



**This electronic thesis or dissertation has been
downloaded from Explore Bristol Research,
<http://research-information.bristol.ac.uk>**

Author:

Boss, George

Title:

Needs in political theory

the problem with analytical approaches, and a Marxian solution

General rights

Access to the thesis is subject to the Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International Public License. A copy of this may be found at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>. This license sets out your rights and the restrictions that apply to your access to the thesis so it is important you read this before proceeding.

Take down policy

Some pages of this thesis may have been removed for copyright restrictions prior to having it been deposited in Explore Bristol Research. However, if you have discovered material within the thesis that you consider to be unlawful e.g. breaches of copyright (either yours or that of a third party) or any other law, including but not limited to those relating to patent, trademark, confidentiality, data protection, obscenity, defamation, libel, then please contact collections-metadata@bristol.ac.uk and include the following information in your message:

- Your contact details
- Bibliographic details for the item, including a URL
- An outline nature of the complaint

Your claim will be investigated and, where appropriate, the item in question will be removed from public view as soon as possible.



**This electronic thesis or dissertation has been
downloaded from Explore Bristol Research,
<http://research-information.bristol.ac.uk>**

Author:

Boss, George

Title:

Needs in Political Theory: The Problem with Analytical Approaches, and a Marxian Solution

General rights

Access to the thesis is subject to the Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International Public License. A copy of this may be found at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>. This license sets out your rights and the restrictions that apply to your access to the thesis so it is important you read this before proceeding.

Take down policy

Some pages of this thesis may have been removed for copyright restrictions prior to having it been deposited in Explore Bristol Research. However, if you have discovered material within the thesis that you consider to be unlawful e.g. breaches of copyright (either yours or that of a third party) or any other law, including but not limited to those relating to patent, trademark, confidentiality, data protection, obscenity, defamation, libel, then please contact collections-metadata@bristol.ac.uk and include the following information in your message:

- Your contact details
- Bibliographic details for the item, including a URL
- An outline nature of the complaint

Your claim will be investigated and, where appropriate, the item in question will be removed from public view as soon as possible.

Needs in Political Theory: The Problem with Analytical Approaches, and a Marxian Solution

George Boss

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law
School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies

September 2021

79,885 words

Abstract

Needs matter. The concept of needs figures importantly in contemporary policy-making. Furthermore, it plays a significant part in many of the vexing social, political, economic, and ethical challenges encountered today. Consequently, that concept – alongside the related concept of capabilities – has been addressed by several important and influential analytical philosophers. Amongst others, these include Miller, Nussbaum, Doyal and Gough, and Sen.

This dissertation argues that these prevailing approaches to needs in analytical political theory are untenable. That untenability can be traced to a shared attempt to ground needs in an extra-political normative foundation. Such attempts reflect certain de-politicising tendencies characteristic of contemporary analytical political theory. The result has been a bifurcated debate over needs in which analytical political theorists end up embracing either an abstract universalist naturalism, or an arbitrary cultural relativism. Neither of those approaches, however, can theorise needs adequately. Because those issues follow from the presuppositions of analytical political theory itself, they are irresolvable without a radical change in approach.

I provide a solution by developing and deploying an alternative ontological and epistemological framework. That framework is derived from a novel reading of Marx's work, hitherto unexamined in this context. That novel reading generates a performative understanding of need which grounds needs in neither nature nor culture, but instead in repetitive citational practices. By understanding needs performatively I show that they are constitutively political, since their performative accomplishment involves the following: political struggles, possibilities for human social agency, and significant political stakes. A Marxian approach built on this basis eschews orthodox theoretical attempts to expunge or transcend the *politics* of need, because it understands political theory as a form of immanent critique and practical intervention. Because my Marxian approach embraces the politics of needs in that way, it provides a compelling alternative to prevailing orthodoxies.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to express my thanks to my supervisors, Terrell Carver and Jonathan Floyd, for their wonderful support. In particular, they helped me maintain my progress through almost two years of research during the coronavirus pandemic. This dissertation would not have been possible without their care, guidance, and encouragement. They are best mentors and teachers I could possibly have had.

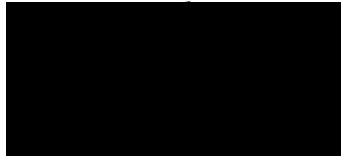
I would also like to thank the many others in the School of Sociology, Politics, and International Studies who supported me through this research, including fellow students, other academic staff in this and other departments, and the wonderful support staff at Bristol. There are too many people to mention by name, and thank you all for help, guidance, and support.

Finally, I could not have got this far without the wonderful support of my family, especially my wife Caro: thank you for keeping me going, and for picking me up more times than I can count. Thank you as well to my daughters Lottie and Joey, who kept me smiling, and who always reminded me to keep persevering.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED:



(George Boss)

DATE: 4th September 2021

Table of contents

1. Introduction	7
1.1 Dissertation outline	10
1.2 Methodology	12
2. Needs in theory	14
2.1 Defining needs	14
2.2 The basic human needs approach	21
2.2.1 Basic human needs	22
2.2.2 Human needs, cultural diversity, and abstraction.....	24
2.2.3 The indeterminacy problem.....	28
2.2.4 Specifiers	31
2.2.5 Against the basic needs thesis.....	33
2.3 The social needs approach	41
2.3.1 Social needs	41
2.3.2 Arbitrariness, and three attendant problems	45
2.4 A false binary?	50
3. The problem with analytical theories of need	52
3.1 The nature/culture binary	53
3.2 An escape from nature and culture?	56
3.2.1 Doyal and Gough’s theory of human need.....	57
3.2.2 Sen and public reasoning.....	61
3.2.3 Nussbaum’s central capabilities	68
3.3 The displacement of politics in the theory of needs	77
3.4 A path forward	82
4. Why Marx had no theorisation of needs	83
4.1 Marx on need: three interpretations	84
4.2 Reading Marx	89
4.2.1 How not to read Marx.....	89
4.2.2 Need in the ‘German ideology’ manuscripts.....	96
4.2.3 How to read Marx.....	103
4.3 Marx’s epistemic outlook	104
4.3.1 Marx against philosophical theorisations	105
4.3.2 Marx and Wittgenstein on language, truth, and knowledge	108
4.3.3 Orthodox interpretations against the epistemic outlook	113
4.4 Rebuttals and foundations	117

5. Performing capitalism	118
5.1 The performativity of need.....	119
5.1.1 Economics as performative.....	119
5.1.2 Need as an economic category	125
5.2 Performativity as politics.....	129
5.2.1 Political agency.....	129
5.2.2 Political stakes	136
5.2.3 Political conflict.....	142
5.3 Needs as political realities.....	146
6. The needs of wage-labour	148
6.1 The revolutionary theorist.....	149
6.2 Behind needs	153
6.2.1 The role of wage-labour.....	153
6.2.2 Preconditions as political accomplishments	156
6.3 Enacting needs	162
6.3.1 Indeterminacy	162
6.3.2 Indifference.....	168
6.4 Following needs	173
6.4.1 From needs as lists to needs as systems	174
6.4.2 Radical needs.....	178
6.5 Marx, theory, and politics of need	180
7. The politics of need.....	182
7.1 Conceptualising needs politically.....	182
7.2 Political theory and the politics of need	187
7.2.1 Solving politics: theories ‘of’ the politics of need.....	188
7.2.2 Assessing politics: theories ‘for’ the politics of need.....	191
7.2.3 Doing politics: theories ‘in’ the politics of need	197
7.3 A Marxian politics of need.....	203
7.3.1 Preconditions	203
7.3.2 Enactments.....	207
7.3.3 Systems.....	211
Abbreviations of Marx’s texts	215
References.....	216

1. Introduction

Needs are everywhere. Even the most casual glance at our daily moral, political, and economic discourses reveals that those discourses are suffused with the language of need. Public policy – from development goals; to welfare distribution; to education; to healthcare; and to more besides – is pervaded with references to needs and neediness: indeed, it is difficult to set out what those various fields are, or what they are for, without recourse to needs. Similarly, one could hardly begin to address many of the vexing political, social, economic, and moral challenges encountered today without thinking and talking about needs: how could one, for instance, address the rights of the refugee; confront the spiralling medical costs of aging populations; counter a pandemic; or envisage a sustainable future, without attempting, in one way or another, to reason about needs? And what is more, peoples’ everyday language and daily moral reasoning is similarly saturated with talk of needs: she needs a warm meal; he needs a kind word; they need help with their homework. It would appear, then, that we are constantly guided by the imperative to meet need, and by the ostensible moral gravity of thwarted need: we are, as one commentator colourfully puts it, surrounded by a ‘cacophony of needs’¹.

People talk about needs because, in some sense or other, they matter. States of need intuitively possess normative weight – a certain poignancy, urgency, and gravity – and we tend to view unmet need as a source of considerable moral potency, and even alarm. The presence of neediness ostensibly requires us to offer some sort of remedy, generating obligations to meet others’ needs, obligations that extend even as far as the needs of otherwise anonymous strangers. However, whilst many needs matter, they do not *all* matter. To take an example, a person might need an axe for a normatively compelling reason; to harvest the firewood that saves them from the cold, say, or to rescue someone from a burning building. But they might also need that axe to build some nice decking; to commit a murder; or to complete their Viking costume. Needs thus range from the urgent and dire to the insignificant and even trivial. What is more, claims-to-need cannot always be taken at face

¹ Miller SC, 2012: 15

value, since such claims can be deployed erroneously or deceptively. Needs-talk, then, is subject to potential error, abuse and even fraud.

One cannot, therefore, assign normative force to needs willy-nilly. And it is here where a handful of political theorists have sought to join the conversation, offering to dissect the concept ‘need’, pulling apart and analysing its diverse senses, and attempting to distinguish between valid and invalid claims-to-need. To do so, they have posited various criteria according to which needs are assessed, allowing different claims-to-need to be identified, compared, validated, and weighed. And whilst there are dire cases where the importance of needs is obvious and intuitive – the needs of the starving, illiterate, or severely ill, say – needs also vary between contexts and through time in ways that can be baffling, and which gives rise to seemingly endless disputes over what is *really* needed. In such circumstances theoretical analysis offers to weigh into the controversy, revealing how certain claims-to-need are misguided, ill-judged, wrongly informed, or even malicious. It is here, then, where the theory of need has an important place: for if needs are to be a focal point of moral reasoning and public policy – as, intuitively, they must be – then we require some mechanism through which we can discern the important from the trivial, the fraudulent from the genuine, and so on. We need, therefore, a theory of need.

Despite all this, however, the concept of needs remains – somewhat surprisingly – largely neglected in contemporary political thought: indeed, the aforementioned group of needs-theorists remains woefully small, and the theoretical interest in needs is comparatively dwarfed by the contemporary preoccupation with other concepts². This is surprising not just because needs-talk and needs-practice itself seems to need theory, but also because the topics that occupy today’s political theorists – especially justice and rights, but also wellbeing, care, desert, and more besides – have strong intuitive connections to needs³. Despite all these connections, however, and despite the widespread recognition that needs matter, and need to be theorised, that concept remains durably unpopular in political philosophy; theoretical

² Braybrooke, 1987: 8; Dean, 2020: 1–7; Hamilton, 2003: 1–20, 2006b; Miller SC, 2012: 2; Reader, 2011; Brock and Reader, 2002

³ On justice, see Brock, 2005, 2009; Copp, 1992, 1998, 2005; Siebel and Schramme, 2020; Thomson, 2012; Wiggins, 2005. On rights, see Doyal and Gough, 1991; Floyd R, 2011; Miller D, 2012. On wellbeing, see Gasper, 2004, 2007, 2009. On care, see Miller SC, 2005, 2012. On desert, see Brock, 1999.

examinations of need continue to be niche; and the literature on need is, on the scale of things, comparatively marginalised. And that neglect in theory, furthermore, has been connected to a damaging neglect of needs in practice: some have suggested, for instance, that the failure of certain needs-based policies can be traced to weaknesses in the concepts⁴; that the absence of robust theories of needs has facilitated damaging assumptions about economic and social ‘progress’⁵; and that the lack of theoretical rigor surrounding needs has left unchallenged a worrying tendency to assume that needs are simply wants people don’t want to pay for⁶.

Needs, then, are important; needs are ubiquitous; needs cannot be neglected; needs have been neglected; needs still are neglected. In claiming all this I am not intending to say anything controversial, and similar observations have been made repeatedly across several decades of literature⁷. But alongside those relatively uncontested claims, I make the further, more controversial argument that theoretical accounts of need have suffered from this comparative paucity of attention. The neglect of needs has thus, I argue, helped produce and leave unchallenged inadequate theories of need. The most damaging consequence of this has been, as I intend to show, the continued popularity of political theories of need that are strangely unpolitical: theories that attempt to understand needs by extracting them from the political to-and-fro, presenting them as things which are just extra-politically ‘there’. A claim that pervades this dissertation, therefore, is that this depoliticising trend has led the political theory of need into a dead-end.

To counter that trend, this dissertation constructs an alternative theoretical account of need that remains political: that theorises need, but theorises them as political all-the-way-down. And just such an account can be found, as I will show, in the work of Karl Marx. Some might find this appeal-to-Marx surprising, and even somewhat dubious: Marx is, after all, sometimes characterised as one of the great anti-political political thinkers⁸; and states calling

⁴ Gasper, 2007

⁵ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 108–111; Gough, 2017: 19–103; O’Neill, 2011

⁶ Gasper, 2004: 155–156; Wiggins, 1998: 5

⁷ For overviews of that literature, see Brock, 1998a, 2012, 2018; Miller SC, 2012: 1–44; O’Neill, 2011; Reader, 2005b, 2006; Thomson, 2012

⁸ For examples and discussion, see Ashcraft, 1984; Chambers, 2014: 84–88; Roberts, 2019; McLellan, 1971: 179–195, 2000: 142; Wheen, 2006; Carver, 2018: 131–132, 2021; Gouldner, 1980: 64–69

themselves ‘Marxist’ have rightly been accused of a thoroughly depoliticising dictatorship over needs⁹. But despite that rather unpromising track record, I argue that when one reads (or rather re-reads) Marx, detaching his work from popular interpretative orthodoxies and from the global political ideology that took his name, one can find a deeply political thinker with – as I will show – a deeply political theory of need.

1.1 Dissertation outline

The goal of this dissertation is, then, to put needs on a firmer, and more thoroughgoingly political, theoretical footing. To do so, I proceed in two main stages.

The first stage (chapters 2 and 3) offers an account of what has gone wrong in the prevailing approaches to theorising need. I begin by laying out the symptoms – as it were – of theoretical neglect, and subsequently inadequate theorisations (chapter 2). To do so, I conduct a literature review of contemporary needs theory, examining how political theorists have attempted to answer the question ‘which needs matter?’. I identify two main strands of theorisation: the basic human needs approach, which holds that the needs which matter (the basic needs) are those which follow from our shared humanity (the human needs); and the social needs approach, which pins the normative importance of need on norms which vary between cultures. I go on to show, however, that both approaches are inadequate. My goal in this chapter, therefore, is to offer a critical review of the prevailing literature; it should be noted, however, that I continue to introduce and review a range of different literatures throughout this dissertation as they enter my argument.

I then turn from outlining symptoms to offering a diagnosis (chapter 3). That diagnosis begins by tracing the failure of contemporary theories of need to certain presuppositions that are commonplace within, in particular, analytical political theory: namely, the presupposition of a nature/culture binary; and the assumption that political theory succeeds only if and when it puts an end to politics. To show thus, I continue my exercise of review and critique, examining the celebrated accounts of Doyal and Gough¹⁰, Sen¹¹, and Nussbaum¹². I demonstrate that despite their sophistication, these accounts do not fundamentally challenge,

⁹ Fehér et al., 1983

¹⁰ Doyal and Gough, 1991

¹¹ Sen, 1999b, 2010

¹² Nussbaum, 2000, 2006a, 2011a

or successfully avoid, appeals to the nature/culture binary. As a result, they fail to escape either the Scylla of naturalist universal humanism (in the form of the basic human needs approach) or the Charybdis of arbitrary cultural relativism (in the form of the social needs approach). Having established this, I then draw on the work of Honig¹³ to argue that the repeated appeals to nature and/or culture are themselves motivated by a curious yearning – characteristic of contemporary analytical political theory – for an extra-political normative basis for needs. The conclusion I reach is that the political theory of need in the analytical tradition, despite its label, is not very ‘political’ at all, and that this represents the root of the problem.

This leads me to the second stage of my argument (chapters 4 to 7), where I turn away from existing analytical literatures, and towards Marx. I begin – in chapter 4 – by critically reviewing the prevailing interpretations of Marx’s account of need, raising two main objections. Firstly, I argue that they adopt a flawed reading strategy, and that this has led to widespread misinterpretations of Marx’s scattered comments on need. Secondly, I argue that Marx developed in his earlier works – in particular, the ‘German ideology’ manuscripts – a distinctive epistemic outlook. Drawing on recent efforts to bring together Marx’s thought and that of the later Wittgenstein¹⁴, I argue that that outlook involved a repudiation of certain then-established philosophical methods, alongside a radical alternative conception of truth and knowledge as grounded in everyday social practice. I go on to show that existing interpretations of Marx’s account of need all violate – in one way or another – that epistemic outlook, and are thus inadequate.

Chapter 5 then picks up these threads, exploring how Marx’s critique of political economy built on that earlier epistemic outlook, thereby developing an innovative conception of the nature of economic categories. Drawing another parallel – this time between Marx and Butler¹⁵ – I argue that Marx understood economic categories as performatives: as constituted through their repetitive citation in everyday social practice, and representing no reality beyond that repetitive citation. What is more, I go on to demonstrate that Marx inserted the

¹³ Honig, 1993

¹⁴ Carver, 2019a; Gakis, 2014, 2015; Kitching, 1988; Kitching and Pleasants, 2002; Rubinstein, 1981; Vinten, 2015

¹⁵ Butler, 1988, 1993, 1999

category ‘need’ into that performative framework, treating needs as just another one of the categories of capitalism, and as, therefore, a performative like all those others. And on the basis of that performative understanding of needs, Marx goes on to expose the politics involved in their performative accomplishment, revealing in particular the political stakes, struggles, and possibilities for human social agency involved in that accomplishment. Marx’s performative account thereby represents, I argue, the sort of deeply political conception of need that is sorely lacking in analytical approaches.

Marx did not, however, simply point to the politics surrounding needs, and leave it at that: instead, Marx’s distinctively saw his theoretical account as a political intervention in that very politics. Chapter 6 explores this facet of Marx’s account through his understanding of needs under capitalism. As I show there, Marx’s adopted a unique theoretical approach, viewing himself as a political participant, and using a form of immanent critical analysis to further stated political goals. I then explore how he deployed that approach in his analysis of the needs of wage-labour, and how he thereby brought to the surface the politics wrapped up in those needs.

Chapter 7 then draws these themes together, showing how a Marxian framework can address the problems diagnosed in chapters 2 and 3, and offers, therefore, a firmer footing for the theory of need. Such a conception, in short, allows one to theorise need politically: to offer a coherent conceptual account of need, but to do so without extracting needs from politics. I then finish by examining and exemplifying how such an approach can be applied in contemporary contexts.

1.2 Methodology

As the above summary highlights, the question of method is central to my dissertation: indeed, one of its principal goals is to show that how prevailing methods have led analytical political theory astray, and to develop an alternative. In pursuit of that goal, I begin within an analytical framework, adopting its methods and presentational orthodoxies. Whilst these themselves are contested¹⁶, they broadly involve certain standard ways of proceeding, such as fine-grained specification of concepts and systematic delineation of each step in theoretical arguments; some standard methodological devices, such as thought experiments, reflections

¹⁶ For discussion, see Blau, 2017; Floyd J, 2016; McDermott, 2008

on intuitions, and careful unpicking of actual linguistic usage; and typical presentational tropes, including the explicit statement of premises and definitions, the use – as far as possible – of non-technical language, and so on.

Part of the point of beginning within that framework, however, is to subvert it: to show – as I do in chapters 2 and 3 – that certain presumptions characteristic of the analytical method have undermined the analytical attempts at theorising need. It is that challenge to analytical orthodoxies that leads me to Marx, and to develop – in chapters 4-7 – a new theoretical framework for needs. That framework is most explicitly spelled out in chapter 7, but to offer a brief summary, it holds that: theoretical activity takes place within – rather than outside or above – everyday social practice; that needs are performatively constituted in and through those practices; that the practices which constitute needs are deeply political, since they are subject to both ongoing, ineradicable contestation, and a drive toward coordinated collective decisions and actions; that the theorist should be construed not as an outside observer but as a political participant; that since theoretical activity – including critical theoretical activity – goes on within everyday social practice, it constitutes a form of immanent analysis and critique; and that the output of theoretical activity is a politically-charged representation of that everyday practice.

2. Needs in theory

Needs – as I argued in chapter 1 – have a somewhat chequered history within political theory. Whilst they have ostensible, even self-evident normative significance and urgency; and whilst some theorists have successfully carved out a distinctive role for themselves in the needs discourse; needs-theory remains somewhat niche, and is comparatively neglected by political theorists. My contention in chapter 1, furthermore, was that this comparative neglect has helped produce, and leave unchallenged, inadequate theorisations. The subject of this chapter is that accusation of inadequacy. What I will show, then, is that the various predominant attempts to theorise needs are implausible, incoherent, contradictory, or otherwise not up to the task.

That claim, however, is made within a specific domain: namely, the domain of analytical political theory. My reasons for doing so were outlined in chapter 1, but to put those reasons in a nutshell: my overall aim across chapters 2-3 is to demonstrate that certain presuppositions characteristic of analytical political theory have led to deficient theorisations, and thus that to successfully theorise need, one must make some key departures from that tradition. For now, however, my goal is not to explain why the analytical approaches to theorising need have ended up failing, or to identify the origins of that failure, but to show that they do fail. To do so, I examine the two main approaches to needs within the analytical tradition – namely, the basic human needs approach (2.2) and the social needs approach (2.3) – showing that neither approach stands up to critical scrutiny, and that something has, therefore, gone seriously wrong in how analytical political theorists have attempted to theorise need. I then build on that analysis in the next chapter, where I turn from laying out symptoms to offering a diagnosis.

2.1 Defining needs

Let me begin, however, with an aspect of the analytical tradition that is largely uncontested, and which I do not dispute: their account of the meaning, and relevant normative sense, of the term ‘need’.

Part of the problem with the concept of need is that needs-talk has a bewildering array of different senses: humans need food; triangles need three sides; the drug addict needs his fix;

the remote control needs batteries; the murderer needs her axe; and so on. Needs-talk is varied and multi-faceted, and it is clear from the outset that people use the term in different ways to make quite different claims. And what is more, not all sense of the term ‘need’ are even *meant* to have normative connotations. If, therefore, we are interested only in the needs that have those connotations – the needs, in other words, that matter – we must start by focusing on the uses of that term that are meant to be normative in the first place. But whilst the search for conceptual clarification is all well and good, there is a danger of going too far in the other direction, proliferating distinctions between different sorts of needs to a point where it becomes unclear what holds needs-talk together in the first place. The theoretical literature on need is somewhat guilty of such over-egging, and is replete with a mind-boggling range of binary distinctions between different sorts of need that criss-cross and overlap in ways that can be extremely difficult to disentangle¹. I will pick out, therefore, just one distinction between different sense of the term ‘need’, a distinction that is necessary in order to distinguish the directly normative sense of that term from all the others.

Most accounts begin by positing that needs appear, in general, have the following form:

A needs X in order to Ø

This so-called ‘relational formula’ presents needs as a relation between a needing subject (A); a needed thing (X); and an end that thing is needed for (Ø)². A person (A) can thus, for instance, need a book (X) in order to continue their education (Ø); or they can need water (X) in order to clean their car (Ø); or, to return to an example I explored in chapter 1, they can need an axe (X) to harvest the wood that keeps them warm, to commit a murder, to complete a Viking costume, to build some decking, and so on (all of which are different possible ends Ø). The axe example highlights, furthermore, a possible explanation for normative senses of the term ‘need’. One might say that that term has normative implications if and when it is directed towards an end (Ø) that itself carries normative weight. Thus the need for an axe matters if that need is necessary for a normatively important end (rescuing someone from a fire, keeping away the cold, etc.) but not if that end lacks such importance (fancy dress,

¹ See, for instance, the distinctions offered by Brock, 1998c; Copp, 1992; Gasper, 2004; Miller SC, 2012: 15–23; Siebel and Schramme, 2020; Thomson, 1987: 1–22; Wiggins, 1998: 1–16

² Braybrooke, 1987: 29–32; Brock, 1998a; Doyal and Gough, 1991: 39; Siebel and Schramme, 2020; Wiggins, 1998: 7

building decking, etc.). So-called ‘instrumentalists’ thus posit that the term ‘need’ has no normative connotations in-itself, and simply picks out necessary instruments for given ends; that, therefore, it is nothing more than a strong modal, like ‘must’; and that consequently the normative significance of a need is derived solely from the normativity of the end (\emptyset) towards which it is directed³.

The problem with instrumentalism, however, is that there are senses of the term ‘need’ which ostensibly carry normative weight without gesturing towards some normatively weighty end. To demonstrate this, let me return again to the axe example. Suppose that one encounters someone who claims to need an axe in order to, say, build themselves some new decking. To assess the normative significance of this claim, one might respond by asking themselves whether the person *really* needs that axe⁴. Notice, however, that there are in fact two ways in which a person might not really need that axe: they might not really need that axe in order to do that; and they might not really need to do that. In the first case, the assessment is focused on the necessity of the axe for the given task, and the need-claim might be countered by pointing out that – for instance – some other means is a reasonable and available substitute. But in the second case, the issue in question is not whether the need is necessary for a given end, but whether the end itself is needed. And whilst one can often sensibly question needs based on what those needs are for (does one really need, for instance, to build that decking?), there are other instances where questioning what a need is for appears to be not only redundant, but outright mistaken, or even nonsensical: as Braybrooke puts it, for instance, ‘one cannot sensibly ask’ if a person really ‘needs to live’⁵. And significantly, whilst instrumentalists can accommodate the first sort of challenge, they can make no sense at all of the second one. This leads to a somewhat standard move in the need literature: the introduction of a second sense of the term ‘need’, namely, a categorical sense⁶. In that sense,

³ Barry, 1965: 47–49; Fletcher, 2018; Goodin, 1988; McLeod, 2015

⁴ Braybrooke, 1987: 29–32; O’Neill, 2011: 26–27; Thomson, 1987: 8; Wiggins, 1998: 6–9

⁵ Braybrooke, 1987: 31

⁶ Others have used different terms, such as ‘fundamental’ or ‘absolute’, to pick out these needs (Copp, 1992, 1998, 2005; Thomson, 1987: 1–22, 2005; Wiggins, 1998: 9–11).

needs pick out not just necessary means to ends, but circumstances of need that have normative weight without reference to any further end (\emptyset)⁷.

It is such categorical needs that will be the focus of this dissertation. Picking out this normatively weighty sense of the term ‘need’ is, however, only part of the battle. The next step is to ask what exactly it is about categorical needs that makes them special, and means they possess this apparent normative urgency and gravity. This, as I will now show, follows from the fact that categorical needs point to needs that are inescapable, and which, if neglected, lead to serious harm.

Let me begin with inescapability. As highlighted above, there is an instrumental sense in which all needs are inescapable: you only really need something, after all, if that something is the only feasible way to get some particular outcome. But as my previous discussion showed, categorical needs are also inescapable in a second sense, in that the need *itself* is unavoidable. Thus whilst an axe might be an inescapable means to both harvest the wood that keeps you warm and to build some decking, one can avoid, eschew, or forsake the need to build decking, but can never dodge the need to keep warm. Categorical needs are thus inescapable needs⁸: they are needs which, as Frankfurt puts it, the needy person needs to need⁹.

Notably, however, the inescapability of categorical needs is not reducible to any kind of strict logical, metaphysical, or naturalistic necessity. A categorical need is fundamentally not like, for instance, a triangle’s need for three sides, because it must be possible for the need to be thwarted, and yet the needy being to continue to exist¹⁰. And the assertion of something like necessity does not imply that there is no possible world in which the needy being A does not require X, since we can quite easily imagine possible worlds where normatively important needs do not pertain (a world where shelter isn’t needed; a world with no disease; etc.)¹¹. Categorical needs do not, then, point to logical preconditions, but rather to inescapable

⁷ Braybrooke, 1987: 29–38; O’Neill, 2011; Siebel and Schramme, 2020; Thomson, 1987: 1–22; Wiggins, 1998: 1–57

⁸ Brock, 1998c; Siebel and Schramme, 2020; Thomson, 1987: 23–34

⁹ Frankfurt, 1998b: 23

¹⁰ McLeod, 2011

¹¹ Siebel and Schramme, 2020

vulnerabilities, and I choose the alternative term ‘inescapable’ precisely because what makes us need these needs is not quite the same thing as strict necessity.

This leaves us, however, somewhat afloat when it comes to the nature of this inescapability itself. Whilst it is clear that categorical needs are in some sense immutable, are beyond people’s volition to change, and cannot be avoided, it is not clear what exactly underpins these sorts of claims. Some theorists, for instance, try to get to the root of inescapability by stripping away all the contingent and volitional aspects of our existence, focusing only on those aspects – and the accompanying needs – which we are ‘born with’, and of which we cannot rid ourselves¹². It would be quite wrong, however, to suppose that inescapability can be reduced to something like the necessities of human physiology or nature: it is a well-known empirical fact, for instance, that many people neglect the biological needs they are ‘born with’ in order to attain a minimal level of social decency and self-respect¹³. Similarly, a need cannot be deemed escapable if the path to its escape requires someone to do something they are morally compelled not to do, or for something morally wrong to be done to them (Thomson, for instance, notes that it does not speak against the ‘need for friendship’ if such a need could be removed through torture¹⁴). And to take another example, one’s relationship to one’s spouse is – self-evidently – not a feature of life one is ‘born with’, and yet the fact that one could in principle have avoided this set of circumstances does not make those relations escapable, or change one’s attitude towards – for instance – the needs of refugee families at the border. Inescapability is not, therefore, reducible to some particular sort of necessity or other, but rather involves a pragmatic judgment of what is reasonable, acceptable, and plausible, given a wide range of social, moral, historical, natural, economic, personal, and other factors¹⁵.

It is not the case, however, that all inescapable needs carry normative weight. In an illuminating example, Frankfurt asks us to consider an incurable genetic condition that brings about ‘nothing more than an occasional inconsequential itch’¹⁶. Whilst such a condition

¹² Brock, 1998c; Frankfurt, 1998b; Miller SC, 2012: 19

¹³ For discussion, see Wolff, 2019, 2020

¹⁴ Thomson, 1987: 26

¹⁵ Wiggins, 1998: 1–17

¹⁶ Frankfurt, 1998a: 180

might entail inescapable needs (for a soothing cream, say), those needs do not carry the sort of normative weight usually ascribed to categorical needs. This points to the second feature that distinguishes categorical needs from the others: their connection to the avoidance of serious harm. This helps to explain, furthermore, the sense in which needs are connected to human vulnerability, and even dependency¹⁷: they point to needs that are not just inescapable, but which, if thwarted, lead to serious consequences – of one sort or another – for the need-bearer. The connection between needs and serious harm is thus ubiquitous in the literature¹⁸.

Despite that ubiquity, however, the content and character of such ‘serious harm’ has remained durably elusive. Different thwarted needs illicit, after all, different sorts of consequences that are not easily comparable (malnutrition is qualitatively distinct from lack of education; from freezing cold; from ill health; and so on) and which are incommensurable (one cannot make up for lack of water by, say, giving extra shelter)¹⁹. Needs thus, it would appear, reflect a plurality of distinct harms, and cannot be straightforwardly reduced to one homogenous common substance or dimension. This has led to a range of theoretical responses: some have attempted to draw these various harms together through one common criterion, such as a capacity for human agency²⁰; others have simply accepted that harm represents an irreducible plurality²¹; others have offered a more relativistic take, arguing that what holds harm together are social norms that vary between cultures²²; whilst others have rejected the concept in its entirety, viewing harm as nothing more than an implausible ‘Frankensteinian jumble’ of different properties²³.

But whilst there is limited agreement on exactly what constitutes harm, it is broadly agreed that whatever it is, harm is a property (or properties) that (a) has significant normative connotations, and (b) is defined according to criteria that go beyond the mental states of the needy subject. The latter feature follows from the fact that one can need some even if one

¹⁷ Dean, 2020: 2; Miller SC, 2012; O’Neill, 2005, 2011; Reader, 2007: 83–85; Wiggins, 1998: 16

¹⁸ Brock, 2009; Copp, 1992, 1998, 2005; Doyal and Gough, 1991; Siebel and Schramme, 2020; Thomson, 1987: 35–62, 1987; Wiggins, 1998: 1–17, 2005

¹⁹ Gough, 2017: 45–46; Nussbaum, 2000: 63

²⁰ Alvarez, 2009; Brock, 2005, 2009; Copp, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2005; Miller SC, 2012; Plant, 2002

²¹ Miller D, 1976: 130–133

²² Doyal and Gough, 1991; Wiggins, 1998: 11–14

²³ Bradley, 2012: 391. See also Fletcher, 2018

does not want it, and without even being aware of it: a person needs exercise, say, whether they want to or not, and whether they realise it or not²⁴. Categorical needs depend, then, on some schemata or criteria that transcends the mental states of all the different separate needy individuals, and which is – in some way or other – held mutually. Indeed, this feature is further implicated by the strong normative imperative that is associated with those needs: if categorical needs possess such normative force, and posit – consequently – onerous duties on others, needs cannot simply be claimed willy-nilly according to wholly self-determined private standards. The needing subject, in short, is not – and cannot be – the sovereign interpreter of their own needs²⁵.

When inescapability and the threat of harm come together, this points to circumstances that possess considerable moral urgency and gravity, and it is in exactly such circumstances that we encounter categorical needs. And crucially, those circumstances, and the needs found therein, must – as I have shown – be determined by some yardstick or other that lies beyond the individual needy subject, appealing to criteria that are in some sense shared, public, and held in common. The question that immediately follows – and which has preoccupied needs theorists, and generated enormous controversy – is what those criteria actually are. Thus whilst the definition of needs offered in this section is broadly uncontroversial, the question of which needs that definition actually applies to – which needs, in other words, really do matter – is the subject of enormous dispute. In the next two sections I turn, therefore, to that question, surveying the two main answers to it offered by analytical political theorists. And what I show – crucially – is that both those answers are inadequate.

²⁴ This feature of categorical needs has often been presented by contrasting needs with wants, preferences, or desires (Braybrooke, 1987: 32; Copp, 1995: 172–177; Doyal and Gough, 1991: 39–42; Frankfurt, 1998b; Miller D, 1976: 126–136; O'Neill, 2011; Siebel and Schramme, 2020; Wiggins, 1998: 1–17, 2005), or by differentiating needs from psychological drives (Doyal and Gough, 1991: 35–39; Gasper, 2007, 2009; Thomson, 1987: 13–15).

²⁵ A version of this argument is presented by Scanlon (1975). Needs theorists have similarly suggested it by positing that categorical needs must be in some sense 'objective' or 'extentional' (Copp, 1995: 172–173; Doyal and Gough, 1991: 35–45; Gough, 2017: 45; Miller D, 2012; Miller SC, 2012: 22; Reader, 2006, 2007: 51–52).

2.2 The basic human needs approach²⁶

I begin with the most prevalent of those two approaches: namely, the basic human needs (BHN) approach. That approach holds, in short, that the needs which matter – the *basic* needs – are *human* needs. The significance of a given need thus depends on its membership of or derivation from a set of universal, immutable, transcultural BHN, usually laid out by the theorist in a convenient list. That framework is then filled out via a range of methodologies, producing handy lists of BHN that vary – in general – only around the margins.

The claim I defend in this section is that the abstract, indeterminate nature of human needs makes it impossible to establish their normative priority (or ‘basicness’). To establish that claim, I begin by showing that human needs are necessarily abstract. This follows, I argue, from the standard response given by BHN theorists to the problem of cultural diversity: to avoid favouring one way of life over others, and to plausibly apply universally, human needs must be specified at a high level of generality. The ensuing problem, however, is that this abstract specification undermines the capacity of BHN to offer guidance in concrete contexts. The BHN approach thus requires some account of the properties which shape the concrete specification of BHN: I call such properties ‘specifiers’.

Having established this largely familiar framework of concepts, lines of reasoning, and series of arguments-and-responses, I go on to offer a novel critique of the BHN approach. As I show, in responding to the problems of cultural diversity and of indeterminacy, the BHN approach constructs an assemblage of concepts – especially the tripartite distinction between human needs, satisfiers and (crucially) specifiers – which make it impossible to establish the normative priority (aka, the basicness) of human needs. To demonstrate this, I consider the grounds for assigning that normative priority, identifying two arguments: the argument from the inescapability of universal preconditions; and the argument from substantive harm. The crucial problem, however, is that both of those arguments are undermined by the status afforded to specifiers in the theory of BHN. Consequently, the assemblage of concepts and arguments used to support the BHN approach is, on closer examination, internally incoherent.

²⁶ A modified version of this section was previously published in the *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* under the title ‘Basic human needs: Abstraction, indeterminacy and the political account of need’ (Boss, 2021).

2.2.1 Basic human needs

The term ‘basic human needs’ has historical associations with an approach to international development adopted by the International Labour Organisation in the 1970s, and later holding sway in World Bank circles. Contemporaneous with, and partly stimulated by, that policy paradigm was a considerable theoretical project. This attempted to develop the conceptual resources of the BHN approach, generating a sizeable literature and commonplace framework of concepts. And whilst the BHN approach has largely been superseded as a policy programme, that framework continues to be highly influential in moral and political theory²⁷. In those circles it has been put to a number of uses: as a grounding for human rights²⁸; as a prerequisite for international justice²⁹; as the basis for a duty of care³⁰; as a criterion for cultural evaluation³¹; and more besides. It has even been suggested that amongst analytical accounts of need, the BHN approach constitutes something of a dominant paradigm³².

That approach is characterised by a framework of concepts that can be summed up, first and foremost, by two central theses:

The human needs thesis – there is a set of abilities and characteristics $[H_1 \dots H_n]$ that are essential to human life. Some subset of $[H_1 \dots H_n]$ yields a set of human needs $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$.

The basic needs thesis – $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$ constitute the basic needs for all human beings.

To begin with the human needs thesis, this identifies a set of needs $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$ grounded in the essential features of human life $[H_1 \dots H_n]$. At the most minimal level, $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$ constitute the prerequisites for human survival. The group of theories I examine here, however, are explicitly more expansive, aiming not only at the continuing existence of the human animal, but the higher standard of a distinctively human form of existence. In this way

²⁷ Gasper, 2004: 131–162; Reader, 2006; Siebel and Schramme, 2020

²⁸ Doyal and Gough, 1991; Floyd R, 2011; Miller D, 2007: 163–200, 2012; Plant, 2002

²⁹ Brock, 1998b, 2002, 2005, 2009; Copp, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2005; Thomson, 2012

³⁰ Miller SC, 2005, 2012

³¹ Johnson M, 2014

³² Brock, 2009: 65; Reader, 2006, 2007: 64–67

human needs pertain not just to facts about human physiology, but to an evaluative notion of a minimally decent (or dignified, flourishing, etc.) human life³³.

Having identified $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$, the BHN approach goes on to make the normative claim – in the form of the basic needs thesis – that $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$ constitute our basic needs, meaning they have normative priority over other needs and features of our wellbeing³⁴. The claim made by BHN theorists is that there is something special about human needs which justifies ascribing those needs, and *only* those needs, that normative priority; indeed, much of the literature goes so far as to contend that basic needs must, by definition, be shared universally³⁵. It follows that the normative importance of a given need is determined by its membership of, or derivation from, the set of human needs $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$. A defining feature of the BHN approach, therefore, is that it deploys an exclusive connection between normative importance and shared humanity in order to distinguish significant from insignificant needs: to tell us, in short, which needs matter.

My target here is a cluster of scholarship within analytical political theory which share these two theses. That focus is both narrow and broad. It is, firstly, narrow in that it lies exclusively within analytical political theory. The term ‘need’ is, after all, ubiquitous, and there is a vast related literature distributed across numerous disciplines³⁶. A narrowing of scope is therefore necessary for pragmatic reasons. But despite that narrowing, my target is still a broad one, in that I am drawing together a number of distinct theories in order to elucidate a common problem. Inevitably, therefore, I lose some of the nuanced distinctions between those theories. My claim, however, is that despite some divergence, these approaches (a) endorse the human needs and basic needs theses, (b) adopt a shared framework of concepts, (c) confront a standard set of problems, and (d) deploy some standard responses to those problems. My choice of scope is thus prompted and justified by those commonalities, which

³³ Siebel and Schramme, 2020; Stewart, 1996

³⁴ Copp, 1992; Frankfurt, 1998b; Gasper, 2004: 141–142

³⁵ Copp, 1992, 1998; Doyal and Gough, 1991: 35–45; Miller SC, 2012: 20–22; Plant, 2002

³⁶ Dean, 2020

– I argue – are shared by all the BHN approach’s central proponents, including Doyal and Gough, Copp, Brock, S. C. Miller, and D. Miller.³⁷

One might wonder how far beyond that list my argument extends. It could be asked, in particular, whether Nussbaum’s celebrated capability account³⁸ falls within the scope of the BHN approach. This is certainly plausible: several commentators have indeed posited such an overlap³⁹; and there is plenty of textual evidence to suggest she endorses something like the human needs and basic needs theses (a)⁴⁰, and that she develops her argument and her distinctive assemblage of concepts along the lines specified in (b)-(d)⁴¹. The problem, however, is that Nussbaum’s account has several distinctive features – not least her focus on capabilities rather than needs, and her politically liberal methodology – which make it difficult to provide a straightforward categorisation without getting embroiled in debates about interpretation and scope. I leave, therefore, a detailed consideration of Nussbaum’s account to the next chapter⁴². For now, I proceed under the hesitant assumption that a version of the argument I offer does indeed apply to Nussbaum, but to ensure precision, and to avoid any ambiguities, my argument will primarily focus on the proponents listed above.

