrate a general argumentative strategy by which one might determine what the minimally good human life requires. First, however, let us say a bit about the autonomy.

Autonomy

To secure autonomy, to shape one’s life, one needs to have some freedom from both internal and external constraint. Internal freedom is roughly the capacity to decide “for oneself what is worth doing,” one must be able to make “the decisions of a normative agent” -- to recognize and respond to value as one sees it (Griffin 2006). One must be able to reason about and make some simple and significant plans on the basis of one’s beliefs, values, desires, and goals (henceforth *commitments*). External freedom, or liberty, is roughly freedom from interference to pursue a “worthwhile life” (Raz 1998; Griffin 2006). One must have some freedom from coercion and constraint; one must be able to carry out some simple and significant plans. The key difference between internal and external freedom is that the former is freedom from self-constraint, the latter freedom from environmental or other-imposed constraints. So a woman who can think

for herself may have internal freedom even if she lacks external freedom because she is imprisoned. To live an autonomous life, however, more is required. One must actually exercise one's freedom -- making both some simple and significant choices. And one must have at least some good options from which to choose. Let us consider each of these conditions for autonomy in turn.

First, what does it mean to say that one must be able to reason on the basis of one's commitments? The idea is just this: Autonomous people must have some instrumental reasoning ability. Some hold demanding conceptions of rationality on which saying that autonomy requires the ability to reason would be controversial. Kant, for instance, thinks that reason requires each of us to acknowledge the categorical imperative as unconditionally required.^{xi} The reasoning at issue does not require this much, however. People must have only some instrumental reasoning ability.

Next, consider what it means to say that one must be able to make some simple and significant plans on the basis of one's commitments. First, one must be able to make both some simple plans and some significant ones. To make significant plans one need not plan one's whole life or every detail of one's day. Rather, one must be able to navigate through one's day without too much difficulty and make general plans for the future. One must not be, like Joseph Raz's proverbial man in a pit or hounded woman constrained to making plans only about how to meet one's needs.^{xii} Though one might not choose to exercise this ability, one must have the planning ability necessary to pursue the projects one values -- to pursue a good life as one sees it. This ability requires a kind of internal freedom one can have even if subject to external constraint. One must be able to form some simple and significant plans that would work if implemented. One must be able to make some simple and significant plans that one could carry through if free from external constraint. There are many ways of making sense of this idea. One might, for instance, analyze the ability to make some simple and significant plans on the basis of one's commitments in terms of the ability to make one's motivating commitments generally coherent. Alternately, one might give a decision-theoretic analysis of planning in terms of a consistent preference ordering. Yet another option is to cash out the ability to make some simple and significant plans on the basis of one's commitments in terms of ordering one's ends perhaps by drawing on John Rawls' work on plans of life.^{xiii} It is not necessary here to further explicate the ability to make some simple and significant plans on the basis of one's commitments since these are all standard moves in the literature on autonomy.^{xiv}

Consider, also, what is required to carry out some simple and significant plans. This ability requires both some internal freedom and external freedom. Once again, internal freedom is roughly the capacity to decide “for oneself what is worth doing,” one must be able to make “the decisions of a normative agent”; to recognize and respond to value as one sees it.^{xv} External freedom, or liberty, is roughly freedom to pursue a “worthwhile life” without interference.^{xvi} To carry out some simple and significant plans one must have enough freedom from coercion and constraint to carry out those actions necessary to bring some valuable plans to fruition. The importance of the qualifier *some* is just this: One need not be able to carry out every valuable plan that one might want to carry out to have this component of autonomy. Still, the ability to carry out *some simple and significant plans* is a necessary component of this kind of autonomy.

Finally, the idea that people must have good options is tied to the idea that people must be able to reason about, make and carry out both some simple and some significant plans. Variety matters as well as number. One must be able to “exercise all the capacities human beings have an innate drive to exercise, as well as to decline to develop any of them” (Raz, 1998, 375). One must be able to move one’s body, sense the world, use one’s imagination, express affection, and occupy one’s mind. One lacks good options if all of one’s choices are dictated by others or circumstances. One must not be paralyzed or chained. One’s every decision must not be determined beforehand by the dictate to maintain one’s life. A singer threatened with the loss of her voice if she does anything another person dislikes, for instance, is not autonomous. Not all of one’s options can have horrendous effects. On the other hand, one’s acting on one’s options must at least sometimes have significant effects. Though, to be autonomous, one need not fully realize one’s valuable capacities, one must be able to choose or reject self-realization (Raz 1998).

Autonomy and the Minimally Good Human Life

In the real world, this kind of autonomy is necessary for a minimally good human life (henceforth simply a *minimally good life*).^{xvii} Deep understanding, rewarding struggle, significant achievement, good relationships, virtue and so forth are some of the things that make a life go minimally well. Autonomy is necessary for these things. Recall that, to be autonomous, people must be able to reason about, make, and carry out simple plans on the basis of their commitments. To create and maintain good relationships, people must reason about, make, and carry out plans to spend time with their friends and family from amongst other good options. Planning and carrying out one’s plans to learn or develop skills or character traits is

necessary for understanding or significant achievement. And so forth. So, autonomy is necessary for a minimally good life.