2.2.2 Human needs, cultural diversity, and abstraction

My case against the BHN approach begins by examining some common challenges, the standard responses to those challenges, and the consequent framework of concepts that has

³⁷ Brock, 2005, 2009; Copp, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2005; Doyal and Gough, 1991; Miller D, 2007, 2012; Miller SC, 2005, 2012

³⁸ Nussbaum, 2000. For further references and examination see section 3.2.3.

³⁹ Brock, 2009: 69–71; Gough, 2014, 2017: 45; Miller SC, 2012: 40; Reader, 2006; Siebel and Schramme, 2020; Thomson, 2012

⁴⁰ Regarding the human needs thesis, Nussbaum account declaredly hinges around the concepts of ‘truly human functioning’ and ‘human dignity’, as well as – in her later work – a human ‘species norm’ (Nussbaum, 2006a: 179–195): indeed, she emphasises that an appeal to such concepts is a key distinction between her account and Sen’s (Nussbaum, 2000: 13). Her argument, furthermore, that her ten central capabilities should be actualised in the form of constitutional guarantees suggests the basic needs thesis (Nussbaum, 2000: 5–6, 2003, 2006a: 155–6, 2011a: 75).

⁴¹ See, in particular, her discussion of the problem of culture, and her response that her list will be specified differently in different contexts (Nussbaum, 2000: 77, 2006a: 78–79, 2006b: 1315, 2011a: 101–112, 2014: 15).

⁴² Section 3.2.3.

been developed. In this section, I consider the problem of cultural diversity, and how this leads BHN theorists to couch BHN in highly abstract terms.

The problem of cultural diversity goes like this. The BHN approach posits that human needs are universal in scope, in that they are held by all people in all societies, simply *qua* their humanity. That universal scope clashes with the reality of cultural difference, in that whatever set of human needs one puts forward, one can always find some people in some cultures who are hostile to the content of that set. The BHN theorist thus appears to confront a stark choice between a universalist account of human needs, and a respect for the value of cultural diversity. As D. Miller⁴³ puts it, the problem is to find some way of specifying a universal account of human needs without thereby engaging in a partisan favouring of one way of life over another.

Fortunately, the BHN theorist has a ready response. Whilst indeed the activity of needs-meeting differs between cultures, these differences equate merely to different modes of satisfaction for common, universal human needs. Thus, for instance, one can meet the need for food in countless ways, and the precise manner of doing so is sensitive to cultural differences. This does not, however, change the fact that humans need food.

This form of argument constitutes the standard response to the problem of diversity. The BHN approach has, furthermore, developed a handy framework of concepts to systematise and embellish this response. It is common to distinguish, in particular, universal human needs (such as the need for nutrition) and specific ‘satisfiers’ for those needs (the various nutritious diets one might have). The standard response thus holds that cultural diversity can be accommodated at the level of satisfiers without abandoning the universalism posited by the human needs thesis. Some form of this distinction can be found in pretty much all of the major contributions to this cluster of scholarship⁴⁴.

It follows from the standard response that BHN must be defined in a sufficiently abstract manner, since they must accommodate a wide range of different concrete needs, including various culturally specific forms of needs-meeting. Indeed, variations in concrete

⁴³ Miller D, 2012

⁴⁴ Brock, 2002; Copp, 1998: 123; Doyal and Gough, 1991: 69–75, 155; Gasper, 2004: 142–152; Miller D, 2012; Miller SC, 2012: 38–39

specifications are down to more than just culture: needs vary in line with physiological differences (such as age or sex), economic factors (those with strenuous jobs require, for instance, different nutrition), religious belief or moral principle (Muslims and vegans might need different diets), and so on. To reach a sufficiently high level of generality, concrete needs must be abstracted from particular circumstances and grouped with other, similar needs in clusters which ascend in increasing levels of generality⁴⁵. Those processes of abstraction can occur to different extents and in varying dimensions: the statement ‘babies need milk’ can be abstracted into ‘humans need nutrition’, requiring an abstraction of the subject (‘babies’ becomes ‘human’) and the object (‘milk’ becomes ‘nutrition’). There is thus – as this example highlights – a connection between the level of specification of the subject and the object⁴⁶. Given this, identifying a set of needs applicable to all humans requires a highly abstract specification of the needs themselves⁴⁷.

Human needs are abstract in the further sense that they do not specify particular forms or standards of provision. The phrase ‘humans need nutrition’, for instance, leaves the appropriate quality and kind of provision unspecified. And whilst some unmet nutritional needs rapidly result in certain death, others lead to qualitatively different forms of deprivation with varying degrees of certainty over differing periods of time. Thus all human needs – even the most vital ones – display diverging degrees of necessity⁴⁸. It follows that judgements of sufficient provision are required. Those judgements do not, however, follow straightforwardly from the nature of the needs themselves without applying some criterion of adequacy⁴⁹. And whilst BHN theorists recognise the necessity of such judgements, they leave their specification open-ended and for determination at a level below the generically human. This is why terms like ‘adequate’, ‘normal’, ‘sufficient’, and ‘appropriate’ can be found in many of the lists of BHN⁵⁰.

We thus have – on the one hand – a range of specific, concrete needs that vary markedly according to particular circumstances, and – on the other hand – a set of human needs

⁴⁵ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 40; Heller, 1993; Reader, 2007: 79–81

⁴⁶ Reader, 2006

⁴⁷ Heller, 1993

⁴⁸ Hamilton, 2003: 29–30

⁴⁹ Miller D, 2001: 206–213; Plant, 2002: 167; Soper, 1981: 10–18

⁵⁰ Brock, 2009: 66–67; Doyal and Gough, 1991: 157–158; Miller SC, 2012: 41–42

couched in terms general enough that their scope encompasses all those varied concrete instances. The BHN approach undertakes a division of labour between those two levels, splitting the tasks of (a) identifying human needs and (b) determining which needs can be validly derived from these abstract categories in concrete contexts. The BHN approach offers theoretical accounts at level (a), with the latter task (b) left undetermined and for specification by some further process.

The BHN approach's strategy for endorsement hinges on that division. By separating tasks (a) and (b), the BHN approach avoids controversial debates about which needs can be derived from generic human needs. There can, for instance, be strong agreement that education is an important need, even when there is equally strong disagreement about the form that education should take. A space for agreement can often be opened up by shifting to a higher level of generality⁵¹, and through this method even the most trenchant disagreements can be transcended. If, therefore, human needs are defined generally enough, this opens a path to endorsement for a range of differing, even contradictory conceptions, with any remaining disputes shifted from the level of human needs (a) to the secondary processes of specification (b). This explains why 'thin', abstractly specified human needs are far less controversial than the concretely-specified, 'thick' forms of those same needs⁵².

This avoidance of controversy via abstraction plays a key role in the standard response to the problem of diversity. By shifting to ever-more abstract levels, the BHN theorist is able to address concerns about partisanship (in D. Miller's sense) by shifting any controversy regarding BHN themselves (a) to the level of concrete specification (b). This allows the theorist to maintain that their universalist accounts of BHN are compatible with a respect for cultural diversity. Consider, for instance, the critic who argues that some vitally important need has wrongly been excluded from the list of BHN. One way to mollify this critic is to argue that this need follows from the existing list, and is simply a concrete realisation of a need already found there. D. Miller, for instance, pursues this strategy when he considers the need for religious education, arguing that a more abstract need for education-in-general encompasses this particular demand⁵³. A similar strategy is pursued by Doyal, in response to

⁵¹ Alkire, 2002: 160; Sen, 1995: 108–109

⁵² Dean, 2020: 27–45; Fraser N, 1989: 162–164; Soper, 2007

⁵³ Miller D, 2012

Soper's criticism regarding the need for sexual relations⁵⁴. Both these examples deploy a kind of *incorporating* abstraction, where the original list is defended on the basis that excluded items are one concrete specification of the existing list of BHN. Alternatively, the BHN theorist might be confronted by a critic who contends that an item on a given list should not be there because it is not universally shared. One response is a *universalising* abstraction, where the BHN theorist shifts to a higher level of generality, thus making their list – once again – universally applicable. Copp pursues this strategy in defence of the need for education, arguing that this need might itself be a particular form of an even more abstract need⁵⁵.

In both cases the BHN theorist moves trenchant debates away from (a) – the list of BHN which must be universally endorsed, to (b) – where different (and even contrary) actualisations can coexist. It is notable, furthermore, that there is a certain fluidity between those two levels, a fluidity that the BHN theorist can exploit to avoid controversy by shifting to ever higher levels of abstraction. Thus, for instance, whilst D. Miller thinks the need for education is abstract enough to be plausibly universal, Copp feels it necessary to take a further step up the ladder of abstraction. What follows are lists of BHN that are highly abstract and difficult to dispute, with any remaining disagreements shifted from the list itself to debates about what is implied by that list⁵⁶.

So human needs are abstract. I am not, however, making the strong claim that the under-specification of human needs demonstrates in-and-of-itself that they are theoretically incoherent: just because one cannot pin down specifications at the generically human level does not mean there are no human needs⁵⁷. Instead, highlighting the abstract nature of human needs constitutes the first step in my argument.

2.2.3 The indeterminacy problem

The problem with abstract specifications is instead that they lead to indeterminate accounts of BHN, undermining the capacity of the BHN approach to guide us in concrete contexts. As a

⁵⁴ Doyal, 1993; Soper, 1993a

⁵⁵ Copp, 1992: 255

⁵⁶ Soper, 1993a, 1993b

⁵⁷ Arneson offers the most famous version of this criticism (Arneson, 2005). Reader offers a reply (Reader, 2006).

result, when the BHN approach descends from abstract BHN to the level of particular needs in specific contexts it becomes unable to perform the very task it was designed for: to tell us which needs matter.

To establish this, recall that the BHN approach equates normatively important basic needs with universally shared human needs. Consequently, whether or not a particular need (call this PN) is deemed important depends on whether one must satisfy PN in order to meet some human need HN⁵⁸. The normative significance of particular needs in concrete contexts thus depends upon their derivation from abstract human needs, via a chain of ‘in-order-to’ statements. Having ascended to a set of needs which are sufficiently abstract to plausibly be considered generically human, those chains of derivation allow the BHN theorist to descend again, and thus make judgements about this or that concrete need. The links in such a chain are, however, open to contestation⁵⁹: human needs, after all, are compatible with multiple possible specifications and thus indeterminate (this is what their abstractness implies), and the concrete specification of abstract human needs does not follow from the internal logic of those needs alone⁶⁰. And the more abstract the human need, the longer the chain of derivation, and the less clear it is whether or not a particular need can be validly inferred from the abstract category.

That process of derivation is further complicated by the strategy outlined in the previous section. By shifting controversies about needs from the list itself (a) to the ancillary process of specification (b), the BHN approach can avoid many of the disputes about needs. But whilst those disputes have been avoided, they have not been overcome; and when the BHN approach returns to concrete contexts, exactly the same points of difference resurface. Thus the more effective the BHN approach is at deriving widely endorsed accounts of human needs (a), the more contestable and controversial is the process of specification (b). Consequently, many of the deepest disagreements about needs are not disputes about whether this or that is in fact a human need, but which particular needs follow from those abstract categories. This can be observed, for instance, in the debates surrounding: how far the

⁵⁸ Braybrooke, 1987: 81–99; Copp, 1992, 1995: 173–174, 1998

⁵⁹ Fraser N, 1989: 162–166

⁶⁰ Plant, 2002

demands of BHN extend, given the reality of aging populations⁶¹; the global economic and environmental consequences that follow from the generous specification of BHN in developed countries⁶²; and the judgement of BHN in welfare practices⁶³.

These observations have been drawn together by Soper⁶⁴ to show that the BHN approach faces two horns of a dilemma: its plausibility and persuasive power requires BHN to be specified abstractly; as a result, however, those specifications cannot guide the assessment of needs in practice. Or to put this another way, a list of BHN defined abstractly enough so as to transcend all controversies would be plausible and compelling but pointless, since it could never, by definition, give any guidance in those controversies. And whilst there are dire cases of need which are uncontroversial, if the BHN approach can tell us only about those cases, it offers nothing beyond the obvious. Soper thus describes the BHN approach as ‘vacuously uninformative’ in concrete contexts⁶⁵. The BHN approach largely avoids these difficulties via tactical silence, leaving the concrete specification of BHN to other processes. But in defining needs abstractly and leaving their specification open-ended, the BHN approach can be deployed paradoxically to justify just about any specific form of consumption as ‘needed’⁶⁶. The end result, as Alkire puts it, is that we must continually ‘hold our breath’, never knowing what the theory of BHN tells us until it is specified in one way or another⁶⁷. To take one example, the BHN for shelter remains – despite its seemingly self-evident importance – durably opaque when it comes to the specific, concrete needs it entails. Does meeting this need require permanent housing? If so, of what type, size, and quality? In what location? The indeterminate character of this need results, as Fraser thus argues, in debates about provision which proliferate indefinitely⁶⁸. That proliferation, crucially, is not merely incidental: it follows directly from the BHN approach’s theoretical design⁶⁹.

⁶¹ Braybrooke, 1987: 293–301

⁶² Soper, 2007

⁶³ Fraser N, 1989: 144–187

⁶⁴ Soper, 1993a, 1993b, 2007

⁶⁵ Soper, 1993a: 113

⁶⁶ Soper, 1993b: 77

⁶⁷ Alkire, 2005: 238

⁶⁸ Fraser N, 1989: 162–164

⁶⁹ For further discussion, see Hamilton, 2003: 48–52; McInnes, 1977

The abstract nature of BHN thus results in accounts that are ostensibly compelling, but which are indeterminate at the level of specification (b), making it difficult to operationalise the theory of BHN without injecting controversial content. Up until now, however, this particular critique has had limited bite. Critics bemoan the nugatory nature of BHN discourse; BHN theorists respond by saying that the identification of certain important and universally shared needs is a substantive achievement with tangible normative consequences; in reply, it is pointed out that those achievements are only possible when the theory of BHN smuggles in substantive, partisan content; and so on. This critique has thus had limited success in dislodging the BHN approach from its predominant position in analytical political theory.

My intention, therefore, is to extend and deepen this critique by showing how the assemblage of concepts characteristic of the BHN approach – notably the human needs thesis, the basic needs thesis, the standard response to the problem of diversity, and the distinction between needs and satisfiers – are internally incoherent. Doing so requires, firstly, a further elaboration of that assemblage of concepts.

2.2.4 Specifiers

Addressing the indeterminacy problem requires the BHN theorist to specify which concrete needs can be validly derived from abstract BHN. This leads me to introduce the concept of ‘specifiers’.

The role played by specifiers can be observed in the case of the diabetic’s need for insulin injections. Such a need is not in-itself a human need, since it is not universally shared or grounded exclusively in the properties $[H_1 \dots H_n]$. Instead, the BHN theorist analyses this case as follows: (a) humans have a BHN for appropriate healthcare; (b) the health of the diabetic requires a particular form of provision, namely insulin injections; thus (c) the diabetic’s need for insulin injections is justified by her BHN for appropriate healthcare. This argument has the following structure: there is an abstract human need (HN), and a particular need (PN). One judges the validity of PN by considering whether it can be derived from HN. To do so, one identifies a range of properties that specify how the abstract human need applies in this concrete circumstance. It is these properties I call ‘specifiers’ (SP). In this case, the diabetic’s need for insulin injections (PN) is a concrete manifestation of her human need for appropriate healthcare (HN) given her diabetes (SP).

Specifiers can thus be defined as any property peculiar to a person's concrete circumstances that has a bearing on the required provision for their BHN. Such properties delineate the boundaries of the set of possible satisfiers in a specific circumstances, determining which *particular* satisfiers *can* and *must* – given those circumstances – meet abstract BHN. The importance of their role can be highlighted by considering the distinction between contingent and necessary forms of provision. Any person can meet their BHN for nutrition by choosing either apples or oranges; those with nut allergies, however, or celiac disease, require specific forms of provision. In these cases, it is not merely that BHN can be satisfied in different ways; sometimes they have to be satisfied in ways peculiar to a person's specific circumstances⁷⁰. It is specifiers that shape these particularities, delineating the specific, concrete needs that follow from BHN in given contexts. They play, therefore, the crucial role of determining what counts as a valid step in the derivation of a particular need PN from a human need HN.

Specifiers have a ubiquitous part to play in the theory of BHN. The extent of their role varies somewhat; the need for shelter requires considerable specification, the need for oxygen little (if any)⁷¹. Nevertheless, judgements regarding BHN are often fine-grained and sensitive to a range of facts about a particular person, their context, and the life they lead. Copp suggests, for instance, that needs must be specified according to physiological factors (including health, sex, and metabolism); contextual factors, like climate; differences between cultures; and differences between individual 'psychologies'⁷². Others have further augmented this list of potential specifiers: perhaps, suggests D. Miller, religion comes into play⁷³; S.C. Miller adds economic factors like 'patterns of trade'⁷⁴; Doyal and Gough contend that 'groups subject to racial oppression' will require 'additional and specific satisfiers'⁷⁵; later, those authors posit that one's 'food requirements' depend on the level of 'heavy labour' one performs⁷⁶; Brock, meanwhile, adds that indigenous people must be able to meet BHN in

⁷⁰ Copp, 1995: 173–174; Doyal and Gough, 1991: 74

⁷¹ Soper, 1993a

⁷² Copp, 1992: 251

⁷³ Miller D, 2012

⁷⁴ Miller SC, 2012: 38

⁷⁵ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 74

⁷⁶ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 164

‘their own traditional ways’⁷⁷. What one finds when one excavates the literature in this way is a ragbag of different properties – relating to biology, culture, social structures, climate, individual psychology, economics, tradition, and more besides – which seem to have some bearing on how BHN are specified.

Having encountered such a diversity of potential specifiers, one might wonder what exactly draws all these various properties together, and whether in fact all of them should count as specifiers. These are questions which elicit considerable debate: whilst some specifications are obvious and scarcely contested (the healthcare needs of the diabetic, for instance), the exact role played by various potential specifiers is rarely self-evident, and often a matter of ongoing controversy (indeed, as I have argued, such controversy in specification follows directly from the design of the BHN approach).

The BHN approach has, however, largely avoided these controversies, leaving the specification of BHN primarily to culturally relative processes⁷⁸. It is notable, however, that the claim that specification is sensitive to cultural variation is itself a theory of specifiers, since it assumes that concrete needs are shaped by one crucial specifier: cultural membership itself. This presupposes a significant role for culture in the chains of derivation between particular needs and human needs. Indeed, the standard response to the problem of diversity makes no sense at all unless one posits culture to be a specifier: unless the BHN theorist holds that culturally specific forms of needs-meeting are necessary forms of provision, the theory of BHN can be used to justify trampling over cultural differences. The standard response requires the BHN theorist to specify, in effect, that one *particular* relativity *must* determine the specification of BHN in a given set of circumstances.

2.2.5 Against the basic needs thesis

Thus far I have focused on elaborating the BHN approach, explicating its central concepts, and outlining some standard positions adopted in response to various critics. This leads me to my central claim: that this assemblage of concepts and arguments is internally incoherent. This is because – as I will show – the role ascribed to specifiers in the theory of BHN is incompatible with the basic needs thesis.

⁷⁷ Brock, 2002: 297

⁷⁸ Brock, 2002; Gasper, 2004: 148–149; Miller D, 2012; Miller SC, 2012: 38–39

To see why, let me begin by outlining the possible groundings of the basic needs thesis. The normative significance of a given need is usually – as I showed in section 2.1 – considered to hinge on two properties: their inescapability; and their connection to serious harm. Deploying those dimensions, the BHN theorist establishes the basic needs thesis by showing that human needs are either uniquely or particularly inescapable, or exclusively connected to serious harm. The problem, however, is that once the role played by specifiers is properly recognised, both these arguments fall apart.

2.2.5.1 The inescapability of universal preconditions

The argument from the inescapability of universal preconditions goes like this: whatever lives we lead or things we value, and whatever context we find ourselves in, there are certain fundamental features of human life. Those features require us to be sustained in various ways, thus determining certain needs. Such needs are, consequently, preconditions to any form of human life. Given this we must fulfil these preconditions first before we move on to contingent aspects of our existence. A human being who is denied water, for instance, will be unable to live any sort of life at all, and thus the need for water is prior to any needs which follow from other, more particular aspects of the life one happens to lead.

This argument can be traced to Doyal and Gough's⁷⁹ seminal account, in which harm is equated with disablement in the pursuit of one's vision of the good. They go on to identify two basic needs – health and autonomy – which must be satisfied to successfully engage in any such pursuit. Thus whatever a person's particular conception of the good, and whatever cultural form they find themselves in, there are certain universally human preconditions to successful action and interaction, and these constitute basic needs.

A number of contributors have endorsed and expanded this argument⁸⁰. The central claim being made is that meeting one's BHN is a precondition for whatever else one happens to value, and that this gives BHN particular normative significance. For these theorists, the significance of BHN lies in their inescapability: whilst other needs depend on features of one's circumstances that are contingent or volitional, there is nothing that can be done (or could have been done) to avoid BHN⁸¹. The human needs [HN₁...HN_n] are thus uniquely

⁷⁹ Doyal and Gough, 1991 (see also section 3.2.1).

⁸⁰ Brock, 1998c, 2009; Copp, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2005; Miller SC, 2012; Plant, 2002

⁸¹ Brock, 1998c

important because those needs are grounded in the essential human properties $[H_1 \dots H_n]$, and are, therefore, impossible to forsake, avoid, or otherwise escape, simply because people cannot dodge their humanness.

As a result, what makes BHN important is not their content; the importance of universal preconditions does not depend on some particular good they enable or harm they avoid. Brock thus envisions the pursuit of BHN as a negative ideal; BHN delineate preconditions to successful action, whilst remaining neutral on what ‘success’ constitutes⁸². Doyal and Gough similarly argue that whilst the preconditions for avoiding harm are universal, harm itself is culturally relative⁸³. BHN are thus posited as the universal, inescapable preconditions for avoiding the harmful end state of [whatever].

The argument from universal preconditions is sophisticated and intuitively compelling. I argue, however, that it fails to establish the basic needs thesis. The claim to basicness made here is grounded on the contention that human needs, and *only* human needs, are characterised by some normatively important type and/or degree of inescapability. Against that claim, I argue that specifiers must possess the same relevant inescapability. What is more, specifiers can ground other needs beyond BHN, and such needs will share that inescapability.

Specifiers play, as I have shown, a crucial role in the theory of BHN; they show which particular needs PN can be validly derived from $[HN_1 \dots HN_n]$. If, however, specifiers are to play this role, then they must possess the same normatively salient inescapability as BHN. Imagine, for instance, that one wants to establish that when need PN goes unmet, this constitutes a violation of some human need HN. To do so, one would have to show that failing to satisfy PN would contravene the conditions of adequate provision for HN. But it might be asked: why *those* conditions of adequate provision? What if some different (perhaps less generous) specification applied in other circumstances? To avoid this problem, the BHN theorist must contend that a given specification *must* apply in this particular case. That contention, however, presupposes that the relevant specifiers are inescapable.

⁸² Brock, 2009: 58–63

⁸³ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 50–51

It follows that whenever the BHN theorist judges some concrete need PN to be normatively important, that judgement requires them to deem inescapable *both* the human needs [HN₁...HN_n], *and* the relevant specifiers [SP₁...SP_n]. Claims to inescapability are, after all, only as strong as their weakest link; that my claim to need an apple rests on my need for nutrition matters little if I could eat an orange instead. Even the most inescapable BHN can, after all, be specified in escapable ways: humans need oxygen, but this does not mean that the need of deep-sea divers for oxygen tanks is a BHN (after all, they don't really need to go deep-sea diving). If, by contrast, one was to posit that specifiers lacked, in general, the required inescapability, then even the most compelling concrete specifications of BHN – the healthcare needs of the diabetic; the dietary restrictions of different faiths; the additional calories required by manual workers – would become similarly escapable. And if, furthermore, the basicness of human needs is grounded in nothing more than their inescapability, this would dissolve the normative importance of those specifications.

The BHN theorist must, therefore, hold that specifiers possess whatever they take to be the normatively salient type and/or degree of inescapability. Specifiers can, furthermore, ground needs independently of human needs, and such needs will share that normatively salient inescapability. This applies, for example, to the contention that BHN are locally specified in culturally relative ways. Recall that human needs are deemed inescapable because they are grounded in features of our existence we cannot dodge (the essential human properties [H₁...H_n]). If, however, culturally specific forms of needs-meeting are indeed worthy of special protection, then this presupposes that cultural membership possesses the same normatively salient inescapability as [H₁...H_n]. It follows, therefore, that *all* the needs grounded in that cultural membership would be similarly inescapable: just as the needs [HN₁...HN_n] derive their inescapability from [H₁...H_n], cultural membership will ground its own corresponding set of inescapable needs, some of which will have no connection whatsoever to BHN. Alternatively, if the BHN theorist refuses to ascribe to cultural membership the normatively salient degree of inescapability, then one can simply ignore culture when determining how to meet BHN. This would, however, undermine the standard response to the problem of cultural diversity.

This leads to the failure of the argument from universal preconditions. If human needs are especially important because of an *exclusive* degree of inescapability, that precludes other needs being similarly escapable. Specifiers must, however, be attributed the same

normatively salient inescapability, as must – consequently – any needs derived from those specifiers. This undermines the privileged inescapability of BHN.

2.2.5.2 Substantive harm

Alternatively, it might be claimed that human needs are uniquely connected to particularly serious consequences. The BHN theorist might point to the physical deprivation caused by under-nourishment, or the way a person's capacities are thwarted if denied education. It is thus – so the argument goes – an exclusive connection between human needs and serious harm that justifies their basicness. I refer to this as the argument from substantive harm, since – unlike the argument from universal preconditions – it offers a view on the substantive content of 'harm' and deploys this to determine which needs matter.

That content might take a number of forms. Some theorists connect it to the capacity for agency⁸⁴; others to a more general notion of a decent human life⁸⁵; more expansively, to a conception of human flourishing⁸⁶; or more minimally, to the bare requirements for human survival⁸⁷. My critique, however, does not depend on 'harm' having any particular content. Whatever substance is implicated by the notion of substantive harm, the argument from substantive harm rests – I argue – on two claims. Firstly, the connecting claim: that there is a connection between human needs and substantive harm such that whenever a human need is thwarted this results in substantive harm (of whatever particular sort). Secondly, the excluding claim: that there are no needs other than the human needs [HN₁...HN_n] which are similarly connected to substantive harm (of whatever particular sort). Taken together, these two claims justify the basic needs thesis.

Those claims are, however, in tension with BHN approach's commitment to flexibility in the concrete specification of BHN. The BHN theorist is faced with the following dilemma: how can one hold that there is unique feature of human needs such that those needs, and only those needs, are connected to harm, whilst simultaneously allowing those needs to vary between contexts? Or, to put this another way, how can the exclusive connection between human needs and harm be maintained even as the specific concrete form of those needs

⁸⁴ Brock, 2009; Copp, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2005; Miller SC, 2012

⁸⁵ Miller D, 2007: 163-200, 2012; Siebel and Schramme, 2020

⁸⁶ Reader, 2005a

⁸⁷ Schuppert, 2013

changes? As the remainder of this section will show, the BHN approach lacks a plausible response to these questions.

I substantiate this argument through the following example, based on the BHN for education. The BHN approach allows that the concrete realisation of this need will differ; the requirements of adequacy might diverge, and different individuals have varied educational needs. Imagine now two individuals, A and B, for whom the concrete specification of this need differs. Both individuals thus share a need for education (HN) but live in circumstances characterised by different sets of specifiers (call A's specifiers $[A_1 \dots A_n]$ and B's specifiers $[B_1 \dots B_n]$). As a result, the concrete needs which follow from the BHN for education diverge, such that A and B have non-overlapping sets of particular needs whilst both satisfying, in their own way, the BHN for education. Perhaps, for instance, A's culture places greater emphasis on aesthetic education, whilst B's focuses on employability.

Given that analysis, suppose there is some particular need of A's (call this APN) that is derivative of HN given specifiers $[A_1 \dots A_n]$ but which is not derivative of HN given specifiers $[B_1 \dots B_n]$. The question I want to consider is this: is APN connected to substantive harm, or not? There are four possible responses to this question which I now examine. What I show is that these responses end up – in one way or another – undermining the argument from substantive harm.

Two responses are plainly untenable. It might be claimed, firstly, that APN is not connected to harm for either A or B. If that were the case, then A would have a particular need that is derived from a human need and yet unconnected to harm. This would violate the connecting claim. Alternatively, one might say that APN is connected to harm in both cases. In that instance B has a need that is not derived from her human needs, and yet which is connected to harm. This would violate the excluding claim.

A more sophisticated response contends that this kind of divergence is not possible: if APN is connected to harm for A, then it is for B also. The supposition, in other words, is that A and B share all particular needs in common. Such an argument might be further elaborated by contending that what differentiates A and B is not their different needs, but the different satisfiers they have for the same needs. Thus whilst A and B share common needs, even at the concrete level, these are differently satisfied according to context.

This response effectively sidesteps the problem by dismissing specifiers from the theory of BHN, returning to a bipartite distinction between needs and satisfiers. The problem that follows, however, is that the distinction between contingent and necessary forms of provision is also lost. That distinction – as I showed above – follows from the fact that what is a normatively important particular need in some circumstances will not be in other circumstances. It is implausible, therefore, to collapse all differences between A and B into different modes of satisfaction for the same particular needs; such a move makes it impossible to formulate, for instance, the particular needs of infants, asthmatics, or vegans. And what is more, the argument that BHN are specified locally in ways sensitive to culture (the standard response) is vacuous if it cannot ground morally compelling differences in the particular needs one can claim.

One final response is to hold that APN is connected to harm in the circumstances of A, but not in the circumstances of B. This response is intuitively plausible, and accurately describes a range of cases: if, for example, A required specific provision because of a physical or cognitive impairment, this might yield particular needs that would be irrelevant in B's case. Something similar might be said of any instance where additional provision afforded to A in light of their need APN would not, if given to B instead, enhance the quality of provision for their BHN.

Not all differences between A and B are, however, like this. This is most obviously the case when the judgement of particular needs depends on specifications of adequacy that vary between cultures. The notion of adequacy plays – as I showed earlier – an important part in the theory of BHN: after all, what the BHN approach offers is not that every possible marginal increase in the quality of provision is guaranteed as a BHN, but some specified standard and kind of provision. What it promises, in other words, is not *maximal* provision, but *adequate* provision. Conditions of adequacy are themselves determined by notions of what is usually required by normally functioning human beings⁸⁸. Those notions are contestable, dynamic, and sensitive to culture⁸⁹. Issues arise, however, when we examine needs that fall in the space between adequate and maximal levels of provision. Those needs – says the BHN theorist – are in excess of what is required, and thus excluded from the

⁸⁸ Copp, 1995: 175–176; Doyal and Gough, 1991: 42–45; Soper, 1993a

⁸⁹ Alkire, 2002: 158–162; Miller D, 2001: 210–213, 2007: 182; Wiggins, 1998: 11–14

necessary provision for BHN. The problem, however, is that those needs are not excluded on the basis that they are unconnected to relevant consequences, but simply because they exceed the level of adequacy. This, however, causes problems for the excluding claim.

This can be seen by returning to my earlier suggestion that in meeting their BHN for education, A might have more provision in some areas (aesthetic education) and B in others (employability). A thus has a need APN (in this case, for some form of additional aesthetic education), which B lacks. According to the argument from substantive harm, APN is a normatively important need in A's case because if it goes unmet, it leads to some particular weighty consequence (which the BHN theorist designates 'harm'). The problem, however, is that this may also be true in B's case: one can imagine a scenario where B faces *exactly the same* consequences, but simply lives in a culture with a divergent notion of adequate provision. In such a case, the variation in specifications of adequacy leads to different judgements about particular needs not because of differences in the weighty consequences faced by these two needs-bearers, but because of different understandings of what is 'weighty'. And in such a scenario, B has a need (APN) which is not derived from his BHN, and yet is connected to the kinds of consequences which the BHN theorist considers to constitute substantive harm. This contradicts, however, the excluding claim.

We thus have, on the one hand, the claim that human needs, and only human needs, are connected to harm; and on the other hand, the contention that the specification of those human needs varies between circumstances. This section has demonstrated that these two claims are incompatible, and thus that the BHN's commitment to the varying specification of BHN undermines the argument from substantive harm.

These difficulties reflect the broader underlying problem with the BHN approach that this section has elucidated. That problem, in summary, is that the BHN approach posits both, on the one hand, that the needs which matter (basic needs) are those which are universally shared (human needs); and that, on the other hand, those BHN can be specified differently in different contexts according to a series of non-universal properties, and thus that what is a normatively important need here is not a normatively important need there. The problem I have elucidated is that the way in which the latter divergences are incorporated into the theory of BHN – in particular, the needs-satisfier-specifier distinction – ends up undermining the arguments used to justify the basicness of human needs. I have shown, therefore, that the

tension between universalism and difference cannot be tidily resolved without threatening the BHN approach's basic premises.

2.3 The social needs approach

I am not the first, of course, to reject the BHN approach. Such rejections tend to be followed by a customary turn towards a seemingly ready-made alternative, an alternative that constitutes the main viable rival to the BHN approach within analytical political theory. That alternative is the social needs (SN) approach, which grounds the normative importance of needs not on people's generic humanness, but instead on social norms that vary between cultures.

That approach, however, is no more tenable than the BHN approach: indeed, one might go so far as to say that the continued predominance of the BHN approach can be partly explained by the fundamental weakness of the SN approach. To demonstrate that weakness, I identify an overarching problem: namely, the arbitrariness of the social norms that supposedly underpin needs. As I will show, that arbitrariness means that the SN approach: cannot give an adequate account of obligations surrounding needs; displays a problematic indifference towards the roots of social norms; and makes it difficult to establish the importance of needs in the first place. And whilst SN theorists have attempted to rebut those criticisms, I show that their typical responses rely on covert references to something like human nature, references that merely replicate the failures of the BHN approach.

2.3.1 *Social needs*

Most SN theories originate in a critique of, and departure from, the conceptual framework of the BHN approach. SN theorists allege, in particular, that the basic concepts underpinning normatively important needs – especially inescapability and harm⁹⁰, but also conceptions of human nature, and what is considered to constitute 'normal' or 'decent' human life⁹¹ – are essentially contestable and inexorably encultured. As a result, they argue that any attempt to pin the normative importance of needs on some universalist account of the 'human' cannot avoid being ethnocentric, partisan, paternalistic, and/or dictatorial about the good⁹². SN

⁹⁰ Wiggins, 1998: 11–14

⁹¹ Miller D, 2001: 203–229; Siebel and Schramme, 2020: 34–36

⁹² Rist, 1980

theorists thus conclude that there are strict limits to what philosophical reasoning can achieve, since abstract theoretical generalisations about the needs that matter always contain hidden references to assumptions that are, on closer inspection, products of culture. The result of such reasoning is to dethrone theory, and to hold that theory must defer, in some important respect, to the authority of culture. Needs, then, derive their ultimate normative importance not from the sort of generally human properties that make easy objects of theoretical reasoning, but from social norms that vary between cultures, and which are inimical to philosophical analysis. It is precisely this form of reasoning which one finds in the paradigmatic SN theories offered by Wiggins, Townsend, Rist, and – in an earlier phase – D. Miller⁹³.

SN accounts thus endorse what I will call the social needs thesis:

The social needs thesis – all needy beings are the members of a culture. Each culture contains a set of norms $[S_1 \dots S_n]$ such that the normative importance of any given need N is derived from the pertinent norm S .

This thesis combines a series of distinct claims: firstly, that all human beings are members of distinct cultures; secondly, that those cultures contain norms $[S_1 \dots S_n]$ relating to needs; thirdly, that those norms determine the normative importance of certain needs (call these $[SN_1 \dots SN_n]$); and fourthly, that there is no other, extra-cultural basis for the normative importance of needs. The claim, then is that when we ask which needs matter, it is culture – and only culture – that constitutes the ultimate and final arbiter.

At times, however, the SN approach resembles nothing more than a concern for paternalism and/or ethnocentricity, combined with a gesture towards a somewhat naïve form of cultural relativism. In particular, SN theorists have confronted concerns about whose voice gets heard, and whose view is authoritative, when it comes to specifying what social norms actually tell us. Those norms, it should be noted, are not in-themselves uncontested, self-evident, static or straightforwardly discernible from observation, and SN theorists have been accused of adopting a simplistic understanding of cultures, viewing them as somehow

⁹³ Miller D, 2001; Rist, 1980; Townsend, 1962, 2013; Wiggins, 1998: 1-57, 2005

monolithic, homogenous, clearly delineated, and consensual⁹⁴. This has resulted in an accompanying danger: that social needs theorists, in fear of the paternalistic implications of ethnocentric theorising, have ironically and inconsistently shown a lack of concern for the paternalistic and authoritarian relationships found *within* cultures. There has thus been a worrying tendency to reduce culture to the pronouncement of supposed cultural authorities, and to consequently facilitate the marginalisation of those who already find themselves marginalised⁹⁵.

It is, however, entirely compatible with the SN approach for the theorist to delineate some procedure through which social norms are discerned, and such procedures can serve to challenge authoritarian power structures, or the marginalisation of particular voices. In other words, a deference to social norms at the level of needs does not imply a deference to the pronouncements of established authorities or dominant voices concerning those norms, and the SN approach can, therefore, legitimately scrutinise whether such supposed cultural authorities do indeed speak for their members. What is more, there is a stronger sense in which thoroughgoing versions of the SN approach cannot avoid these sorts of questions about voice, since they are tied up with questions about what a ‘social norm’ actually is, and how we know one when we have got one. The SN theorist finds themselves, in other words, having to weigh in when cultural authorities clash with marginalised groups, since those clashes force the theorist to confront fundamental questions about what a ‘social norm’ actually is in the first place. Given this, it is consistent for the SN theorist to make reasonably strong claims about how various views should be aggregated, and whose views are authoritative, when it comes to the determination of norms, whilst still maintaining that when it comes to working out which needs matter, culture constitutes the ultimate authority.

It is exactly such balance which is struck, I argue, in the work of Braybrooke⁹⁶. At the core of Braybrooke’s approach is his ‘Criterion’ which is ‘functioning without derangement’ in carrying out certain social roles, namely ‘the roles of parent, householder, worker, and

⁹⁴ Gasper, 2004: 208–209; Gough, 2004; Nussbaum, 2000: 41–50, 2011a: 101–112; Sen, 1999a, 1999b: 227–248

⁹⁵ Gasper, 2004: 208–209; Nussbaum, 1992, 2000: 41–50; Sen, 1999b: 246–8

⁹⁶ Braybrooke, 1987, 1998a, 2005

citizen'⁹⁷. Deploying that criterion, Braybrooke identifies a list of 'Matters of Need', each of which constitute necessary prerequisites to such non-deranged functioning. Braybrooke's focus on the minimum requirements for basic social functioning has led some authors to consider Braybrooke a BHN theorist⁹⁸: Braybrooke, however, explicitly departs from the BHN approach, stating that his goal is not a transcultural, permanent, or extra-social set of human needs, but an account of need that 'enjoys very widespread normative commitment' amongst a given population at a given time, resting on 'something like a consensus'⁹⁹. Thus his 'Criterion' is not intended to provide a philosophical conception of need which applies at all times to all peoples, but rather to codify a set of norms discernible within a given social context¹⁰⁰. Braybrooke thus holds that needs are conventional (in part at least)¹⁰¹, and that the content of his list is explicitly fixed by negotiation and discussion, rather than theoretical reasoning or the properties of the generic 'human'¹⁰². Thus whilst Braybrooke provides a sophisticated route of derivation, his end goal is an account of need grounded on the norms of a given society at a given time.

The SN approach, therefore, leaves the job of assigning normative importance to need to culture, arguing that such importance is – in the end – something that every society decides for itself. That definition invites (much like the BHN approach – see section 2.2.1) inevitable debates about scope: it might be wondered, for instance, whether Sen's public reasoning approach is encompassed by that definition¹⁰³, or similarly whether deliberative democratic theories fall within its scope¹⁰⁴. My argument, however, is that these sorts of approaches are different from the SN approach, primarily because they offer a substantive normative vision of democracy, and what democratic societies should look like, positing forms of procedure that – unlike Braybrooke's approach – attempt to mollify the worst excesses of cultural relativism by transforming, rather than merely reflecting or aggregating, each society's

⁹⁷ Braybrooke, 1987: 47–48

⁹⁸ Brock, 1994, 2009: 64, 2012; Siebel and Schramme, 2020

⁹⁹ Braybrooke, 1987: 64–67

¹⁰⁰ Braybrooke, 1987: 77–79, 1998a

¹⁰¹ Braybrooke, 1987: 91–95

¹⁰² Braybrooke, 1987: 66, 2005

¹⁰³ In particular, see Sen, 1999b, 2010

¹⁰⁴ Examples of which can be found, in particular, in the capabilities literature (Crocker, 2009; Alkire, 2002).

norms. To avoid – once again – dwelling on these issues of scope, I set aside these sorts of theories for now, returning to them in detail in section 3.2.2.

2.3.2 Arbitrariness, and three attendant problems

The difficulties with SN theories are rooted, as I will now show, in their commitment to a problematic arbitrariness. They hold, in particular, that a thoroughgoing neutrality towards and respect for cultural difference requires that firm limits are placed on what theory can do, thus positing that there is no criterion, procedure, standard, or, indeed, anything of any sort by which an outsider could ever say ‘that social norm should not be as it is’. The exclusive focus of SN theorists is thus – as it were – downstream from the norms (S), and their theory does not offer, and indeed posits that one cannot offer, any reasons or justifications for the set [SN₁...SN_n] to have any particular content. It is not, therefore, merely the case that for the SN theorist social norms do not require any particular justification: instead, their view is that such norms *cannot* be justified by any higher standard, since any such supposed standard would inevitably ride roughshod over cultural difference¹⁰⁵. Social norms are thus construed as matters-of-fact which always remain beyond reproach, especially the reproach of outsiders¹⁰⁶. And notably, this arbitrariness is built into the SN approach by design: it is a central tenet of, and justification for, that approach that one can never settle questions about the needs that matter at the level of theory without falling victim to a dangerous ethnocentricity, partisanship, paternalism, or intolerance.

This is not necessarily implausible in-itself: indeed, pretty much all contemporary needs theorists posit a degree of culturally relative arbitrariness at the level of satisfiers (see section 2.2.2). But as I will now argue, the deeper form of arbitrariness proffered by the SN approach results in three attendant problems which, taken together, call the whole approach into question.

The first of these problems concerns conflicts and obligations which cross cultural lines. The SN theorists posits that the needs [SN₁...SN_n] carry a certain normative weight, an ascription of normativity that implies – as discussed in section 2.1 – certain duties to meet these normatively important needs; duties to act or, alternatively, to refrain from acting that are –

¹⁰⁵ Gasper, 2004: 210–211

¹⁰⁶ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 43–44; Sayers, 1998: 160; Soper, 2007

crucially – potentially burdensome. The problem for the SN theorist, however, is that the arbitrary nature of norms makes it all but impossible to offer any plausible account of whom those duties and burdens should fall upon.

One might begin by surmising that the cultural specificity of important needs implies that those duties are similarly culturally specific. Under such an interpretation, one's needs should be met entirely within one's own culture, with obligations never crossing the boundaries between societies. Whilst this is sometimes what strong forms of relativism are taken to imply¹⁰⁷, it is clearly implausible. Firstly, it is strongly counter-intuitive to imagine that the moral gravity and urgency of need ceases at society's doorstep, since this would imply that one never has obligations to respond to the needy in other societies, no matter how destitute they are. This would hugely restrict the way in which the concept of need is used, and detach that concept from its actual usage in a way that is ostensibly preposterous. What is more, such a position ignores the reality that the processes by which needs are specified and met are fundamentally interconnected, a reality that makes it wholly implausible to maintain any sort of thoroughgoing neutrality about needs in other societies. Indeed, such neutrality makes no sense in a world where the needs of people in affluent societies are beyond the reach of many others¹⁰⁸, where productive processes necessary to meet those expansive needs often require that the needs of others are kept to a far lower minimum¹⁰⁹, and where those processes cause ecological damage that threatens the capacity of all future peoples to meet their needs¹¹⁰.

One might alternatively suppose that duties to meet social needs do cross borders, and that there is a general obligation to meet the needs of others, even though needs themselves are culturally specific¹¹¹. This alternative, however, is no less palatable. The problem now is that each society is able to generate claims that travel beyond their borders, but ground those claims on an arbitrary and purely internal set of norms that are beyond reproach. If needs are going to place onerous duties on others in this way, then they must – as I argued in section

¹⁰⁷ Soper, 1993b

¹⁰⁸ Soper, 1993a

¹⁰⁹ Albritton, 2009; Soper, 2007

¹¹⁰ For discussion of needs theory in the context of climate change, see Gough, 2017

¹¹¹ A position taken by D. Miller in his earlier work (Miller D, 2001).

2.1 – be justifiable according to some standard that is held in common¹¹². In the absence of such shared standards, we risk finding ourselves hostage to views that we find repugnant¹¹³, and potentially in the unjustifiable situation where the destitute in one society end up with burdensome duties to meet the far more expansive needs of the affluent, simply because their own culturally specific needs are less generous.

Secondly, the arbitrariness of social norms makes it impossible to scrutinise – in any sort of critical way – the roots of those norms. For the SN theorist, norms are simply given – or, more precisely, must be treated by the theorist as simply given – and the exclusive focus of the theorist, as noted above, is downstream from those norms. Consequently, upstream factors – the roots of those norms in various possible causes, such as human physiology, economics, each culture’s unique history, and so on – can be recognised, but it is seen as illegitimate (partisan, ethnocentric, paternalistic, etc.) to critique norms on any basis, including – significantly – our views on their roots. One can thus never say, for instance, that another culture is wrong because it fails to take into account this or that factor.

This leads to two related difficulties. Firstly, there is a risk that social norms become radically detached from certain aspects of human experience that ostensibly have a significant bearing on needs. In particular, an argument repeatedly levelled against SN theorists is that they are guilty of an anti-naturalism or anti-biologism, and thus risk detaching needs from the reality of human embodiment, including – in a strong version of this argument that tends to be levelled by BHN theorists – certain supposedly ‘objective’ features of human existence, such as the facts of human physiology¹¹⁴. Secondly, a related criticism concerns not the neglect of features of human life that should shape the normatively important needs, but instead the illegitimate influence of factors that should not. Such a concern follows, in particular, from the phenomenon of adaptation. That phenomenon has been widely recognised at the level of

¹¹² Notably, this is exactly the argument that leads D. Miller to shift away from his earlier relativism (Miller D, 2001), towards a BHN account (Miller D, 2007: 163-200, 2012).

¹¹³ Miller D, 2007: 196

¹¹⁴ BHN theorists have leveraged this sort of argument to suggest that the only path forward is the kind of universal, ‘objective’ normative reasoning they proffer (Doyal and Gough, 1991: 7–34; Gough, 2004; Nussbaum, 1988, 1992). That particular conclusion only follows, however, in the absence of any alternative, and on falsely reducing our choices to one between ‘human essence’ and ‘anything goes’. For discussion, see chapter 3.

individual preferences: multiple theorists – in particular Sen, Nussbaum, and other capability theorists¹¹⁵ – have noted that those suffering from deprivation, oppression, and disadvantage sometimes respond by altering their goals, desires, and so on. And notably, there is no obvious reason to think that social norms will not be similarly adaptive – indeed, several theorists have extended the concept in exactly that direction¹¹⁶ – and if that is the case, we might find ourselves in circumstances where we are not just unable to critique needs that are the products of disadvantage, but indeed are forced to ascribe normative weight to those needs. To put this another way, if we are truly unable to critique, and adjudicate between, different cultural norms, then we might find ourselves committed to norms that are the product of circumstances that are themselves ostensibly illegitimate, or even unconscionable. The potentially chilling consequence is that one can end up treating those norms as *de facto* justified, ascribing normative force to the ensuing needs, and consequently positing duties to support those adapted needs in ways that make one complicit.

Thirdly – and lastly – the arbitrariness of social norms makes it all but impossible to establish the importance of needs themselves. To see why, note first that the SN approach rests on two separate claims: that need is, in some sense, a normatively weighty concept; and that that normative weight is allocated according to norms that differ between cultures¹¹⁷. The problem, however, is that the latter deference to culture can be extended to undermine the former universalist normative claim. A number of theorists thus contend that there are no thoroughgoing relativist positions, since SN theorists cannot consistently make the kinds of general, transcultural normative claims behind a relativism-about-needs (that there is some kind of general normative injunction behind needs; that people should, in general, respect different cultures; and so on) without violating the ultimate deference to culture they themselves posit¹¹⁸. And this inconsistency, furthermore, flows both ways: it is – to adapt an

¹¹⁵ Burns, 2016; Gough, 2004; Nussbaum, 1988, 2000: 113–115; Qizilbash, 2012, 2016; Reader, 2006; Robeyns, 2017: 137–142; Sen, 1980, 1987b: 15, 2009

¹¹⁶ Austin, 2018; Burchardt, 2009; Deneulin and McGregor, 2010; Nussbaum, 1988, 2000: 41–50

¹¹⁷ Wiggins (1998: 1–16), for instance, defends needs generally, before then contending that the content of those needs is fundamentally relative. D. Miller’s (2001: 203–229) argument has a similar structure.

¹¹⁸ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 22–34; Gasper, 2004: 210; Gough, 2014

argument made by Nussbaum¹¹⁹ – odd to say that ‘needs matter’, and then subsequently to be totally ambivalent as to the actual content of that claim. The issue, then, is that the arbitrariness of need, and an ambivalence towards the question of which needs matter, makes it all but impossible for the SN theorist to make the general claim that needs matter at all. The ‘social needs approach’ is thus, it seems, something of an oxymoron.

SN theorists are not blind to these criticisms. To counter these various lines of attack, it is common to highlight that a deference to culture is not the same thing as claiming that culture itself is arbitrary. Culture, so the argument goes, is not spontaneous or infinitely malleable, but a product of human thought and action that is itself responsive to other aspects of the human condition. There are, therefore, certain limits to the plasticity of culture, and so it is supposedly consistent to claim that there are such limits, whilst also refusing to arbitrate between cultures, or seeking to override other people’s norms. This allows the SN theorist to respond in various ways to the criticisms presented above. Braybrooke, for instance, counters concerns about the detachment of needs from human physiology by arguing that whatever culturally specific set of needs [SN₁...SN_n] is derived, the need for food will be part of that set, and that need will be for more than a ‘thimbleful of rice’¹²⁰. One might similarly argue that these real-world limits to the spontaneity and flexibility of culture provide a basis for cross-cultural obligations to meet need: D. Miller’s later work, for instance, attempts just such a move¹²¹. And one might further point to a (supposed) cross-cultural reality of a generic human vulnerability in order to justify a generic normative injunction behind needs, whilst still maintaining that cultural norms and values are – in the end – the final authority.

The problem, however, is that in making those responses the SN approach has ended up collapsing back into a form of the BHN approach. To see why, recall firstly that – as I argued above – norms have their roots in a variety of different properties, properties that might include the physiological, but also the economic, historical, political, etc. Now in making the argument above, it is notable that the SN theorist has got into the business of picking out some of those properties, and ascribing to those particular properties an importance,

¹¹⁹ Nussbaum makes this argument concerning Sen’s refusal to provide a ‘list’ of central capabilities (Nussbaum, 2003). For discussion see sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.3.

¹²⁰ Braybrooke, 1998a: 65

¹²¹ Miller D, 2007: 163-200

weightiness, or significance that they deny – or even outrightly reject – when it comes to others. They thus not only posit that certain factors do in fact appear upstream from social norms, but defend a pre-selected subset of those upstream factors as having a positive, justified impact on $[SN_1 \dots SN_n]$. Now the question that follows is: on what basis can the SN theorist make those sorts of claims, or offer those sorts of justifications? And why is it that those special factors – like physiology – and, crucially, *only* those factors, are seen as shaping social norms in a normatively valuable way? And how, in parallel, can it be held that other factors – like, for instance, a history of oppression – should not influence cultural norms? The answer to those questions cannot, of course, be culture itself, since those factors were posited to precede culture, and to be transculturally important (or unimportant; or even despicable). When one states, therefore, that norms *should* respond to certain factors beyond culture, this requires one to presuppose that those factors carry some sort of independent normative weight. And since that weightiness is posited to be universal and pre-cultural, it seems to rest on an appeal to the kind of generically human factors that underpin the BHN approach. The proposed escape from the perils arbitrariness thus leads the SN theorist straight back to the sorts of appeal to generic humanness that they began by strongly repudiating, and which section 2.2 showed are untenable.

2.4 A false binary?

The conclusion I reach, therefore, is that the two alternative approaches to theorising need within analytical political theory are not up to the task. One might worry, however, that I have presented something of a false binary. I have posited, for instance, that these two approaches constitute ‘alternatives’, playing them off against one another in ways that might suggest that I am doing little more than levelling critiques borrowed from the two approaches, whilst refusing to pick – as it were – a side. And it is notable, furthermore, that I am far from the first to recognise the problems inherent in either strict normative universalism or in cultural relativism: indeed, there are several widely recognised and celebrated theorists who have attempted to overcome these problematically bifurcated alternatives, but who have thus far received limited attention. It might be supposed, therefore, that I have illegitimately reduced a complex literature to a straw-man binary. And indeed, there have been a couple of occasions where I have left alternative avenues and arguments aside ‘for now’ in a way that might, in the context of my purported binary, look suspect, or even duplicitous. My review and critique of the analytical approaches to theorising need

requires, therefore, that I show not only that the BHN and SN approaches are untenable, but also that analytical theorists have failed to develop feasible alternatives to those approaches, and how and why this is the case.

Addressing that concern will, therefore, be the purpose of the next chapter, where I shift – as I noted earlier – from outlining symptoms to offering a diagnosis: in other words, from demonstrating that something has gone wrong in the analytical attempts to theorise need, to explaining how and why this has happened. My goal in doing so is to demonstrate how certain assumptions characteristic of analytical political theory have made it impossible to successfully theorise needs, and thereby to show what it is about the contemporary theoretical approaches to needs that must change.

3. The problem with analytical theories of need

Chapter 2 examined the two major approaches to need within analytical political theory (APT), and found them wanting: one – the basic human needs (BHN) approach – was shown to be implausibly abstract and internally incoherent; whilst the other – the social needs (SN) approach – posits an untenable arbitrariness. The questions that follow are whether some viable alternative to those approaches can be found within APT? And if not, why not? The purpose of this chapter, then, is to answer those questions. To do so, I broaden the literature review I began in chapter 2, surveying the wider debate over need within APT, and examining some of its most celebrated accounts. What I find is that certain central presuppositions implicit in APT have resulted in an impoverished, bifurcated debate that offers little hope of providing a plausible account of needs. Those findings lead me to my central claim: that to successfully theorise need, we require a radical change in approach.

My argument is divided into two parts. Firstly, I argue (in sections 3.1 and 3.2) that APT is committed to a nature/culture binary, and that that binary has fundamentally shaped the terms of the debate over needs within that tradition. As I will show, an unwavering – though often disguised – commitment to that binary has had an integral and deleterious role in shaping the analytical approaches to theorising need, resulting in an implausible bifurcation of the needs debate, and in analytical theorists being inexorably led to embrace one of the two untenable approaches examined in chapter 2. To demonstrate this, I offer – in section 3.1 – some general observations about the nature/culture binary, the accepted understanding of the concept of need, and the shape of the needs debate within APT, before then examining – in section 3.2 – how analytical theorists have themselves tussled with the nature/culture binary. As I show, both ends of that binary have been widely recognised to be problematic, and there have consequently been several attempts to mitigate, avoid, bypass, or transcend it. Exploring those attempts, I critically examine the approaches offered by Doyal and Gough, Sen, and Nussbaum. What I show, however, is that all those attempts to escape our problematic binary either collapse back into one or the other alternative, or are implausible in their own terms.

I go on to argue – in section 3.3 – that the outgrown influence of the nature/ culture binary on the needs debate is itself traceable to an underlying anti-political tendency within APT.

Drawing on the work of Honig¹, I argue that analytical theorists have customarily assumed that the most urgent and central normative priorities must lie beyond the vagaries of politics. If, therefore, needs constitute such priorities – as ostensibly they must – then it follows that the theorist must identify some such extra-political grounding for needs: some criterion, standard, or evaluative space that lies outside of political contestation, and through which the theorist can determine which needs matter. That search for extra-political groundings is, I argue, responsible for repeatedly driving the debate over needs back to its ontological underpinnings, thereby explaining why the debate over needs within APT has become so hopelessly bifurcated.

3.1 The nature/culture binary

Let me begin, then, by explicating the nature/culture binary. That binary posits, firstly, that human beings possess a nature conceived of as an (a) innate, (b) immutable, (c) universal, (d) delimited, and (e) fundamental inner core. Natures are, firstly, innate (a) in that one is born with their nature; it is attached to them from the moment of their existence. This inherent attachment is immutable (b); whilst many of the features of our existence come and go over the course of our lives, what is natural is fixed and unalterable. Natures are, furthermore, conceived of as universally human (c); one has a nature *qua* one's humanity, as opposed to other, more particular features of our existence, and that humanity is posited to be held in common by all human beings, barring some natural variations within the human species. This universal human nature is, furthermore, clearly delimited (d), in that it has fixed, non-porous boundaries such that what is natural is separable – logically and metaphysically – from the contingent, external environment. Finally, what is natural constitutes a fundamental inner core (e); we are natural first and all else second, and the natural is considered to reflect our innermost selves.

Culture, by contrast, is conceived as (a) acquired, (b) particular, (c) contingent, (d) arbitrary and (e) external. One's culture is, firstly, acquired (a); whilst humans are born with a nature,, birth marks the commencement of a subsequent process – nurture, enculturing, socialisation,

¹ Honig, 1993

or whatever – in which cultural forms are layered on top of that nature. Those forms can vary markedly (b); whilst humans possess one universal nature, there are many cultures, and they vary both geographically and temporally. Cultural forms are, furthermore, fundamentally contingent (c) and are not underpinned by the metaphysical forces of natural necessity that entrench the natural. What is more, they are viewed as arbitrary and unfettered (d): their content is not discernible through some or other process of reasoning, or via any form of correspondence to external standards. Finally, cultures emanate from a source outside of each individual themselves (e); whilst natures constitute an inner core or essence, cultural forms are derived from the outside and accrue on top of one's inner nature.

Such a picture is not without controversy: the nature/culture binary is far from self-evident; nor is it beyond reproach; and there are other ontologies that are at least as plausible and coherent as this one². But despite its contestability, that binary has been presupposed by much of APT, a presupposition that has fundamentally shaped – as I will show – contemporary theoretical debates concerning need. My goal is not, therefore, to survey the wider analytical literature, or to defend the general claim that APT is committed to this binary – since that claim has been discussed and defended in detail elsewhere³ – but instead to demonstrate specifically that analytical theories *of need* have presupposed that binary, and to consequently consider how it has impacted the needs debate.

That impact comes, firstly, because their analyses of the concept of need have led analytical theorists to questions about what is essential to us as the sort of being that we are, questions that have driven the debate back – again and again – to its ontological underpinnings. This is because the needs that matter – as discussed in section 2.1 – are posited to be inescapable, and connected to harm, and the ascription of those two properties seems inevitably to raise questions about what is quintessential (as it were) to our being. Beginning with inescapability, the most inescapable needs are intuitively those that are rooted – in some sense or other – in our very existence. Because inescapability points to features of our

² The nature/culture binary has been confronted, for instance, by post-structuralist and feminist authors (Butler, 1988, 1993, 1999; Dudrick, 2005; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Foucault, 1998), by new materialists (Coole and Frost, 2010), by the bio-social approach (Barker, 2015; Frost, 2016; Ingold and Pálsson, 2013; Meloni et al., 2016; Rose, 2013), and by historical, genealogical, and comparative cultural studies (Keller, 2010; Meloni, 2016; Robb and Harris, 2013; Shilling, 2005).

³ Bagg, 2018; Floyd J, 2016; Frost, 2016; Sayers, 1998; White, 2000

existence that are impossible to dodge or forsake, and because the most undodgeable and unforsakeable of those features are, it seems, those which are wrapped up with our existence as the sort of being we are, needs theorists have drawn the seemingly obvious conclusion that the most inescapable needs are those necessary for, and implied by, one's very existence⁴. A similar trail of reasoning appears for the second criterion – harm – since such harm is posited to link (as I showed in section 2.1) to some 'external', 'extentional', or 'mind-independent' feature of our existence⁵. Having highlighted this feature, analytical theorists have gone on to suggest that needs point, not to how we feel, or to what we perceive or desire, but to our supposedly 'objective' capacity to live and to function as the sort of being that we are⁶. Enquires about what is fundamental to our existence thus seem to be implied by analyses of both inescapability and harm: indeed, so strong is this supposed connection that it has become commonplace to *define* important needs with reference to claims about the sort of being that we are⁷.

Having posited that enquiry, what one then finds is an impoverished debate that is already foreclosed by an unspoken ontological presupposition: namely, the presupposition of the nature/culture binary. Surveying the range of positions within APT, what one thus finds is that it offers one of two sorts of account: either it gives some direct specification of human nature; or it refuses to, contending that any such specification is essentially contestable and relative to culture. The nature/culture binary thus traps APT on two horns of a dilemma: it can either adopt an account of nature, resulting in a form of the BHN approach; or it can refuse to, drawing instead on cultural norms, and thereby adopting the SN approach.

The impact of the nature/culture binary can be further detected in the terms of the debate between the BHN and SN approaches: when one explores that debate, what one finds are repeated attempts by those two groups of theorists to weaponise the nature/culture binary against one another. BHN theorists argue that the only way to escape the relativistic nihilism, boundlessness and caprice of culture is to ground needs in the supposedly objective

⁴ See, for instance, Brock, 1998c; Thomson, 1987: 23–34; Wiggins, 1998: 15–16

⁵ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 35–45; O'Neill, 2011; Siebel and Schramme, 2020

⁶ See, for instance, Alvarez, 2009; Braybrooke, 1987: 31; Copp, 1995; Miller D, 2007: 163-200; Nussbaum, 1992, 2000; Reader, 2007, 2011

⁷ Brock, 1998c, 2018; Reader, 2007; Reader and Brock, 2004; Thomson, 1987

properties of human nature⁸: against this, SN theorists decry the BHN approach as an inevitably ethnocentric diktat of theory concerning what is essentially contestable, freezing what should be dynamic, and overriding differences that must be respected, thus concluding that the only way to admit reasonable contestation and to embrace pluralism is to anchor needs in culture⁹. And when confronted with such critiques, the standard response has been a kind of reciprocal finger-pointing: simply accusing the other side of a graver error, the same error, or the same error on an even greater scale¹⁰. The undergirding assumption in all this, however, is that the needs debate constitutes a binary choice between alternatives, and that the defeat of one position is equivalent to the victory of the other. Those two groups of thinkers thus deploy the nature/culture binary as a stick with which to beat the other side; what is notable, I argue, is that in doing so they are holding the same stick, just by different ends.

3.2 An escape from nature and culture?

My case thus far has rested primarily on generalisations and somewhat sweeping observations concerning the shape of the needs debate. The purpose of this section then, is to establish that case through a more detailed review of the evidence. What that review will show is that the nature/culture binary is so deeply engrained in analytical thinking that it has placed an insurmountable constraint on the debate, preventing viable alternatives from being developed. Thus despite an awareness amongst analytical theorists of the dangers inherent in both universalist nature and relativist culture, attempts to escape those alternatives have – as I will show – failed, and remain doggedly within the presuppositions and conceptual framework of the nature/culture binary. To show this, I home in on three candidates, chosen on the basis of their sophistication and widespread influence; because their theories represent the most serious attempts to escape the nature/culture binary; and because they constitute exemplars of the various alternative approaches found in the literature.

⁸ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 9–34; Gasper, 2004: 191–220; Miller D, 2007: 163–200, 2012; Nussbaum, 1993, 2000: 34–111, 2003

⁹ Miller D, 2001: 203–228; Sen, 2004a; Townsend, 1962, 2013; Wiggins, 1998: 11–17

¹⁰ See, for instance, Nussbaum, 1992, 2000: 51–59

3.2.1 Doyal and Gough's theory of human need

I begin, therefore, with Doyal and Gough's theory of human need¹¹. That theory starts – in a familiar fashion – by positing that basic needs constitute the universal preconditions for the avoidance of harm¹². Notably, however, Doyal and Gough reject any attempt to define harm according to some universal account of impaired human functioning, recognising and accommodating concerns that those sorts of account are inherently ethnocentric and dictatorial about the good. They thus offer an alternative understanding of harm as 'fundamental disablement' in the pursuit of one's particular 'vision of the good'¹³, or – equivalently, as they have it – impaired 'participation' in valued forms of life, forms of life that vary between societies¹⁴. The point of this – as the authors stress – is that harm is not ascribed according to theoretical diktats, but instead must 'be understood culturally'¹⁵.

Doyal and Gough go on to argue, however, that whatever one's form of life happens to be, and whatever culturally-specific context one find oneself in, there are certain universal prerequisites to avoiding harm, prerequisites that hinge on the universal features of human biology, psychology, and so on. Thus to strive towards whatever one's valued form of life happens to be, one requires certain things in common with all other human beings, and it is those universal prerequisites that constitute the basic needs. And those basic needs, we are told, include the twofold requirements of physical health and of autonomy¹⁶.

Doyal and Gough go on to argue that we have a right to an 'optimum' level of those two basic needs. That level is differentiated from both a 'minimal' standard – which they describe as what is sufficient to avoid 'gross suffering', and to just 'get by'¹⁷ – and a 'maximal' commitment to providing everything one can possibly provide in order to increase needs-satisfaction. Instead, the optimal level is understood as a global, pragmatic, and dynamic understanding of what constitutes our best efforts in practice¹⁸. Pursuing that optimum

¹¹ Outlined principally in Doyal and Gough, 1991. See also Doyal, 1993, 1998; Gough, 2004, 2014, 2017

¹² Doyal, 1993; Doyal and Gough, 1991: 39–42; Gough, 2017: 42

¹³ Gough, 2014: 364

¹⁴ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 50

¹⁵ Doyal, 1993: 121

¹⁶ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 49–75

¹⁷ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 99

¹⁸ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 100, 146, 164

requires the provision of ‘satisfiers’ for basic needs, but Doyal and Gough once again recognise the dangers of ethnocentricity and paternalism, arguing that those satisfiers will vary from culture to culture¹⁹. Nevertheless, the huge variety of possible satisfiers will meet basic needs only to the extent that they display certain ‘universal satisfier characteristics’; you might, for instance, eat bread and I might eat rice, but both those satisfiers share a universal characteristic – their capacity to deliver nutrition – and thus meet our basic needs²⁰. Doyal and Gough thus present a list of ‘intermediate needs’ which display those universal satisfier characteristics, including, for instance, protective housing, appropriate education, physical security, and so on. They go on to posit that we have a right to ‘minimum optimum’ levels of satisfaction for these intermediate needs, meaning the minimal level of ‘intermediate need-satisfaction to produce the optimum level of basic need-satisfaction’²¹. Thus whilst rice and bread constitute different possible satisfiers, the quantity of either rice or bread needed is set by the minimum level of nutrition required to reach optimum levels of health and autonomy.

Doyal and Gough’s account is sophisticated, and the subtle interrelationship they spell out between cultural difference and universal normative requirements appears to be highly promising. In particular, Doyal and Gough refuse to revert to universalist normative naturalism in their account of harm, and at the level of satisfiers: both are, for them, specific to each culture. Between those two levels, however, they pick out a space where universally human prerequisites look plausible. Indeed, one might look at their account of needs as representing a kind of bottleneck in the space between fundamental normative principles (in the form of harm) and actual social and individual practices (in the form of contextually-specific satisfiers), a bottleneck that reflects the fact that whatever those basic principles and actual practices are, we are all – in the end – human, and that this requires everyone to confront certain universally human prerequisites to unimpaired functioning. Such a ‘bottlenecking’ approach has been extraordinarily influential, stimulating several broader trends in the literature²², most notably one towards the view that basic needs should be

¹⁹ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 155

²⁰ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 155–159

²¹ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 162

²² See, in particular, my discussion of the argument from inescapable preconditions (section 2.2.5.1).

equated with the prerequisites for human agency²³. And what is more, it appears to offer an escape from the Scylla of normative naturalism and the Charybdis of arbitrary relativism.

That appearance, however, is a deceptive one, since – as I will now argue – their approach ends up collapsing into an absolutist appeal to nature. To see why, note firstly that Doyal and Gough's account is – as has been noted by Gasper²⁴ and by Soper²⁵ – oddly restrictive, in that they limit the preconditions for the avoidance of harm to their two universal prerequisites (health and autonomy). Such a narrowing notably follows from the fact that needs – say Doyal and Gough – are fundamentally universalisable: indeed, they posit that this is a definitional feature of that concept²⁶. But given that harm itself varies – as Doyal and Gough argue – from culture to culture, one might be left wondering why other, more particular preconditions to the avoidance of harm do not share a similar normative status. If, for instance, one's 'vision of the good' revolved around spiritual fulfilment, would one not – in Doyal and Gough's terms – be harmed if denied the opportunity for such fulfilment, even if that opportunity was not narrowly grounded in the universal needs for health and autonomy? Doyal and Gough's 'puritanical' suggestion is thus – as Soper puts it – that all those other non-universal elements of human life are, in the end, not really needed²⁷.

Secondly, Gasper and Soper have also claimed that alongside this narrowness and parsimony Doyal and Gough's account is – curiously enough – also too expansive, principally because of their demand that we strive for 'optimal' levels of basic needs-satisfaction. Now in some cases such striving pushes us only to the 'minimum optimum' level, meaning that the demands of needs are constrained by certain limits native to the nature of satisfiers and needs themselves (one can, for instance, only gainfully consume so many calories). But as Doyal and Gough themselves note, such minimum optimum levels do not apply to some needs, like those for education or for healthcare. In those cases, they posit instead a 'constrained' optimum, based on the highest level 'generalisable over the relevant population'²⁸. The difficulty, however, is that Doyal and Gough thus appear to set the bar extraordinarily high:

²³ Brock, 2005, 2009; Copp, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2005; Plant, 2002; Siebel and Schramme, 2020

²⁴ Gasper, 1996

²⁵ Soper, 1993a, 1993b, 2007

²⁶ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 39

²⁷ Soper, 1993a: 119

²⁸ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 164

one might wonder, for instance, whether this requires us to bring everyone's life expectancy up to the level of Japan²⁹. The ensuing problem is that Doyal and Gough's theory of basic needs is not so basic after all, since it ends up being so onerous and demanding as to leave little space for the pursuit of other normative priorities.

Finally, there is also a strange inconsistency in Doyal and Gough's account. That inconsistency is located in one item on their list of intermediate needs: namely, the needs for 'safe birth control and child-bearing'. Now whilst the significance of such needs is beyond doubt, their inclusion on this list violates – as Doyal and Gough themselves note – the supposed universality of that list. Justifying that violation, Doyal and Gough point to the fact that '[s]ignificant biological differences *within* the human species' result in certain 'distinct satisfier characteristics', and that the 'most significant of such differences' is the 'difference between men and women'³⁰. The issue, however, is why such 'biological' differences matter in a way that others – culture, say, or faith, or personal preference – do not. It seems that universalizability allows these authors to, on the one hand, exclude certain needs, and paint them as non-basic; but then one finds that that universality requirement itself wilts in the face of biological reality.

What connects and draws together these problems is an underlying and unspoken commitment to the nature/culture binary, and a subsequent belief that escaping the threat of relativism requires an appeal to nature. The bottlenecking I outlined above is a bottlenecking through nature as understood in a particular, narrow sense: as an innate, universal, immutable, clearly delimited inner core. Because nature is understood that way, the needs that matter are presumed to be the universal needs (since we share, by and large, the same nature); it is that understanding of nature, furthermore, which justifies the priority of such needs over all other aspects of our existence (since that nature is purported to represent what is most fundamental to us); and it is even that understanding of nature that permits certain exceptions to that universality (because the limited variations in nature are the only things

²⁹ An example suggested (in a different context) by Wolff (2013: 9). Doyal and Gough do place some practical limitations on the demandingness of their theory (see, for instance, Gough, 2017: 48), but these are beyond my scope here.

³⁰ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 158, emphasis in original

that can trump universalism). Doyal and Gough's theory of human need thus fails to dodge, in the end, the nature/culture binary.

3.2.2 *Sen and public reasoning*

I turn now to a second candidate: namely, Sen's account of public reasoning. Sen has developed that account most notably – for my purposes – in the context of his celebrated capabilities approach³¹. That approach began as a critique of alternative, previously dominant paradigms within development economics: Sen's argument was, in particular, that those prevailing orthodoxies had hinged judgements of development on the wrong sorts of metrics and evaluative materials. He thus challenged so-called 'resourcism' – which judges development according to what people *have* – and so-called 'welfarism' – which makes those judgements according to what people *want* – arguing that neither could ever fully capture a person's real level of wellbeing and/or advantage. In their place, Sen thus posited an alternative focus on what people are able to *do* or to *be*³². The product of that thinking was the concept of capabilities: the various sets of beings and doings (aka 'functionings') which people can achieve, and from which they can choose³³. It is thus capabilities – suggest Sen and other capabilitarians – that should constitute our basic evaluative metric, rather than resources, preferences, and so on. And whilst capabilities began narrowly as an approach to international development, an enormous range of other uses have since been found for that concept³⁴.

Right from the start, however, it was recognised that capabilities are not all equally valuable – some capacities to function are, after all, trivial³⁵; undesirable³⁶; harmful³⁷; or even unethical³⁸ – and it is thus implausible to compare capabilities through any kind of neutral

³¹ Sen, 1987b, 1995, 1999b, 2010

³² Sen, 1980, 1987b, 1995, 1999b: 35–110, 2009

³³ The concept of 'capabilities' is itself contested (Arneson, 2010; Fleurbaey, 2014; Robeyns, 2016, 2017). For Sen's account, see Sen 1980, 1987a, 1995, 1999b: 87–110

³⁴ For an overview, see Robeyns, 2017

³⁵ Giri, 2000; Sen, 1993a: 34–35

³⁶ Gasper, 2002

³⁷ Arneson, 2010: 104; Robeyns, 2016: 406; Vallentyne, 2005: 362

³⁸ Nussbaum, 2011a: 72

counting³⁹. Sen thus identified what he called an ‘inescapable valuational problem’⁴⁰, arguing that the use of capabilities as a common metric required some account of which capabilities are the valuable ones⁴¹.

This brings me back to my enquiry concerning the needs that matter. What this section will consider is how Sen’s answer to that valuational problem might be transferable to the needs debate, and whether the resulting approach can escape the nature/culture binary. Such an inquiry might begin by noting that Sen has vocally, repeatedly, and explicitly opposed both timeless, universalist normative theorising⁴² and arbitrary cultural relativism⁴³, arguing that neither approach could ever produce a defensible answer to the inescapable valuation problem⁴⁴. Given those two oppositions, Sen’s account might rightly pique the interest of an analytical theorist seeking to avoid our problematic binary. What I will show, however, is that despite its many strengths and ostensible promise, Sen’s account confronts – in the end – questions about the needs that matter at the level of normative theory. As a result, Sen ends up attributing value to certain needs according to universalist theoretical principles, principles that rest on an appeal to nature.

To defend that claim, I begin by reconstructing Sen’s public reasoning approach. That approach is rooted in what Sen posits to be a basic requirement of ethical reasoning: namely, that one must be as impartial and objective as one can reasonably be when making ethical judgements⁴⁵. One might begin by taking that basic requirement as a primarily personal or internal precept, and indeed Sen recognises that it has those sorts of implications, requiring

³⁹ Arneson, 2010; Gasper, 2002

⁴⁰ Sen, 1999b: 31

⁴¹ Sen, 1987a: 20, 1993a, 1995: 44, 2003

⁴² Sen, 1993a, 1999b: 73–74, 2004a, 2005, 2010: 242

⁴³ Sen, 1993b, 2004a, 2004b

⁴⁴ It is this position, and in particular Sen’s opposition to Nussbaum’s approach (see section 3.2.3), which triggered the so-called ‘list’ debate, fought out in the capabilities literature in the 2000s (Alkire, 2002: 28–36; Baujard and Gilardone, 2017; Hamilton, 2019: 49–68; Nussbaum, 2000: 11–15, 2003, 2006b; Robeyns, 2017: 75–77; Sen, 2004a, 2010: 242–3).

⁴⁵ Sen, 2010: 31–50

people, for instance, to take a certain perspective; to engage in particular types of reasoning; and to adopt a certain independence of mind⁴⁶.

The problem, however, is that no matter how well one sticks to such internal precepts, one will never be able to achieve a wholly detached, depersonalised, or transcendental kind of objectivity, since even our most considered ethical judgements will be shaped – Sen claims – by our positional perspective. To flesh this point out, Sen develops his distinctive account of what he calls ‘objective illusions’⁴⁷, arguing that certain statements – such as ‘the sun and the moon look similar in size’ – are position-dependent but person-invariant, meaning different people would make the same observations if they held the same position. The problem with such statements is that no matter how objective one attempts to be in their purely personal reasoning, one’s perspective will always be constrained by one’s position (the sun and moon *really do* look to be a similar size from that position), and that this can result in false beliefs (that the sun and the moon really are the same size). Consequently, the objectivity of individual reasoning is inevitably constrained by one’s positional perspective, and potentially based on any number of objective illusions that no amount of positionally-situated reasoning could ever displace. There is, therefore, no way to attain a ‘view from nowhere’, but only from some ‘delineated somewhere’, and exactly where that somewhere happens to be will shape people’s judgements in ways they cannot individually avoid⁴⁸. Consequently, the demands of ethical objectivity require that we go beyond such purely personal reasoning.

Those demands thus require – says Sen – that we subject our ethical beliefs and judgements to ‘reasoned scrutiny from different perspectives’⁴⁹. Such ‘trans-positional scrutiny’⁵⁰ seeks – through open, informed, unobstructed critical engagement – to synthesise the views from as many ‘delineated somewheres’ as possible, allowing one to make sense of their own positionally-dependent observations, and thereby avoid – as much as one can – forming false beliefs⁵¹. Sen goes on to consider how this primarily procedural requirement to subject one’s ethical beliefs and judgements to reasoned scrutiny generates certain substantive demands.

⁴⁶ Sen, 2010: 45–46, 162

⁴⁷ Sen, 1993b, 2010: 155–173

⁴⁸ Sen, 1993b: 127

⁴⁹ Sen, 2010: 45

⁵⁰ Sen, 1993b: 130

⁵¹ Hamilton, 2019: 99–118; Sen, 2004b, 2010: 44–46

As he argues, public reasoning cannot properly take place in the absence of a range of demanding background conditions and antecedents, including, for instance, that a reasonably wide range of information is available⁵²; that arguments take place in an unobstructed fashion⁵³; that scrutiny is welcomed from a wide range of different positions⁵⁴; and so on. And it is on the basis of such a procedural and substantive understanding of impartial, unobstructed, reasoned scrutiny that Sen sets forth his exacting vision of democracy⁵⁵.

It is, therefore, only ideas which survive exposure to this particular sort of public reasoning and scrutiny which satisfy the basic requirement to be as objective as possible in ethical reasoning⁵⁶. And crucially, exposure to such scrutiny does not merely aggregate or conjoin people's starting positions, but involves interactions, deliberations and interchanges that end up transforming those positions, as well as winnowing out ideas and beliefs that fail to be adequately impartial, or which turn out to be founded on contextual adaptations and/or objective illusions⁵⁷. Sen thus ascribes democratic dialogue a 'constructive' function, in that it shapes, rather than merely reflects, people's values and priorities⁵⁸.

The crux of Sen's account, then, is that it does not answer questions of valuation at the level of theory, but tells us what sorts of ways of answering those questions are, in principle, acceptable, before positing that answers given in those particular justified ways will be shaped and filtered in the ensuing process in a manner that rules out various unacceptable alternatives. And the resulting account offers – outwardly at least – an escape from the nature/culture binary. By requiring that people engage in public reasoning, Sen can (so the argument goes) counter the worst excesses of arbitrary cultural relativism, forcing people to confront and consider other viewpoints in ways that transform their values, which winnow out unconscionable cultural norms, and which achieve some form and degree of objectivity. But Sen also places that procedural scrutiny in the hands of the public, rather than the

⁵² Sen, 2004b: 349

⁵³ Sen, 2005: 160

⁵⁴ Sen, 1993b: 138, 2004b: 354–356, 2010: 124–152

⁵⁵ Sen, 1999a, 1999b: 146–159, 2010: 321–354

⁵⁶ Sen, 2004b, 2005, 2010: 44–46, 121–122

⁵⁷ Alexander, 2008; Qizilbash, 2016; Sen, 2004b

⁵⁸ Alkire, 2002: 133–137; Sen, 1999a, 1999b: 153–154. This is, furthermore, what differentiates this type of account from the sorts of non-constructive procedures offered by theorists like Braybrooke – see section 2.3.1.

theorist, refusing to directly offer any normative account of needs, or to pre-empt or foreclose the actual conduct of public reasoning. Sen thus posits – so the argument goes – no principle or standard of valuation beyond what society judges for itself⁵⁹.

What is more, Sen’s account does not presuppose any particular evaluative material, instead holding that the choice of such material is a matter for democratic deliberation rather than theoretical diktat⁶⁰. Indeed, Sen explicitly refuses to confine public reasoning to the evaluation of capabilities, exploring other concepts as possible objects of that reasoning⁶¹, including – notably – needs themselves⁶². It is thus plausible, and in keeping with his own account and explicit statements, to apply Sen’s public reasoning approach to my enquiry concerning which needs matter⁶³, and to consider it as a candidate for escaping the nature/culture binary in that context.