Autonomy is also partly constitutive of a minimally good life. This is because autonomy is partly constitutive of agency or personhood and this in turn partly constitutes a minimally good human life.^{xviii} Consider, first, why agency or personhood is partly constitutive of a minimally good life. When we humans live minimally good lives we “have a conception of ourselves and of our past and future. We reflect and assess. We form pictures of what a good life would be, often, it is true, only on a small scale, but occasionally also on a large scale. And we try to realize these pictures” (Griffin, 2006, Ch. 2). In other words, we act as agents or persons. Those who lack a conception of being a self persisting through time with a past and future cannot hope or dream. Those who never pursue their conception of a good life cannot achieve their goals, carry out projects, or live their lives on their own terms.^{xix} Hence personhood or agency is partly constitutive of a minimally good life. From here is a short step to the conclusion that autonomy is partly constitutive of a minimally good life. For, we have already seen that autonomy is partly constitutive of agency. Although it may be synonymous with a robust kind of autonomy as self-realization, integrity, independence, or responsibility, agency or personhood is more than the minimal kind of autonomy as a pre-requisite for free action we have cashed out. Still, personhood or agency includes the reasoning and planning conditions for autonomy and requires good options. After all, reasoning is part of reflecting and assessing, and planning is part of trying to realize one’s picture of a good life. And, in the real world, people need good options to achieve their goals, carry out their plans, and live life on their own terms. So, since personhood or agency is partly constitutive of a minimally good life and autonomy is partly constitutive of personhood or agency, autonomy is also partly constitutive of a minimally good life.^{xx}

The fact that autonomy is necessary for and partly constitutive of a minimally good life can also be brought out by examples. Suppose that someone, let us call her Naima, drifts through life either making one choice then another randomly or letting others or natural circumstances choose for her. Suppose that Naima is drifting not because she has freely chosen to drift. Rather, she is drifting because she cannot reason about, make, or carry out plans. Naima cannot shape her own life. She may travel on the whimsy of chance never pursuing anything at all or may not choose consistently enough to attain anything she desires. She may end up subject to the will of another. Naima functions poorly because her life is not truly her own.

Even if, by chance, Naima does secure many valuable things, her life will still lack an important kind of value. Her life will be like a prize won accidentally (Raz, 1998).

Although people need not control every aspect of their lives or even be very resolute to live minimally good lives, those who lack autonomy are impaired. Because autonomy is necessary for securing many of the things that make a life go minimally well, the non-autonomous will be unable to live minimally good lives. Because autonomy is partly constitutive of such a life, even those who secure all of the other things that make a life go minimally well will not live minimally good lives.

One might object that this account of a minimally good life is too demanding. Some can have minimally good human lives without autonomy. The severely disabled and very young, for instance, may have such lives. Even if these people cannot reason, form, or carry out plans they may experience joy and sadness, pleasure and pain, music and light (Kittay, 2005). Autonomy is not necessary for or partly constitutive of a minimally good life.

This objection contains a valuable insight. Disability theorists have convincingly argued that there may be a lot of value in a life without autonomy (Kittay, 2005). Saying that people who cannot secure autonomy cannot live minimally good lives does not mean their lives are not worth living. The fact that it is valuable to experience emotions, music, and light provides little reason to believe those who cannot reason and plan can live minimally good lives.^{xxi} Rather, it is such a great loss if the extremely disabled cannot secure autonomy precisely because everyone needs autonomy to live a minimally good life (though people also need other things to live such lives).

One might push this objection. One might argue, for instance, that monks lack autonomy since they must follow the rules of the monastery and give up all of their worldly possessions. Monks freely abdicate their autonomy. But, one might maintain, many monk's lives are minimally good.

This objection misunderstands the kind of autonomy that we have argued is necessary for and partly constitutive of a minimally good life. One need only have good options and be able to reason about, make, and carry out some simple and significant plans to have this kind of autonomy. Most monks pursue their ideal of a religious life and go about their daily business of praying reading, writing, cooking, gardening and so forth. So, most monks have the kind of autonomy at issue here.

III. Competing Accounts of Needs

This paper has started to cash out the minimally good human life account of needs by arguing that autonomy is necessary for and partly constitutive of a minimally good human life. But why think this provides the basis for a good account of needs? This section argues that the minimally good human life account of needs has some advantages over the most plausible alternatives: Harm and social role accounts. It argues that neither competitor provides a satisfactory conception of needs. Finally, it shows that the minimally good human life account captures some of the advantages of these accounts and avoids some of their problems.

Before beginning, however, it is important to note that the accounts we will consider were not designed to fulfill the desiderata with which we started. Harry Frankfurt really only intends to account for the presumptive force of needs (Frankfurt, 1988). Garrett Thompson is trying to give an account of needs that can explain why one cannot say truly that someone should have different needs (Thompson, 2005).^{xxii} Braybrooke wants to give an account of what people need that can play a role in guiding public policy (Braybrooke, 1987). Still, the accounts we will consider are amongst the best developed so it is worth seeing if they can fulfill the other criteria for a good account of needs as well as those they are supposed to fulfill. If they cannot and we are right that the minimally good human life account of needs fares better, there is at least some reason to take the minimally good human life account seriously.

Harm-Based Accounts

Harry Frankfurt in *The Importance of What We Care About* defends one of the most famous accounts of need. Frankfurt argues that we need those things that allow us to avoid harm when we cannot avoid harm in any other way. People need those things that are “necessarily necessary for avoiding harm” (Frankfurt, 1988, 112). Although he does not give a complete account of *harm*, Frankfurt says a few things. First, he says, one is harmed if one is made worse off than before. He also claims that, if the only way to keep one’s situation from becoming worse is to make it better, one’s situation must improve for one to avoid harm. Finally, Frankfurt says that if one remains in a bad condition, one is harmed. He justifies this last claim by noting that more of a bad thing is worse than less of it (Frankfurt, 1988, 110).