Sen, of course, is not the only theorist to defend impartial scrutiny, ethical objectivity, and democratic deliberation⁶⁴. His views, however, have been highly influential, indeed might justifiably be considered canonical, and certainly constitute a compelling exemplar. However, despite its sophistication and numerous laudable attributes, Sen’s account fails – as I will now show – to escape the problematic nature/culture binary. That is because he confronts, but fails to overcome, the so-called ‘democratic dilemma’⁶⁵: the problem that democratic accounts – like Sen’s – must in one way or another be underpinned by an underlying normative principle or vision, but that such principles or visions themselves demand a particular sort of society and way of life, a demand that significantly constrains the scope for deliberation on the basis of abstract principles. And that problem, as I will show, means Sen cannot avoid getting into

⁵⁹ Hamilton, 2019: 59–62

⁶⁰ Baujard and Gilardone, 2017; Hamilton, 2019: 50; Robeyns, 2017: 75–77

⁶¹ In particular, rights: see Sen, 2004b, 2005

⁶² This link to needs has been made both directly (Sen, 1999a, 1999b: 146–159) and in his discussions of basic capabilities (Alkire, 2002: 154–195; Crocker, 2009: 306; Sen, 1993a, 2005).

⁶³ The close relationship between needs and capabilities has, furthermore, been widely examined and defended in the literature (Alkire, 2002: 154–195, 2005; Brock, 2009: 69; Gough, 2017: 45; Miller, 2012: 40; O’Neill, 2011; Reader, 2006).

⁶⁴ See, for instance, Alkire, 2002, 2005; Crocker, 2009

⁶⁵ Claassen, 2011; Byskov, 2017; Floyd J, 2017a: 55–61

the business of valuing needs at the level of abstract, extra-social, pre-procedural normative theory.

Let me begin, then, with the democratic dilemma. At the root of that dilemma is the fact that Sen's public reasoning procedure rests on a set of normative arguments that are posited theoretically, and which transcend, and are presupposed by, actual democratic practice. That fact is evident, firstly, in how Sen himself proceeds: he begins, after all, with a general philosophical argument about the requirements of ethical objectivity, rather than with any actually existing procedures or *pro tanto* values and mores. Secondly, it is not just the case that Sen does proceed that way, he also *must*: he must justify, for instance, his choice of democratic procedures over others; he must be able to explain why post-procedural values have greater normative significance than pre-procedural ones; and he must justify the sorts of coercion and non-consensual decision-rules that are necessary when a full consensus happens to be lacking⁶⁶. And thirdly, substantive normative defences of democracy are required given the failings of actual democratic practice. As Sen's critics have noted, even the most well-established democracies can be subject to the distorting influence of power imbalances, are often precarious, and can be prone to corruption⁶⁷. In response to such dangers, Sen has readily admitted that democracies are likely to be imperfect in practice⁶⁸, arguing that what is needed is not – as his opponents sometimes appear to suggest – an alternative to democratic procedures, but more and better democracy⁶⁹. That call for more-and-better democracy presupposes, however, a normative vision of democracy that is not premised on the workings of extant – and, as Sen admits, often flawed – democratic practices. Sen method, therefore, is to justify democratic processes according to a substantive set of underlying normative principles⁷⁰.

Problems emerge, however, when one notes that those principles have implications that go far beyond the narrowly procedural. As Sen makes abundantly clear – and as was noted above – the requirements of public reasoning are *both* procedural and substantive, and

⁶⁶ Byskov, 2017; Claassen, 2011; Crocker and Robeyns, 2009; Fleurbaey, 2002

⁶⁷ Crocker, 2009: 356–360; Dean, 2009; Deneulin, 2011; Deneulin and McGregor, 2010; Hamilton, 2003: 99–100; Nussbaum, 2005; Stewart and Deneulin, 2002

⁶⁸ Sen, 1999a: 154–155, 2010: 343, 349–350

⁶⁹ Crocker, 2009: 320–321; Sen, 1999b: 154–159

⁷⁰ Sen, 1999a, 1999b: 146–154; Sen and Drèze, 1995: 106

processes of impartial scrutiny require that we put in place a diverse set of procedural antecedents, the demands of which are often stringent. Sen thus spells out a vision of democracy that goes far beyond simple elections and voting, and which includes: a range of institutional guarantees for political freedoms⁷¹; a broader set of economic, social, and political background conditions⁷²; high levels of participation⁷³; and a widespread set of democratic values – such as tolerance towards minorities⁷⁴ – that suffuse and inform that participation. Sen’s vision of democracy, therefore, is not a straightforward democratic procedural bolt-on, but a thoroughgoing reshaping of our social, economic, and political institutions; societal norms; and actual political and social practices, a reshaping that – crucially – must follow certain predetermined substantive lines. It is not, therefore, simply the case that any-and-all societies can, from time to time, engage in exercises in public reasoning, and then go back to being exactly as they were, since that reasoning presupposes a particular sort of society, a society which fulfils Sen’s demanding criteria.

The difficulty with all this, however, is that that demanding vision for democracy rests – as I showed above – on a *theoretical* call, rather than a democratic political one: it is a demand for a better application of democratic theory to democratic practice, rather than an achievement of goals found within democratic practice itself. That leads Sen into the aforementioned democratic dilemma: whilst his arguments for democracy appear to hinge on leaving substantive matters for the people themselves to decide, his exacting vision of how people must, as it were, go about deciding turns out to presuppose a demanding and wide-ranging vision of what society should look like in the first place⁷⁵. And that vision notably – and crucially for my purposes – also incorporates certain important needs. Sen has explicitly argued that deliberative democratic practices and impartial public reasoning cannot operate where people lack the means to meet certain basic needs: he contends, for instance, that engaging effectively in democratic deliberation requires sufficient education⁷⁶; that where

⁷¹ Sen, 1999a, 1999b: 146–159, 2010: 321–337

⁷² Sen, 2010: 350

⁷³ Sen, 1999b: 154–157, 2010: 354

⁷⁴ Sen, 1999a, 1999b: 154–159, 2010: 348–354; Sen and Drèze, 1995: 133

⁷⁵ Indeed, Nussbaum has suggested that normative vision is so substantive it constitutes a comprehensive doctrine (Nussbaum, 2011a: 74–75).

⁷⁶ Byskov, 2017; Claassen, 2011; Sen, 1999b: 32–33

important needs go unmet, people end up in a daily struggle that leaves little opportunity for political participation⁷⁷; and so on⁷⁸.

The problem, however, is that Sen has now shifted from refusing to offer any normative answers to the inescapable valuational problem, and from arguing that theory can never in itself fix such values, to positing a substantial core of normatively important needs in the name of a wholly theoretical call for democracy. What is more, that core is itself insulated from the vagaries of democratic politics, since Sen's normative vision for democracy must, as I have shown, trump actual (potentially flawed) democratic practice. The result is that Sen's normative core of important needs ends up being *more* entrenched – to matter, as it were, even more – than those needs that might emerge in and through democratic practice itself. Needs, it would appear, have moved from being objects of public reasoning to being objects of pure theory, objects that are posited prior to, and in abstraction from, what people themselves happen to think, and thus any cultural specificity, contextual political realities, or the outcomes of actual democratic processes. Thus by asking himself what things are really needed *before* people engage in the process of public reasoning, Sen ends up with the sort of universal, abstract, contextless, and immutable appeals-to-nature which he had set out to avoid.

3.2.3 Nussbaum's central capabilities

Nussbaum's celebrated account of the ten 'central capabilities'⁷⁹ constitutes perhaps the most sophisticated attempt to derive a set of cross-cultural basic entitlements without relying on an absolutist appeal to nature. That account – unlike Sen's – defends a substantive universal set of valued capabilities, a set that itself hinges on the notions of truly human functioning and human dignity⁸⁰. But crucially, that universalist account is not offered on the basis of a straightforward appeal to human nature, but instead as a form of political liberalism⁸¹. That proffered political liberalism begins – Nussbaum tells us – by positing that people possess

⁷⁷ Sen and Drèze, 1995: 29

⁷⁸ See also Anderson, 1999; Crocker, 2009: 316–319

⁷⁹ Presented principally and most famously in Nussbaum, 2000. See also Nussbaum, 2004, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2011a, 2011b, 2014. For earlier Aristotelian versions, see Nussbaum, 1988, 1992, 1993.

⁸⁰ Nussbaum, 2000: 11–15, 2006a: 69–81, 2011a: 17–45

⁸¹ Nussbaum, 2000: 5–6, 2006b, 2011b, 2014

different comprehensive conceptions of the good, and that there will be ongoing reasonable disagreement between such conceptions. Given that reasonable disagreement, one must devise political principles that – firstly – show proper respect for persons, refusing to override their comprehensive conceptions through, in particular, force; and – secondly – are stable, in that they are persist through time and are adhered to. Those demands require the development of principles that can be set out independently from, and endorsed by those who hold, the full range of reasonable comprehensive conceptions⁸². Nussbaum’s claim, then, is that her central capabilities constitute just those sorts of principles. They are thus offered as a political ‘module’, a set of basic entitlements that is ‘freestanding’ – in that they are set out independently from all the reasonable comprehensive doctrines that citizens affirm – so that they facilitate the pursuit of, and leave space for, those comprehensive conceptions. Her list is thus, so the argument goes, not dependent on any problematic metaphysical commitments, but is grounded instead on its capacity to be the object of an overlapping consensus⁸³.

Such a metaphysics-free grounding for a set of universal entitlements looks like a promising alternative to both bare-faced universalist naturalism and free-wheeling cultural relativism⁸⁴. And much like Sen, it is wholly plausible to consider Nussbaum’s political liberalism as an approach to evaluating needs, rather than capabilities: indeed, the case is perhaps even stronger for Nussbaum, given her focus on human vulnerability and functioning⁸⁵; the overlaps between her central capabilities and many of the lists of BHN⁸⁶; and her own allusions to needs⁸⁷. This section will, therefore, consider whether a Nussbaumian political liberalism can tell us which needs matter, and can do so without reverting back to the nature/culture binary. As I will show, however, Nussbaum fails to avoid that binary, since her methodological approach presupposes an underlying naturalism.

⁸² Nussbaum, 2011a: 17–45, 2011b

⁸³ Nussbaum, 2000: 76, 2006a: 297, 2006b, 2014

⁸⁴ Indeed, Nussbaum claims something along these lines (Nussbaum, 2000: 105, 2004, 2011a: 101–112).

⁸⁵ Alkire, 2002: 154–195, 2005; O’Neill, 2011; Reader, 2006; Robeyns, 2017: 177–8; Siebel and Schramme, 2020; Stewart, 1996

⁸⁶ Alkire, 2002: 59–78; Brock, 2009: 69–71; Gough, 2014; Miller SC, 2012: 40

⁸⁷ Nussbaum even suggests at one point that her account constitutes an ‘account of basic human needs’ (Nussbaum, 2006a: 278). See also Nussbaum, 2006a: 87–89, 159–190, 274. For commentary see Brock, 2009: 69–71; Gough, 2014, 2017: 45

It is important to note, firstly, that Nussbaum's list is not strictly metaphysics-free. To see why, one might begin by highlighting the self-evident tension between her focus on the seemingly metaphysical notions of truly human functioning and human dignity, and the basic politically liberal requirement of respect for persons. Political liberals have tended to hold metaphysical claims at arms-length, viewing these as inevitably controversial, always incompatible without at least some reasonable comprehensive conception, and properly belonging to the domain of the good rather than the right⁸⁸. And indeed, Nussbaum has on several occasions distanced her account from exactly those sorts of metaphysical commitments⁸⁹. On the surface, however, this is implausible, given that questions about the nature of, and prerequisites for, human functioning and human dignity seem to hinge – if they hinge on anything – on metaphysical notions of the human.

Indeed, that apparent contradiction can be traced below those surface tensions, all the way down to the arguments by which Nussbaum justifies her enquiry in the first place. Nussbaum has forcefully argued that traditional Rawlsian political liberalism draws on a distinctively Kantian notion of the self that problematically underplays – says Nussbaum – human vulnerability. Nussbaum postulates instead an Aristotelian recognition of that vulnerability, making the quite reasonable point that one cannot separate out – in a Kantian fashion – the rational being from the vulnerable animal, and that our political institutions must recognise that citizens are also vulnerable human beings⁹⁰. And it is on the basis of such a recognition that Nussbaum justifies her central task: the development of a list of central capabilities within a politically liberal framework. But whilst forcing the Rawlsian to confront human vulnerability might be all well and good, one might wonder whether the resulting fusion of politically liberal methods with Aristotelian problematics makes sense in its own terms. Alexander, for instance, has argued otherwise, suggesting that whilst Nussbaum's inquiry requires her to invoke metaphysics, her politically liberal framework rules out such invocations, making her account fundamentally inconsistent⁹¹.

⁸⁸ Alexander, 2014; Bagg, 2018; Rosenthal, 2016; White, 2000

⁸⁹ Nussbaum, 2000: 76, 2006a: 71, 2011a: 28

⁹⁰ Nussbaum, 2003, 2006a: 87–89, 159–160, 2011b

⁹¹ Alexander, 2014. See also Menon, 2002; Deneulin, 2002

It is, however, wrong to suggest – as Alexander does – that any-and-all metaphysical commitments violate the principles of political liberalism. Political liberalism does not require the overlapping consensus to be free of metaphysics, but merely that it is free of *controversial* metaphysical commitments that are likely to divide citizens⁹². What is more, the question Nussbaum asks is not a metaphysical one (‘what is human nature?’) but a political one (‘given human vulnerability, what should citizens be entitled to?’); and the answers and justifications she offers are not metaphysical ones (‘human nature is like that, so here is my list’) but political ones (‘here are some statements about the requirements of human functioning and dignity that all reasonable comprehensive conceptions can sign up to’)⁹³. By asking questions and positing answers that way, the minimal metaphysics of the political module can – so the argument goes – be laid out independently from the comprehensive conceptions individuals happen to hold, with each holder of those conceptions interpreting any politically necessary metaphysical commitments in light of their own broader metaphysics. The resulting list is thus in its justification and in its character a freestanding political notion, but nevertheless its content both contains and presupposes a distinctive set of metaphysical claims.

Nussbaum herself sometimes portrays her approach in a way that displays this subtler relationship with metaphysics, going from describing her theory as absolutely metaphysics-free, to stating that it does not rely on any ‘controversial’, ‘deep’, or ‘thick’ metaphysical notions⁹⁴, and positing – furthermore – exactly such a non-controversial metaphysics in the form of her ‘public conception of the person’ and ‘species norm’⁹⁵. Despite, therefore, Nussbaum’s occasional gestures against metaphysical notions in general, her claim is best understood not as implausibly suggesting that her account of truly human functioning and human dignity is entirely metaphysics-free, but that it rests only on a narrow range of metaphysical content – a degree of moral intelligence, the reality of human need, human sociability, and so on – that are non-controversial, that can be endorsed politically as part of an overlapping consensus, and that leaves space for the various types of human flourishing

⁹² Rosenthal, 2016

⁹³ Terlazzo, 2019

⁹⁴ Nussbaum, 2006a: 86, 188, 2006b, 2011a: 90

⁹⁵ Nussbaum, 2006a: 158, 180–182, 188

that different comprehensive conceptions avow⁹⁶. I will call that minimal content Nussbaum's political metaphysics.

One might question, however, if there really is such a thing as a wholly political metaphysics: indeed, the prevailing assumption amongst other political liberals has been – as I have highlighted – that there is not. What Nussbaum must show, then, is that there is indeed substantive content that addresses her questions about truly human functioning and human dignity whilst remaining free of the sorts of controversy that might divide citizens. That brings into sharp focus Nussbaum's method for deriving and defending her list. How, then, does she actually go about arriving at that substantive content? How does she know that her list, despite its metaphysical claims, remains non-controversial? And how does she know that there is such wholly political metaphysical content to be found in the first place?

Nussbaum has, in fact, several methods for deriving her list, but I will narrowly focus on the method that is considered dominant⁹⁷: namely, an adapted version⁹⁸ of the Rawlsian method of reflective equilibrium. That method, Nussbaum tells us, involves putting forward one's secure ethical intuitions, making proposals in a 'Socratic' fashion to be reflected upon, tested, and refined. The goal of such a process is to identify a set of principles that are internally coherent, whilst remaining open to testing and revision via continued reflection, external input, and moral argument⁹⁹. And crucially Nussbaum – like Rawls – envisages that process occurring in a 'specifically political domain', meaning that it seeks out 'a conception by which people of differing comprehensive views can agree to live together in a political community'¹⁰⁰. The point, then, is that the results of the process of reflective equilibrium are not just internally coherent, but are also compatible with the underlying principles of stability and respect for persons. By deploying that process within the political domain in that way,

⁹⁶ Nussbaum, 2006a: 158, 182, 274–278

⁹⁷ For discussion of those approaches, and the dominance of this method, see Alkire 2002: 32–43; Jaggard, 2006; Nussbaum, 2000: 148–166, 2004, 2014

⁹⁸ Whilst Nussbaum repeatedly describes her method as 'Rawlsian' there are some notable differences. Where these occur, I have followed Nussbaum's presentation.

⁹⁹ Nussbaum, 2000: 77, 101–3, 2004, 2011a: 77–78, 2014. For discussion see Floyd J, 2017b; Gough, 2014; Jaggard, 2006

¹⁰⁰ Nussbaum, 2000: 102

Nussbaum's hope is that the end product can plausibly command an international overlapping consensus¹⁰¹.

The crux of my case against Nussbaum is this: that this method only makes sense, and only delivers Nussbaum's desired outcome, because it presupposes an underlying naturalism, a naturalism that prevents Nussbaum's political liberalism from escaping the nature/culture binary. To see why, let me begin by outlining three problems with Nussbaum's method.

Firstly, Nussbaum appears to assume that through the process of reflective equilibrium, people's views on questions about human dignity and truly human functioning will converge, and converge on one unique outcome¹⁰²: namely, her own political metaphysics. One might wonder, however, whether such a convergence will occur; for how are we to know that different individuals, given their different starting points, won't end up with different reflective equilibria? One might imagine, for instance, that more minimalistic versions of Nussbaum's list – perhaps a version which subtracts some of the more controversial items – could be the subject of a reflective equilibrium, and could similarly be put forward as plausibly commanding an overlapping consensus. One might alternatively imagine a more expansive list that is harder to establish, but which brings other benefits. Now the question is: what is it in Nussbaum's method that rules out those other, alternative political metaphysics? And if they are not ruled out, then what makes – one might wonder – Nussbaum's political metaphysics better than those others? The question, then, is not whether there is a reflective equilibrium there to be found, but whether there is only one such outcome, and, if not, what makes Nussbaum's chosen outcome the best one¹⁰³. Nussbaum simply seems to presuppose, however, the uniqueness or bestness of her particular solution. The point, in other words, is that even if one endorses the methods of reflective equilibrium, and is happy to accept that reflectively reached equilibria are better than non-reflective initial starting points, this does not help us if different people end up with different equilibria. Nussbaum only gets around this problem by presupposing – rather than proving – that some sort of convergence between

¹⁰¹ Nussbaum thus does not – *pace* Rawls – restrict the domain of her political liberalism: see Nussbaum, 2000: 104, 2006a: 298–305

¹⁰² When such a reflective equilibrium is a 'full' one (J. Floud, 2017b: 370).

¹⁰³ Jaggard, 2006

these equilibria will occur: she assumes, in other words, that there is something like a latent, underlying agreement there to be found¹⁰⁴.

A second related issue concerns Nussbaum's view that the reflective equilibrium she arrives – namely, her political metaphysics – can plausibly command an overlapping consensus. Her argument is not, of course, that her list already as a matter of fact does so: this is, after all, plainly untrue¹⁰⁵. Instead, she contends – following Rawls – that what is required is not current endorsement, but a plausible path to endorsement¹⁰⁶. Nussbaum's method for deriving her list is thus not about what people currently happen to think, but instead requires that our moral convictions are grounded in 'good moral argument'¹⁰⁷ and continually tested in her 'Socratic' fashion, a testing that generates principles that could plausibly – over time – command such an international overlapping consensus. One might wonder, however, what gives her the confidence that there is such a path to endorsement there to tread. Now of course an international overlapping consensus over her list is *possible* (perhaps all dissenters get swept away in a typhoon), but in stating that it is *plausible*, Nussbaum seems to accept a higher burden a proof. However, she then largely fails to offer such proof, making the occasional sweeping statements of the form 'we can all accept human life has a certain shape'¹⁰⁸, whilst also noting that there continue to be durable disagreements over her list¹⁰⁹. The question, then, is what justifies Nussbaum's faith that something like an overlapping consensus can be developed on these particular matters – matters of human dignity and functioning – despite the presence of durable and persistent disagreements regarding precisely those matters.

Finally, there is a tension in Nussbaum's method between her reliance on intuition and her concern for the problem of adaptation. Nussbaum's process of justification via reflective equilibrium notably begins with one's current intuitions as its raw datum: she talks of

¹⁰⁴ Floyd J, 2017b; Jaggar, 2006; Siebel and Schramme, 2020

¹⁰⁵ There are notable controversies concerning, in particular, individualism (Menon, 2002), reproductive rights (Robeyns, 2016), autonomy (Fabre and Miller D, 2003; Okin, 2003), property (Noonan, 2011), and relationships with other species (Stewart, 2001). See also Deneulin, 2002; Nelson, 2008

¹⁰⁶ Nussbaum, 2004, 2006a: 298–305, 2011a: 90–91, 2014

¹⁰⁷ Nussbaum, 2004: 200

¹⁰⁸ Nussbaum, 2006a: 188

¹⁰⁹ See, for instance, Nussbaum, 2011a: 90–91

beginning with an intuitive conception of human functioning; putting forward proposals in her ‘Socratic’ fashion to be ‘tested against the most secure of our intuitions’¹¹⁰; holding up arguments and conceptions against the ‘fixed points’ in our intuitions¹¹¹; and so on¹¹². By using intuition as the basis for normative principles in this way, justification via reflective equilibrium is a process by which – as Floyd puts it – one transitions from one’s current ‘thoughts’ to normative ‘oughts’¹¹³. But this methodological dependence on intuition jars with Nussbaum’s repeated and forceful deployment of the concept of adaptation¹¹⁴.

Nussbaum clearly recognises that even one’s most secure intuitions can deceive them, and that people can have deeply ingrained adaptations that can be extremely difficult to budge¹¹⁵. But when Nussbaum makes those arguments, they always seem to apply exclusively to other people: she is, it seems, oddly content to place faith in her own intuitions, whilst being willing to dismiss the views of others as distorted. And even more alarmingly, the criterion for judging such distortions seems primarily to be a substantive one that hinges on agreement with Nussbaum’s list¹¹⁶. It is thus Nussbaum who – as ‘keeper-of-the-findings’ – is permitted to exclude others, and even train their introspections when they fail to agree with hers¹¹⁷. One might wonder, therefore, how Nussbaum can simultaneously rail against adaptation, whilst maintaining such an overwhelming faith in her own intuitions.

What blinds Nussbaum to those difficulties is, I argue, an underlying naturalism that is wrapped up in her methodological procedures and assumptions. Returning to Floyd, his case, as we saw above, is that underpinning the attempt to justify normative principles via reflective equilibrium is an attempt to transition from present ‘thoughts’ to normative ‘oughts’. But as he points out, that move is ostensibly questionable, and it violates the long-standing presumption that one can never transition from ‘is’ statements to ‘ought’ statements. Squaring that circle, says Floyd, requires the theorist to presume that their current intuitions

¹¹⁰ Nussbaum, 2000: 77

¹¹¹ Nussbaum, 2000: 151

¹¹² See also Nussbaum 2004, 2006a: 83

¹¹³ Floyd J, 2017b

¹¹⁴ Nussbaum, 2000, 2004, 2006b

¹¹⁵ Nussbaum, 2000: 161–166

¹¹⁶ Nussbaum, 2000: 149, 2001, 2004. For discussion see Jaggard, 2006

¹¹⁷ Alkire, 2002: 38–42

track an underlying normative nature: that by plumbing one's intuitions in the proffered way, one can identify natural patterns in one's existing normative thinking, thus revealing some true normative nature, a nature that constitutes a valid grounding for normative principles¹¹⁸. It is, then, such an underlying naturalism that justifies the use of one's present intuitions as the base datum for normative principles.

Floyd's general diagnosis shines a new light on Nussbaum's account, bringing to the surface a methodological naturalism that helps to explain her failure to recognise and deal with the problems outlined above. What is more, Nussbaum's naturalism is a naturalism of a particular sort: the sort I outlined in section 3.1. Nussbaum thus posits certain general truths about the nature-culture relationship¹¹⁹; about the universality of human nature and embodiment¹²⁰; about the priority of the natural over all else¹²¹; and so on. Thus when Nussbaum presumes that intuitions reveal a true normative nature, it is a nature understood in this certain way, a way that is neither self-evident, nor – despite her claims to the contrary – uncontested. And it is that conjunction between methodological naturalism and the nature/culture binary which leads her to think that she can – as I put it above – address Aristotelian problematics through a Rawlsian framework, since the true normative nature revealed by the process of reflective equilibrium is, she presumes, an underlying, pre-cultural nature that is the same for everybody.

It is that conjunction, furthermore, which produces – and prevents Nussbaum from seeing – the above problems. It leads Nussbaum to presume, for instance, that the process of reflective equilibrium will produce one unique outcome. Having delved into her own intuitions to discover an underlying normative nature, Nussbaum goes on to presume that that nature is not personal, cultural, social, or in any other way particular to Nussbaum herself, or to her context, but instead that it is a universal human nature. And if – as Nussbaum presupposes – the process of reflective equilibrium reveals that nature, and if the revealed nature is a shared human nature, then all the separate reflective equilibria will, in the end, converge on one

¹¹⁸ Floyd J, 2016, 2017a: 99–165, 2017b

¹¹⁹ Nussbaum, 1992, 2000: 23,155, 2006a: 180, 188, 285. For discussion see Deneulin, 2002; Menon, 2002; Noonan, 2011

¹²⁰ Nussbaum, 2000: 22–23, 2006a: 180–188

¹²¹ As demonstrated by Nussbaum's view that her list is not just instrumental, but of central value to any human life (Nussbaum, 2000: 74–75).

unique outcome. What is more, since such an outcome reflects not just one's own nature, but a shared, underlying nature, it can 'plausibly' command an international overlapping consensus. Similarly, that conjunction blinds Nussbaum to the possibility of adaptation, since it leads her to presume that the true normative nature revealed by the process of reflective equilibrium represents a pre-social, underlying reality, a reality that exists separate from, and prior to, any cultural shaping. Adaptation, conversely, is presented as the outcome of some sort of problematic or distorted cultural shaping¹²². If, however, such problems and distortions are products of culture; and if intuitions are rooted in nature; then those intuitions cannot suffer from cultural adaptation. The difficulty here is that Nussbaum's deployment of the method of reflective equilibrium requires – in its transition from 'thoughts' to 'oughts' – an underpinning naturalism, a naturalism that perversely and contradictorily immunises her own view from the very problem of cultural adaptation that she hopes to tackle.

My conclusion, then, is that despite its sophistication, and despite its thoroughgoing attempts to rid itself of metaphysics, Nussbaum's theory hinges on an underlying methodological naturalism, and thus fails to overcome the nature/culture binary.

3.3 The displacement of politics in the theory of needs

Thus far, this chapter has explored the nature and shape of the needs debate in APT, demonstrating how that debate is underpinned by the nature/culture binary; how analytical theorists have failed to overcome that binary; and how this prevented them developing plausible alternatives to the untenable BHN and SN approaches. This section builds on that analysis by turning from APT's ontological presuppositions to its theoretical aims. It offers, therefore, the final strand of my diagnosis: namely, that the deeply entrenched and thus-far ineluctable position of the nature/culture binary in the analytical attempts to theorise needs can be traced to commonplace assumptions about the nature and aims of political theory. In particular, I argue that analytical theories of need have attempted to silence, suppress, transcend, or otherwise do away with the political dimension of need, and that such an anti-political tendency is responsible for repeatedly driving needs theorists back to an unhelpful nature/culture ontology.

¹²² Nussbaum, 2000: 111–166

Let me begin, then, by explicating that anti-political tendency. For that purpose, I turn to Honig's seminal account of the displacement of politics in political theory¹²³. Honig's claim is that traditional political theory displays a characteristic aversion to political conflict, so that the success of that sort of theory is thought to lie in the elimination of political dissonance, with the goal of getting politics – as Honig puts it – 'right, over, and done with'¹²⁴. Honig's further contention is that any such attempt to transcend or eliminate conflict is doomed to failure; conflict is, she argues, fundamental to the political and ineradicable. Honig thus defends an 'agonistic' approach to political theory, arguing that the closure of the political is impossible. And not only is it impossible; it is also undesirable: since conflict is interminable, any closure of the political can only succeed by generating a 'remainder'¹²⁵, shifting what does not fit to the outside and attempting to suppress, deny, silence or eliminate it. Honig's analysis has been highly influential, stimulating an 'agonistic turn' in political theory¹²⁶.

This brief overview leaves much unanswered: how, for instance, are we to understand 'the political'? If political conflict really is ineradicable, and if there are no universal political values or normative principles, then is politics simply an anarchic free-for-all? And if all this is true, what place is left for political theory? Political agonism itself, furthermore, is not narrowly Honigian, not uncontested, and not without its own problems¹²⁷. For now, however, my narrow goal is to deploy Honig's analysis as a critical tool: to see whether that analysis holds true for needs theory, and in what ways it supports my general diagnosis. I will leave, therefore, questions about how one then proceeds from those critical observations to later chapters.

On that basis, this section will defend two contentions: that both the BHN and SN approaches display the anti-political tendency Honig diagnoses; and that this has led the political theory of need into a dead-end. Beginning with BHN approach, that approach – I argue – displays an anti-political tendency in three distinct domains: its deployment of abstraction; its labelling of abstract categories; and its disregard for need-interpretation. Taking first abstraction, I

¹²³ Honig, 1993

¹²⁴ Honig, 1993: 2

¹²⁵ Honig, 1993: 5

¹²⁶ For discussion see Humphrey et al., 2014; Maxwell et al., 2019; White, 2021

¹²⁷ White, 2021

showed in section 2.2 that the BHN approach deploys processes of abstraction to derive a set of BHN that transcend any troublesome disputes over needs, separating out abstract BHN from their concrete specifications, and continually abstracting from specific circumstances until any-and-all conflict over needs become conflicts over the specification of BHN, rather than over the BHN themselves. Significantly, however, those processes do not overcome or end those conflicts, but simply shift them away from the core theory, producing by way of abstraction universal accounts of BHN that are generic, intangible, and largely devoid of content, with any attempt to make such accounts say something substantive simply re-entering the political debates that had supposedly been transcended. The result, then, is to shift all political dissonance away from the theory of BHN itself, and into the supposedly extra-theoretical process of specification.

Secondly, the BHN theorist labels those abstract categories as ‘natural’. Such labelling has the effect of entrenching those categories by equating them with immutable, pre-political features of human existence. And that labelling is – notably – not something that follows from processes of abstraction themselves. As has been argued, political negotiation, compromise, and consensus-building often deploy abstraction as a mechanism for finding common ground¹²⁸. But the BHN theorist does not view abstraction as merely a tool for identifying some consensus between various positions, or to reveal happenstance overlaps or convenient intersections between opposing views: instead, those abstractions purportedly reveal certain underlying, supposedly ‘natural’ features of human existence. Such labelling turns abstraction from a being political strategy into something like a metaphysical-cum-logical method for picking out the extra-political features of human existence that – so the story goes – lie behind any and all political positions. The BHN theorist thus falsely assumes that just because needs can be defined at a certain abstract level this implies that those needs possess, in some manner or other, their own metaphysical existence¹²⁹. And by making and concealing that unsupported naturalising assumption, the BHN theorist ringfences needs from the very possibility of political contestation.

¹²⁸ Sen, 1995: 108–109

¹²⁹ Heller, 1993; Sayers, 1998: 149–168. For examples from the BHN literature see Alvarez, 2009; Doyal and Gough, 1991: 141; Nussbaum, 2006a: 285; Plant, 2002

Having identified an abstract, universal set of BHN and naturalised those categories, the BHN – thirdly and finally – depoliticises need in the processes of specification. Whilst the needs-theorist can – so the story goes – identify a set of universal needs, they cannot specify what those needs mean in specific contexts, leaving such specification to the vagaries of some contextual process or other, and positing that such processes lie beyond the scope of theoretical examination. The problem, however, is that the specification of abstract BHN is a thorny and unavoidable practical problem, and without addressing that problem, it is hard to say if the theory of BHN tells us anything at all. Does the theory of BHN, for instance, set a global standard so high that it swamps all other normative priorities, leaving us with a sense of hopelessness? Or does it set it so low that seemingly horrific practices and conditions somehow pass muster? Or do we allow standards to vary, meaning that what is abhorrent here is somehow passable there? And where standards vary, how do we know what specification of need applies where? How, then, do we know a settled specification when we have got one? What do we do in the many cases where specifications are themselves disputed? And who, furthermore, gets to say? Those questions – and many others – have been highlighted by numerous critics and commentators¹³⁰. The point that underscores them all is, I argue, this: that by relegating politics to processes of specification, and washing their hands of such specifications, BHN theorists have been drawing and defending a barrier between the theoretical and the political, a barrier that leads them to implausibly eschew any engagement with real-world controversies over need.

The politics of need suffers a second closure within the SN approach. Such a closure follows, firstly, from the arbitrary nature of SN. As I showed in section 2.3, that arbitrary nature means there is no higher standard, principle, or criterion to which cultural norms defer, and that any attempt to assess cultures from the outside is posited to be inevitably paternalistic, intolerant, partisan, and ethnocentric. In this way, social norms are presented as simply ‘there’, beyond critical scrutiny, and justified by the very fact of their presence¹³¹. As several commentators have pointed out, however, the ensuing problem is that if one can never look beyond one’s own culture to assess its norms and mores, and if a culture’s particular norms are *ipso facto* justified, then the social critic ends up with no access to any sort of critical

¹³⁰ Fraser N, 1989: 144–187; McInnes, 1977; Soper, 1993a, 1993b, 2007; Wolff, 2013, 2015

¹³¹ Gasper, 2004: 210–211

external viewpoint¹³². The upshot of this is that one can never contest a given society's norms – and the ensuing needs – from any sort of outside perspective.

Having ruled out political contestation from the outside, the SN approach then similarly rules out contestation from the inside, further draining needs of their political dimension by implausibly presenting cultures as themselves non-political. The SN theorist assumes, firstly, that each person is unambiguously assigned to one clearly delimited social group. But the boundaries between different cultures and societies are heavily contested, and only questionably present at all¹³³. It is therefore difficult to determine which set of norms applies in each case, and – what is more – who gets to say. And even if a person's cultural membership were unambiguous, it is a gross oversimplification to think that one shared set of norms pertains across an entire culture: cultures are, as Nussbaum points out, never monoliths, and when one assumes that there is some set of settled, homogenous norms representative of a whole culture, that assumption tends to support supposed cultural authorities over-and-above more marginalised voices¹³⁴. The assumption of homogeneity is thus not just poor sociology, but is in fact a *political* assumption that favours certain groups over others. By presenting cultures as clearly delimited, semi-consensual monoliths, the SN approach obscures the ongoing political processes, relations of power and dominance, and processes of cultural interchange and borrowing that go into establishing those norms in the first place¹³⁵. Underpinning all this, then, is the presumption that cultures are non-political, *ipso facto* justified matters-of-fact. Thus the SN approach – on the one hand – makes it impossible to contest a society's norms from the outside, whilst simultaneously – on the other hand – positing a non-political understanding of culture itself. The result, therefore, is that political contestation is suppressed, silenced, and labelled as inexorably unjustified, or even impossible¹³⁶.

Both the SN and BHN approaches have thus – in one way or another – displaced any ongoing political contestation over need. This, I argue, justifies my claim that a Honigian diagnosis of

¹³² Nussbaum, 1992; Siebel and Schramme, 2020; Soper, 1993b

¹³³ Gasper, 2004: 208–209

¹³⁴ Nussbaum, 2000: 42–49, 2011a: 106

¹³⁵ Deneulin and McGregor, 2010; Doyal and Gough, 1991: 30–31; Nussbaum, 1992

¹³⁶ Chambers, 2014: 1–32; Gasper, 2004: 191–220; Nussbaum, 1988, 1992, 1993

displacement can be applied specifically to the analytical approaches to theorising need. What is more, that anti-political tendency helps to explain why those analytical approaches have consistently found themselves – as I showed in sections 3.1 and 3.2 – driven back to their ontological underpinnings. Needs theory, after all, is trying to say something about which needs matter: to ascribe, in one way or another, normative importance to this or that need. But such normativity must – according to those commonplace anti-political assumptions – be pinned to principles that are insulated in one way or another from the vagaries of politics and political conflict¹³⁷. Because of this, when one goes about building a political theory of need, the first port of call has been some such extra-political grounding, some starting principle which is just ‘there’, and beyond the horizon of political contestation. And that search for incontestable ‘thereness’ has led analytical theorists to approach the concept of need in the sort of narrow ontological terms I examined early in this chapter; terms that – as I have shown – are dominated by a presupposed nature/culture binary.

3.4 A path forward

To bring these arguments together, the crux of my case in this chapter is that developing a plausible theoretical account of need requires two major departures from the traditional assumptions of APT: it must abandon, firstly, the nature/culture binary, offering an alternative understanding of the nature of the category ‘need’; and it must set theoretical goals, and deploy theoretical approaches, that embrace, rather than displace, the political. The goal of the remainder of this dissertation is, therefore, to develop just such an account.

¹³⁷ Galston, 2010; Honig, 1993: 1–17; Humphrey et al., 2014

4. Why Marx had no theorisation of needs

Thus far, my dissertation has problematised analytical approaches to need, tracing the problems of those approaches to certain underpinning assumptions, before then suggesting – at the end of the last chapter – that a radical change in approach is required. The contention I defend in the rest of this dissertation is that such an alternative approach can be found by turning to the work of Karl Marx. I intend to show, therefore, that a Marxian account of need can succeed where analytical political theory has failed, principally because Marx develops a distinctive theoretical approach to need that is – crucially – political all-the-way-down.

In making this turn to Marx, however, the first thing one must address are the established orthodoxies surrounding his account of need. Dealing with those orthodoxies will, therefore, be the purpose of this chapter. Those orthodox interpretations can – as I show in section 4.1 – be categorised into three groups: there is, firstly, psychologism, which holds that needs are historically-specific psychological phenomena; next, essentialism, which posits timeless and universal normatively important needs; and finally, historical humanism, which grounds needs in human nature, but holds that that nature transforms historically. But despite their ostensible differences, what this chapter will demonstrate is that those orthodox interpretations share certain fundamental similarities in how they envisage Marx’s intellectual contribution, the nature of his writings, the type of account he is thought to offer, and the nature of his resulting account of needs. I wrap those similarities together in the claim that those interpretations all presume that Marx proffered some ‘theorisation of need’: some general, trans-contextual set of principles-about-need, presented from the timeless, detached, extra-contextual perspective of the theorist¹.

My central contention is that Marx had no such theorisation; that because they mistakenly attribute him such a theorisation, Marx’s interpreters on need have made a series of related interpretative errors; and that consequently, their interpretations should be rejected. What is more, the arguments I present in this chapter lay the foundations for my own interpretation, reaching conclusions about how one should engage with Marx’s texts, and about his

¹ This chapter deploys the term ‘theory’ in a more general sense, and the term ‘theorisation’ to refer to the particular *type* of theory described here.

distinctive understanding of the nature, purpose, and methods of theoretical activity, that underpin my reading of Marx's account of need: an account that – as chapters 5-7 will show – offers a promising alternative to the analytical approaches I have rejected.

To make that argument I proceed in two steps. I begin by presenting – in section 4.2 – a philological argument concerning the commonplace reading strategies that underpin orthodox interpretations. Exploring how interpreters do, and should, engage with Marx's texts, I argue that a flawed reading strategy has led Marx's interpreters on need to systematically misconstrue his scattered comments on that topic. Section 4.3 goes on to offer a conceptual rebuttal of prevailing interpretations. To do so, I examine Marx's understanding of theoretical knowledge, method, and practice, in particular the understanding which he (working with Engels) develops in the 'German ideology' manuscripts. Building on recent parallels drawn between Marx's thought and that of the later Wittgenstein, I argue that through his critique of Young Hegelian philosophy, Marx arrived at a distinctive 'epistemic outlook' in which meaning, truth, and knowledge are determined in and through people's everyday social practices. I go on to demonstrate that each of the three orthodox interpretations of Marx's account of need violates that outlook, positing forms of knowledge, meaning, and/or truth that constitute exactly the kind of timeless philosophising that Marx rejected.

4.1 Marx on need: three interpretations

To reach those conclusions, my starting point is to outline the three prevailing interpretations of Marx's account of need². I begin, therefore, with *psychologism*, according to which Marx held that needs – firstly – are psychological drives; and – secondly – that needs vary historically³. According to this view, to have a need is to be gripped by some motive force, directed towards some object or activity. Such drives, furthermore, are stimulated socially and develop historically: they are engendered in different ways by social-historical forces specific to each historical context, thus evolving through time⁴, whilst themselves playing an important role in the process of historical change⁵.

² My threefold categorisation reflects a similar division in interpretations of Marx's account of human nature (Byron, 2016).

³ Psychologistic interpreters include Braybrooke, 1998b; Raekstad, 2018; Soper, 1981; Springborg, 1981

⁴ Raekstad, 2018; Soper, 1981: 38–72; Springborg, 1981: 102–104

⁵ Raekstad, 2018; Springborg, 1981: 101–102

Psychologistic interpretations have their roots in traditional scientific Marxism, and the supposition that Marx, in his so-called ‘mature’ works, shifted from Hegelian philosophising to the ‘science’ of historical materialism⁶. For Marxism to constitute such a science it must – as the story goes – be value-free⁷, leading to the claim that normative uses of the term ‘need’ should be ascribed to the unscientific category of ideology and dismissed as incompatible with Marx’s ‘mature’ thought. Where that term does appear in his later work, it can, therefore, only do so in a purely empirical fashion that is compatible with Marx’s supposed scientific outlook. The result is a psychologistic conception of needs, and the distancing needs from their normative connotations.

This leads, furthermore, some of Marx’s psychologistic interpreters to posit that the needs brought about under capitalism are somehow distorted or illusory: they are, as these interpreters have it, motive forces put into people’s heads by capital for its own purposes, tricking us into patterns of behaviour that serve capital’s interests⁸. A key aim of the socialist movement, then, is to unmask and then transcend such capitalistic needs⁹. The ensuing – and durably popular – Marxist notion of ‘false’ needs thus implies a psychologistic interpretation: it suggests that when Marx talked about needs, he was talking about the twisted motives that get plugged into people’s brains by capitalistic social practices.

If, however, needs are merely psychological drives, this leads to the following problem: it becomes impossible to either critique capitalism or praise communism on the basis of need¹⁰. This, however, is clearly incongruous with the many passages where Marx does just that¹¹. Many of Marx’s interpreters thus posit – either against or alongside psychologism – an *essentialist* account of need, based on the suppositions that, firstly, needs are a normative

⁶ For discussion relating the tradition of ‘scientific Marxism’ to need, see Soper 1981: 20–37; Springborg, 1981: 100–105. For broader discussion, see Althusser, 2005, 2015; Gouldner, 1980; Holloway, 2015. For an alternative approach not rooted in orthodox scientific Marxism, see Raekstad, 2018

⁷ Sayers, 1998: 111–116; Soper, 1981: 31–33

⁸ See, for instance, Marcuse, 2002: 3–20

⁹ Springborg, 1981: 5–17

¹⁰ Soper, 1981: 91

¹¹ See, for instance, EPM: 304; MECW, 5: 289; MECW, 28: 451; MECW, 24: 87

concept grounded in human nature; and secondly, that such human nature – and the ensuing needs – are universal and transhistorical¹².

Essentialist accounts tend to begin by identifying a perfectionist, humanist strand in Marx's early work, drawing in particular on the theory of alienation found in the so-called 'economic and philosophical' manuscripts¹³, a text that contains – so the story goes – Marx's most explicit and thoroughgoing presentation of his account of needs. In that presentation, Marx appears quite happy to make reference to 'human', 'intrinsic', 'true', and 'essential' nature¹⁴, and on the basis of such passages, authors have argued that the 'young' Marx had a view of human nature that is transhistorical (at least in part); that Marx deployed that transhistorical account as a normative standard; and that a key component of that account is a set of needs grounded in human nature¹⁵. But whilst essentialist interpreters have agreed that Marx endorsed a transhistorical conception of human nature and need in this 'early' period, they often disagree about his later thought. Some suggest, for instance, that Marx went on to abandon his early essentialism¹⁶; others, by contrast, cast no aspersions on Marx's 'mature' work, focusing solely on the 'young' Marx¹⁷; whilst others – more controversially – suggest that Marx never deserted his early essentialism¹⁸.

The problem both psychologism and essentialism face, however, is that Marx ostensibly attributed to needs both normativity and historicity: that needs have some sort of normative status, but *also* evolve historically. Interpreters have often squared this circle by attributing to Marx multiple different conceptions of need, conceptions that either occupy distinct phases in his thought¹⁹ or which are concurrent throughout his work but operate autonomously²⁰.

¹² Essentialists include Chitty, 1993; Geras, 1983; Hughes, 2000; Leopold, 2007. See also Braybrooke, 1998b; Leiss, 1979; Springborg, 1981: 94–117

¹³ MECW, 3: 211–228; EPM: 270–282

¹⁴ EPM: 275–277, 296–296, 317, 332–333

¹⁵ Chitty, 1993; Hughes, 2000; Leiss, 1979; Leopold, 2007: 223–245; Miller D, 1976: 32; Springborg, 1981: 94–100

¹⁶ Leiss, 1979; Springborg, 1981: 94–117

¹⁷ Chitty, 1993; Hughes, 2000; Leopold, 2007

¹⁸ Geras, 1983

¹⁹ Leiss, 1979; Springborg, 1981

²⁰ Braybrooke, 1998b; Hamilton, 2003: 53–62; Soper, 1981

Against this, however, is a final strand of interpretation: namely, *historical humanism*²¹, which adopts from essentialism the contention that needs are a normative concept grounded in human nature; whilst also maintaining – like psychologism – that needs vary historically²². To develop such an account, historical humanists have attacked traditional frames of interpretation, arguing that they rest on harsh fact/value, mind/body, and nature/culture binaries that Marx repudiated²³. By abandoning those traditional frames and returning to a suite of concepts which Marx supposedly derived from Hegel, those theorists attempt to make sense of Marx’s scattered comments on need without any unnecessary bifurcation²⁴. Drawing on seemingly similar contrasts made by Marx and Hegel between humans and non-human animals, historical humanists posit – in particular – that Marx adopted a Hegelian (and Feuerbachian) conception of human ‘species-being’ characterised by a uniquely human capacity for conscious labour²⁵. Whilst animals, as Marx supposedly claims, have needs that follow directly from their natural constitution, and respond to those needs in an immediate and unmediated fashion, humans distinctively interject their conscious will between their needs and the object of satisfaction²⁶. Thus human beings (and supposedly only human beings²⁷), are able to direct their interrelationship with nature according to conscious intentions, transforming their external environment, and thus – as Marx puts it – humanising nature²⁸.

That transformation is not, however, a one-way street, since in radically altering their world via their labour, human beings also – so the argument goes – transform their *own* nature. Rather than viewing human nature as a hardy, timeless, immutable inner core, the historical humanists present that nature as inseparably entangled with the world around us. The result is

²¹ The phrase ‘historical humanism’ is from Sayers, 1998

²² Historical humanists include Benton, 1988; Fraser I, 1998, 2000; Heller, 1978; Sayers, 1998, 2011. Closely related accounts include Hamilton, 2003: 53–62; Soper, 1981

²³ Sayers, 1998

²⁴ Fraser I, 1998, 2000; Heller, 1978; Sayers, 1998, 2011; Stillman, 1983

²⁵ Benton, 1988; Chitty, 1993; Fraser I, 1998: 45–63, 143–147, 165–168; Heller, 1978: 40–44; Sayers, 2011: 15–18

²⁶ EPM: 276–277, 337; CAP: 283–284

²⁷ For discussion and critique, see Benton, 1988

²⁸ EPM: 301–302; GI: 46–51

a dynamic cycle whereby humans shape the world via their labour, and that world in turn shapes human beings²⁹, leading to the historical transformation of both elements. And what is more, needs – says the historical humanist – play an important role in that cycle: labour, they contend, is itself motivated by need; in labouring to meet needs, humans transform the world; and in transforming the world humans also transform themselves, generating new needs, and beginning the cycle once again³⁰.

What follows from this analysis is a complex – and distinctively Hegelian and dialectical³¹ – picture of the normative nature of need that combines both immanent and teleological elements. Historical humanists are clear, firstly, that the normativity of needs evolves along with our changing social-historical circumstances³². That historical specificity should not, however, be confused with some form of radical social constructionism: such an interpretation would incorrectly view historical humanism through the lens of a traditional nature/culture binary, concluding – as a result – that the denial of timeless ‘human’ or ‘natural’ needs is equivalent to the endorsement of a radical relativism. Against this, historical humanists emphasise that Marx saw the natural and socially developed aspects of need existing together in a dialectical unity. Needs are thus, for the historical humanist, always both universal and particular, with neither aspect existing in abstraction from the other³³. Marx’s alleged dialecticism appears, furthermore, in another feature ubiquitously – though not universally³⁴ – ascribed to him by the historical humanists: namely, his supposed teleology. Those authors thus attribute to Marx a Hegelian dialectical progression of needs

²⁹ EPM: 275-276, 296-297, 336-337; GI: 103; MECW, 28: 418; CAP: 283-284. For discussion see Heller, 1978: 40-44; Lebowitz, 2003: 179-184, 2010: 47-64; Sayers, 1998: 65-68, 149-165, 2011: 14-31

³⁰ Benton, 1988; Hamilton, 2003: 54; Sayers, 1998: 65-68, 152

³¹ The nature of Hegelian dialectics is itself contested, but broadly consists of the notion that history involves the movement of consecutive contradictions whose succession constitutes a form of teleological progress. It has, however, been persuasively argued that the association between Hegelian dialectics and Marx’s work has more to do with Engels, and Engels’s posthumous framing of that work, than it has to do with Marx. For discussion, see Carver, 1998: 169-172, 2002, 2015a, 2018: 63-66; Cleaver, 1979: 30-32, 2019: 90-91; Roberts, 2018: 9-12, 208-222; Stedman Jones, 2016: 191-194. See also section 5.2.2.

³² Fraser I, 1998: 154-159, 2000; Heller, 1978: 74-81; Sayers, 1998: 125-130

³³ Fraser I, 1998, 2000; Hamilton, 2003: 21-62; Sayers, 1998: 149-168

³⁴ See, for instance, Sayers, 2019

through history, a progression that culminates in some final reconciliation with human ‘species being’ under communism³⁵.

We have, therefore, three interpretations of Marx on need that seemingly paint very different pictures: for one, that picture is Marx the historical materialist and scientist; for another, it is Marx the essentialist and humanist; and for the last, it is Marx the dialectician and disciple of Hegel. The central claim I make in this chapter, however, is that despite their seeming differences, all those approaches rest on a shared set of presuppositions; that those presuppositions are flawed; that consequently, these authors make a series of different but related interpretative errors; and that therefore these three interpretations must be rejected.

4.2 Reading Marx

To make that case, I turn now to the first flawed presupposition, which concerns reading strategy: the assumptions one makes about Marx as an author, about his writings, and about what is valuable in them; the methods used to select, read, and draw meaning from those writings; and the interpretative frames through which that meaning is ascribed. My claim in this section is that the three interpretations outlined above each adopt, in their own way, the same orthodox reading strategy, and that that strategy has led those interpreters astray. Having rejected that orthodox reading strategy, I then offer my own alternative, an alternative that underpins the account I go on to offer in chapters 5-7.

4.2.1 *How not to read Marx*

I begin by outlining the problematic orthodox reading strategy as a series of standard interpretive assumptions. The first of these is the assumption of trans-contextual principles, according to which Marx’s interpreters discern from his various writings some overarching system or doctrine, the main merit of which is that it contains a set of concepts, principles, relations, etc. that correspond (in some meaningful way) to an underlying sociological, normative, metaphysical, and/or material reality, and is thus (in some trans-contextual sense) ‘true’ or ‘right’³⁶. Different theorists have, of course, posited various truths that Marx espoused, or ways in which he was right: for some, Marx’s main offering is an account of underlying socio-economic structures and future trajectories; for others, it is a metaphysical-

³⁵ Fraser I, 1998: 143, 2000; Hamilton, 2003: 58; Heller, 1978: 44–48, 125–130

³⁶ Carver, 1998: 24–42, 2018; Cleaver, 1979: 3–43; Roberts, 2018: 1–16, 2019

cum-logical picture of the motion of all human history; for others still, it is an alternative economic orthodoxy underpinned by a theory of crisis; for yet more others, it is a set of timeless, universal normative principles; and so on. Despite, however, their obvious divergences, what unites all these pictures is a belief that what matters in Marx, and what one should take from his work, is some new, true and/or right way of seeing the world, to replace the old, false and/or wrong one.

That belief, crucially, is detectable in the interpretations outlined in section 4.1, each of which attempts to extract from Marx's writings some doctrinal theory that characteristically contains a cluster of trans-contextual, timeless, generally true principles-about-need. It is in this sense, then, that I characterise all of these interpretations as *theorisations* of need. Essentialists, for instance, proffer a set of universal normative standards derived from an account of human nature; historical humanists, meanwhile, posit a distinctive conception of human 'species being' and the subsequent dialectical transformation of need through history; whilst psychologists put forward a social-cum-psychological theory of social transformation, and the workings of social forces on the human mind.

In taking this tack, however, Marx's interpreters encounter an early problem: he very rarely engages in any sort of direct, unambiguous recitation of the supposed great theory. Caught up in the political to-and-fro of his time, his work is most often rhetorical and polemical rather than didactic, and his writing style is rarely literal³⁷. What is more, Marx was a prolific author who wrote many things, all of which one encounters – these days – as his 'texts': there are published works, unfinished manuscripts, newspaper and journal articles, personal correspondence, political declarations and manifestos, notebooks, and so on³⁸, as well as various 'texts' that are made up of a higgledy-piggledy patchwork of those elements. All this makes it difficult to distil from Marx's writings a clear-cut statement of the form: here is my thesis; now let us test/ apply/ invoke it³⁹. And this is particularly true of needs, since Marx's reference to that concept are scattered⁴⁰, never systematic, and usually made in the context of

³⁷ Carver, 1998: 24–42, 2002; Chambers, 2014: 84–88; Cleaver, 1979: 3–66; Roberts, 2018: 1–17

³⁸ Carver, 1998: 163–167

³⁹ Chambers, 2014: 84–88. Arguably, the *Theses on Feuerbach* is an exception, though these were notes-to-self not intended for publication.

⁴⁰ Lebowitz, 1979: 349

critique rather than exposition, resulting in a tangle of sideways references and allusions the meaning of which has often been durably ambiguous. Consequently, anything that one might call Marx's 'theory of need' appears to be buried deep beneath layers of seeming obfuscation. Given this, Marx's interpreters have assumed the job of sorting through, unpicking, and then recombining Marx's vast *oeuvre* into some compressed account of his great theory. The goal, then, is to uncover Marx's hidden principles, and then elucidate said principles – in a helpfully explicit fashion – on Marx's behalf. And in pursuit of that goal, Marx's interpreters have made a series of additional interpretative assumptions: there is, for instance, the assumption of detachability, in which the political engagements that suffuse Marx's writings are interpreted merely as rhetoric, illustration, and/or application, and thus safely separable from the general principles on which they (supposedly) supervene⁴¹. Next one finds the assumption of coherence: that all Marx's various 'texts' – which include many different things written in many different ways for many different audiences – all supervene on the *same* underlying basic principles. This assumption allows the interpreter to stitch together a wide range of valuable titbits discerned in comments across numerous writings into an explicit, coherent, and tidy whole. And where elements appear to be missing, the assumption of coherence allows the interpreter to fill any gaps by plumbing the archive: scouring that vast resource of available material for new jigsaw pieces, picking up such pieces from here-there-and-everywhere, and drawing them all together to complete the neat theoretical picture⁴². To facilitate that process, one finds the assumptions of literalism and of authenticity. In the case of literalism, the interpreter looks for those rare occasions where Marx appears to explicitly recount his theory – such as, to take one notable example, the 1859 preface⁴³ – and then places enormous emphasis on those recountings as the interpretative key to the rest of Marx⁴⁴. And in the case of authenticity, the interpreter assumes that the Marx one encounters through wrestling with this textual tangle is, in some authentic sense, the man himself, 'The Real Marx'⁴⁵.

⁴¹ See, for instance, Mandel's introduction to *Capital: Volume One* (CAP: 16).

⁴² Carver, 1998: 163–180

⁴³ MECW, 29: 261–265

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Cohen, 1978: 1–27

⁴⁵ Carver, 2017, 2018: 1–11

However, there has been a growing apprehension that something has gone deeply wrong with those sorts of readings⁴⁶. Trouble emerges in the following way: if – as the above reading strategy presumes – what one looks for in Marx’s work are certain abstract principles and general laws, then the principles and laws one ends up distilling from that work are entirely autonomous of the political struggles which Marx was deeply engaged in throughout his life. There is thus an issue of biography here, for the moment that one imagines that Marx has hit upon some sort of trans-contextual doctrine that operates over-and-above actual political practice, then it becomes difficult to explain why he embedded himself so thoroughly in the day-to-day political struggles of the 19th century radical socialist movement. If, for instance, one were to suppose – in the manner of, say, traditional historical materialism – that Marx uncovered certain transcendent principles that govern all social processes, then the socialist project cannot fundamentally challenge the underlying laws that produce capitalism as a social form. Consequently, any radical revolutionary challenge to capitalism becomes nothing more than screaming into the wind⁴⁷. Alternatively, if one paints Marx as a radical humanist offering an ethical vision of the good life, then his approach becomes little more than a detached utopianism. Those outcomes represent, therefore, exactly the sorts of political dead-ends Marx railed against⁴⁸. The resulting interpretative paradox is that under the above reading, Marx’s supposed theoretical innovations become not just detachable from his extensive political interventions; instead, the two become directly contradictory⁴⁹.

There is, then, a puzzle concerning how a picture of Marx as primarily a theoretician, philosopher, or scientist fits with the biography of a radical revolutionary. Solving that puzzle requires a reassessment of how we picture Marx, and how we engage with his various writings. That reassessment begins by framing Marx first-and-foremost as a political *activist*, rather than a political philosopher or thinker or scientist, thus viewing his works as a series of political interventions rather than primarily as objects of academic study⁵⁰. The purpose of

⁴⁶ Carver, 1998, 2018; Chambers, 2014: 83–108; Cleaver, 1979, 2019; Johnson S, 2019; Kitching, 1988, 2002b; Roberts, 2019; Rojahn, 2002

⁴⁷ Leading to the common contention that Marx’s account is anti-political: see chapter 1, footnote 8.

⁴⁸ See, for instance, TF: 3-5; PP: 206-212; CM: 497-519

⁴⁹ Cleaver, 1979: 3–66

⁵⁰ This reading is indebted to Carver, 1998, 2018; Cleaver, 1979, 2019; Kitching, 1988, 2002b; Roberts, 2018, 2019

Marx's works, therefore, was not primarily theoretical explanation from the standpoint of the detached observer, but political advocacy from the standpoint of the committed campaigner. One cannot, then, read Marx as if he were an academic writing for an academic audience in a closed intellectual world insulated from everyday politics. Instead, one's starting point must be that his various writings are themselves forms of political activism, conducted by a political actor deeply embedded in struggles against prevailing powers and orthodoxies which were rarely passive opponents, as well as in an ongoing battle for pre-eminence within the socialist movement itself. Marx's principal goal was not, therefore, the construction of a trans-contextual doctrine, but instead the efficacy of his political activism.

Furthermore, Marx's political interventions had numerous targets, written in the context of a pattern of political rough-and-tumble that was constantly changing⁵¹. Over the course of his life he confronted numerous different rivals, with those confrontations taking place through numerous different writings – letters, published works, articles, etc. – each with different stylistic demands and intended audiences. All of that, however, must get smoothed over if one is to produce – as the aforementioned reading strategy demands – Marx's singular authoritative voice and overarching system⁵². The problem, however, is that if one takes seriously the primary importance of Marx's activism, then detaching some generic theory from that activism will drain his writings of what – for Marx – was their core purpose. This calls into question, therefore, tidy-minded orthodox assumptions concerning detachability and coherence.

This brings us back to Marx's often baffling literary style. An emphasis on Marx's politics helps one to remember, firstly, that Marx and his contemporaries were attempting to conduct a radical political movement against a background of repressive state regimes, presenting them with practical barriers – such as widespread censorship – alongside considerable personal dangers. As a result, their political programme was necessarily conducted in a somewhat coded, disguised, and satirically inverted fashion: Marx early philosophising, for instance, was – in part at least – necessitated by context, given that the political positioning and jostling for influence going on at the time could not be conducted in overt political language, whilst philosophy in general – and Hegelianism in particular – were respectable

⁵¹ Carver, 1998: 167

⁵² Carver, 1998: 163–180; Kitching, 1988: 7–10

enough, and obfuscatory enough, to get past the censors⁵³. That context – alongside Marx’s own proclivities, and his distinctively political objectives – resulted in writings that are primarily subversions and provocations, rather than didactic expositions.

Those subversions and provocations, however, can be easily missed when extracted from context, and are often disguised by Marx’s extensive, elaborate, and often subtle deployment of parodic imitation, satire, and irony. Marx was a master at setting his rivals up for a fall, a strategy he regularly deployed against his various opponents: aping their methods and manner of presentation, spinning out theories in terms which they would have to accept only to lead them by the hand to a cruel twist-of-the-knife at the end of long period of seemingly innocent exposition⁵⁴. These observations call into question assumptions about Marx’s literalism, since attempts to scour the archive for nuggets of literal exposition seem – under this new light – to be missing Marx’s central (politically-charged, subversive, provocative) points⁵⁵. And more problematically still, in the quest for literalism, Marx’s interpreters risk mistaking parody and satire for their coveted exposition: indeed, the problem with Marx’s often elaborate parodies is that they can be all too convincing, leading his interpreters to detach the parody from its subversive context, and to end up taking it literally.

The search for Marx’s underlying expository doctrine has, furthermore, taken place through the lens of various orthodox interpretative frames, frames whose origins are as much to do with the history of Marxology and Marxism as they are to do with Marx himself⁵⁶. It must be remembered that Marx was a comparatively marginal figure in his own lifetime, with his rise from hitherto little-read radical revolutionary to the originator of a globe-spanning ideological movement taking place posthumously, and primarily under the guidance of other figures with their own agendas⁵⁷. And as Marx’s influence grew over the course of the early 20th century, his work and thought became inextricably connected with the global political

⁵³ Carver, 2002, 2018: 125–126, 2019b; Leopold, 2007: 1–16

⁵⁴ A strategy widely deployed, for instance, in Marx’s critique of political economy (Carver, 1998: 7–20, 63–86, 2018: 131–3; Harvey, 2018: 92–93).

⁵⁵ An argument levelled, in particular, against the outgrown influence of the 1859 ‘Preface’ (Carver, 1998: 173–173; Chambers, 2014: 83–88).

⁵⁶ Carver, 2017

⁵⁷ Carver, 1998: 169–172, 2002, 2018: 63–66; Cleaver, 1979: 31; Roberts, 2018: 9–11; Stedman Jones, 2016: 191–193

ideologies that took his name. The result was that Marx increasingly took on the problematic role of putative doctrinal authority⁵⁸. Consequently, debates over ‘what Marx said’ have found themselves intimately interwoven with the fraught political history of the Marxist movement, a movement in which the textual foundation of doctrinal truths had enormously tangible stakes. The exercise of ‘interpreting Marx’ thus has its own complex tradition and history, and this has produced a series of different readings, and thus numerous different ‘Marxs’ – the dialectical materialist, the socialist scientist, the radical humanist, and so on – which his interpreters now must contend with⁵⁹. All this inevitably shapes – whether one likes it or not – how Marx is published and read, determining the questions, problems, assumptions, and rival positions one has to navigate; how one approaches Marx’s writings; the particular writings one engages with; and so on. Thus the various interpretative attempts to ‘clean-up’ Marx’s (supposed) expository doctrine from its (supposed) obfuscations never really begin by – as it were – reading Marx clean.

What is more, Marx’s period of outgrown doctrinal significance has resulted in an ongoing preoccupation with finding the ‘true Marx’, a preoccupation which assumes there is such a ‘true Marx’ there to be found, and that *that* Marx – in some significant sense – matters⁶⁰. This search for such a ‘true Marx’ has become tangled up with the necessity of finding some authoritative singular voice to act as a doctrinal touchpoint for those who call or have called themselves ‘Marxist’ (or, indeed, anti-Marxist). The consequence is that whilst we are happy to borrow, update, revise, and otherwise take the good and leave the bad from other political thinkers, with Marx the game has tended to be about ‘rescuing’ him from misinterpretation, or – alternatively – finally condemning him to the dustbin of history. The upshot of all this is to problematise both the plausibility and the purpose of the search for an authentic Marx.

One might think, however, that despite all these difficulties, one at least has the reliable touchpoint of the words on the page, words in Marx’s own hand that allow some direct interface between us the readers and Marx the author. But even here problems persist, since that interface itself is a constructed one, with that construction taking place in and through the aforementioned interpretive wrangling. This applies, firstly, to presumptions about which

⁵⁸ Carver, 2017, 2018: 4–8; Stedman Jones, 2016: 1–6

⁵⁹ Carver, 1998: 234–236, 2017, 2018: 1–11; Stedman Jones, 2016: 1–6

⁶⁰ Leopold, 2007: 1–16

writings from Marx's vast *oeuvre* are taken to constitute the canon. Marx was, after all, a prolific writer, and rather than confront this mass of material blindly, interpreters tend to begin with standardised lists of must-reads, lists which are themselves products of various interpretative orthodoxies⁶¹. Regarding need, for instance, the sporadic nature of Marx's writing on the topic has led interpreters to home in on a handful of famous passages, especially those found in the 'economic and philosophical' manuscripts and the 'German ideology' manuscripts⁶² (though also occasionally the *Grundrisse* and, more occasionally still, *Capital*), whilst tending to neglect – for no obvious reason – relevant discussions found in other texts⁶³.

What is more, those interpretative frames shape not just which of Marx's many writings we end up reading, but the words on the page themselves: one might note, for instance, how orthodox interpretative assumptions have shaped the way Marx's texts are standardly translated⁶⁴. More worrying still, several of the supposed 'works' that make up the orthodox canon are themselves editorial artifices, pieced together long after Marx's death under the pervasive influence of then-prevailing interpretative frames. We find ourselves encountering, for instance, the *The German Ideology*, the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and the *Grundrisse* as 'books' that represent Marx's 'thought'. These were, however, never 'books' until Marx's posthumous editors made them so, and the passage from notebooks to 'manuscript' to 'book' has often been a winding one loaded with its own controversy⁶⁵.

4.2.2 *Need in the 'German ideology' manuscripts*

At this point, my argument shifts from the general to the particular, building on my broad-strokes critique of the reading strategy adopted by orthodox interpreters through a close examination of an exemplar. As I outlined above, those interpreters have – given the lack of any singular didactic presentation of Marx's account of need – focused on a handful of

⁶¹ Carver, 1998: 163–181, 2017, 2018: 126–129

⁶² Two texts considered to contain Marx's most fulsome examination of needs (Benton, 1988; Chitty, 1993; Hughes, 2000; Soper, 1981: 31).

⁶³ Such as the *Poverty of Philosophy* (PP) or the "'Notes" on Adolph Wagner' (WAG).

⁶⁴ Carver, 1998: 146–162

⁶⁵ Carver, 2002, 2010, 2017, 2018: 156–165; Carver and Blank, 2014a; Chambers, 2014: 88–93; Johnson S, 2019; Rojahn, 2002; Saito, 2017: 27–29; Stedman Jones, 2016: 191–194

famous passages, passages that supposedly offer some central insight into his overarching theorisation. Whilst I cannot trawl through all those passages, showing in each case how orthodox reading strategies have influenced Marx's interpreters, what I will do is zero in on one of the most famous of those famous passages. By using that passage as an exemplar, therefore, my aim is to demonstrate how orthodox reading strategies have led Marx's interpreters astray.

I start with the exemplar passage itself, which is located in the famous 'Feuerbach chapter' of Marx and Engels's 'German ideology' manuscripts⁶⁶. The passage begins as follows:

We have to make a start with the Germans, who are devoid of premises, by setting forth the first premise of all human existence, and therefore of all history, namely the premises that men have to be in a position to live in order to be able to "make history". But living requires above all else eating and drinking, shelter, clothing and yet other things. The first historical act is therefore the production of the means to satisfy those needs, the production of material life itself, and indeed this is a historical act, a founding condition of all history, which must be fulfilled today, on a daily and hourly basis, just as it was thousands of years ago, simply for men to stay alive⁶⁷.

Marx and Engels then argue that the 'action of satisfying' these needs, and the 'instrument acquired' for their satisfaction, 'leads to new needs', before – somewhat curiously – labelling this 'production of new needs' as yet another 'first historical act'⁶⁸. This is followed by a third historical act: the propagation of the human race – 'making other men' – through the 'relation between man and wife, elders and children, the family'⁶⁹. As needs continue to expand, this leads finally to a fourth historical moment: the establishment of 'new social

⁶⁶ My references to the 'German ideology' manuscripts are drawn from two sources. I use Carver and Blank's (2014b) presentation where possible (referring to this as 'GI') due to problems with other presentations of the text (Carver and Blank, 2014a). Where this is not possible, I use the relevant MECW edition (5).

⁶⁷ GI: 63

⁶⁸ GI: 67

⁶⁹ GI: 67-69, emphasis as in original

relations' extending beyond the family, relations that themselves depend on a 'mode of social interaction' that varies historically⁷⁰.

A number of interpreters have seized on this passage as evidence that Marx had an underlying, philosophised set of trans-contextual principles-about-need. Geras, for instance, cites this passage as proof that Marx 'had something to say about universal or permanent human needs'⁷¹: and indeed, Marx and Engels's identification of a cluster of needs necessary for 'human existence' appears to support that conclusion. Other interpreters have taken a different tack, arguing that the succession of 'historical acts' points to a something like a dialectical progression of human needs through history⁷². But whilst they characterise the passage in different ways, Marx's interpreters on need have unanimously supposed that one can glean from it certain timeless theoretical truths, truths that constitute Marx's supposed overarching theorisation of need.

There are several issues with that interpretation. To see why, note first that the 'book' from which this passage is drawn is a classic example of the editorial 'scissors-and-paste'⁷³ construction I alluded to earlier. What we know as '*The German Ideology*' began life as a set of discontinuous scribbles, crossings-out, doodles, and notes-to-self, written largely as a series of *ad hominem* polemics against political opponents now largely forgotten. It was not until the mid-1920s that these manuscripts were resuscitated and then assembled into a 'book' with 'chapters' for the first time. It was as such a 'book' – first published in 1932 – that these manuscripts became known to a wider audience under the invented title '*The German Ideology*'⁷⁴.

Problematic in all this, however, are the disjoints and editorial artifices that emerge in the transition from a series of discontinuous, scattered, and often baffling manuscripts and fragments into a smooth-text 'book'⁷⁵. In making such a transition, Marx's posthumous

⁷⁰ GI: 71-73

⁷¹ Geras, 1983: 69

⁷² Fraser I, 2000; Heller, 1978: 41-42; Sayers, 1998: 65-68; Springborg, 1981: 100-101; Stillman, 1983: 301

⁷³ Carver, 2018: 24

⁷⁴ For a detailed history of the text, see Carver and Blank, 2014a

⁷⁵ Carver, 2010, 2015b, 2019b; Carver and Blank, 2014a, 2014b; Johnson S, 2019; Stedman Jones, 2016: 191-194

editors have engaged in a number of questionable editorial practices: cutting and pasting between various passages; the assignment of the whole book into three ‘chapters’ and ordering of those chapters into ‘sections’; the shifting of that material into a new, invented, non-chronological order; the invention of titles for sections, chapters, and indeed the ‘book’ itself; and so on. The ensuing manufacture and aggrandisement of the ‘German ideology’ – especially the prized ‘Feuerbach chapter’⁷⁶ in which this passage is found – has resulted in a ‘book’ that is taken to offer key insights into Marx’s early ‘thought’⁷⁷. This is, however, despite the fact that its contents were never intended to be published together⁷⁸; despite their primarily polemic style and political intent⁷⁹; despite the questionable relationship between Marx and Engels as joint authors⁸⁰; and despite Marx’s somewhat dismissive comments on the original manuscripts⁸¹.

The cumulative weight of these arguments is to call into question attempts to draw from these manuscripts some neat expression of Marx’s finished, doctrinal theorisation of need. Given this, I will now return to and reappraise the exemplar passage in light of the above arguments. That reappraisal begins by noting that this passage contains an apparent – though overlooked – contradiction. Having presented the familiar story of needs and the various ‘historical acts’, Marx and Engels go on to argue that only after those four ‘moments’ does consciousness come about, stating – furthermore – that that consciousness is a ‘social product’, emerging from ‘the need, the necessity, of social interaction with other men’⁸². They then go on to present a second historical story, this time of the development of consciousness. This proceeds through various stages, culminating in a ‘pure’ consciousness that imagines it can ‘emancipate itself from the world’, and thus exist as ‘something other than the consciousness of existing practice’⁸³. That consciousness, in other words, has foolishly convinced itself that it can transcend the social conditions that produce it, existing in an imagined ‘pure’ form

⁷⁶ Carver and Blank, 2014b: 1–31; Johnson S, 2019

⁷⁷ For examples of such an interpretation, see Churbanov in MECW, 5: xiii-xxvi; McLellan, 2000: 175

⁷⁸ Johnson S, 2019: 2

⁷⁹ Carver and Blank, 2014b: 7–9; Johnson S, 2019

⁸⁰ Carver, 1998: 168–169, 2010; Saito, 2021

⁸¹ MECW, 29: 264

⁸² GI: 72-75

⁸³ GI:79

rather than as a ‘social product’. Those references to ‘pure’ consciousness are clearly derogatory and directed towards Marx and Engels’s Young Hegelian interlocutors. The problem that follows, however, is that if consciousness is indeed a social product, and if any attempt at this kind of ‘pure’ theory is delusional, then one might wonder where exactly the authors themselves are speaking from. If consciousness is socially embedded in the way they suggest here, then how can they claim knowledge of the kind of pre-social, transhistorical theorisation of need with which they began this discussion? Marx and Engels, it would appear, have hoisted themselves by their own petard.

We can make sense of this by viewing the passage as an ironic showing-up of the Young Hegelians via parody of their methodology. Marx and Engels’s apparent self-contradiction can thus be construed as an attempt to reveal the absurdity of that methodology. Indeed, the whole passage is jarringly Hegelian in its expression: it talks about the gradual evolution of history through theoretically devised historic ‘moments’, adopting a manner of speaking with a strongly Hegelian flavour not widely repeated in the rest of the ‘German ideology’ manuscripts. By contrast, those manuscripts are crammed with irony, parody, and sardonic and sarcastic humour⁸⁴. Orthodox interpreters have failed to properly account for the oddity of the voice adopted here, thus taking the passage – and its Hegelian overtones – quite literally. My contention, by contrast, is that Marx and Engels are aping the Young Hegelian’s method and style of presentation for the purpose of parody.

Marx and Engels signal their parodic intent in a comment which was initially positioned immediately prior to this passage, before being crossed out. There they state there that ‘[t]he reason we nevertheless examine so called history so closely here is because the Germans’ – aka the Young Hegelians – ‘are used to the words history and historical representing all things possible’; all things possible, that is, ‘except reality’⁸⁵. What this suggests is that the discussion which follows is not an attempt by Marx and Engels to offer their own grand theory of history, but a showing-up of the way in which the Young Hegelians use exactly those sorts of abstract, philosophised historical narratives in a way that detaches them from reality. Marx and Engels thus go on to present just such a story, with the crucial twist that at its climax we find Young Hegelian thought itself, in the guise of ‘pure’ theory. The intent,

⁸⁴ See, for instance, MECW, 5: 152-160, 278-281

⁸⁵ GI: 60-62

therefore, is to reveal a contradiction in Young Hegelian thought: that in assuming a detached, timeless theoretical perspective whilst simultaneously attempting to offer a grand, ‘historical’ theory-of-everything, the Young Hegelians inevitably end up excluding at least one element, namely the thinking and theorising of the philosopher themselves. Thus the argument Marx and Engels make here – and which I examine further in section 4.3.1 – is that the theorist cannot consistently posit this sort of all-encompassing ‘historical’ grand narrative.

That interpretation, furthermore, sheds new light on Marx and Engels’s references to need. To see why, it is important to read this passage in light of some commentary on Feuerbach that immediately precedes it. Significantly, Marx and Engels’s discussion of the four ‘historical acts’ dovetails a passage in which they lambast Feuerbach for his detached, philosophic form of materialism⁸⁶. Notably, however, orthodox presentations of the ‘German ideology’ manuscripts split that preceding passage from the discussion of need, interposing an invented section heading, and thereby implying that the passage on need constitutes a discrete discussion⁸⁷. The effect is to encourage the reader to take that passage to constitute a freestanding, seemingly quite literal exposition of Marx’s ‘thought on need’. In reality, however, the manuscripts themselves possess no such section break or clear division. Thus despite the standard presentation imposed on Marx and Engels’s manuscripts by later editors, there is nothing in the text itself to suggest that those two discussions are anything but continuous⁸⁸.

It is worth, therefore, exploring how the meaning of the text alters when one puts those two passages back together⁸⁹. Marx and Engels, it turns out, immediately precede their comments

⁸⁶ For reasons I explore in section 4.3, Marx and Engels’s opinion of Feuerbach’s ‘materialism’ was famously mixed (Leopold, 2007: 190–195; Saito, 2017: 51–54; Stedman Jones, 2016: 124–129).

⁸⁷ See, for instance, MECW, 5: 41.

⁸⁸ The original manuscripts were written on large printer sheets (*Bogen*) that the authors sub-divided into four smaller pages (*Seite*). These sheets and pages were numbered firstly by Engels, and then later (and differently) by Marx (Carver and Blank, 2014b: 1–31). The discussion of the ‘historical acts’ begins on the ‘page’ Marx numbered 11, and there is a fairly continuous line of thinking from that point which concludes roughly on the page Marx numbered 16. It is common to treat 11–16 as a discrete ‘section’: my argument here, however, challenges that treatment.

⁸⁹ My method here parallels recent work by S. Johnson (2019).

on need by stating that Feuerbach ‘conceives of men not in their given social connection, not under current conditions of life’⁹⁰. He thus ‘never arrives at actually existing men, but rather stops with the abstraction “man”’⁹¹. The consequence of this is a recourse to an abstract form of theorising that detaches the theorist from the everyday experience of those ‘actually existing men’. And that existence includes, crucially, their neediness: as Marx and Engels go on to argue, if Feuerbach were to be confronted by ‘a heap of scrofulous, overworked and consumptive starvelings instead of healthy men’, he would be ‘forced to take refuge in the “higher view”’, the ‘ideal “reconciliation of the species”’, thus ‘relapsing into idealism precisely at the point where the communist materialist sees the necessity and at the same time the condition for a transformation of industry as well as the social structure’⁹². Having made that argument, Marx and Engels quickly turn to the passage on need and the ‘historical acts’. My suggestion is that those comments on need should be read as part of a continuous argument or (more minimally) a trail of thought. If this is correct, that passage becomes an attempt to further highlight the ways in which the philosophy of the Young Hegelians detaches the social critic from the quite real suffering going on right in front of them.

This sheds new light on the ‘historical acts’: the comments about being in a ‘position to live in order to be able to “make history”’, ‘eating and drinking, shelter, clothing and yet other things’ and the necessity of the ‘means to satisfy those needs’ should not be read as a set of philosophical claims about human needs, but a pointed comment on the sort of important everyday things that German idealist philosophy would – by its very nature – ignore⁹³. What the Young Hegelians had forgotten, in other words, was that the philosopher themselves had to be in a ‘position to live’ before they could ‘make’ their philosophical ‘histor[ies]’. Read this way, the passage on need serves to hammer home and expand the earlier criticism levelled against Feuerbach. The argument, therefore, is that rather than starting with abstract philosophical accounts of ‘man’ and/or historical grand narratives, the theorist should begin with what is right before their eyes: the practical, everyday experience of needs and activity of needs-meeting. By placing exactly that activity at the start of their parodic historical

⁹⁰ GI: 68

⁹¹ GI: 69

⁹² GI: 59

⁹³ See also GI: 36, 108; MECW, 5: 289

narrative, a narrative which pointedly culminates in Young Hegelian thinking itself, Marx and Engels are highlighting their view that the theorist must not forget that their own theorising presupposes, and paradoxically has ended up ignoring, a practical everyday reality happening all around them.

My conclusion, therefore, is that by detaching this passage from its polemical context, prevailing interpretations have philosophised it into some representation of Marx's thought, doctrine, or system. By contrast, when it is read in the context of Marx's activism, and when one refuses to take for granted orthodox interpretative frames and editorial practices, the passage is revealed to be one of Marx's (and Engels's) characteristic extended parodies. And furthermore, my close analysis of this particular passage acts – I argue – as an exemplar of the various ways in which orthodox reading strategies have led Marx's interpreters astray.

4.2.3 How to read Marx

All this problematises the five orthodox interpretative assumptions outlined above. And in confronting these orthodoxies, I have also drawn the outlines of an alternative approach, an alternative that I summarise as – firstly – a *political* and as – secondly – a *Marxian* approach. Regarding the former, I have argued that Marx's interpreters must abandon attempts to crystallise his various writings on need into some doctrinal edifice, seeing his thought instead as interwoven with his political practice, and largely losing its significance, purpose, and meaning when abstracted from the context of Marx's political interventions.

Secondly, I use the term 'Marxian' to distinguish my approach both from attempts to replicate what Marx 'really thought'; and from Marxist approaches, which embed themselves in the global political ideology *Marxism*, and which are only indirectly about Marx himself. A Marxian approach, by contrast, treats Marx as just another political thinker one can look to for valuable insights, happily borrowing and updating his useful notions to address a particular problem (namely, the problem of needs), and without – as Leopold puts it – feeling the need to 'swallow (or spew out) the whole'⁹⁴. This is not to say, of course, that I will wholly eschew interpretative questions: I do, in end, have to show that my reading of Marx is a plausible one, and counter interpretations that are incompatible with my own, and which would – if left untouched – undermine my conclusions. The difference, however, is that in

⁹⁴ Leopold, 2007: 11

the Marxian approach those interpretative questions remain secondary to, as it were, the usefulness of Marx's work as a source of theoretical insights and innovations.