There are at least three problems with Frankfurt’s account. First, Frankfurt’s notion of harm is too inclusive. Intuitively, one may not be harmed if one’s bad state merely persists.^{xxiii} One is not made worse off than before by remaining in a bad state that does not become worse. Suppose, for instance, that Grace is in the early stages of Parkinson’s syndrome, a degenerative disease. She shakes and has bradykinesia but

can still walk and feed herself. Suppose, further, that she is given a new medication that stabilizes her condition. Her condition may remain the same (in at least one sense); she may still shake and have bradykinesia but retain her mobility and ability to feed herself. Even so, it seems that Grace has been helped, not harmed.

Perhaps Frankfurt could say that one's going from a degenerative to a stable condition constitutes a change in one's state. If so, one's bad state does not persist, rather one is in a new stable state. So, he could argue that one has not been harmed by the change. But he should still say more to show that one can not benefit from something that keeps a bad state from getting worse in light of the fact that one may be lucky one's state does not deteriorate.

Alternately, Frankfurt could respond to the Grace case a different way. He might say that Grace is harmed because, absent the disease, she would be much better off. Grace is worse off than she was before she became ill. More generally, Frankfurt could maintain 1) that someone may be harmed if and only if they would otherwise be in a much better state and 2) that people whose bad state persists are worse off than they would otherwise be.

Neither contention is plausible. Adopting this conception of harm for the moment, however, it should be clear that one's bad state persisting does not necessarily make one worse off than one would otherwise be. Grace, for instance, would have been in a worse state if her condition had not stabilized (on any reasonable way of thinking about her state; she would have both lost the use of her legs and continued to degenerate). The fact that her bad state persists does not mean she is worse off than she would otherwise be. Saying that the relevant comparison is to the time right before Grace before got her degenerative disease will not help. Before getting her degenerative disease Grace may have had a much worse disease. She might, for instance, have had cancer (though her cancer was removed just as she was developing Parkinson's). If so, Frankfurt must agree that (on this conception of harm) Grace has not been harmed by becoming ill. But this is unintuitive.

The second problem for Frankfurt's account is that people do not always need those things that allow them to avoid harm. Some harm is insignificant and people do not need to avoid insignificant harm. I do not need to wear protective clothing even if this is the only way to keep me from getting paper cuts. Even if it is a law of nature that I will get paper cuts if I do not wear protective clothing, I do not need to wear such clothing.

Frankfurt might object that the paper cuts are not harms because they are not severe enough to constitute harms. Alternately, he could say that one does not need to wear protective clothing to avoid paper cuts because the clothing would be more harmful than the cuts.

I do not believe either of these responses goes through. First, it is more plausible that the cuts are minor harms than that they are not harms at all. Second, it is hard to see how protective clothing is harmful. Perhaps the idea is that the social stigma surrounding full body coverings is harmful. But many people around the world do wear such clothing. So, for instance, suppose a woman in Iran could fit in quite well with a hijab that would protect her from paper cuts. Does she then need to wear a hijab? I think not, or at least not to avoid paper cuts.

Even setting aside these objections from intuition, however, there is another problem with saying that people have a basic need for full body coverings to avoid paper cuts. A good account of needs should provide a plausible basis for what, at minimum, a decent society is obligated to enable its members to secure. Decent societies do not always need to enable their subjects to secure full body coverings (even if full body coverings are necessary to avoid paper cuts).

Furthermore, decent societies are not always obligated to enable their subjects to secure even what will enable them to avoid significant harms. Sometimes undergoing significant harm can be beneficial. Enduring significant harm may, for instance, be the only way to secure an even greater benefit. Someone with a good prognosis for recovery who must live through chemotherapy may be harmed by the therapy but still needs it. Even if chemotherapy is successful it can cause kidney malfunction, infections, blood clots, and many other serious problems for patients (National Cancer Institute, 2007). Upon recovery patients may end up with new problems. They may even be sicker than they were when their cancer was first discovered (though they may be better off than they would otherwise be). Usually the harms that result from the treatment are less severe than those that will occur without the treatment, but they are still harms. It may even be the case that a decent society must enable its subjects to secure chemotherapy.

Frankfurt might argue that this is not a good case because one who has to undergo chemotherapy is not harmed by the therapy but is instead helped by it. After all, without the chemotherapy those with cancer often die. At least this seems right if Frankfurt's underlying conception of harm is one on which people can only be harmed by something if they are made worse off than they would otherwise be (Kagan, 1998).

Although we did not challenge this way of specifying Frankfurt's conception of harm above, it is implausible. Suppose that George is riding upon his dark steed when he comes across Effe standing on a corner. Being a Very Evil Man, George stabs Effe, grabs her purse, and gallops away. Unbeknownst to George, Effe had just decided to walk down a dark street that she could not see was covered with ice. If George had not interrupted her she would have walked down the street, fallen, hit her head, and died from the injury days later. But, because she has been stabbed, Effe goes to the hospital instead. It seems that George has still harmed Effe. Frankfurt could not argue that the fact that someone has not been made worse off than they would otherwise be means that that person has not been harmed.^{xxiv}

Even if Frankfurt does not share this intuition and insists on a global theory of harm, his account must be rejected. His theory does not capture all and only the needs of each person. Unless he can say more, his account unintuitively suggests that some people need things they do not (e.g. full body coverings) and cannot account for the fact that some people need the things they do (e.g. stabilizing medication, if not chemotherapy). So, Frankfurt's account does not provide a plausible basis for what, at minimum, a decent society is obligated to enable its members to secure.

Perhaps a different harm-based account of needs will fare better. In his delightful article "Fundamental Needs," Garrett Thompson argues that "X is a fundamental need for person A" if "X is a non-derivative, non-circumstantially specific and an inescapable necessary condition in order for the person A not to undergo serious harm" (Thompson, 2005, 175). Thompson specifies that "a person is harmed when he or she is deprived of engaging in non-instrumentally valuable experiences and activities as well as the possibility of appreciating them" (Thompson, 2005, 178).

Unfortunately, Thompson's harm based account of needs must also be rejected. There is an important ambiguity in Thompson's claim that "a person is harmed when he or she is deprived of engaging in non-instrumentally valuable experiences and activities as well as the possibility of appreciating them" (Thompson, 2005, 178). It is not clear whether Thompson intends to indicate that:

- 1) A person is harmed when he or she is deprived of engaging in *any* non-instrumentally valuable experiences and activities as well as the possibility of appreciating them.

Or:

- 2) A person is harmed when he or she is deprived of engaging in *all* non-instrumentally valuable experiences and activities as well as the possibility of appreciating them.

Neither interpretation of Thompson's definition is plausible. The first way of construing his definition must be rejected for the following reason: People are not necessarily harmed by being deprived of some non-instrumentally valuable experiences and activities or the possibility of appreciating them. I may have a non-instrumentally valuable experience looking at a van Gogh. I will not be harmed if I am deprived of doing so because the museum is closed. Some non-instrumentally valuable experiences are not important enough that being deprived of them constitutes harm. The second way of construing Thompson's definition is also implausible. People may be harmed even if they are not deprived of all non-instrumentally valuable experiences and activities and the possibility of appreciating them. I am harmed if I am not allowed to associate with other humans even if I am not deprived of other non-instrumentally valuable activities or experiences.

Now, Thompson might not be intending to offer a definition of harm but still insist that his account of needs is generally defensible. If a person is deprived of engaging in *all* non-instrumentally valuable experiences and activities as well as the possibility of appreciating them, that person is harmed. Usually those who are deprived of non-instrumentally valuable experiences are harmed.

Although this response is promising, it cannot do. With this analysis, Thompson's account at most offers a characterization of needs. It is not clear that a characterization of needs can help us figure out what each and every person needs or what a decent society must enable its member to secure. Furthermore, it is not entirely plausible to characterizing needs in this way. In many cases, one can be seriously harmed by being deprived of non-instrumentally valuable experiences without being deprived of what they need. Even a rich person may be seriously harmed by being deprived of his or her job though the rich person does not need the job. This example might be adapted to provide a general objection to harm accounts. It is not always plausible to think the person who is harmed has unmet needs.

Finally, Thompson's account may have to contend with another general objection to harm accounts. Intuitively, some of the things people need they need not merely to avoid harm but in order to flourish. We might argue for this conclusion in several ways. If, for instance, we adopted a conception of harm on which someone can only be harmed if she is made worse off than before, we could argue as follows. In some developing countries there are ten year old children who are working and will not receive a secondary school education. On this conception of harm, these children will not be harmed by failing to receive this education: they are not made worse off than they were before if they are not educated.^{xxv} But,

intuitively, at least most of these children do need education. Intuitively, this is something that a decent society should, at a minimum, enable these children to secure *because* they need it.

Social Role Accounts

The minimally good human life account of needs is not the only account that can explain why people need things that they do not need to avoid harm, however. David Braybrooke's social role account in *Meeting Needs* has this flavor: Policy makers can determine the needs of a population via a two step process. First, they must create a list of necessary goods that enable individuals to fully carry out four social roles – citizen, worker, parent and housekeeper (Braybrooke, 1987). Discussion is essential to determining the exact content of the list (Braybrooke, 1987). Then, policy makers must determine the minimal standards of provision for necessary goods. These standards should be set at the level sufficient for each member of the population to carry out each social role. Braybrooke thinks that even those who choose not to occupy a particular social role need many of the same things that those who occupy all of the roles need. Unfortunately, some people do not need the things that would let them occupy Braybrooke's social roles and others need things that they do not need to occupy these roles (especially if they hope to occupy other roles). A monk may not need to have children or be a worker but may need religious freedom.

Braybrooke might not think that the monk needs religious freedom. But, even if he accepts this example, he might suggest that this freedom is just a part of the freedom of conscience necessary for the social roles at issue in his account. He might maintain that people need freedom of conscience to be good citizens, for instance. On the other hand, Braybrooke might maintain that the monk only needs the *opportunity* to have jobs and children. Perhaps his idea is just that people need to have the opportunity to fulfill his social roles.

Perhaps some freedom of religion is necessary for the kind of freedom of conscience people need to be good citizens, workers, parents, and housekeepers. But, it is not clear that people need the kind of religious freedom the monk needs to fulfill these roles. Furthermore, Braybrooke cannot claim that people just need to have the opportunity to fulfill his social roles. If the monk, for instance, never wants to have children nor wants the opportunity to do so, it would be strange to say he needs this opportunity. At least the monk does not need the opportunity to have children if he stays a monk who does not want children.