The end result of these shifts, as we shall see in later chapters, is a very different picture of the sort of thinker that Marx was. What is more, it is by examining Marx's work through this lens that, as I will show, Marx's promising alternative approach to needs emerges.

4.3 Marx's epistemic outlook

Before jumping ahead to that alternative, I will present my second critique of the prevailing interpretations of Marx on need: that they all attribute to Marx a form of theory and an understanding of the nature and purpose of theoretical activity that he repudiated. In doing so, I build on my earlier discussion of the 'German ideology' manuscripts: as I will argue, the rebuttal of Young Hegelian thinking contained therein would have an enormous broader significance for Marx's thought, including – crucially – his thought on need. The problem, however, is that orthodox reading strategies have obscured that significance, detaching those manuscripts from their political context and polemical intent; ignoring their unfinished nature and patchy history; and crystalising what remains into Marx's supposed great system. Having addressed and critiqued those orthodox readings, I am now in position to offer my own.

That alternative interpretation begins by placing Marx's politics front-and-centre. The 'German ideology' manuscripts were written in the context of a conflict between Marx and Young Hegelian political philosophising that had been simmering throughout the 1840s, before breaking out into what Engels described as an outright 'war' with the publication of *The Holy Family* in 1845⁹⁵. It was as part of this tit-for-tat conflict that Marx and Engels set out in 1845 to write a series of polemical pieces against their Young Hegelian opponents⁹⁶, and it is the resulting manuscripts that became '*The German Ideology*'.

⁹⁵ MECW, 4: 240

⁹⁶ Marx and Engels's principal targets were three Young Hegelian thinkers – Bruno Bauer, Stirner and (to a lesser extent) Feuerbach – and for accuracy my arguments focus on their critique of these authors, and of Young Hegelian thinking more generally. Part of that critique, however, was that whilst the Young Hegelians pursued a very different politics from the 'old' Hegelians, they nevertheless remained within their idealist assumptions, and that this made their politics ultimately nugatory. Consequently, those manuscripts posited several challenges to German idealist philosophy in general, and thus all Hegelianism (Browning, 1994; Carver, 2010, 2019b; Carver and Blank, 2014a; Johnson S, 2019).

This section re-examines those manuscripts in the context of that conflict, and in light of the critique of orthodox reading strategies I offered above. By doing so, what I show is that Marx and Engels's goal was not to displace one set of theoretical principles in favour of another, but to challenge the whole way that the Young Hegelians went about theorising. Through his engagement with, and repudiation of, Young Hegelian philosophy, Marx dismissed the notion that the path to knowledge required the theorist to see behind everyday practical realities and experiences in order to access some hidden, underlying principles or timeless 'truth'. In place of that method, Marx developed, I thus argue, his distinctive epistemic outlook⁹⁷: a radically socialised and historicised epistemology which grounded meaning, knowledge, and truth in those everyday social practices themselves. And furthermore, that outlook – as I argue here, and go on to examine in chapters 5 and 6 – had an enormous bearing on his account of needs.

4.3.1 Marx against philosophical theorisations

The authors' target in the 'German ideology' manuscripts was a certain methodical approach which was characteristic – so they claimed – of the whole swathe of Young Hegelian philosophers. That method involved a dualistic distinction between two domains: there is (1) the domain of pure reason, abstract ideas, and timeless essences; and (2) a practical world that people experience in their everyday life, full of everyday notions, and embedded in a particular social-historical context⁹⁸. Next, that method posits the explanatory dominance of domain (1) over domain (2): that socially-historically embedded activities, ideas, categories, etc. are merely embodiments, interpretations, or specifications of timeless concepts and principles⁹⁹. Furthermore, people's everyday thinking, commonplace conceptions, and so on (2) are full of illusions and distortions that obscure underlying realities (1)¹⁰⁰. And such illusions and distortions, and the ensuing gap between everyday reality (2) and the realm of

⁹⁷ I use the term 'outlook' to reflect Marx and Engels's characterisations of the ideas they developed in these manuscripts (MECW, 29: 261-265, MECW, 16: 465-477), and to distinguish my reading from attempts to extract from them Marx's finished system or overall doctrine. That outlook is thus an example of – as Carver puts it – Marx's 'thinking' at the time, rather than his finished 'thought' (Carver, 2010, 2019b; Carver and Blank, 2014b: 1-4).

⁹⁸ GI: 34-35; MECW, 5: 28-30. See also TF: 4; MECW, 38: 104

⁹⁹ GI: 35, 56-61, 186, 360-363; MECW, 5: 24, 99, 158-160, 183-4, 288-94; CM: 510-513

¹⁰⁰ TF: 3-5; MECW, 5: 281-282, 357

pure reason (1) are – to the Young Hegelians – the root cause of today’s problems¹⁰¹. They thus assign themselves the task of seeing through this everyday befuddlement, using some operation of the mind – conscious thought, logic, the manipulation of language, and so on – to tear away everyday appearances (2) and reveal some underlying principle or higher truth (1)¹⁰².

Having thus framed their philosophical method, Marx and Engels then identify a supposed paradox in Young Hegelian thinking, the crux of which is the following question: where exactly does the thinking of the theoretician themselves fit into these two domains? The answer might, of course, seem obvious: it is surely the domain of pure reason (1), since the point of theory is to see through befuddled everyday appearances (2) in order to tap into underlying principles, essences, etc. The theorist thus assumes a certain detached theoretical perspective, separating themselves out from the confused domain of everyday thinking, standing apart from that everyday world in order to analyse it and to theorise about it. However, the absurdity of such a perspective – Marx and Engels tell us – is that in standing outside the world in order to offer a theory-of-everything, such a theory inevitably excludes at least one element: the thinking mind of the theorist themselves. The problem, then, is that by presuming a point of view sufficiently distant from the world that it transcends the confusion of everyday appearance, the theorist ends up proffering theories whose explanatory power is so great that the theorist themselves must – if one is to remain consistent – fall under its domain. The end result is that such theories can only be produced when the theorist excludes themselves from the practical, everyday world they are analysing, but only succeed when the theorist is not so excluded. The claim to all-encompassing grand narratives characteristic of Young Hegelian thought is thus – say Marx and Engels – inherently self-defeating¹⁰³.

The Young Hegelians had thus paradoxically divided the world into the philosopher and the philosophised, with each domain playing by very different rules, and the latter wholly derivative of the former. In their commentary on Feuerbach, for instance, Marx and Engels argue that despite his supposed ‘materialism’, Feuerbach retains the philosophical notion that

¹⁰¹ MECW, 5: 23-24, 30

¹⁰² MECW, 5: 27-30

¹⁰³ GI: 23-30, 108-110, 152-3, 444-450. See also section 4.2.2.

the theorist stands apart from the objects of their theoretical examinations¹⁰⁴. Feuerbach is thus accused of a ‘double conception’, a ‘profane’ one that ‘describes only “the immediately apparent”’, and a ‘philosophical one’ that ‘describes the “true essence” of things’. Feuerbach thus wears, despite his supposed materialism, the ‘spectacles’ of the philosophers¹⁰⁵. And in wearing said spectacles, Feuerbach must posit – on the one hand – the radically free mind of the extra-contextual philosophising subject, and – on the other hand – the fundamentally embedded and contextually shaped philosophised object. The result – as Marx points out – is to ‘divide society into two parts’, one of which is curiously ‘superior to society’, forgetting, crucially, that even ‘the educator must himself be educated’¹⁰⁶: that the philosopher is also an everyday human being whose ideas must – like everyone else’s – come from somewhere.

The ensuing further problem was that the Young Hegelian’s philosophical methods had blunted their politics. At the heart of this political problem is the way in which the philosophical method detaches – as we saw above – the theorist from everyday practical reality. By separating out domains 1 (philosophical thinking, pure reason, eternal ideas) and 2 (everyday practical reality and experience), and by positing that everything significant there is to know about domain 2 can be explained with reference to domain 1, the theorist oddly supposes that people’s lives, activities, and experiences only matter to the extent they represent abstract philosophical categories. Everyday life is made, in other words, a mere epiphenomenon to philosophical analysis. People thus ‘only exist for one another as representatives of a universal’ only as “‘man” himself”¹⁰⁷, never as just actual people in their particular contexts and everyday lives.

The consequences of their detached theorising were, firstly, to deaden the Young Hegelian philosophers to the real-world horrors going on all around them: rather than recognise those horrors as a palpable reality that the theorist – especially the socialist revolutionary theorist – must confront, the Young Hegelian’s response was to retreat to some ‘higher view’, some abstract simulacrum that supposedly lies behind those horrors. In such an approach, say Marx

¹⁰⁴ GI: 157, see also EPM: 328-329

¹⁰⁵ GI: 46-47

¹⁰⁶ TF: 4. See also GI: 35, 44-47; MECW, 5: 109

¹⁰⁷ MECW, 5: 157

and Engels, people's actual suffering is – alarmingly – never what really matters¹⁰⁸. Next, the Young Hegelians had reduced revolutionary struggle into a battle of ideas. Given that the philosophical domain (1) explains everything one might have to say about the everyday domain (2), the concretely situated world of actual human thinking, human action, and everyday social practices never – so the story goes – moves on its own, and is always pre-empted by some change in the philosophical domain. The result is that the source of revolutionary change is, and only can be, an engagement that takes place 'in the realm of pure thought'¹⁰⁹. But the ensuing 'demand to change consciousness' amounted, say Marx and Engels, to little more than 'a demand to interpret reality in another way', a demand that leaves the world itself untouched¹¹⁰. Finally, in over-emphasising the centrality of the battle of ideas, the philosophers had deprived people of the power to initiate and enact real change in their everyday lives. In particular, by locating the active, thinking mind firmly in the extra-contextual world of philosophy, the direct corollary was that practical reality itself became fundamentally mindless, passive, and absent of human agency¹¹¹. For the Young Hegelian philosophers, therefore, the revolutionary subject was always a philosophising subject, with the revolutionary activity of actual people reducible to the movement of so many philosophised objects. For Marx and Engels, therefore, one could never be both a revolutionary and a Young Hegelian, since Young Hegelian politics was fundamentally nugatory.

4.3.2 Marx and Wittgenstein on language, truth, and knowledge

It might be pointed out at this stage that Marx and Engels's critique of Young Hegelian philosophy is based on a somewhat caricatured, overdrawn picture of the Young Hegelians, one they – arguably – construct to provide themselves an easy target. My interest in that critique is not, however, whether it actually hits home, but in the *reflexive* significance it had on Marx's own method. As I will argue, on the basis of this critique, Marx and Engels reached the conclusion that revolutionary politics could no longer use German idealist

¹⁰⁸ See the example from section 4.2.2, as well as MECW, 5: 129, 188, 211-212; 288-294, 387-388. See also CM: 510-513.

¹⁰⁹ MECW, 5: 27. See also TF: 3; MECW, 5: 28-30, 130, 282, 293, 431-439.

¹¹⁰ MECW, 5: 30. See also MECW, 1: 400; TF: 5; MECW, 5: 23-24, 43, 366, 469; CM: 510-513.

¹¹¹ This is the nub of Marx's criticism of Feuerbachian 'contemplative' materialism in the *Theses on Feuerbach* (TF: 3-5, see also GI: 57).

philosophising as its vehicle: '[I]et us revolt', the authors thus implore, 'against this rule of concepts'¹¹². But this 'revolt' did not mean that the authors wanted to give up on theoretical activity altogether: indeed, such an assumption would make it difficult to make sense of Marx's life and works, and his continual production of texts that were – in some sense or other – theoretical. The question this raises, then, is how Marx squares his anti-philosophical stance with his own theoretical method. The crucial result – I argue – is Marx's distinctive epistemic outlook.

Responding, then, to their critique of Young Hegelian philosophy, the central innovation made by Marx and Engels was to reunify the two domains outlined in section 4.3.1 by bringing the theoretical mind back down to earth: to include in the domain of one's theories the thinking mind of the theorist themselves, viewing that thinking as just another activity that takes place in the world itself¹¹³. Theoretical thinking is thus never extra-contextual, but always the thought of this-or-that person in this-or-that context, and there is no mental operation, logical trick, manipulation of language, or anything else by which the theoretician can escape their contextual embeddedness and achieve any kind of philosophical view-from-nowhere.

Marx and Engels make their case through – amongst other arguments – their famous aphorism that 'consciousness is a social product'¹¹⁴. This a theme they return to repeatedly in the 'German ideology' manuscripts: that the source of people's ideas, the principles and categories they work with, and all the content of their consciousness thought, always come from somewhere, and that somewhere is a social-historical somewhere¹¹⁵. The argument being made, in short, is that the categories and ideas people work with in their thinking are always drawn from a social fund of shared language, concepts, practices, meanings, and so on, and are never wholly spontaneous or independent products of some extra-contextual mind¹¹⁶. These passages have, however, been widely misrepresented, and read through the lens of ostensibly similar comments Marx made more than a decade later in the 1859

¹¹² MECW, 5: 23

¹¹³ Kitching, 1988: 7–35, 2002b

¹¹⁴ GI: 74

¹¹⁵ TF: 5; GI: 128-131, 176-177; MECW, 5: 25, 36-37, 480

¹¹⁶ GI: 75. See also TF: 4; GI: 325; MECW, 5: 183-4; TOM: 71-74

preface¹¹⁷, comments which are taken to place consciousness in the superstructural part of an orthodox Marxist base-superstructure relationship¹¹⁸.

Such an interpretation, however, is a paradigmatic example of the perils of the search for literalism which I outlined above: it leverages a supposed literal master-key to Marx's thought in order to extract Marx and Engels's arguments about the social nature of consciousness from their political intent, generating an interpretation that misses their entire polemical point, with the end result of attributing to Marx exactly the sort of theorisation he was rubbishing. The polemical significance of these passages is contained in the fact that not just consciousness-in-general, but specifically the *theoretical* consciousness, must be pictured as a social product. The crucial point being made is that whenever people think, including when they think philosophically or theoretically, that thought is always the thought of *those* people, and never just contextless 'thought'¹¹⁹. The problem, however, is that the philosophers had forgotten that they are, just as much as anybody else, people embedded in a specific social-historical context: as Marx had put it earlier, '[t]hese Berliners do not regard themselves as men who criticise, but as critics who, incidentally, have the misfortune of being men'¹²⁰.

The point of their arguments, then, was to dethrone the philosophical method by explaining philosophical practice: it is dethroned, since the practices which had previously been posited as a ladder by which to transcend everyday appearances are brought down to the realm of those appearances; and it is explained, since – as just another everyday practice – its emergence and character are a function of real-world conditions. Thus whilst the Young Hegelians had inconsistently excluded their own theoretical activity from the domain of their theories, and thus failed to treat philosophy as just another product of real-world conditions, Marx and Engels are more than happy to take this step on their behalf. They thus set about connecting 'German philosophy with German reality'¹²¹; 'explaining the curiosities' of these

¹¹⁷ MECW, 29: 263

¹¹⁸ Cohen, 1978: 364-388; Harman, 1986; Williams, 2000

¹¹⁹ MECW, 5: 263

¹²⁰ MECW, 3: 356. Notably, Marx levels a similar argument – much later – against methods commonplace in political economy (TOM: 71-82, 129-153).

¹²¹ MECW, 5: 30

‘theoretical castles in the air’ by examining their ‘formation from actual earthly relations’¹²²; describing how people’s ‘outlook on life’, even the ‘warped one of the philosophers’ could ‘only be determined by their actual life’¹²³; explaining how the ‘boasting of these philosophic commentators’ simply ‘mirrors the wretchedness of the real conditions in Germany’¹²⁴; and so on¹²⁵. Marx and Engels thus turn a powerful explanatory tool familiar amongst Hegelian philosophers against the Young Hegelian philosophers themselves.

The orthodox base-superstructure interpretation thus fails to recognise that the point of Marx and Engels’s comments about consciousness is to undermine a particular approach to theory and kind of theorisation. Because it does so, it implies that Marx and Engels dethrone Young Hegelian philosophy simply by enthroning their own alternative, an alternative that paradoxically attributes to the authors exactly the sort of error they are attempting to highlight.

A far better account is offered, I argue, by a number of interpreters who have drawn an illuminating parallel between Marx’s epistemic thinking and the work of the later Wittgenstein¹²⁶. The starting point of such a reading is – as Kitching suggests – the notion that Marx’s rebuttal of a particular philosophical approach equally applies to his own work: that Marx’s thought is – as much as anyone else’s – the product of a socially-historically situated thinking individual¹²⁷. Given this, Marx abandoned the notion that one’s language or thinking could ever claim to access some higher extra-social reality. Marx and Engels’s attack on philosophy required, in particular, that they reject any method or epistemology that hinged on some form of correspondence: the notion, in other words, that one can pin the meaning of language, or the validity of claims to knowledge and to truth, on the correspondence between one’s language, concepts, etc. and some extra-social confirmatory outside¹²⁸.

¹²² GI:145-147

¹²³ MECW, 5: 438

¹²⁴ MECW, 5: 23

¹²⁵ See also GI: 142-153; MECW, 5: 263-264, 430

¹²⁶ Carver, 2002, 2019a; Gakis, 2014, 2015; Kitching, 1988; Kitching and Pleasants, 2002; Rubinstein, 1981; Vinten, 2015

¹²⁷ Kitching, 1988: 1–35, 176–179, 2002b

¹²⁸ Paralleling, once again, Wittgenstein (Carver, 2019a; Gakis, 2014; Rubinstein, 1981: 165–180).

Having rejected that approach, Marx embraces an alternative, radically socialised and historicised epistemic outlook. And the result, I argue, is familiarly Wittgensteinian, in that Marx holds that meaning, truth, and knowledge do not hinge on some correspondence with extra-social ‘things’ words and ideas are meant to stand for, but depend instead on how words and ideas are actually *used* in everyday practice¹²⁹. Rather than trying – in the philosophical manner he had repudiated – to pull back the curtain and find some sort of deeper reality that lies behind the world of everyday social practice, and to use that deeper reality as an epistemic touchpoint by which to attain knowledge, judge truth, and so on, Marx’s method starts with the recognition that even the philosopher’s concepts are drawn from that everyday world. His crucial move, then, is simply to accept that conclusion, and take those concepts as they are, viewing them as unproblematic starting-points, rather than as illusions that the philosopher must dispel¹³⁰. Consequently, knowledge, meaning, and even truth are understood as determined within social-historical everyday practices themselves: as Marx put it, the ‘question of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking’ is not a ‘question for theory’ but instead, crucially, a ‘practical question’¹³¹.

So to put radical revolutionary theory on a firmer footing, the key step – say Marx and Engels – is to descend from ‘philosophical illusion’ to the ‘language of life’¹³², taking as the base-datum for their theories the categories, ideas, and language that one finds in everyday social practice. In this way, Marx recognises and fully accepts the situated nature of his own thinking, openly admitting that his ideas – like everyone’s – come from a concrete social-historical somewhere: indeed, as he put it much later, the only plausible ‘theoretical method’ always requires that ‘society must always be born in mind as the presupposition of [any] conception’¹³³. His crucial innovation, however, is to find that move untroubling: taking his radical polemical argument about the social nature of thought, meaning, truth, etc., and

¹²⁹ Wittgenstein, 1968. For discussion see Carver, 1998: 27; Gakis, 2014; Rossi-Landi, 2002; Rubinstein, 1981: 121–138, 2002

¹³⁰ It has thus been noted that Marx opposes the Cartesian method of beginning with doubt (Carver, 2002, 2019a; Gakis, 2014; Rossi-Landi, 2002; Rubinstein, 1981: 121–138).

¹³¹ TF: 3

¹³² MECW, 5: 446–447

¹³³ TOM: 74

turning it from being a way to problematise philosophical knowledge into the foundation of his own radically socialised and historized epistemology¹³⁴.

4.3.3 Orthodox interpretations against the epistemic outlook

This brings us back to needs. My contention is that the epistemic outlook I sketched above is of profound significance if we are to understand Marx's thinking on needs; that orthodox interpretations have missed that significance, attributing to him – in one way or another – exactly the kind of philosophical method he ruled out; and that consequently, they must be rejected. That rejection, furthermore, sets the scene for my next step: developing – in chapters 5-7 – an alternative reading of Marx's account of need that is grounded in Marx's distinctive epistemic outlook.

Let me begin, then, with essentialism. If what I argue about that outlook is correct, then this is quite clearly inconsistent with essentialist interpretations. Such interpretations posit, as we saw in section 4.1, that needs are grounded in some timeless, universal human essence or nature, and that consequently, needs constitute a fixed, transhistorical normative standard. But if knowledge, truth, and meaning are features of socially-historically situated everyday practices, then timeless truths and eternal natures are meaningless notions: they are, to use a Wittgensteinian parallel, a classic example of language going on holiday¹³⁵. Essentialism represents, therefore, precisely the sort of philosophising that Marx renounced¹³⁶.

Psychologistic interpretations are more promising. Their emphasis on the historical variability of needs appears, at first glance, to abandon the idea of a truth-about-needs that transcends everyday practical reality, equating needs instead with the motive forces produced in particular historically-specific conditions. This suggests a closer alignment with Marx's epistemic outlook.

The problem, however, is that psychologism makes the crucial error of reducing needs to purely mental phenomena. Thus even if needs are *caused* or *stimulated* by people's broader social-historical context – as, indeed, psychologism contends – needs themselves remain

¹³⁴ MECW, 5: 31, 37, 263, 326

¹³⁵ Wittgenstein, 1968: 19. Notably, Marx argues something similar (TF: 5; GI: 50-51; MECW, 5: 28).

¹³⁶ It might be maintained that Marx posited some form of essentialism *prior to* renouncing philosophy in the mid-to-late 1840s. This particular debate concerning the 'early' Marx is, however, beyond my scope here.

fundamentally mental: to say whether this person needs this or that person needs that, the only way to tell is to look, as it were, inside their skull.

But whilst psychologism equates needs with mental phenomena going on inside people's heads, for Marx, categories like 'need' depend not on what people *think* but on what they *do*. This view, then, follows from Marx's epistemic outlook: that what gives terms like 'need' their meaning is not what is going on between people's ears, or in the 'mind' as understood in abstraction from people's social-historical everyday reality, but instead the significance of that term as it is established in a socially-historically changing pattern of everyday practical activity. The resulting view – which will be explored in greater detail in chapters 5 and 6 – is that people's needs follow from their positions as practical beings trying to move through their world, a world which has a particular social-historical shape and form. People thus need this or that because they hold a particular position in a complex of social-historical relations, a particular social world, and those things are the things they need to get by in that world. Those needs are not, therefore, reducible to people's mental states: there are, after all, many needs that people have under capitalism, but which they do not experience as any sort of psychological drive or motive force¹³⁷. Indeed, as purely private phenomena, mental states have little to do with the fundamentally social and shared fund from which people draw their language, ideas, practices, concepts, and so on¹³⁸.

That argument can be elucidated through some common-sense examples, several of which Marx himself deploys. To begin with a small but nevertheless illuminating case, I wonder what a psychologistic interpretation might make of the 'need for lawyers' that Marx suggests in the *Poverty of Philosophy*. Surely the point of such a need is not that one occasionally experiences the desperate drive for legal advice, but that one can find oneself in a set of social circumstances (as Marx puts it, some kind of 'civil law', a particular 'development of property' and of 'production', etc.) which mean that one might need – from time to time – a lawyer¹³⁹? To take another example, consider the need for a job. Such a need is surely a very

¹³⁷ This relates to the contention – common in the analytical literature on need – that one can need something without feeling it or even knowing it: see section 2.1.

¹³⁸ There is a parallel here with Wittgenstein's private language argument (Wittgenstein, 1968: 88–101). For discussion, see Rubinstein, 1981: 153–164

¹³⁹ PP: 119. See also further discussion in section 5.1.2.

real one, and certainly is – according to Marx – in capitalism, since without a job those deprived of access to the means of production can achieve little else¹⁴⁰. This centrally important and palpably real need cannot, however, easily be reduced to people’s mental states. Similarly, Marx’s arguments about the level of subsistence of wage-labour trace that level back to the cost of production of a particular commodity: the commodity labour-power¹⁴¹. Workers are – as Marx tells us – just machines for pumping out value¹⁴²; and wages for workers are thus – as Marx puts it – simply oil for the wheels¹⁴³. The workers’ subsistence cannot, therefore, be reduced to anything going on in the *minds* of the workers, and is instead about what is necessary from them in their practical life: what they need to engage in certain social practices, given their social position. Those examples highlight, I argue, what has gone wrong for psychologism: it makes needs about the mind, about what people think; and not about their practical activity, about what people do.

Turning finally to historical humanism, what one finds once again is an approach with considerable ostensible potential – in, for instance, refusing to appeal to timeless pre-social human nature¹⁴⁴; or in its development of historically-specific forms of normativity and social criticism¹⁴⁵ – but which nevertheless violates, in the end, Marx’s epistemic outlook. That violation can be traced to the following problem: that historical humanism grounds its arguments concerning the historicity of human nature and of need on a timeless, philosophised conception of the human species. As I showed in section 4.1, historical humanists defend the historicity of human nature by positing a particular conception of the human-nature relationship, a conception they believe to have detected in Marx, and that they trace back to the influence of Hegel. That conception, in short, is that humans consciously direct their labour, thereby transforming the world that they inhabit, a world that itself goes on to shape human nature.

The problem, however, is that this argument hinges on certain timeless principles about the nature of humans as a species. Those principles – as I showed above – are often derived by

¹⁴⁰ CM: 490. See also section 6.2.1.

¹⁴¹ EPM: 284; MECW, 9: 198-204; CAP: 274-6, 718

¹⁴² EPM: 256; CAP: 742

¹⁴³ EPM: 284

¹⁴⁴ Fraser I, 1998: 123–142; Sayers, 1998: 152–155; Soper, 1981: 73–93

¹⁴⁵ Fraser I, 1998: 154–159; Heller, 1978: 74–95; Sayers, 1998: 130–137

exploring human-animal contrasts that Marx (supposedly) adopted from Hegel, a contrast that problematically invites an enquiry about the general character of humanity as a species. In making such contrasts, and in developing these arguments, the historical humanist thus adopts certain principles – about the nature of the human species, about the human-nature relationship, and so on – that themselves constitute the sort of timeless philosophical truths that Marx rejected. Thus when historical humanists posit that human beings and the human-nature relationship have a certain character, and that that character results in a historicisation of human nature, this is to posit something *in general* about human beings and the human species from a standpoint outside of one’s social-historical context¹⁴⁶.

Given, however, my account of Marx’s epistemic outlook, this will not wash. Whilst Marx would certainly agree that there is no such thing as timeless human nature, this was not a conclusion which he reached on the basis of other, even deeper timeless truths. Instead, for Marx the historicity of human nature follows from the fact that one can never claim to know truths about human nature or need that remain stable through the process of historical change, precisely because ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ are themselves understood to be historical and social all-the-way-down. Thus ‘man-as-such’, ‘nature-as-such’ and, consequently, ‘the-man-nature-relationship-as-such’ only exists in the head of the philosopher¹⁴⁷. In place, then, of this ahistorical view of the human-nature relationship, Marx argued that that relationship, as well as the two elements it relates, only make sense when understood socially-historically. Whilst, therefore, the historical humanists argue that the human-nature relationship has a particular character such that one ends up with a historicised man and a historicised nature, Marx held – more strongly, and in line with his epistemic outlook – that the character of that relationship is itself historicised, and can only be examined through a frame that is itself social-historical¹⁴⁸. Thus whilst historical humanists attempt to historicise human nature, they establish and defend their interpretation on the basis of the sort of philosophical method that Marx’s epistemic outlook explicitly ruled out.

¹⁴⁶ See, for instance, Sayers’s claims about labour (Sayers, 1998: 40, see also 32, 48, 57), or his problematic use of human/animal contrasts (Sayers, 2011: 14–31).

¹⁴⁷ Saito, 2017: 259–261

¹⁴⁸ For further discussion of Marx’s account the human-nature relationship, see recent work on his theory of ‘metabolism’ (Burkett, 2014; Foster, 2000; Saito, 2017, 2020).

4.4 Rebuttals and foundations

In summary, prevailing interpretations of Marx's account of need fail two important tests: a philological test, in that they adopt a flawed reading strategy; and a conceptual test, in that they presume that Marx took a certain theoretical approach which he, in fact, strongly repudiated. I conclude, therefore, that Marx's account of need cannot be represented as a set of timeless, trans-contextual, theoretical principles-about-need or truths-about-need: Marx thus had, to deploy the term I used earlier, no such theorisation of need.

This is not, however, to deny that Marx's work is in some sense theoretical, or that he had a distinctive and philosophically significant account of needs, but only to deny that he adopted a particular *sort* of philosophising. This leads me, then, to turn more directly to my own account of Marx's theory, his theoretical approach, and the resulting account of needs. And here this chapter provides something of foundation, laying out an approach to reading Marx, and an account of his understanding of the nature of theoretical activity, that forms the basis of the reading of Marx – and, crucially, of his innovative and highly promising account of need – that I develop in the coming chapters.

5. Performing capitalism

This chapter puts forward a Marxian approach to need as an alternative to prevailing orthodoxies. That alternative – as I will show – is to treat needs as performatives: as categories that are established through repetitive citational social practice, and which constitute through their usage the very things they purport to express or reveal. My contention is that such a Marxian, performative account of need can avoid the flaws and dilemmas that have troubled contemporary needs theory, and which I charted in chapters 2 and 3: it can, I argue, escape the jaws of the problematic nature/culture binary; and it makes it possible to construct a theoretical account of need without thereby doing away with the politics.

Marx's reasons for adopting this performative approach are – as I will show – rooted in his politics. Deploying the interpretative framework I developed in chapter 4, I show the importance of reading Marx's economic works through the lens of the activist Marx, rather than the doctrinal Marx. Those works, I contend, cannot be treated as didactic presentations of literal economic truths, but must instead be interpreted as political interventions levelled against both the political economists and Marx's socialist rivals¹, with the related intention of putting a revolutionary tool in the hands of the workers themselves². The crux of Marx's theoretical analysis is thus – I will argue in this chapter, and continue to examine in the next – the way in which that theoretical analysis enables, facilitates, and actually conducts Marx's politics

As this chapter will demonstrate, it is by approaching Marx's economic works through those frames that a promising Marxian performative approach to needs emerges. To develop that approach, I begin – in section 5.1 – by drawing a parallel between Marx's account of economics and Butler's account of gender, suggesting that those accounts are united by a parallel performative understanding of the categories they are analysing. Having defended

¹ Marx's allegations against his various opponents are, of course, questionable in their own terms. However, as in chapter 4, I am primarily interested in how Marx understands and presents his *own* theory *given* those allegations. I do not presume, therefore, that those allegations are correct, politically or otherwise.

² See chapter 4. This approach has also been applied specifically to Marx's economic writings (Carver, 1998, 2018, In press; Cleaver, 1979; Kitching, 1988; Roberts, 2018).

that general conclusion, I then turn to the category ‘need’. What I argue is that Marx includes that category amongst the more overtly economic ones – like the commodity, capital, money, and so on – suggesting that when the political economists pretended otherwise, this was simply to naturalise one element of contemporary economic life in order to justify the whole edifice of capitalistic categories and relations. Marx, I thus conclude, treats needs as just another economic performative.

What is more, that performative framework had a crucial role in Marx’s radical politics, laying the groundwork and setting the scene for his own political interventions. To reach that conclusion, I show – in section 5.2 – how that performative understanding helped Marx to unleash the political potential contained within the categories and relations of capitalism, a political potential that had been – says Marx – obscured by the naturalising pretensions of the political economists. Countering those de-politicising naturalisations, Marx stresses instead that the performative categories and relations of capitalism are, in fact, political realities, since they are subject to people’s political agency; since their achievement (or not) represents a substantial set of political stakes; and since they are sites of ongoing political struggle.

5.1 The performativity of need

I begin with the following contention: that Marx understands needs neither as fixed by extra-social nature, nor as infinitely malleable artifices of culture, but instead as performatives. I reach that conclusion in two steps, showing – firstly – that Marx takes economic categories in general to be performatives; before then arguing – secondly – that he included needs amongst those economic categories.

5.1.1 Economics as performative

Marx’s *Capital* looks, in many ways, like a work of economics: its subject matter is familiarly economic; the constituent categories identified – such as the commodity, money, and so on – would not have looked out of place in the economics textbooks of the time; and even some of his analyses and conclusions closely tracked what his contemporaries would have considered to be accepted economic wisdom³.

But *Capital* is also – quite explicitly – a *critique* of then-contemporary economic thinking. As such a critique, the book – and Marx’s engagement with political economy more generally –

³ Carver, 2018: 138–166; Harvey, 2018: 22

was not intended to be simply another rejoinder within a given debate, and which took that debate's presumptions and parameters as given: instead, Marx's argument was that the entire intellectual exercise that these theorists were engaged in had got things wrong from the beginning. Central to those failings – as Marx has it – is that the political economists had misunderstood the nature of the phenomena they were theorising, falsely supposing that the categories and relations of capitalism represented fixed, extra-contextual truths that applied to all peoples in all times and all places⁴. A direct corollary of such assumptions was to neutralise those categories and relations, supposing them to be simply natural givens, ineluctable facts of life, or the spontaneous result of free human interaction. And those assumptions, furthermore, radically reduced the scope for human social possibility, since any attempt to modify or mollify the supposed eternal 'laws' of capitalist economics would, as a result, be ultimately futile.

For Marx, this was politically unconscionable. But whilst he repeatedly lambasted the political economists for naturalising the categories and relations of capitalism, he was equally wary of another contrasting political dead-end. That dead-end was exemplified by some of his rival socialists, who treated capitalistic categories and relations as little more than illusions, ideas in people's heads, or funny ways of seeing the world, thereby imagining that one could undo capitalism simply by thinking about the world differently⁵. Juxtaposing these alternatives in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx criticises both the 'economists' who 'want the workers to remain in society as it is constituted and as it has been signed and sealed by them in their manuals', and the utopian socialists who, he argues, 'want the workers to leave the old society alone, the better to be able to enter the new society which they have prepared for them with so much foresight'⁶. In both cases, the nub of Marx's critique is that neither alternative could provide any critical purchase on capitalism itself, since neither – he argues – can properly capture the harsh realities of life under capitalism, or tell us how capitalism can be successfully resisted. Marx's politics required him, therefore, to chart a course between those 'manuals' and those 'utopias'.

⁴ PP: 162, 174-5, 202; TOM: 53-54; CAP: 101, 174, 575, 791-4, 925

⁵ As previously discussed in Marx's critique of the Young Hegelians: see Section 4.3.1.

⁶ PP: 209-201. Again, one might question whether Marx's criticism is accurate or hits home: see footnote 1.

The obvious question this raises, of course, is that if economic categories do not straightforwardly pick out extra-social realities, and if they are not simply ideas in people's heads, then what exactly are they? My contention is that to address this puzzle, Marx posits that economic categories are performatives: categories which get constituted through their repetitive citation in everyday social practice. To spell out that interpretation, this section draws a parallel between Marx's understanding of economic categories and Butler's performativity of gender⁷. The ensuing contention that economic categories are performatives has several contemporary advocates – notably Callon⁸ – and the Marx-Butler comparison I make has also been suggested⁹. My reading, therefore, builds on and expands this Marx-Butler parallel to paint a performative picture of Marx's economics.

Let me begin, however, with Butler. Butler introduced the notion of performativity to challenge prevailing assumptions concerning the difference between sex – posited as an underlying biological given – and gender – assumed, contrastingly, to be a malleable cultural artefact. Against that assumption, Butler argues that the supposedly extra-social sexed body is itself a gendered construction: sex does not correspond to a passive material or natural reality which discourse merely names, but is itself constituted in and through discourse. Gendered language, categories, and activities, therefore, are not 'constative' but always 'performative': they do not designate, reflect, or express states of affairs that pertain outside people's gendered language, categories, and activities, but instead bring into being the very things that they name¹⁰.

This bringing-into-being occurs – Butler argues – through the repetitive citation of gendered norms in people's everyday social practices. The notion of citation is drawn from Derrida¹¹, and might be put the following way: people always conduct social actions within a socially given framework, attempting to make their actions meaningful and intelligible to one another by referencing a shared fund of established norms. People's actions are, therefore, 'stylised'¹²

⁷ Butler, 1988, 1993, 1999, 2010

⁸ Callon, 1998, 2008, 2010

⁹ Carver, 2021

¹⁰ Butler, 1988, 1993: 12–16, 1999: 171–180

¹¹ Derrida, 1991

¹² Butler, 1988: 519

in this way: they are shaped in order to reference this-or-that extant norm, and it is by referencing norms in this way that people's acts can be said to have some sort of shared significance, and thus be 'social actions' – or even just 'actions' – at all¹³. Thus in their social practices, people cite – again and again – the extant shared fund of norms, reiterating an existing iterable model¹⁴ in their repeated attempts to make their actions socially meaningful and intelligible.

That model, however, exists only because it is continually cited: it is this continued pattern of citational social practices that establishes this particular set of categories, and this particular pattern of social activity, as the accepted and socially given one¹⁵. Thus gender, as Butler puts it, has 'no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality'¹⁶, and 'without those acts, there would be no gender at all'¹⁷. When, therefore, performatives purport to express or reveal some underlying essence, nature, or substance, those ontological suppositions are in fact – says Butler – performatively produced fabrications¹⁸. Despite, therefore, their appearance, our gendered categories and discourses never simply correspond to an extra-social, pre-discursive reality, but instead constitute the very things they supposedly reveal. Consequently, the standard language of truth and falsehood does not apply to gender¹⁹, since the valid use of gendered categories and language can never be pinned to an external reality that lies outside that very use²⁰. Any 'truth' to gender lies, therefore, only in the fact that this-or-that pattern of citational practice has been established rather than some other one. It is better, therefore, to say that a performative has become actual, or has been accomplished, rather than that it is 'true'²¹.

Marx's understanding of economic categories parallels, I argue, Butler's notion of performativity. That parallel begins in their shared contention that the categories they are

¹³ See Schatzki's (2002) distinction between 'actions' and 'basic actions'.

¹⁴ Derrida, 1991

¹⁵ Butler, 1988

¹⁶ Butler, 1999: 173

¹⁷ Butler, 1999: 178

¹⁸ Butler, 1999: 163–190

¹⁹ Leaving aside the question of what it *can* apply to, or whether it applies to anything.

²⁰ Butler, 1988: 528

²¹ Callon, 2008: 319–321

studying are not constative: just as Butler stresses that there is no ‘sexed’ reality that precedes gender, Marx holds that economic reality does not precede people’s economic practice, language, and thought. At the very beginning of *Capital*, for instance, he notes that whilst the commodity ‘appears at first sight to be an extremely obvious, trivial thing’ its ‘analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing’²². People do, after all, call lots of very different things ‘commodities’, since that category encompasses the entire vast array of different things that people happen to encounter as available for purchase in a marketplace, be that wool or iron; sportscars or sausages; bibles or financial services; and so on. Amongst this ragbag there is, Marx notes, no physical or natural ‘common element’²³, and when people call things ‘commodities’ this does not neatly refer to some ‘geometrical, physical, chemical, or other natural property’ shared by all those things²⁴. ‘Not an atom of matter’, as Marx thus puts it, enters into the ‘objectivity’ of commodities²⁵.

Proceeding from that point, Marx highlights that economic categories make no sense at all when posited in supposed abstraction from people’s social actions and from a socially-historically given framework of understandings: the product of someone’s labour is not a ‘commodity’ until it is presented for sale in a market by some social actor or other²⁶; a lump of gold that has not been dug up from the earth and utilised in a particular way is not ‘money’²⁷; a great big pile of accumulated wealth is not ‘capital’ until it is put to a particular social use in a particular social-historical context²⁸; and so on²⁹. There is, therefore, no already-existing property of things that fixes the truth and meaning of people’s economic categories, and towards which they merely refer.

The reality of economic categories does not, therefore, precede economic activity and economic discourse: instead – as Marx again makes clear – that reality is established in and through social action. Returning to the commodity, Marx tells us that the ‘objectivity’ of

²² CAP: 163

²³ CAP: 127. See also 138-9, 142-4, 149, 177

²⁴ CAP: 127

²⁵ CAP: 138-139

²⁶ CAP: 165, 178-179, 273, 874, 933

²⁷ CAP: 187

²⁸ CAP: 247-257, 909, 933

²⁹ See also PP: 120-144, 165-6

commodities consists of a ‘purely “social existence”’³⁰: his argument, in short, is that in exchanging this for this and that for that, people do not reveal some inherent, latent property of the things-in-exchange that precedes the act of exchange, but instead the act of exchange itself performatively constitutes the object as a commodity. When people call this or that thing a ‘commodity’, this represents nothing more than the fact that that thing has been brought to market by a social actor, and presented by that actor as an object for exchange in a way that is meaningful and intelligible to the other social actors they encounter³¹.

Such commodifications are, furthermore, nonsensical if imagined outside of a given, particular social-historical context³². To commodify the products of their labour, producers must conform, says Marx, to a series of already-established expectations, and adopt a socially accepted and expected set of behaviours³³. Putting this performatively, one might say that the acts by which people turn their products into ‘commodities’ only make sense when there is an extant iterable model already there to cite. And outside of such a given context, furthermore, those social actions become meaningless, weirdly unintelligible, or even non-sensical: the act, for instance, of hanging a price tag on a product is clearly an intelligible, purposeful, and often efficacious social action when one assumes the presence of an established set of norms, but makes no sense at all outside of that context. Rather, then, than expressing a reality that is already there, and which the price tag merely names, the act of hanging the price tag generates the very reality it then expresses³⁴.

Proceeding from the commodity, Marx demonstrates one by one how all the categories and relations that formed the essential constituent elements of then-contemporary capitalism – or which, at least, he considered to be such constituent elements³⁵ – get constituted

³⁰ CAP: 159, see also 138-139, 149, 153-154, 166

³¹ CAP: 178

³² CAP: 154, 163-169, 273

³³ CAP: 178

³⁴ CAP: 189; WAG: 247-248

³⁵ A potential problem is that some of the economic analysis Marx conducts in *Capital* – most notably concerning ‘value’ – takes place within dated and highly dubious problematics Marx adopts from political economy, and which modern-day economists would take to be wholly implausible (Carver, 1998: 63–86, 2018: 121–123, In press). I argue, however, that Marx’s performativity of economics does not depend on the value problematic, and can be rescued from it: indeed – as Callon and others have argued – it is quite plausible to

performatively. ‘The categories of bourgeois economics’, he thus concludes, ‘consist precisely in forms of this kind’, they are ‘forms of thought’ that have become ‘socially valid, and therefore objective’ in a given social historical-context³⁶. And because, furthermore, those categories ‘spring from’³⁷ present society, and are peculiar to the particular pattern of citational social practice one finds in that society, they possess a ‘transitory and historical’ character, persisting only so long as society maintains its current form³⁸. Given this, the ‘whole mystery of commodities’ simply ‘vanishes’ as soon as we move to other social-historical contexts³⁹.

5.1.2 Need as an economic category

Whilst the previous section considered the nature of economic categories, this section concerns the *domain* of economics. As I will show, on several different occasions Marx poured scorn on the political economists for using needs as a basic postulate, and thereby as a means to ground the categories of everyday economic life in a supposedly extra-social reality. Countering that notion, Marx drew the category ‘need’ into the scope of everyday economic relations, arguing that it is – just like all the other economic categories – nothing more than a performative established in and through people’s everyday social practices.

This argument emerges – like so much of Marx’s thought – through critique. In this case the subject of Marx’s ire is an attempt to use needs to ground the meaningfulness and validity of economic categories in a reality that supposedly lies outside of contemporary economic practices. In a series of interventions spanning from an early foray against the economic pretensions of his socialist rival, Proudhon⁴⁰; to an attack on the political economists in general⁴¹; to a riposte against the noted critic of *Capital*, Wagner⁴², Marx takes his opponents

reimagine modern economics in a similarly performative fashion (Callon, 1998, 2010; Cochoy et al., 2010; MacKenzie et al., 2008); and others, furthermore, argue that Marx’s economics itself can be rescued from the value problematic (Chambers, 2018).

³⁶ CAP: 169. See also 162, 167, 182, 189

³⁷ CM: 501

³⁸ MECW, 38: 100; PP: 165-166; CAP: 174

³⁹ CAP: 169

⁴⁰ PP: 111-119

⁴¹ TOM: 56-71

⁴² WAG: 235-240

to task for imagining they could ground the categories of contemporary economic life on a set of timeless principles-about-needs. In each case, Marx highlights how these authors and self-styled politicians had begun with needs, positing that that category picks out features of human life that are simply the case, and lie outside the vagaries of contemporary economic and social life. Having done so, they then used those needs as a fixed point to underpin all the other economic categories, and thus build the whole edifice of capitalistic social relations upon a supposedly natural, extra-social foundation.

Marx would have none of this. Responding to these various authors, Marx makes – again and again – the same argument: that in each case they had merely taken one element of contemporary life; posited that that one element constituted an extra-social grounding; and then used that element to validate all the others. In his attack on Proudhon, for instance, Marx tells us that his rival had simply presupposed what he set out to prove: by taking certain needs to constitute an underlying truth, Proudhon had done little more than assume one element of contemporary economic and social reality, before then using that one element to ‘prove’ the rest: ‘[o]ne might as well’, as Marx puts it, simply ‘have presupposed’ those other elements ‘from the very beginning’⁴³. He goes on to argue that needs are not extra-social realities which one can use to pin down all the other economic categories, but are instead just as artificial and social-historical as all the others, and only capable of being comprehended as part of the broader the totality of contemporary economic and social relations⁴⁴. Much later, Marx returns to exactly these themes in a commentary on the methods and assumptions characteristic of political economy, arguing that when the political economists attempted to pin economic categories to extra-social realities by way of needs, all those authors had done was recognise that a series of economic terms and relations are inter-related, and imply one another, before then assuming that one of those terms – need – constitutes an underlying reality. Marx’s rebuttal, therefore, is that in assuming need, these authors had simply assumed this entire assemblage of categories from the get-go⁴⁵.

Hammering this point home, Marx argues that in treating needs as an extra-social reality, his various opponents had merely projected contemporary society into some sort of mythologised

⁴³ PP: 111-112

⁴⁴ PP: 118-9

⁴⁵ TOM: 56-71

pre-social state. He makes this argument, in particular, through his repeated and forceful critique of the abstraction ‘man-in-general’, and relatedly the fairy tales, states-of-nature, and Robinsonades that the economists had deployed in their analyses. Such devices simply serve – Marx argues – to project contemporary life onto imagined hypothetical abstracts or mythologised scenarios, thereby propping up an appearance of naturalness. The oddity Marx identifies is that the pre-social or extra-social ‘man’ we supposedly encounter through these devices is always strangely familiar: despite being posited as outside of or prior to society, this ‘man’ somehow thinks like us, has our categories at hand, and is able to spontaneously establish the whole framework of contemporary society. Marx’s conclusion – often delivered with his characteristic scornful wit – is that such an individual is nothing more than a projection of contemporary life⁴⁶. For this abstraction ‘man’ to be anything more than a meaningless abstraction, and for that ‘man’ them to be able to think, act, and talk at all, this ‘man’ must – Marx argues – be ‘situated’ in ‘some form of society’. But once it is recognised that the abstraction ‘man’ is in fact a ‘social man’, then the ‘specific character of this social man’ must be ‘brought forward as the starting point’⁴⁷.

Picking up these themes, Marx argues that ‘needs’, just like ‘man’, can only be understood in their specific social-historical character. In one notable (though neglected) passage, Marx resoundingly rejects those who ‘confound and extinguish all historical differences in general human laws’, applying that criticism specifically to those who posit that ‘the slave, the serf, the wage-labourer all retain a ration of food which makes it possible for them to exist as slave, as serf, as wage-labourer’⁴⁸. Against that approach, Marx points to the absurdity or vacuousness of such supposed ‘general human laws’ concerning need. Through a series of ironic examples – including the need for lawyers, for honours and decorations, or even (pointedly pricking the pretensions of his rivals) for a ‘professorial title’⁴⁹ – Marx makes the argument that needs only make sense at all from the perspective of ‘some quite definite “social organisation”’⁵⁰, and that when one supposes otherwise, one rapidly finds oneself

⁴⁶ See, for instance, EPM: 345; PP: 112-113, 174-5; TOM: 47-50; CAP: 169-173, 791-4, 874; WAG: 235. For discussion, see Carver in TOM: 88-114; Chambers, 2014: 83–108; Soper, 1981: 76–81; Winter, 2014

⁴⁷ WAG: 235

⁴⁸ TOM: 54

⁴⁹ PP: 119; WAG: 247

⁵⁰ WAG: 247

dealing in patent absurdities. The point of these comical examples is not, therefore, that these things are somehow not really needs, but that when people imagine that needs represent extra-social realities, the results quickly become farcical. And one can, furthermore, only avoid the error of projecting contemporary life on to imaginary pre-social state by committing a different error that is ultimately just as grievous: namely, abstracting categories from their specificity to such a high degree that one ends up with inane, platitudinous, empty abstractions⁵¹. When one pretends, therefore, to ground their analyses on some essential substance or inner truth concerning need, this turns out – on closer inspection – to be either a vacuous empty abstraction, or nothing more than a simulacrum of contemporary life dressed-up as some axiomatic truth or supposedly pristine natural order⁵².

All this leads Marx to suggest a profound shift in the theoretical approach to needs, a shift that begins – in a familiar fashion⁵³ – with the premises that the category ‘need’ must itself come from somewhere, and that that somewhere is a social-historical somewhere. In his commentary on Wagner, for instance, Marx argues that all the theorising about needs that goes on in political economy had failed to bear in mind that people’s ‘process of securing life’ – people’s needs, and their needs-meeting and needs-making activities – always already has ‘some kind of social character’, and this applies as much to the theorist’s process of securing life as it does to everyone else’s. Marx thus argues that people – including the theorist – do not begin by finding themselves in some sort of ‘theoretical relationship to the things of the outside world’ but by ‘actively behaving’: actual people begin, ‘like every animal’ by ‘eating, drinking, etc.’ rather than by ‘finding themselves’ already in some extant theoretical relationship. Marx thus contends that thinking and theorising are always acts performed in the actual brains of actual human beings, human beings who are already engaged in practical activities by which they ‘[avail] themselves of certain things of the outside world’ in order to ‘satisfy their needs’. And this profoundly impacts, furthermore, how one thinks about needs: it is, Marx argues, only through the ‘repetition’ of these practical activities that the capacity of certain things to satisfy needs gets ‘impressed upon their

⁵¹ The phrase ‘empty abstraction’ is from Marx (TOM: 67). For discussion, see Best, 2010: 11–33; Cleaver, 1979: 87–127; Roberts, 2009; Sayers, 1998: 152–158

⁵² WAG: 248

⁵³ See section 4.3.

brains'. The theorist must, therefore, recognise that the categories at the core of their accounts are not 'theoretical' but 'practical from the outset' and 'established by action'⁵⁴.

Marx thus argues that in the place of abstract man with his abstract needs, one must begin with actual human beings, their actual needs, and their needs-meeting and needs-making activities in given social-historical circumstances. The striking claim that follows is that needs are not an extra-social basis on which to ground the meaningfulness and validity of all the other economic categories, but are instead just another economic category that is – like all those others – a performative.

5.2 Performativity as politics

These debates about the nature and domain of economics were, for Marx, far from merely academic: instead – as this section will show – they were a necessary precursor to, and central plank of, his own radical politics. As he contends, the characterisations of contemporary life peddled by the political economists were far more than just harmless, rather abstract assumptions about the nature of things, but instead quite real political interventions with tangible political consequences. In offering his alternative performative approach, one of Marx's central aims was, therefore, to reveal the political nature of the categories and relations he was theorising, thereby clearing the way for his own political interventions. He did this, as I will argue, in three key ways: firstly, by showing that capitalistic categories and relations are within the scope of people's collective political agency to change; secondly, by highlighting that capitalism is wrapped up with a distinctive distribution of harms, burdens, powers, and benefits, which together constitute the political stakes at play in capitalism's performative accomplishment; and thirdly, by demonstrating the ineluctability and persistence of struggles over that accomplishment.

5.2.1 Political agency

I argue, firstly, that Marx's performative understanding of capitalism's categories and relations opens up a vital space for political agency. Some, however, might find that contention somewhat dubious. Marx is sometimes taken to theorise the social world in a way that makes the political merely derivative of deeper structural forces, thus locating the source

⁵⁴ WAG: 235, emphasis removed

of social and political change in the movement of those deeper forces, a movement that plays out inexorably and inevitably, thereby supplanting – it would seem – human agency⁵⁵.

This section challenges those readings, thereby reasserting the role of political agency in Marx's social theory. I argue that whilst Marx does indeed believe capitalist society to be structurally determined in a certain sense, he does not posit that structural determination in the form of a social-scientific truth or underlying social reality, but instead as a performative accomplishment. Consequently, whilst people's agency is limited under capitalism, those limitations are not unchangeable necessities produced by some inhuman force, but something people impose on each other through their repetitive citational social practice. Furthermore, because those structural constraints are produced through action, they could – in principle – be undone by different actions.

Let me begin with the troublesome relationship between structure and agency found in Marx's *Capital*. At the beginning of chapter two, Marx makes a controversial claim: that 'in the course of our investigation' the 'characters who appear on the economic stage are but the personifications of the economic relations that exist between them', and it is thus only 'as the bearers of these economic relations that they come into contact with each other'⁵⁶. For the purposes of Marx's analysis, therefore, individuals count only as these 'personifications': as structural placeholders whose individual characteristics, desires, choices, and so on are irrelevant to the analysis, ceasing to be an explanatory factor for anything. The problem that follows is that Marx seems to be asserting the prominence of structure at the expense of the agency, turning individuals into mindless cogs in a ceaseless social machine, cogs whose movements can be wholly explained by the 'economic relations' they inhabit and 'personify'. Agency, it would appear, drops entirely out of Marx's picture.

I want to re-examine this seemingly problematic relationship between agency and structure through a performative lens. It is notable, firstly, that Butler has encountered a similar dilemma. Much like Marx's comments about people existing only as personifications, Butler's denial of any sort of agentic subject existing prior to performative action – famously captured in her claim that there is 'no doer behind the deed'⁵⁷ – appears to lock people into a

⁵⁵ Ashcraft, 1984; Chambers, 2014: 84–88; Cleaver, 1979: 3–70; Roberts, 2019

⁵⁶ CAP: 179. See also 92, 342, 381, 739

⁵⁷ Butler, 1999: 33

world where action is compelled by reiterative citation, a world, consequently, that leaves no hope of doing otherwise, and thus no space for agency⁵⁸.

What such a criticism gets wrong, says Butler, is that it pictures agency as lying prior to citational social practices. Butler's case, by contrast, is that performative 'construction' is not 'opposed to agency', but is instead the 'necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible'⁵⁹. Butler's case might be phrased as follows. A capacity for agency presupposes, firstly, an ability to take efficacious action. Understood performatively, however, many of the actions one might take are only meaningful and intelligible because of the performative norms they cite: it is only because people's actions cite this or that extant norm that those actions have the character and effect that they do. The notion that citation only constrains action is, therefore, completely wrongheaded, since stripped of their citational significance people's actions become ineffectual, meaningless, unintelligible, and even nonsensical. A world stripped-down in this fashion would, therefore, be a poor home for agency.

Agency is thus enabled performatively; but it is also, Butler argues, constrained performatively, since the scope for performative agency is limited to the range of iterable models already available. It is only possible, after all, to cite a norm that has been performatively accomplished, meaning people's actions are constrained by the legacy of performative accomplishments of the past, a legacy people individually encounter as a given. For Butler, therefore, the agentic subject is always preceded and made possible by prior performative actions, actions that contain socially binding consequences that weigh upon the present⁶⁰.

Alongside those constraints, however, Butler also identifies certain possibilities for performative agency. She stresses, firstly, that performative citation is constitutively capable breakdown and disruption: citational practices can fail to produce the phenomena they are meant to enact; only succeed in favourable circumstances; possess no degree of certainty; are repeatedly fallible; often errant; and sometimes produce inverse effects – what Mackenzie

⁵⁸ Benhabib et al., 1995: 17–34; Nelson, 1999; Salih, 2007

⁵⁹ Butler, 1999: 187. See also 1988: 526, 1993: 12–16, 2010

⁶⁰ Butler, 1988, 1993: 12, 1999: 145, 2010

calls ‘counterperformatives’⁶¹ – that undermine what they anticipate⁶². Performatives can, then, fail to enact what they anticipate, and can even be deployed subversively to trigger those errors, misfires, and counter-performatives. And this opens up, furthermore, the possibility of change. The performatively legacy people encounter is – after all – nothing more than the result of *collective* human action: it is only through repetitive citation that that legacy gets established in the first place, and it continues to pertain only so long as people succeed in actualising it. By tearing away their illusory substance, and by revealing performatives instead to be present only because they are constantly re-constituted in and through human action, Butler opens up the possibility of acting subversively, of establishing a different pattern of performative practice, and of thereby generating a quite different performative actuality⁶³.

Returning to Marx, there is a notable parallel between Butler’s account of performative agency and Marx’s views on the way in which the scope for human action is shaped by the weight of history. In one famous passage, Marx argues that ‘[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past’⁶⁴. Whilst this passage is often interpreted through the lens of traditional historical materialism, others have suggested readings that fit an alternative performative lens. Kitching, for instance, highlights that the ‘circumstances’ Marx refers to should not be construed as purely ‘material’, and include a common framework of ideas, categories, language, shared meanings, and so on⁶⁵. Marx’s point – says Kitching – is that the possibilities for human agency are shaped by a legacy of shared understandings, a legacy that shapes the somewhat indeterminate boundaries of possible social action. But whilst ‘men’ do not make history ‘as they please’, they do – in the end – make history, since the circumstances they confront are not timeless realities or immutable essences, but are present precisely because they have been made actual by prior human action.

⁶¹ MacKenzie, 2004

⁶² Butler, 2010

⁶³ Butler, 1988: 520, 1993: 14, 1999: 187, 2010

⁶⁴ MECW, 11: 103

⁶⁵ Kitching, 2002a. See also Carver, 2021

Such acts of making should, furthermore, be understood performatively; and understood so, they posit the aforementioned possibilities for performative agency. Much like Butler, Marx stressed that performatives contained their own agentic possibilities, since the economic order people performatively accomplish is constitutively capable of misfire, containing as it does certain contradictions, inverse effects, fallibilities, and insufficiencies that people act out in various ways in their everyday social practice. In other words, rather than neat and tidy references to simply present extra-social ‘things’, the categories and relations people enact in their everyday lives are inexorably incomplete, fallible, and full of tensions, and these get played out – as it were – in people’s social actions, thereby generating possibilities for subversive, oppositional acts of agency⁶⁶. And this opens up, furthermore, the broader possibility that that economic order can be unmade, or made differently. People are thus – as Marx put it elsewhere using a theatrical analogy that is familiarly Butlerian – both the ‘actors’ and the ‘authors’ of their ‘own drama’⁶⁷.

That theatrical analogy recalls the passage highlighted earlier in which Marx states that the ‘characters who appear on the economic stage’ are nothing but ‘personifications’ of economic relations. To bring together these comments and build on the theatrical analogy, I want to suggest that Marx’s references to the ‘characters’ on the ‘economic stage’ lead to a structuralist non-agency only when one views people solely as the ‘actors’ of the drama, forgetting that they are also its ‘authors’. To defend that suggestion, I re-examine Marx’s apparent structuralism through the lens of performative agency, making sense of the structure-agency relationship by treating structures as the sort of performative legacy I outlined above.

That argument hinges, as I will now show, on Marx’s account of commodity fetishism⁶⁸, in particular a reading of that account given by Roberts⁶⁹. Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism appears at the end of chapter one of *Capital*, where he compares the fetishism of commodities with religious fetishism, arguing that just as in the ‘realm of religion’ the ‘productions of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their

⁶⁶ Carver, 1998: 43–62

⁶⁷ PP: 170

⁶⁸ CAP: 163–177

⁶⁹ Roberts, 2018: 82–101

own’, so it is in the ‘world of commodities’, where the ‘products of labour’ are similarly ‘endowed’ with mysterious forces⁷⁰. In this famous passage, Marx takes a notion of religious fetishism derived from de Brosses⁷¹ and transplants it onto his analysis of the commodity, arguing that in setting up the world of commodity exchange people had endowed objects with seemingly mystical powers that had come to control them.

That ‘endowment’ however, is not some error of perception or a psychological trick: instead, commodity fetishism is a palpable reality of the everyday social reality people had created for themselves. The generation and projection of these controlling forces is, says Marx, something people carry out in their everyday social practice, and which determines the practical possibilities for social action they have in their everyday lives. Exploring this account, Roberts argues – alongside others⁷² – that commodity fetishism is best understood as a remorseless, immanently necessary social logic that emerges in the world of commodity exchange, and which has ended up compelling people’s actions. That logic comes about because the world of commodities presupposes, Marx argues, a separation between the labour of individuals, a separation that is a characteristic feature of capitalistic social relations, and quite unlike other social-historical contexts⁷³. Because of that separation, producers labour independently from one another, only coming into ‘social contact’ in the act of exchange itself⁷⁴. As a result, capitalism is premised on a set of circumstances in which social interactions occur indirectly, with the impersonal medium of the market as the unavoidable go-between. Consequently, individuals direct their separate activity according to social signals, signals that help coordinate everyone’s separate activity, and that are themselves communicated through the movement of abstract categories (in particular, prices)⁷⁵.

The problem, however, is that this abstract, depersonalised social logic has ended up becoming an immanent necessity people have little choice but to obey⁷⁶. Separated out from one another, the cooperative actions and exchanges people require to meet their needs, and to

⁷⁰ CAP: 165

⁷¹ de Brosses, 2017

⁷² Andrews, 2002; Carver, 1998: 24–42; Read, 2002; Saito, 2017: 99–119

⁷³ TOM: 47-50; CAP: 165, 170-173, 181-2, 486-487. See also Best, 2010; Saito, 2017: 35–40

⁷⁴ CAP: 165

⁷⁵ CAP: 164-165

⁷⁶ CAP: 167, 381, 424-5, 689-90

act efficaciously, are only possible when one submits to this remorseless social logic: people have become, as Saito puts it, forced to conform to a particular social rationality in order to survive⁷⁷. Economic categories thus do not simply mediate the processes of interaction between individuals, becoming instead the sole practically plausible goal for social actions⁷⁸. The result of this remorseless, impersonal social logic is, says Marx, a trammelling of individual agency. The fetishism of commodities is a feature of a social world where the judgements, desires, choices, and so on of other people enter our own deliberations only so far as they engender shifts in abstract social dialectics, sending signals that get communicated to us through the commodity⁷⁹. The commodity, therefore, rather than being ‘under the control’ of individual producers, comes to ‘in fact control them’⁸⁰, since people’s capacity to engage in any sort of social action depends upon their submission to an immanently necessary social logic that gets communicated to them as the supposed properties of things, namely commodities. As a result, choices of action have become detached from individual judgements, since the scope of people’s deliberation is narrowed according to social parameters to the extent that such individual judgement becomes – as Roberts puts it – ‘incontinent’⁸¹. Thus under capitalistic social relations, all social action gets hemmed in to such an extent that that action is predetermined by the movement of an impersonal ‘social mechanism’ in which individuals are ‘merely a cog’⁸².

Having established commodity fetishism at the end of chapter one, Marx then immediately makes – at the start of chapter two – his claim that individuals can be treated as personifications of economic relations. What is often missed, however, is that that structuralist move itself follows from and depends on commodity fetishism, and only pertains in a social world where that fetishism has become a reality. Indeed, whilst Marx holds that his analysis can treat individuals as nothing but personifications, he also – significantly and repeatedly – places a number of restrictions on the domain of those claims: capital’s laws are necessary only in certain times, places, and from presupposed perspectives; only when people

⁷⁷ Saito, 2017: 112

⁷⁸ MECW, 9: 212; CAP: 179, 228-9, 234, 252, 644. See also Best, 2010; Roberts, 2009

⁷⁹ Roberts, 2018: 87–88

⁸⁰ CAP: 167-8

⁸¹ Roberts, 2018: 85

⁸² CAP: 739, see also 381, 777, 689-690

find themselves caught up in relations that are taken to be simply present; only when one presumes that people treat certain categories and relations as socially valid; and so on⁸³. It is, therefore, only *when* and *if* social reality is fetishistic that Marx thinks people can be treated simply as the ‘bearers of economic relations’.

Consequently, the structuralist characterisation of capitalistic social relations does not represent some sort of underlying truth, but should instead be treated as a performative accomplishment. Fetishism is only in place because people carry it out in their social life: they set up, performatively, the world of commodity exchange, all its categories and relations, and consequently its limitations and constraints. Once accomplished, that fetishism weighs on people as a performative legacy, trammelling their deliberations according to established parameters. And it is that performatively accomplished trammelling which gives social relations their structural character. The result, therefore, is that Marx’s claims regarding structuralism do not turn people into non-agents: instead, as Roberts puts it, they are agents who have become dominated by impersonal forces they themselves have a hand in producing⁸⁴. And crucially, because fetishism and structuralism are performative accomplishments, they could, in principle, be un-accomplished, and done otherwise.

5.2.2 Political stakes

Secondly, Marx politicises the categories and relations of capitalism by laying out the political stakes at play in their performative accomplishment: the harms, power relationships, burdens, and benefits that go along with bringing about capitalism, rather than some other performative actuality.

To illuminate those stakes, Marx – in familiar fashion – identifies and then subverts the assumptions, preconceptions, and pretensions characteristic of political economy. He begins that subversion by pointing out that the world of commodity exchange – a world he dissects in the first two parts of *Capital* – closely approximates an idyll that had been championed by the political economists, and which their economic blueprints were meant to establish. That world, so the story goes, is the ‘very Eden of the innate rights of man’, where individuals confront each other as the ‘simple owner[s] of commodities’, exchanging ‘equivalent for

⁸³ CAP: 167, 173-5, 187, 675-82. See also section 6.2.

⁸⁴ Roberts, 2018: 95

equivalent’ on the basis of mutual benefit, enjoying ‘equal[ity] before the law’ and selling or buying on the basis of ‘their own free will’ alone. And whilst in this idyll everyone ‘pays heed only to himself’ the spontaneous result of their free interaction, alongside the invisible forces of the market, would ensure that ‘they all work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal, and in the common interest’⁸⁵. The political economists presented this idyllic scene as patently or even *ipso facto* justified: it was, after all, a scene in which each individual enjoyed the same rights, freedoms, and privileges, and in which all social interactions were based on the free and willing consent of all the parties involved.

But whilst capitalism in theory followed this idyllic blueprint, capitalism *in practice* was far more bleak. The practical realisation of the blueprints of the political economists seemed to coexist with numerous social horrors that were ubiquitous in the modern industries of Marx’s time: the growing destitution of the workers⁸⁶; the monotony, dangers, and over-work of the capitalistic workplace⁸⁷; the rising tide of unemployed workers⁸⁸; and so on. What is more, those horrors were all the more shocking since the immiseration of one part of society – the workers – seemed to go hand-in-hand with the ever-greater dominance and burgeoning wealth of the other – the capitalists.

There was, therefore, a disjunct between an idyllic theoretical picture and a practical horror. The various defenders of that idyll – including the political economists, but also some of Marx’s socialist rivals – responded to that disjunct in one of three ways. The first was to suggest the two were *unconnected*: that those horrors were entirely exogenous to capitalism, and merely the result of some social-historical fluke or, alternatively, simply an unavoidable fact-of-life, meaning that the capitalism itself was absolved of the blame⁸⁹. Secondly, others suggested capitalism’s horrors existed because the liberal idyll had been *perverted*, usually by some unscrupulous capitalist who had twisted the laws of commodity exchange to their

⁸⁵ CAP: 280

⁸⁶ See, for instance, CAP: 601, 637, 811

⁸⁷ See, for instance, CAP: 552, 799, 821

⁸⁸ CAP: 762-802

⁸⁹ Marx levelled this accusation against those socialists who wanted to take the good of capitalism, whilst leaving the bad (MECW, 38: 103; PP: 174-175; CM: 513-514). For discussion see Carver, 2018: 138-166; Roberts, 2018: 74-101, 119-133, 176-183

advantage⁹⁰. Finally, there were those who *justified* those social horrors as somehow legitimate or even deserved, for instance by suggesting that the misery of the working class was somehow the product of their own reprehensible behaviour, or the wealth of the capitalist fair reward for their diligence⁹¹.

Against those arguments, Marx's contends that all those horrors are, in fact, direct, native, and inseparable products of capitalism itself: they are not imposed from the outside, or down to the errors or corruption of individuals, but 'baked in' to capitalism's categories and relations from the off⁹². His argument, in other words, is that then-contemporary capitalism was *both* the realisation of the liberal idyll of commodity exchange, *and* a palpable horror. Its attendant social evils are thus, in other words, wholly endogenous to capitalism itself, and represent nothing more than the practical realisation of the political economists' blueprints, since they were the direct and unavoidable results of bringing those blueprints from the textbooks into reality⁹³. And the political point of this was to reveal how even the most basic categories and relations of capitalism are ravelled together with the gruesome reality of capitalism in practice, meaning there was no way to enact those categories and relations – to 'do capitalism' – that didn't involve a descent into the grisly reality of 19th century life.

To defend that contention, Marx traces capitalism's systematic interconnections forward from the moment of exchange, a social moment that the political economists had – he claims – illegitimately isolated from the broader totality of capitalist social relations. The political economists framing of the sphere of commodity exchange as an idyll only succeeded – Marx contends – because they took the act of exchange to be an isolated social moment, bookended by two other moments (the acts of production, and of consumption) which were posited to be supposedly private, purely extra-social activities taking place outside the scope of legitimate public scrutiny, or even of theoretical analysis.

Against this, Marx stresses capitalism's systematic interconnections and internally produced dynamic movements. In his 1857 'introduction' – usually published as the first item in the

⁹⁰ Marx was particularly scornful of the socialist moralists who pinned the failings of capitalism on the behaviour of individual capitalists (CAP: 92, 381, 739, 742). For discussion see Roberts, 2018: 56–103

⁹¹ See, for instance, CAP: 738–746, 788, 873

⁹² Roberts, 2019

⁹³ Carver, 2018: 138–166; Harvey, 2018: 287

Grundrisse edited collection of notebooks and manuscripts – Marx argues that political economy had attempted to understand capitalistically constituted social relations through four linear moments: production, in which products are brought forth that ‘correspond with needs’; distribution, dividing those products according to ‘social laws’; exchange, dividing again according to ‘individual need’; and then consumption, the final ‘enjoyment’ of the ‘objects’. Having presented this picture, Marx then devotes a lengthy analysis to dissecting and refuting the supposed separations between these four moments. The political economist’s approach was thus, Marx argues, a ‘sundering of something which belongs together’⁹⁴, since consumption is at once production, production is at once distribution, and so forth. Marx’s argument, therefore, is that one cannot understand each of these elements as discrete, sequential, and operating under its own independent logics; instead, one must analyse each moment through the inner connections and interdependences shared between it and the rest of a dynamic social totality⁹⁵.

Capitalism, therefore, has to be understood as a system that arises as it is performed. And it cannot, therefore, be justified by looking at one isolated element in abstraction, but has to be scrutinised as a totality, along with all its burdens and benefits, harms and advantages, freedoms and constraints, and so on. Deploying that understanding, Marx returns to the sphere of commodity exchange, and asks: given capitalism’s systematic interconnections, what follows from these apparently idyllic, wholly free, spontaneous, and mutually beneficial acts of exchange? Addressing that question, Marx then sets out – I contend – two arguments that were intended to have significant political ramifications: firstly, that the idyll of commodity exchange only becomes full-blown capitalism when it produces a new, profoundly asymmetrical social relation – namely, the modern class relation – and secondly, that the ensuing social system is one by which one class is progressively exploited, immiserated, oppressed, and brutalised for the benefit of the other.

To reach these conclusions, the crucial exchange Marx draws our attention to is the wage-contract. In that exchange, one human being sells their labour capacity – what Marx calls

⁹⁴ TOM: 58

⁹⁵ TOM: 56-71. For discussion see Carver in TOM: 114-129; Chambers, 2014: 93–98

labour-power⁹⁶ – in return for a wage. Exactly why and how this exchange occurs is a topic I return to in section 6.2, but for now, the point Marx gets at is that from a certain perspective, this exchange is quite innocuous: what we have, after all, is just two equal commodity owners freely exchanging for their mutual benefit, and Marx makes no suggestion that that exchange is anything other than a fair one (or, that is, a fair one according to the rules, expectations, and assumptions native to the world of commodity exchange⁹⁷). For the political economists, the completion of this exchange was the end of the story: once commodity owner exchanges with commodity owner, both retreat into the supposedly ‘private’ worlds of consumption and production, ceasing their relationship until they have new products to exchange, once again, on the marketplace.

Such a story does not, however, hold true for labour-power. What people exchange in the market, as Marx points out, is only a potential to labour, and for that commodity to be consumed – to have its use-value extracted – those potentials have to be actualised: the work has to be done. As a result, the buyer of labour-power can only deploy their new commodity because a new relationship between buyer and seller has emerged, a relationship that continues *after* the act of exchange. A proper, holistic understanding of capitalistic social relations thus requires – Marx argues – that we ‘follow’ the buyer and seller of labour-power ‘into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice “No admittance except on business”’⁹⁸. Once we cross into that ‘hidden abode’, what one finds is that those buyers and sellers have taken on new roles: ‘[h]e who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his worker’⁹⁹. Our two commodity owners, therefore, have entered a new social relationship: and

⁹⁶ Marx ascribes labour-power certain problematic, quasi-metaphysical properties that he arrives at by invoking Aristotle, positing – in particular – that human labour possesses a unique capacity to generate more value than its production requires. This, however, is not really tenable (Carver, 1998: 63–86), and remains embedded in the implausible value problematic (footnote 35). My argument, however, does not depend on those untenable claims, and I deploy the term ‘labour-power’ to refer to generic human labour-capacity without adopting or endorsing them.

⁹⁷ As I suggest here, the relevant notion of ‘fairness’ is – as Marx highlights – a bourgeois notion: see CM: 497–506; MECW, 24: 77–99. For discussion see Lebowitz, 2015: 42–75

⁹⁸ CAP: 279–280

⁹⁹ CAP: 280

unlike those in the sphere of commodity exchange, this new relationship is no relationship of equals. The worker's life has, therefore, taken on a dual existence: they are, on the one hand, the producer and seller of a commodity – labour-power – in the ostensibly free sphere of commodity exchange; and, on the other hand, they are proletarians whose physical presence, energy, and labour-activity have been sold away for control by another¹⁰⁰. From the symmetrical and egalitarian relations between commodity owners in the sphere of exchange, a new asymmetrical and inegalitarian relation has thus emerged: we have moved, in other words, from the one-sided world of commodity exchange to the two-sided world of full-blown capitalism¹⁰¹.

Marx thus subverts the idyll of commodity exchange, revealing that that idyll contains within it the germ of class-relations. Having established this, Marx shifts from the tidily homogenous presentation of the sphere of exchange to a complex, dual presentation that reflects the inherently class-based nature of those new social relations. He then invites the reader to revisit the seemingly innocuous, innocent analyses and explanations given by the political economists, reassessing those familiar questions with the new perspective in mind¹⁰².

It is through this class lens, then, that Marx re-examines the many social horrors of then-contemporary capitalism. Attacking all the various attempts to mask, justify, or disassociate capitalism from those horrors, Marx tells a very different story, showing – one by one – how each of those horrors is produced in and through the operation of capitalistic social processes: exploitation is not, for instance, the wrongful manipulation of capitalism by a self-serving elite, but a necessary element – indeed, even *the* necessary element – of capital's operation¹⁰³; the misery of the capitalist workplace is the home-grown consequence of building that workplace in conformity with the demands of capital¹⁰⁴; pauperisation, immiseration, and mass unemployment are native products of capitalism's operation, products that capitalism increasingly comes to rely on¹⁰⁵; and so on. And all those horrors,

¹⁰⁰ CAP: 415-416

¹⁰¹ PP: 176

¹⁰² See, for instance, CAP: 425, 675-682, 730-2, 789, 794

¹⁰³ CAP: 320-329. For discussion see Roberts, 2018: 104–145

¹⁰⁴ CAP: 481-6, 548, 645-646, 799

¹⁰⁵ CAP: 482, 716-719, 799

furthermore, are concentrated at one social pole: they are visited upon the workers in direct juxtaposition to the growing dominance and wealth of the bourgeoisie, and are – what is more – the very means through which that dominance and wealth is secured¹⁰⁶. In this way, Marx attacks and subverts the apparently innocuous – and even laudable – idyll of commodity exchange, demonstrating that it turns out on fuller analysis to be little more than the hell of then-contemporary capitalism in proto-form.

Marx's point in tracing out capitalism's systematic connections is thus not (as is sometimes supposed) to identify the self-activating movement of some transcendental logic that plays out no matter what, or to lay out some roadmap for all human history¹⁰⁷: instead, his point is to reveal the grisly consequences that come about precisely because capitalism has – up to now – had its way. And the politically potent upshot of all this is that the blueprints of the political economists were (despite their pretensions to the contrary) far from neutral in their connotations. Performatively constituting one's social world according to those blueprints not only established the supposedly idyllic sphere of commodity exchange, but entailed an enormous range of further consequences, consequences that generated a distinctive – and distinctively unequal – distribution of harms, burdens, powers, and benefits. As Marx argues, therefore, those outcomes are the necessary concomitants of the performative constitution of capitalism: they are the political stakes at play in that constitution, in the exercise of people's collective agency to establish this particular performative actuality, rather than some other one.

5.2.3 Political conflict

Capitalism, finally, is a scene of endemic political conflict: it is not something that simply 'happens', but which has to be made to happen, and this making-happen – Marx argues – always involves a struggle.

The fact that struggles exist over capitalism's accomplishment (and Marx thinks it is a fact) itself presents something of a puzzle. As I argued in section 5.2.1, performative agency requires the citation of norms as an enabling factor. Consequently, the possibilities for

¹⁰⁶ CAP: 416, 711-724, 797, 811

¹⁰⁷ I argue, therefore, that Marx's characterisation of capitalism as a dynamic system is not – as is sometimes supposed – a form of Hegelian dialectics. See also chapter 4, footnote 31.

agentic action are limited according to the citational ‘tools’ one has to hand¹⁰⁸: the extant norms that are already there to be cited. The ensuing curtailment of agentic possibilities applies, notably, to the political actors caught up in that performatively constituted social reality. Thus even the radical revolutionary – Marx’s kind of political actor – can only conduct their politics within the social-historical framework of shared understanding they find already present. The ostensible problem with this, however, is that that framework is capitalism’s framework, and the tools in it are capitalism’s tools. The result, it would seem, is that even the most radical politics gets limited to a kind of refereeing in which one chastises capitalism for failing to stick to its own rules. This would appear to make impossible any sort of radical critical purchase on capitalism as a whole, thereby blunting – or even ruling out – exactly the kind of revolutionary politics Marx espoused.

The supposed problem here is, therefore, how one can proffer a performative understanding of capitalism, whilst also leaving space for ongoing political conflict over capitalism’s performative accomplishment. The nub of Marx’s answer to this problem – as I will show – is to attack the terms and assumptions by which that problem gets presented as a ‘problem’ in the first place. His argument is that this ‘problem’ itself rests on a particular picture of capitalistic social reality, one that paints that reality as a simply present, inherently stable, self-sustaining, totalising, coherent monolith. Marx thought that picture was historically implausible and intellectually dishonest: a moment’s attention to the past and to everyday life reveals that capitalism is full of conflicts, contradictions, and struggles, many of which Marx charts in *Capital*¹⁰⁹. Struggles between worker and capitalist are, therefore, a historical fact, and are immediately and readily apparent if one simply cares to look.

The problem, however, is that people do not look; and they do not look, furthermore, precisely because they had bought into a distinctive picture of the social world that had been presented and championed by the socially dominant class (the bourgeoisie) as well as their theoretical representatives (the political economists). Marx’s suggestion, therefore, is that the presence of critical tendencies within capitalism only gets presented as a ‘problem’ when one adopts a set of presuppositions that turn out – on closer inspection – to be myths proffered by socially dominant groups. His response, therefore, is to challenge those myths, countering

¹⁰⁸ As Butler puts it (Butler, 1999: 145).

¹⁰⁹ See, for instance, CAP: 340-416, 553-564, 762-802

them – as I will show – with his own performative understanding of the categories and relations of capitalism.

Those myths were, I argue, twofold. Firstly, Marx took exception to those who treated capitalism as if it was just ‘there’: as if it was simply an already present, *de facto* social-historical given whose origins had ceased to be politically salient (if indeed they ever were). That myth stemmed from suppositions about capitalism’s naturalness and spontaneity. As I highlighted above, Marx regularly criticised the political economists for naturalising the categories and relations of capitalism. That presumed naturalness had, Marx argues, obscured the fact that capitalism only exists – and only continues to exist – because a unique set of social-historical circumstances has emerged. Those circumstances include, for instance, the separation of the worker from the means of production, since it is only because the workers lack the ability to labour independently – says Marx – that they agree to the wage-contract in the first place¹¹⁰; similarly, commodity exchange presupposes that each individual labours within a system that controls all access to their means of subsistence, producing goods not for their own consumption, but for exchange on the market¹¹¹; that market itself rests, furthermore, on presumptions about the so-called private individual’s right and capacity to own and dispose of their property as they see fit, and thus a certain legal and institutional structure¹¹²; and so on.

Having pinpointed those preconditions, Marx argues that they are never, in fact, fully and irrevocably established; that consequently, capitalism itself is precarious, and in need of constant maintenance; and that the acts by which capitalism gets established and re-established are, have been, and will continue to be subject to considerable contestation. As I will show in the next chapter, for instance, the workers’ loss of the ability to labour independently is *both* one of capitalism’s central preconditions, *and* a site of an ongoing struggle between worker and capitalist. That struggle begins with the driving of the peasants of the land¹¹³, and is replicated in ‘mature’ capitalism through numerous capitalist strategies, such as the deskilling of the workforce, the growth of an industrial reserve army, and the

¹¹⁰ CAP: 166, 270-280, 382, 873-786

¹¹¹ CAP: 165, 273. See also section 5.2.1.

¹¹² CAP: 178-179, 270-271

¹¹³ CAP: 877-895

transformation of the capitalistic workplace¹¹⁴. The point of charting each of these shifts was to highlight that ‘wage-labour’ – this essential, supposedly ‘given’ or even ‘natural’ constituent element of contemporary capitalism – is, in reality, a social-historical artifice. And that artifice, furthermore, only comes about because capitalism has won out in a process of struggle, thereby imposing a set of conditions that make the category ‘wage-labour’ into an actuality¹¹⁵.