Braybrooke would probably respond to this last worry by saying that he is only concerned to give an account of what people *typically* need in a way that could be presented to the public. For, he explicitly

says that not everyone will need to play every social role on his list and emphasizes that he is not concerned about idiosyncratic, or episodic needs.^{xxvi} Most people need what will allow them to have children and homes. Few people need the kind of religious freedom monks need. Similarly, most people need what will allow them to work and to have citizenship in some country, though some extraordinary individuals do fine without these things. For Braybrooke, needs are (rebuttably) universal propositions for people in their prime who are not disabled (Braybrooke, 1987, S2.33). And Braybrooke aims to give an account that can form the basis for social policy.

This, however, is just to say that Braybrooke is engaged in a quite different project than the one in which this paper is engaged. And, although I believe Braybrooke's project is also quite valuable, it seems that his account cannot be used for our purposes. Braybrooke's account does not fulfill the desiderata with which we started. It does not capture all the differences in individual needs because, intuitively, some needs are not even rebuttably universal (i.e. few would think everyone needs the kind of religious freedom the monk needs).^{xxvii} So it does not capture these idiosyncratic needs. Braybrooke's account, like harm accounts of needs also suggests that some people need things that they do not (some do not need work or children but these are rebuttably universal needs).^{xxviii} Perhaps for this reason, decent societies need not enable their members to secure all and only those things Braybrooke's account suggests. They need not, for instance, enable monks who do not want to have children to do so. Decent societies may, however, have to enable monks to secure significant religious freedom.

Braybrooke might object that a good account of needs must provide a basis for public policy. He might argue that the minimally good life account of needs cannot play that role. Few people understand, never mind agree on, the value of autonomy that is central to the account (Braybrooke, 1998). And policy makers need a simple, concrete list of what most people need, not a highly philosophical account of needs.

But, the minimally good life account of needs might provide a basis for public policy. People do understand what it means to reason and plan etc. so policy makers could just talk about the abilities constituting what we have called autonomy, rather than using the term "autonomy."^{xxix} Furthermore, the minimally good life account can provide the basis for a simple, concrete list of needs. To create such a list, policy makers just have to focus on what *most* people need to live a minimally good life. Finally, even if it is not good to use a highly philosophical account of needs as the basis for public policy, such an account may be necessary for other (i.e. philosophical) purposes. Philosophers are often interested in figuring out

what conditions are necessary and sufficient for characterizing concepts such as needs. The minimally good life account may provide these conditions. Once again, this is just to say that social role and minimally good life accounts of need may be part of different but valuable projects.

Harm, Social Roles, and the Minimally Good Human Life

Intuitively, not everyone needs everything that will allow them to avoid harm or fulfill traditional social roles and some people need other things. Still, there is a close connection between meeting needs, avoiding harm, and fulfilling traditional social roles. If the minimally good human life account of needs is defensible, it may be able to explain this connection. People are usually harmed if their ability to live a minimally good life is undermined. Those who cannot live a minimally good life are often unable to do so because they have been harmed or are prevented from fulfilling important social roles. One may not be able to live a minimally good life if one is prevented from working and earning enough to feed one's self, for instance. Similarly, people are often incapable of fulfilling social roles and avoiding harm because they cannot live minimally good lives. Those who cannot secure autonomy, for instance, may not be able to fulfill important social roles or avoid serious harms. The minimally good human life account may retain some of the advantages of the traditional accounts.^{xxx} It also avoids some of their implausible consequences. The account does not fall prey to the above counter-examples to harm and social role based accounts. Most rich people do not need jobs to live minimally good lives, they do need human interaction. Most monks do not need to be workers or parents to live minimally good lives, but most children need education to live such lives.

IV. The Minimally Good Human Life Account of Needs and the Desiderata

Although the minimally good human life account of needs can capture some of the advantages of and avoid some of the unintuitive consequences of the main alternatives, one might wonder whether the account fulfills the desiderata with which we started. Does it capture differences in individuals' needs and provide a plausible basis for what decent societies must enable their members to secure?

Considering the account's practical implications will help make the case that it captures the desiderata with which we started. This section will start by arguing that the account can explain why most people need many of the things that appear on traditional lists of needs like food, water, shelter, education, health care, emotional and social goods. Showing that most people need these things will make it plausible that the account provides a plausible basis for what a decent society must enable its members to secure and

captures differences in individual needs. This section will conclude, however, by considering and responding to a few objections to the claim that the account fulfills these desiderata.

Practical Implications and the Desiderata

Consider, first, how those who lack basic food, water, and health care are likely to suffer from autonomy undermining disabilities. Malnutrition inhibits one's immune system's ability to fight infection and poor nutrition is linked even more directly to many non-infectious illnesses.^{xxxix} -^{xxxix} Those without basic preventative health care (e.g. immunizations) are most at risk for many of these illnesses. And those who cannot secure essential medications (e.g. dehydration salts and antibiotics) are most likely to be disabled by these diseases. Often the diseases those who lack basic food, water, and health care acquire result in severe disabilities. Sometimes they kill people.^{xxxix} The very sick and dead are obviously incapable of securing the kind of autonomy we have argued is necessary for and partly constitutive of a minimally good life.^{xxxix}

Similarly, if people lack adequate shelter they are likely to suffer from autonomy undermining disabilities. Those without adequate shelter may be exposed to environmental hazards including disasters, pollutants, parasites, and bacteria (e.g. in flood water or unsanitary living conditions).^{xxxix} These "hazards are responsible for about a quarter of the total burden of disease worldwide, and nearly 35% in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa."^{xxxix} Bed nets alone could prevent a lot of autonomy undermining illness.^{xxxix}

Less obviously, those without basic education, emotional and social goods may suffer from autonomy undermining disabilities.^{xxxix} Basic education, emotional, and social goods are often necessary for securing decent living conditions, health care, livelihood opportunities, and earning power.^{xxxix} Those who lack (formal or informal) elementary education may not develop or maintain the reasoning and planning skills they need to secure autonomy.^{xi} Those who lack basic emotional and social goods are at high risk for mental and physical illness, suicide, and early death from other causes.^{xii} "Fear, insecurity, dependency, depression, anxiety, intranquility, shame, hopelessness, isolation and powerlessness... such experiential elements of a bad life...[often impact]agency"^{xxxix} Most people must be able to secure basic education, emotional, and social goods to secure autonomy.^{xliii}

It plausible that a decent society must enable its members to secure food, water, shelter, education, health care, social and emotional goods. And the minimally good human life account can explain why. So it plausible that the account provides a plausible basis for what a decent society must enable its members to secure. Different people also need different things to secure autonomy. On the conditions for autonomy

defended above, individuals can secure autonomy as long as they can reason about, make, and carry out plans and have good options. So, some people will be able to secure autonomy without being able to obtain very much food, water, shelter, education, health care, social or emotional goods.^{xiv} On the other hand, more may be necessary for others to secure autonomy. The very ill or disabled, for instance, may need much more than minimal health care. So, the minimally good human life account of needs also captures individual differences in need.

Objections

Perhaps one could argue that a good account of the minimally good life should include much more than the sort of autonomy that we have argued is part of this life above. If autonomy only requires the ability to reason about, make, and carry out plans and good options, some young children are autonomous. At least one could argue that the account of the minimally good life at issue in the account is too minimal to provide a plausible basis for what a decent society must enable its members to secure. Similarly, saying that everyone needs what will allow them to secure the kind of minimally good life cashed out here will not account for each and every person's needs.

It is certainly true that a *full* account of the minimally good life must include much more than this minimal autonomy. But, we have only argued that the kind of autonomy we have sketched is *necessary* for and *partly* constitutive of the minimally good life. And we have also argued that to live minimally good lives people must, for instance, have agency or personhood, which includes more than the minimal kind of autonomy we have sketched. Other things are probably necessary for such a life as well. So, while the account has not been filled out enough to provide a complete account of what a decent society must enable its members to secure it is plausible that decent societies must enable their members to secure at least this much. Similarly, we have not shown that a complete account of the minimally good life will capture each and every person's needs, but the account does capture some important differences in individual needs and it does not say that people need things they do not. So, there is reason to think a fully cashed out version of the minimally good human life account of needs will capture individual differences in need especially since the account already avoids the problematic counter-examples to which the alternatives fall prey.

A more troublesome objection is that it would be too much to require a decent society to enable all of its subjects to secure what they need to attain even the minimal autonomy (never mind agency) we have

argued is necessary for a minimally good life. Some have very expensive health needs they would have to satisfy to secure such autonomy. One might argue that a decent society need not enable people with such severe immunodeficiencies that they must live in sanitary bubbles to survive to secure this much, for instance.

Perhaps it is implausible to believe that all decent societies in the real world have to enable all of their subjects to live minimally good lives. But, if this is so, it is also implausible to believe these societies have to enable everyone to secure a minimal level of welfare, secure basic capabilities, or fulfill their preferences. Furthermore, when there are enough resources to do so, it is plausible that any decent society should enable its members to live minimally good lives. And, even if this is not realistic or desirable in our world because doing so is too expensive, that is not necessarily a problem for a theory of needs: There may be a cost threshold limiting what a society is required to provide for its members that is threshold is external to an account of what people need. And there are good reasons to keep the threshold external to an account of what people need. If one has immunodeficiencies so severe that one must remain within a sanitary bubble to survive, one needs a bubble, even if that is not the kind of need it is reasonable to require a decent society to meet. One must distinguish clearly between what a decent society should provide for its members and an account of what people need. So even in our imperfect world, the minimally good human life provides a plausible *basis* for what a decent society should enable its members to secure.

V. Conclusion

The minimally good human life account, unlike its main competitors, can fulfill the desiderata for a good account of needs with which we started. Both harm and social role accounts capture some things it seems that people do not need and/or neglect other things it seems that people do need. Because of this, it is not plausible that a decent society must enable its subjects to secure what they need to avoid harm or fulfill social roles. The minimally good human life account of needs fares better. It is plausible that each person needs whatever will enable them to live a minimally good life and nothing else. It is plausible that a decent society should enable its subjects to secure what they need for a minimally good life.^{xiv} Like its competitors, the minimally good human life account requires further cashing out. There is, however, reason to take it seriously.

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i Some of the arguments in this paper were first introduced in “Human Rights, Needs, and Autonomy” published in the Proceedings for the 3rd

International Conference on Philosophy, AITNER, Athens, Greece.

Thee author would like to thank Gillian Brock, David Braybrooke, Thomas Pogge, Thomas Christiano, Michael Gill, Jerry Gaus, Keith Lehrer, Susan Wolf, Allen Buchanan, Alex London, Dale Dorsey and audiences at the University of Arizona, ATINER 3rd International Conference on Philosophy Northwest Philosophy Conference, and Kwazulu-Natal University for helpful comments, suggestions, and/or discussion. She apologizes to anyone she has so carelessly forgotten to mention. Finally, she is terribly grateful for the support she received from the American Association of University Women, the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Duke University, and the Earhart Foundation during the course of the project.

ii Although decent societies may not have to enable their subjects to secure everything they need if their subjects lack the resources to do so, they should do what they can to enable most of their subjects to secure what they need. On this see: Gillian Brock. 1998.

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iii For discussion of the idea that justice should respond to individual differences in this way see: Martha Nussbaum. 2000. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. Also see: Thomas Pogge. 2002. "Can the Capability Approach be Justified?" *Philosophical Topics*. Vol. 30, No. 2: 167-228.

iv If these things include welfare, capabilities, resources, or opportunities, this account may overlap in part or whole with versions of welfare, capability, resource, or opportunity accounts of what decent societies must enable most of their members to secure.

v Ultimately, Arneson rejects this kind of perfectionism because he does not think it can accommodate cheap thrills. I do not find this particularly compelling, but if cheap thrills are essential to human wellbeing, maybe humans and other animals need cheap thrills to live minimally good lives.

vi He uses Kripkiean thought experiments to argue for this contention.

vii Neither author uses the exact phrase "minimally good life" but, as I explain below, the exact phrase is not important.

viii As David Brink puts it, "This perfectionist conception of the significance of choice or post-deliberative desire may sound remarkably like an informed desire conception of practical reason or the good. But notice some important differences. First, an informed desire conception defines normatively significant desire by appeal to a counterfactual condition. Is the desire one which would emerge from some suitable idealization of the agent's current desires? By contrast, the perfectionist conception appeals to an historical condition. Is the desire one which was produced or is sustained by a suitable kind of deliberation?" Still, "it is choice, rather than desire, as such, that has normative significance."

See: David Brink. Forthcoming. "The Significance of Desire." *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* v. 3 Oxford University Press: Oxford. p.30-31.

ix Some have suggested autonomy-based accounts of need. On such accounts, people need whatever will enable them to live autonomous lives. The problem with this account of needs is that some people cannot secure autonomy, but even these people have some needs.

x Although it will not do here to go into Hurka's argument for this conclusion, he basically uses a scientifically informed (Kripkiean) conceptual analysis to reject other perfectionist conceptions because they fail two tests. They either fail to retain the appeal of the idea that human nature is morally significant or have implausible consequences by suggesting that human nature includes things that lack moral significance. See: Thomas Hurka. 1993. *Perfectionism*. Oxford University Press: Oxford. p.9. As Richard Kraut puts it,

perfectionist theories are developed via a “two-stage processes in which a broad account that applies universally is then made more specific by being tied to the peculiarities of the human situation.” See: Richard Kraut. 1994. “Desire and the Human Good.”

Presidential Address Ninety-Second Annual Central Division Meeting. May 6. Missouri, Kansas. p. 48.

xi See: Thomas E. Hill Jr. 1989. “The Kantian Conception of Autonomy.” *The Inner Citadel: Essays on Autonomy*. John Christman Ed. Oxford University Press: Oxford. Also see:

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xii See: Joseph Raz. 1998. *The Morality of Freedom*. Clarendon Press: Oxford.

xiii John Rawls. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Belknap Press: Massachusetts.

xiv For instance, see: Michael Bratman. 2005. “Planning Agency, Autonomous Agency.” *New Essays on Personal Autonomy and its Role in Contemporary Moral Philosophy*.

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xv James Griffin. 2006. *Human Rights: The Incomplete Idea* (Working Draft). Oxford, Corpus Christi College: Ch. 7.

xvi Ibid.

xvii This does not mean that autonomy’s value is completely derivative from its role in enabling people to live a minimally good life or that the minimally good life’s value depends entirely on the value of autonomy.

xviii Technically something might be partly constitutive of something which is partly constitutive of a minimally good life without being partly constitutive of a minimally good life. But we have argued that the requisite part of agency is a part of a minimally good life and autonomy is (in its entirety) a part of agency.

xix Again, the kind of reasoning and planning one must be able to do need not be particularly complex. One need not have particularly great intellectual powers, for instance, or even be able to make a complete life plan. Carrying out a plan to volunteer some weekends may be significant enough. Furthermore, it is worth repeating that there is more to a minimally good life than autonomy. For an interesting discussion of non-intellectual pleasures that may contribute to a minimally good life see: David Braybrooke. 1989. “Review: Thoughtful Happiness.” of *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance* by James Griffin. *Ethics*. Vol. 99, No. 3: 625-636.

xx At least this seems right on the conditions for autonomy we have defended.

xxi If, however, disability theorists insist on reserving the term “minimally good human life” for the valuable lives the extremely disabled (and very young) can live, then they can simply call the sort of life at issue in this account the “minimally good and autonomous life.” I am honestly not sure if the issue is just semantic or not.

xxii More precisely, Thompson wants to account for fundamental needs. Thompson says that “1. A fundamental need for X is itself inescapable in the sense that the fact that X is causally necessary for not suffering serious harm cannot be altered. The causal link is inescapable. [And] 2. The harm itself must be inescapable.” See: Garrett Thompson. 2005. “Fundamental Needs.” Soran Reader ed. *The Philosophy of Need*. Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. p. 177.

xxiii Even if a person’s prospects or justifiable expectations are relevant to our judgments about whether or not they are harmed, this is so in a different way than Frankfurt supposes. One might think that if a sick person has a great chance of recovery without receiving stabilizing medication but will remain in a stable state with the medication then the medication has harmed them. This is only because the person’s prospects have been reduced, however. The person has been made worse off than before. Furthermore, if the person was lucky to be alive at all and the medication stabilized his or her condition, it seems that the person has benefited from the medication. Frankfurt may have thought remaining in a bad condition was sufficient for harm because he supposed people needed to get better and deserved to do so or because he thought that people would (or should) get better.

xxiv For discussion of this kind of point see: Joel Feinberg. 1984. *Harm to Others*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

xxv There are other problems with this conception of harm as well. Recall the example of the woman who had a more serious illness before getting a degenerative disease. She is harmed by getting the degenerative disease even though she was worse off before getting the disease.

xxvi An illustration will suffice to make the distinction clear. Everyone has a non-episodic need for food even if they are currently well fed. One has an episodic need for food when one is starving.

xxvii Braybrooke does allow for the fact that the minimum standards for provision for necessary goods will vary between individuals (Braybrooke, 1987, S2.32). He also says that not every individual must play every social role (Braybrooke, 1987, S2.45).

xxviii In conversation Braybrooke has resisted the idea that people need children but I can see no other way that one might be a parent.

xxix Perhaps it is less clear what constitutes a good option but public debate of the sort Braybrooke suggests may help clarify the notion for the purposes of creating public policy.

xxx One might argue that it is possible to cash out a good harm-based theory of need if one says people are only harmed when their ability to live a minimally good life is impeded. I worry, however, that this theory of harm could not account for many things we intuitively count as harms. Those who can live minimally good lives even if they lose some of their valuable jobs and possessions are still harmed by the loss.

xxxi Scurvy results from a lack of vitamin C, beri-beri from a lack of thiamine, pellagra from niacin deficiency, and macrocytic and microcytic anemia from folic acid and iron deficiencies, for instance. There is also a lot of evidence that decent nourishment is important for good cognitive functioning. Children's mental functioning can even be impaired if their mothers do not receive proper nourishment during pregnancy. See: Howard Leathers and Phillips Foster., 2004. *The World Food Problem: Tackling the Causes of Undernutrition in the Third Worl*. Lynne Rienner Publisher: Colorado.

xxxii Keratomalacia which results from vitamin A deficiency, kwashiorkor which results from protein deficiency, and iodine deficiencies can all lead to severe disabilities and death. See: *Ibid*.

xxxiii *Ibid*.

xxxiv The feedback loop between malnutrition and illness also goes in the other direction – illness can promote dietary deficiencies just as dietary deficiencies can promote illness. *Ibid*.

xxxv Those who must live in unsanitary conditions are likely to contract diseases like dysentery, tetanus, typhoid, cholera, or hepatitis. Red Cross. 2007. "American Red Cross Urges Public Health Precautions." Red Cross: Washington D.C. Available at: <http://www.redcross.org/pressrelease/0,1077,0_172_4554,00.htm>.

xxxvi World Health Organization. 2007. "10 Facts on Preventing Disease Through Healthy Environments." World Health Organization: Geneva: Available at: <http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/environmental_health/en/index.html>.

xxxvii Bed nets can prevent many cases of dengue fever and malaria, for instance. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. 2007. "Vector Control." Center for Disease Control and Prevention: Atlanta. Available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/malaria/control_prevention/vector_control.htm>.

xxxviii See: Michael Woolcock. 2001. "The Place of Social Capital in Understanding Social and Economic Outcomes," *Isuma*. Vol. 2, No. 1. Available at: <

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xxxix Michael Marmot. 2004. *Status Syndrome: How your Social Standing Directly Affects your Health and Life Expectancy*. Bloomsbury: London.

xi Stress may contribute to a host of autonomy-undermining mental disorders. Stress can, for instance, cause panic attacks and depression. Psychological disorders can reduce the ability of one's immune system to fight infection. See: David B. Beaton, "Effects of Stress and Psychological Disorders on the Immune System," Rochester Institute of Technology Working Paper (New York: Rochester Institute of Technology, 2003). The causal evidence suggests that perception of low social standing may increase stress which reduces immune functioning and can harm health in other ways as well. Rodger Doyle, "Calculus of Happiness: Assessing Subjective Well-being Across Societies," *By the Numbers*. Scientific American. November 2002. Also see: Michael Marmot, *Status Syndrome: How your Social Standing Directly Affects your Health and Life Expectancy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004).

xlii See: Michelle Cullen and Harvey Whiteford. 2001. "Inter-relations of Social Capital with Health and Mental Health," Mental Health and Special Programs Branch Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care Discussion Paper. Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care: Canberra. See also: Michael Woolcock. 2001. "The Place of Social Capital in Understanding Social and Economic Outcomes," *Isuma*. Vol. 2, No. 1. Available at: <
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xlii Those who lack self-esteem are more likely to develop some devastating psychological problems. Karen Brock. 1999. "Its Not Only Wealth that Matters it's Peace of Mind Too": Review of Participatory Work on Poverty and Illbeing." Institute of Development Studies: Birmingham.

xliii It is worth noting that decent societies might not need to enable some people to obtain an education sufficient to secure a decent job if they provide these people with other things that enable them to secure autonomy e.g. food stamps and free health care. In our world, however, most people will have to secure some education to secure autonomy.

xliv Onora O'Neill. 2000. *Bounds of Justice*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

xlv If it is very expensive to meet an individuals' needs, then a decent society may not be able to do so and, in a world of competing priorities, other things may sometimes trump meeting needs.