In this way, Marx highlights how capital must constantly strive to produce and re-produce its own preconditions: those preconditions – as he stresses again and again – do not just happen, but have to be made to happen through continual intervention. And the worker, furthermore, is no passive victim in this process, deploying various strategies of their own in an effort to resist¹¹⁶. When one, therefore, simply takes the existence of capitalism as a given, this is skip over and erase the political conflicts through which those categories have in fact been made actual¹¹⁷. It is, in other words, to take the victory of capital for granted.

Having placed the categories and relations of capitalism within this on-going, socially-historically uncertain process of struggle, Marx goes on to identify a second myth: that capitalism is simply self-perpetuating, and continues to pertain unless it is disrupted from some supposed ‘outside’. Against that myth, Marx stresses that even when and if capitalism does get performatively accomplished, that accomplishment produces further struggles and critical tendencies that are endemic to capitalism itself. This occurs because the result of that performative accomplishment is not some internally coherent, fully stable, totalising, entirely harmonious social monolith, but instead – as I argued above – a disparate, ever-incomplete, fundamentally errant, and ever-changing system that produces various elements and tendencies over the course of its long and chequered history. Building on that picture, Marx argues that those elements and tendencies are unstable, fallible, and not *ipso facto* integrable: capitalism can, for instance, both require that something happen, whilst also preventing it occurring; demands this or that whilst also insisting on its opposite; fail to produce an effect

¹¹⁴ As examined in Section 6.2.2.

¹¹⁵ CAP: 925

¹¹⁶ See, for instance, CM: 482-496

¹¹⁷ Cleaver, 1979, 2019

its ‘laws’ anticipate’; posit, in one part of the system, a social tendency that undermines the operation of another part; and so on¹¹⁸.

By spelling out these various errancies, insufficiencies, and tensions, Marx’s is not trying to show that capitalism is somehow logically flawed, or represents some sort of logical impossibility. Not is his emphasis on those tensions an attempt – as some of his interpreters have it – to envisage capitalism’s historical evolution through the lens of Hegelian dialectics¹¹⁹. Instead, his goal is to show, I argue, that capitalism constitutively contains the possibility of breakdown and disruption. By stressing the non-integrability and fallibility of its categories and relations, what Marx demonstrates is that capitalism contains various tensions, contradictions, and incompletenesses which – taken together – make its continued performative accomplishment far from certain. Capitalism is, in other words, fundamentally precarious even in its own terms; and that precarity, furthermore, is a political precarity, resulting in endless struggles over when, how, and if capitalism will continue to pertain. All the various contrary tendencies posited by capitalism’s categories and relations thus get *politically* played out in people’s everyday social practices, appearing as struggles between opposing forces, unintended consequences, and intermittent crises¹²⁰. Capitalism thus produces in the course of its development new antagonisms, new arenas for political struggle, new political confrontations, and fresh political possibilities. In this way, the performative accomplishment of capitalism always sets the scene for yet more struggles, struggles that are native products of capitalism itself.

5.3 Needs as political realities

Against, therefore, orthodox approaches which assign needs to either extra-social nature or infinitely malleable culture, Marx’s approach centres on everyday social practice: on patterns of human doing, and the performative actualities people constitute through that doing. And whilst those patterns of practice enact performative social realities that are stubborn, constraining, and palpably real to those caught-up in them, those realities are nevertheless political: since they are within the scope of people’s collective agency to change; since they

¹¹⁸ GI: 36; PP: 175, 190, 210-211; CM: 489, 519.

¹¹⁹ For discussion see chapter 4, footnote 31.

¹²⁰ See, for instance, PP: 175, 211-212; CM: 492-493; MECW, 29: 134, 158; CAP: 103, 568-569, 635

posit their own antagonisms and political stakes; and since they can be, are being, and have been struggled over.

6. The needs of wage-labour

Marx – as the previous chapter argued – theorises needs as political realities. Rejecting abstract, contextless references to ‘human need’, Marx argues instead that needs are performative: they are constituted through repetitive citational social practice, and represent no reality beyond that pattern of repetitive citation. What is more, by understanding needs performatively, Marx also – as I showed - unleashes their political potential, highlighting the political stakes, struggles, and possibilities for political agency associated with their performative accomplishment.

Marx does not, however, simply point to that politics, and then leave it at that. Instead – as this chapter will show – his theoretical account is intended to be a direct, overtly partisan political intervention into the very political to-and-fro that that account had revealed. Marx, in other words, uses theory not just to analyse politics, but to *do* politics: to directly engage in the extant struggles that that theory had brought to the surface, actively partaking in them, and attempting to influence their course. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to examine Marx’s theory as this sort of political intervention, focusing – in particular – on his politics of need.

That politics interests me for two reasons. Firstly, it offers a form of theorising about need that is authentic about their political nature. As I argued in chapter 3, the issue with many contemporary approaches to need is that they see the success of theory as going hand-in-hand with the cessation, resolution, or disappearance of political conflict, and thereby attempt to fix needs to some or other extra-political theoretical foundation. Under the Marxian approach, by contrast, theory is not an activity outside politics through which one attempts to resolve any and all political struggles, but instead a form of political action that takes place *within* those struggles. As a result, the Marxian approach can – I argue – theorise need without thereby doing away with the politics.

Secondly, I am interested not just in Marx’s general theoretical approach, but the specific content of his political interventions. In making those interventions – in the form, as I will

show, of an immanent critique of capitalism and of capitalistic needs¹ – Marx develops various lines of inquiry, conceptual innovations, and analytical tools that can, I argue, be redeployed to shed a new light on the contemporary theory and politics of need. To defend that contention, this chapter draws several contrasts between Marx’s political account of need and contemporary needs theory, showing in each case how that account upends widely accepted presuppositions, frameworks, and problematics that have served to de-politicise needs. By doing so, what I will show is how a Marxian approach brings to the surface the political conflicts, agency, and stakes wrapped up in the question of need; a politics which – contrastingly – contemporary needs theory has served to dismiss, silence, and/or suppress.

I begin, therefore, by examining Marx’s distinctive theoretical approach (section 6.1), showing how Marx conceptualises theoretical activity as a form of political action. I then go on to consider Marx’s account of need as exactly that sort of partisan political intervention. I do so by examining three different strands of his politics of need, in each case drawing contrasts between his approach and the commonplace frameworks and assumptions standardly adopted in contemporary needs theory. Those three strands include, firstly, the politics going on *behind* needs (section 6.2): the battle over the preconditions that have to be in place for that category to get performatively constituted in the first place. Secondly, there is the politics contained in *enacting* needs (section 6.3): in carrying out capitalism’s categories and relations in people’s social actions. And finally, there is the politics *following* needs (section 6.4): in the broader systematic consequences that inexorably arise when people performatively constitute what has been called the capitalistic ‘system of need’, including – crucially – a persistent and horrific failure to meet needs.

6.1 The revolutionary theorist

Let me begin, therefore, with Marx’s understanding of theory as a form of political intervention. Famously, Marx once argued that the philosophers had failed to move the world², but that argument is just the most prominent example of what would be one of Marx’s most ubiquitous themes: he repeatedly and forcefully chided his various opponents – from the Young Hegelian ‘philosophers’; to the political economists; to the socialist

¹ I use the phrase ‘capitalistic needs’ to refer to the needs performatively constituted by capitalistic everyday social practices.

² TF: 5

moralists, utopians, and ameliorators³ – for conducting forms of theoretical activity that had generated ineffectual politics. And it was, furthermore, partly on the basis of such critiques that Marx set out to build his own theoretical alternative, believing that such an alternative would contain far more political potency.

That alternative (again famously) is based on an immanent form of social criticism. As Marx has it, the act of critiquing one's society does not require the theorist to ascend to some higher, meta-level of analysis, since our performatively constituted social reality already contains a range of tools for its own critique⁴. Such an approach follows closely on the heels of Marx's contention (explored in chapter 4) that the act of theorising is just another activity that takes place in the world itself – in a specific, given social-historical context – and which draws on the conceptual resources the theorist already finds present there. Attacking his various rivals and opponents on that basis, Marx denies that the theorist can ever step outside the social-historical practical reality they find themselves in, arguing – consequently – that theoretical activity cannot claim to access some underlying reality, or target some higher, transcendent form of truth. Marx's concludes, therefore, that the theorist must begin by recognising that all thinking, including *theoretical* thinking, is social-historical thinking: 'society', as he puts it, 'must always be born in mind as the presupposition of [any] conception'⁵.

The problem, however, is that whilst Marx bursts the theoretical pretensions of his various rivals and opponents in this way, he also seems to sap theoretical activity of its central purpose. Marx's dethronement of theory leads him to ground his own account in the categories of everyday economic life, categories that – as he puts it – are drawn from people's 'ordinary language'⁶, and that 'everybody knows'⁷. Elsewhere, Marx and Engels describe the 'theoretical conclusions' of the 'Communists' as 'merely express[ing]' the

³ As summarised most famously in *The Communist Manifesto* (CM: 507-519). See also sections 4.3 and 5.2. As previously stated (chapter 5, footnote 1), my primary concern is not the accuracy of these accusations, but their significance for Marx's account.

⁴ For discussion of Marx's immanent critical method see Carver, 1998: 63–86, 2019a; Kitching, 1988: 7–35; Leopold, 2007: 279–297; Pleasants, 2002; Read, 2002; Roberts, 2018: 231–244; Uschanov, 2002

⁵ TOM: 74

⁶ MECW, 5: 446-447

⁷ PP: 165. This particular passage refers to Proudhon's misuse of those everyday categories.

‘actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes’⁸. And elsewhere still, we are told that as class antagonisms develop, the revolutionary theorist simply needs to ‘take note of what is happening before their eyes and... become its mouthpiece’⁹. But if all Marx’s theory tells us is things we already know, and all it can point to are things that are already right there in front of our eyes, then one might wonder why we should bother with theory at all. If, in other words, theory can never access a higher vantage point, and is as much embedded in a given social-historical context as any other activity, then what – in the end – does theory actually offer?

To answer that question, it helps to consider a different one: if theory is indeed nugatory in the sense outlined above, then why did Marx devote so much energy to critiquing it? Marx’s *magnum opus* – *Capital* – is, after all, subtitled ‘A Critique of Political Economy’, and central to that critique is a confrontation with not only capitalism itself, but with the particular way that the political economists had theorised capitalism. Marx’s objection to political economy is not principally that it failed to reflect reality, but rather the way in which those theorists had *presented* the reality they were theorising. Those presentations had buttressed certain commonplace ‘forms of appearance’¹⁰, conducting a series of naturalisations, obfuscations, retrospective justifications, boundary-buildings, and so on. Marx thus branded the political economists the ‘sycophants’¹¹ and ‘apologists’¹² of capital: their theoretical activity was, he claims, a disguised political project, one which had obscured capitalism’s stakes, struggles, and immanent critical tendencies, and thereby presented certain social possibilities as the dominant, only legitimate, or even only possible ones.

⁸ CM: 498

⁹ PP: 177

¹⁰ CAP: 173-5, 713-4, 675-682, 875. Significantly, such deceptive forms of appearance are how things really do appear to those who find themselves standing in a particular performatively constituted social-historical somewhere. They are, therefore, unlike hallucinations or delusions, and more akin to optical illusions, such as how objects appear reversed when viewed in a mirror (CAP: 164-5, 677, 682). In this way, Marx’s arguments about capitalistic ‘forms of appearance’ parallel some of Butler’s concerning the supposed ‘substance’ that lies behind gender (Butler, 1999: 181–190).

¹¹ CAP: 794, 932

¹² CAP: 566, 568

This brings us to Marx's own approach. If the political economists could prop-up bourgeois dominance through their theorisations of everyday practical reality, then the radical social critic can perform the same trick, only in reverse: '[j]ust as the economists are the scientific representatives of the bourgeois class' – as Marx puts it – 'so the socialists and communists are the theoreticians of the proletarian class'¹³. Such a theory serves alternative political goals through similar means: it offers a politically-loaded re-presentation of everyday social practices that historicises rather than naturalises; disrupts rather than establishes boundaries; emphasises rather than suppresses or conceals existing struggles; shifts the frames of what is considered salient and significant; makes the seemingly commonplace and familiar appear mysterious and exotic; and so on. The point of such a theory is not, therefore, to solve the problems of contemporary social world by offering solutions from the outside, but instead to bring to the surface realities, tensions, tendencies, and possibilities already present in that social world, but which had been previously obscured¹⁴. The *modus operandi* of such a theory, therefore, is description and re-presentation rather than explanation¹⁵: the point is to get people to see things which are already there in their everyday social world, but which have often been missed, and to view those things in a certain light and through certain frames.

For Marx, therefore, theories are always political projects: and whilst in the political economists' case that project had been a disguised one, in his own case, that project is overt, by and large intentional, and declaredly partisan. The theory Marx offers on this basis is thus a distinctively political sort of political theory. It is not political theory in the sense that it takes an object, 'politics', and then 'theorises' it, but rather in that it views the doing of theory as itself an inherently political act. The ultimate aim of such a theory is, furthermore, not to solve politics, but to prompt political action, getting people to exercise their political agency in certain proscribed ways, thereby fuelling ongoing struggles, and realising certain political possibilities rather than others.

¹³ PP: 177, emphasis removed

¹⁴ MECW, 3: 144; GI: 36, 93-95; MECW, 5: 31; PP: 175-176, 190, 210-211; CM: 482-496, 518-519; MECW, 40: 270; CAP: 99

¹⁵ Several authors have, therefore, drawn parallels between Marx's approach and Wittgenstein's notion of 'perspicuous representation' (Wittgenstein, 1968: 49–50). For discussion see section 7.2.3.

6.2 Behind needs

The remainder of this chapter will, therefore, consider Marx's account of need as exactly this sort of theoretical-cum-political intervention, beginning – in this section – with the politics going on *behind* people's needs.

A notable corollary of Marx's performative understanding of the category 'need' is that that category is not self-positing: it is not the case that there must be a category 'need', and that category does not just pop into existence, appear spontaneously in the head of the theorist, or parachute in from some supposed outside. Given this, a useful starting point is to ask: in contemporary social practice, how does the category 'need' actually arise? Or, to put this another way, under what particular circumstances do we confront the category 'need' in the actual practice of actual people? And what features of contemporary life make it the case that one requires that category in the first place?

Marx – as this section will show – gives a fairly direct answer to these questions: under capitalism, the category 'need' emerges in the context of the relationship between wage-labourer and employer. But as he goes on to argue, for that relationship to arise – and thus for the category 'need' to appear at all – certain social-historical preconditions must be in place. Those preconditions, furthermore, do not just happen spontaneously or appear naturally, and are not just simply and uncontroversially 'there', but hinge instead on the success of various political actors in bringing about and sustaining a relationship of structural dependence. And the result of that argument, as I will show, is the following political point: that the needs one encounters within capitalism are tainted from their very inception, since their existence presupposes that a system of subjugation, expropriation, and exploitation has been accomplished.

6.2.1 *The role of wage-labour*

To make that argument, Marx begins by tracing the emergence of the category 'need' within capitalism. Exploring that question in *Capital*, he mirrors the presentation of the political economists, beginning – as I discussed in chapter 5 – in the world of commodity exchange. In that world, everyone is simply a commodity-owner: they are equal individuals who are formally free to exchange the products of their labouring activities on the market, engaging in social interactions through the act of exchange, before exiting that social sphere once again to

conduct private acts of consumption¹⁶. In this hypothetical world of freely interacting commodity-owners, the category ‘need’ never gets posited: the impersonal categories and relations of the market obscure the individual, extra-social acts of production and consumption that go on outside the sphere of exchange, meaning that all that separate individuals can see of each other are prices, and all they care about (and, indeed, *can* care about) is whether there is effective demand for their products. In such a world, the social rationality which compels people’s actions is wholly indifferent as to whether a buyer uses – say – the water they purchase to stave off their thirst; to clean themselves; to fill their swimming pool; or if they simply pour it down the drain¹⁷. In this abstract, hypothetical world, the category ‘need’ serves no purpose, never enters the shared fund of concepts people use to make their actions intelligible to one another, and cannot be said to be meaningful at all.

Things change, however, with the wage-contract. In that exchange, the worker commodifies and sells their labour-power – their capacity to labour – in return for a wage. Like every other commodity, what the seller of labour-power receives in exchange – according to this hypothetical heuristic – is the value of that commodity; and just like any other commodity, that value is – Marx claims – determined by the socially necessary labour-time required to produce it¹⁸. And that production requires, he argues, that the worker is supplied with the ‘means of subsistence’ necessary for their ‘maintenance’ and ‘reproduction’ in their ‘normal state as a working individual’, which include various components: the physical necessities for the replenishment of the worker; certain ‘necessary requirements’ grounded on their ‘habits and expectations’; the need to produce future workers, and thus of the worker’s family; and the need for education¹⁹. The category ‘need’ is, therefore, encountered in this specific everyday social practice, and it is only at this point of exchange between the buyer and seller of labour-power that that category can be said to be socially salient, and therefore meaningful at all. Putting this performatively, one can say that the citational social practices that constitute the performative ‘need’ are the practices involved in the buying and selling of

¹⁶ TOM: 56-58. See also section 5.2.2.

¹⁷ CAP: 178-187

¹⁸ CAP: 270-280. Here again I make use of Marx’s categories and language without endorsing the implausible aspects of his economics (see chapter 5, footnotes 35 and 96).

¹⁹ CAP: 274-276

labour-power, and thus that categories is enacted in and through the performance of a particular social role: the role of wage-labour²⁰. For Marx, therefore, whenever one talks about needs under capitalism, one talks about the needs of wage-labour.

Whilst that claim itself is more than a little controversial, the core of Marx's argument tracks some quite common themes in contemporary needs theory. Almost all needs theorists have recognised that any adequate account of needs must include some kind of specification of the sorts of activities that people standardly value and engage in²¹. Consequently, needs theorists have offered numerous devices to provide the requisite specificity: some have argued, for instance, that needs are specified in accordance with some conception of minimally adequate human life, whilst leaving that conception itself open-ended and for elaboration by some further process²²; others have been more willing to posit particular content, designating – by theoretical fiat – some set of generically valuable human roles and practices²³; a third group has similarly offered up specific content, though in this case narrowing their scope to particular societies²⁴; whilst a fourth and final approach has tried to get around the problem by discerning a group of needs necessary for the successful performance of any social role²⁵, whilst nonetheless recognising that such a generic human capacity for action is meaningless in the absence of specific socially valuable opportunities to act²⁶. Behind all those various approaches lies a widespread recognition that in the absence of some particular specification of important roles and activities, generic human neediness tells us pretty much nothing.

Once this is recognised, Marx's account of the needs of wage-labour can be viewed as offering nothing more than what every theorist of need must offer: some specified set of practices and activities that the satisfaction of needs is meant to enable. The point of dispute is not, therefore, over the importance of social roles (or some equivalent), but instead concerns, firstly, *which* particular roles matter; and secondly, *why* they matter.

²⁰ MECW, 3: 220; EPM: 273, 283-4; CM: 490, 499; MECW, 9: 463; MECW, 24: 92; MECW, 30: 42-46

²¹ Section 2.2.

²² Alvarez, 2009; Copp, 1995: 174–177; Gasper, 2004: 142–152; Siebel and Schramme, 2020

²³ Miller D, 2007: 183–5, 2012

²⁴ Braybrooke, 1987, 2005

²⁵ In particular those who connect needs with a capacity for agency (Brock, 2005, 2009; Doyal and Gough, 1991; Miller SC, 2012).

²⁶ Doyal and Gough, 1991: 184–187

6.2.2 Preconditions as political accomplishments

This takes me to a notable advantage of Marx's approach. There has been an overwhelming tendency in contemporary needs theory to either posit some generic truths about specific valued activities that must be enabled, or to avoid this question by leaving the specification of those activities to an arbitrary cultural relativism²⁷. Needs theorists have left themselves, therefore, with nothing to say about why a particular set of practices and roles are deemed important, beyond the fact that they just 'are'.

Marx's approach, by contrast, is to scrutinise the social-historical origins of the contemporary assemblage of roles and social practices, along with the ensuing needs. What is innovative about this approach – I contend – is the way in which it refuses to take that assemblage as simply given, but instead critically examines the politics present in how those roles, practices, and needs come about in the first place. And it is by doing so – as I will show – that Marx reaches a significant conclusion: that capitalistic roles, practices, and needs only emerge when and if a relationship of structural dependence gets established. The point of this is to reveal that people's needs under capitalism presuppose a set of social-historical circumstances that are not spontaneous, natural, simply given, or – crucially – neutral in their connotations. And the political upshot of that analysis is to show that the very emergence of the category 'need' under capitalism goes hand-in-hand with the subjugation, expropriation, and exploitation of the worker.

Marx's argument begins by highlighting how the particular roles central to people's needs and needs-meeting activity – the roles of wage-labourer and capitalist – only emerge under specific social-historical circumstances²⁸. That contention suggests a question about capitalism's historic origins: what is it about the contemporary world, one might ask, that means capitalistic social relations have been established here, and not in other times and places²⁹? That question had been explored by political economists, who tended – says Marx – to give one characteristic answer: in those other times and places, human beings lived under systems of repression that prevented them interacting as free and equal individuals. Once

²⁷ For discussion see chapter 3.

²⁸ CAP: 270-273, 382, 925

²⁹ MECW, 28: 206-207; CAP: 273, 382, 874

those constraints are stripped away, capitalistic social practices – so the story goes – naturally and spontaneously emerge³⁰.

By contrast, Marx's analysis of capitalism's historic origins – so-called 'primitive' accumulation – presents a very different story³¹. As he argues, rather than being the spontaneous result of their liberation from feudalism, capitalistic social roles and practices only emerged because social actors had successfully imposed a series of essential background conditions, in the absence of which capitalism would never have got off the ground. Making this argument, Marx begins by stating that capitalistic social relations are premised upon a 'confrontation' between 'two very different kinds of commodity owners', namely, on the one hand, the 'owners of money, means of production, means of subsistence', and on the other hand the 'free workers, the sellers of their own labour-power'³². The point being made here is ostensibly innocuous, and would have been viewed as such at the time: Marx appears to be drawing attention to nothing more than the fact that capitalistic social relations can only arise when worker and capitalist encounter each other in the market, and when the worker, freed from their feudal bondage, is the proprietor of their own labour-capacity, meaning they can commodify and exchange their labour-power for the (supposed) mutual benefit of these two hypothetical commodity owners.

Marx, however, goes on to argue that for that vital exchange to occur, those 'free workers' must in fact be 'free' in a 'double sense': they are free not just in that they are liberated from that feudal bondage, but also – crucially – in that they are 'free from, unencumbered by, means of production of their own'³³. His argument, then, is that the wage-contract only occurs when the owners of the means of production are confronted by a sufficient population of people who are not only (a) able, but also (b) willing to sell their labour-power, and that (b) can only be secured by denying people all possible independent access to those means. It is by denying people that access, he argues, that capitalism's forebears had generated 'social conditions' that 'compel' the worker to accept the wage-contract: 'to sell the whole of his active life, his very capacity for labour, in return for the price of his customary means of

³⁰ PP: 174; CAP: 794, 875

³¹ CAP: 873-940

³² CAP: 874

³³ CAP: 874, see also 272-273

subsistence, to sell his birthright for a mess of pottage'³⁴. Central to establishing those conditions, Marx argues, is the 'forcible driving' of 'the peasant from the land'³⁵, a historical process that separates people from direct access to the means of production, generating a structural dependence on the owners of those means, and thereby inaugurating the system of wage-labour that is – Marx argues – the distinctive hallmark of contemporary capitalism. Marx's second 'freeing' is, therefore, an ironic one: the 'freeing' of the serf from access to the means of production is rather like the highwayman liberating their victim of his purse³⁶. Against, therefore, the happy picture painted by the political economists, Marx reframes wage-labour as far from a natural or spontaneous occurrence, presenting it instead as a social artifice, and one which only emerges when a relationship of structural dependence has been successfully imposed³⁷. The wage-contract, therefore, is simply a mechanism through which the owners of the means of production leverage that structural dependence for their own advantage, before then concealing that act through the pretence of the worker's formal rights as a commodity owner. As Marx puts it, whilst the 'Roman slave was held by chains', the wage-labour is also 'bound to his owner', but they are bound – in this instance – by the 'invisible threads' of structural dependence, threads that are masked by the 'legal fiction of a contract', and which are established through the 'separation' of workers from the means of production³⁸.

Such a separation only occurs, furthermore, through a process of struggle that is often bloody, involving coercion, imposed discipline, and even violence. 'Force', as Marx thus puts it, is 'the midwife' of this 'new society'³⁹, a society which comes into being 'dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt'⁴⁰. The key conclusion that follows is that capitalism's assemblage of social roles and practices emerges only when a relation of

³⁴ CAP: 382, see also 719, 875

³⁵ CAP: 878, see also 874-896

³⁶ CAP: 875

³⁷ CAP: 925

³⁸ CAP: 719

³⁹ CAP: 916

⁴⁰ CAP: 926

structural dependence is brought about through struggle, a struggle which – Marx argues – teems throughout the period of primitive accumulation.

This raises the question: exactly how long does that period of struggle last⁴¹? Addressing that question in the final chapter of *Capital*, Marx turns – rather abruptly, and somewhat surprisingly – to an extended discussion of colonial capitalism⁴², and in particular the rather obscure work of one particular political economist: Wakefield. What was notable about Wakefield’s analysis was that he posited that the entire edifice of capitalistic social relations lacked any sort of purchase on a terrain where the direct producer had not been expropriated⁴³. This led Wakefield to conclude – in a major departure from the other political economists – that capitalism’s categories and relations were not natural, but social, manifesting only in particular circumstances characterised by certain conditions. And those conditions – as Wakefield claimed – were not only absent in the colonies, but increasingly under threat where capitalism was well-established, resulting in crises of overproduction, declining profit, overpopulation, and pauperisation⁴⁴.

Seizing on this, Marx argues that Wakefield’s analysis of capitalism’s periphery had revealed something fundamental about its core: that capitalism relies on preconditions that are precarious, constantly under threat, and which must be continually reimposed for capitalism to continue to pertain. The violence and struggles of primitive accumulation are not, therefore, confined to capitalism’s distant past or contemporary edges, but instead have to be repeated again and again at every point in capitalism’s on-going history⁴⁵. The somewhat perplexing end to *Capital* is thus intended as something of a final twist, exposing at the

⁴¹ This question points to an ongoing interpretative debate surrounding Marx’s account of primitive accumulation. Orthodox interpretations contend that that account refers to a prior historical stage that was a necessary precursor to capitalism’s emergence, and which was eventually supplanted by ‘mature’ capitalism (Ince, 2018a; Nichols, 2015). Several authors have gone on to offer their own reformulations of the concept, suggesting that primitive accumulation is not confined to capitalism’s pre-history, but is instead a continuous, integral feature of capitalism itself (Coulthard, 2014; Federici, 2004; Harvey, 2003). However, following several recent interpreters, I argue here that Marx *himself* held that latter, supposedly ‘reformulated’ view (Bonefeld, 2001, 2011; Carver, In press; Cleaver, 2019: 16–97; Glassman, 2006, 2007; Roberts, 2018: 187–227, 2020).

⁴² CAP: 931-940

⁴³ Roberts, 2018: 222

⁴⁴ Wakefield, 1968. For discussion see Ince, 2018b; Roberts, 2018: 187–227

⁴⁵ CAP: 716-727, 874

climax of the book the reality that capitalism only pertains so long as it continues to be successfully imposed. Marx's examination of capitalism's historical origins thus turns out – on closer inspection – to tell us not just about the political events of capitalism's past, but instead about the political realities of capitalism's present. The struggle to establish the structural dependence of the worker, is, therefore, ongoing, and a constitutive element of capitalism throughout its history.

That struggle often – and especially initially⁴⁶ – takes place through dispossession: through denying people independent access to the means of production. Dispossession is not, however, the *only* way that that structural dependence gets established: instead, its more general mechanism is to make capital, in one way or another, a necessary intermediary between the worker and the act of productive labour; to make, in other words, the intervention of capital a necessary precondition for the performance of productive labour. Viewed in this broader way, Marx's conception of primitive accumulation helps expose the political stakes at play in the numerous shifts and evolutions he had charted throughout *Capital*, revealing those shifts and evolutions to be yet-further ways that capital had struggled with the worker to bring about, extend, and entrench the key relationship of structural dependence.

This applies, for instance, to Marx's detailed examination of the transformation of the capitalistic workplace⁴⁷. That transformation, as he argues, is not just a handy way to increase the capitalist's profits or to ratchet up productivity, but also a political process that establishes – again and again – 'new conditions for the domination of capital over labour'⁴⁸. The de-skilling of the workforce, for instance, is not just an unintended consequence of the increasing division of labour, but a way to rob the worker of the means to produce independently, thereby entrenching their dependence on capital⁴⁹. Similarly, the mechanisation of the workplace transforms the labour process into an enormous collective enterprise, producing a vast collective action problem that has to be solved before labouring activities can take place at all, a problem that capital itself generates before then inserting

⁴⁶ In, for instance, the aforementioned driving of peasants off the land. For contemporary discussions see Coulthard, 2014; Glassman, 2007; Harvey, 2003.

⁴⁷ Through what Marx called its 'real' as opposed to its 'formal' subsumption (CAP: 1023-1025).

⁴⁸ CAP: 486, see also 799

⁴⁹ CAP: 455-461, 482-486, 545-7

itself as the only practically plausible solution⁵⁰. And similarly again, the homogenisation of the labour process makes labour more mobile between industries, and able to be conducted by the unskilled, and eventually even by children⁵¹, making the worker ever more easily replaceable, and thus their position ever more precarious⁵². The point of all this was to show that all these changes – and many more besides – are far more than just technical tweaks to the production process: instead, they are fundamentally *political* processes in which capital leverages its command of the workplace in order to deepen and entrench the structural dependence of the worker.

What Marx's analysis reveals, therefore, is that capitalistic needs are not just there and do not just happen: instead, that category only emerges as it does when, if, and so long as a system of subjugation, expropriation, and exploitation gets successfully imposed. The result, therefore, is to taint capitalistic needs from their very inception: those needs only emerge, after all, when and if the worker's structural dependence has been secured, since it is by securing that structural dependence that the worker is left with just one option; namely, to commodify their labour-power and sell it for a wage. And whether or not one buys into the specifics of Marx's story about capitalism's historic origins, and whether or not one thinks the picture he paints of capitalism itself is plausible, these arguments still represent – I contend – a significant innovation. The crux of that innovation is to reframe the roles that lie behind people's needs as political phenomena: rather than taking those roles as simply given, Marx brings to the surface the political processes, struggles, and stakes that lie behind them, thereby upending de-politicising assumptions that are ubiquitous within contemporary needs theory. And in doing so, Marx makes – as I have shown – considerable political hay, drawing attention to the ways in which people's needs under capitalism are premised on a set of circumstances in which their very neediness is leveraged against them: in which, in short, they are stripped of their capacity to pursue any sort of life at all, and thereby forced to adopt a position of subjugation in order to regain that capacity.

⁵⁰ CAP: 448, 480-482, 562

⁵¹ CAP: 517, 545, 601

⁵² PP: 126-128; MECW, 9: 225; MECW, 28: 41; CAP: 618, 799

6.3 Enacting needs

At one point – in a discussion of the labour theory of value – Marx makes the following comment: that the ‘labour-time socially necessary’ to produce different things ‘asserts itself as a regulative law of nature. In the same way, the law of gravity asserts itself whenever a person’s house collapses on top of him’⁵³. Marx’s comment here is profoundly satirical: capitalism’s supposed ‘laws’ – as he was at pains to point out – do not operate autonomously from human action, are not self-activating, never just ‘assert [themselves]’, and are thus nothing like ‘law[s] of nature’. Instead, the force that lies behind those ‘laws’ is the force of human action: they apply precisely and only because people carry out social actions in compliance with a set of norms that themselves only pertain because they have been performatively accomplished. Economic ‘laws’ do not, in short, just happen, but have to be enacted by people.

Marx seizes on this observation to reframe and politicise the operation of those laws: because those ‘laws’ never just effect themselves, but must instead be put into practice by people, there is a profound struggle over exactly how, when, and in what ways those ‘laws’ get done. Struggles of this kind had been, Marx argues, obscured by the naturalising presumptions of political economy⁵⁴, and his response is to undermine those presumptions by bringing struggles over the enactment of capitalism to the foreground of his analysis. And what is more – as this section will show – Marx applies those arguments to needs in particular, exploring the political stakes wrapped up in how that category gets played-out in specific social practices and actions.

6.3.1 Indeterminacy

There is, firstly, the politics that Marx identifies in the space between capitalism’s abstract categories and relations, and the realisation of those categories in people’s everyday social practice. To examine that politics, let me begin with the following common complaint: that Marx’s specifications and definitions of his theoretical categories are unhelpfully vague. Marx is never clear, as this complaint has it, what exactly counts as ‘labour’; or ‘production’; or a ‘productive force’; or a ‘class’; and so on. And this has, furthermore, led some of Marx’s

⁵³ CAP: 168

⁵⁴ CAP: 605, 609, 793-4, 799

commentators to posit a number of supposed interpretative puzzles: is Marx's account too focused on material production⁵⁵? What would he think about intellectual labour⁵⁶? Does scientific knowledge count as a productive force⁵⁷? How do stay-at-home mothers fit into the class structure⁵⁸? Are shareholders capitalists⁵⁹? Are Marx's theoretical categories still applicable in the radically changed economic order we find ourselves in today⁶⁰? And so on and so on. This vagueness is readily bemoaned by Marx's more literal readers: if only – the complaint continues – he could have been more *specific*.

I contend that this complaint has it quite wrong: the indeterminacy of his categories is not, I argue, an error or omission on Marx's part, or a logical rope by which he hangs himself, but instead a political point. In deploying his various categories, Marx is not giving strict definitions of economic 'things', and there is no economic substance or relation 'out there' which sets the parameters of his various categories, and which he is merely naming. Instead, the performative social practices which constitute economic categories do not generate clear demarcations that tidily fit all possible circumstances, or which fully circumscribe how those categories get realised in actual practice. The parameters of those economic categories, therefore, are not fully determined in advance by the workings of some abstract logic, but are enacted by people in their everyday social practices, and thus depend – in the end – on the actual social actions that those people carry out. When, for instance, one asks whether this or that thing counts as a 'commodity', the answer must be that this depends on what actual people have performatively commodified in the course of their everyday social practice⁶¹. Marx's theory cannot, therefore, foreclose how these social categories get realised in actual social practice, and that realisation cannot be fixed in advance, or set independently from what actually happens. It is not, therefore, Marx's task to say exactly what counts as

⁵⁵ Hardt and Negri, 2003: 289–294; Sayers, 2011: 32–47

⁵⁶ See footnote 55.

⁵⁷ Cohen, 1978: 45–47

⁵⁸ Chattopadhyay, 2001

⁵⁹ Friedman, 1974

⁶⁰ As discussed, for instance, by Cleaver, 1979: 31–46.

⁶¹ As discussed in section 5.1.1. For an interesting contemporary example, see Holm's account of what he calls 'cyborg fish' (Holm, 2008).

‘production’, ‘labour’, ‘commodities’, etc., since the concrete practical realisation of those things only gets determined by being played out in social life.

Because many of Marx’s interpreters have missed this, they have ended up overlooking an important struggle over need that Marx identified within then-contemporary capitalism: the struggle, namely, over the specification of that category. Outlining that struggle will, therefore, be the purpose of this section.

That struggle emerges, as I will show, from the terms of the wage-contract itself. Capitalistic needs revolve around – as I argued earlier – the exchange between worker and capitalist, an exchange involving the sale and purchase of the worker’s labour-power. That analysis, however, leaves a huge amount unanswered. When the capitalist purchases labour-power, for instance, she purchases it from different individuals with different physical capacities, skills, and so on. As the owner of this commodity – labour-power – she is entitled to use it as she wishes, though uncertainty remains over how far that entitlement stretches: how long, for instance, will she be allowed to deploy it for? Is she entitled to use it just as she wishes, heedless of the worker’s safety, long-term health, physical exhaustion, and so on? And what level of effort, obedience, and so on can she reasonably expect from the worker? And similarly, whilst the worker receives in exchange for his labour-power certain means of subsistence, this leaves a further set of questions unanswered, questions concerning the type and quality of those means (can workers expect, for instance, their food to be nutritious or tasty, or their clothes to be comfortable?), the precise quantities they can expect (exactly how many calories, for instance, should they expect to consume?), and so on.

What these questions reveal is that the exchange at the heart of Marx’s account of need has terms that are fundamentally indeterminate. Addressing that indeterminacy, Marx’s initial response in *Capital* is often to posit a holding assumption: to assert as a *ceteris paribus* social standard as a given ‘known datum’⁶² that pertains in a given place at a given time, and which underpins the specific terms of the exchange of labour-power in that given context. Marx makes a series of these sorts of assumptions over the course of his analysis: the exchange between worker and capitalist assumes that the labour-power supplied is of ‘normal effectiveness’; it must display the ‘average skill, dexterity and speed’ prevalent in the trade in

⁶² CAP: 275

which it is employed; and must, furthermore, be expended ‘with the average amount of exertion and usual degree of intensity’⁶³; and for a ‘normal average duration’⁶⁴. The wage received in exchange is itself based on numerous social averages: the ‘normal standard conversion of living substances into motion’; the ‘normal duration of the life of a worker’⁶⁵; the means of subsistence ‘habitually required by the average worker’⁶⁶; the value of which is determined by the measure ‘social necessary labour-time’, which is itself dependent on assumptions about the average productivity of labourers⁶⁷; and so on.

In asserting all these holding assumptions, Marx’s account is sometimes interpreted as saying something quite banal: that the ‘normal’, ‘reasonable’, or ‘adequate’ standard varies from place to place, and depends on a range of exogenous factors (cultural differences, variations in climate, etc). Having recognised these vagaries, Marx then makes – so the story goes – these holding assumptions simply to allow him to march on with the more substantive parts of his analysis. Read in this way, those assumptions are taken to represent a kind of innocuous contextual variation – or even a form of relativism – that Marx recognises and nods to, but views as largely tangential to his analysis, thus simply fixing a certain standard before proceeding to his more significant and central themes⁶⁸.

That reading, however, misses Marx’s politics. Marx not only recognises the pliability of these social averages, but also that their determination is a political process, and a site of continued conflict between the worker and the capitalist⁶⁹. The confusion here stems from Marx’s manner of presentation, alongside a reading strategy that is overly literal. My contention, by contrast, is that when Marx posits these holding assumptions, he is – in fact – being ironic. His aim is to initially present the given standards of ‘average’, ‘normal’, and so on in a way that makes them look perfectly innocuous, and as nothing more than a straightforward methodological move that allows him to proceed with his theoretic

⁶³ CAP: 303, see also 694, 701-2

⁶⁴ CAP: 664, see also 343

⁶⁵ CAP: 664, see also 797

⁶⁶ CAP: 655, see also 701

⁶⁷ CAP: 134-5

⁶⁸ As suggested, for instance, by Harvey, 2018: 106–107.

⁶⁹ As argued, in particular, by Cleaver, 1979: 115–126. See also Myers, 2014; Philip, 2001; Roberts, 2018: 131–132, 2020

exposition. But whilst this is his initial presentation, he later on returns to and opens up these assumptions, thereby revealing the politics, the interplay of power, and the struggle that those seemingly innocent assumptions had in fact obscured. In doing so, Marx highlights that the exchange between worker and capitalist is not only based on terms that are indeterminate, but also that that exchange generates an antagonism between the contracting parties, an antagonism that cannot be settled through references to the formal categories and relations of capitalism. And the result is, therefore, an endless struggle between worker and capitalist over how the terms of their deal get spelled out in practice.

Marx makes this argument most explicitly at the start of his extended discussion of the length of the working day⁷⁰. As he points out there, beyond ‘certain extremely elastic restrictions’, there is nothing in the wage-contract itself that sets a limit to the length of the working day: this is, therefore, a classic case of the indeterminacy of capitalism’s formal categories and relations. What is more, the terms of the wage-contract also posit a direct confrontation between worker and capitalist over how this indeterminacy gets settled in practice: we have, on the one hand, the capitalist, who as the purchaser of labour-power has the right to dispose of their new commodity as they see fit; but also, on the other hand, we have the worker, who asserts that ‘excessive consumption by the purchaser’ will exhaust them, undermining their ability to work again tomorrow, thus violating their ‘right as a seller’. ‘There is here’, as Marx thus argues, ‘an antinomy, of right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchange’. And ‘[b]etween’ such ‘equal rights’, Marx argues, ‘force decides’⁷¹.

Marx’s argument, therefore, is not only that the formal operation of capitalism’s categories and relations does not foreclose an answer to this conundrum, but also that that formal operation generates conflict over that very indeterminacy, since it is – after all – the wage-contract itself that places the contracting parties into two antagonistic positions with very different stakes in how that indeterminacy gets settled in practice. The wage-contract, therefore, posits both indeterminacies and antagonism over those indeterminacies, whilst providing the warring parties with no formal mechanism to resolve their dispute, and saying to them instead: you have competing interests here, so have at it.

⁷⁰ CAP: 340-416

⁷¹ CAP: 344

Marx's holding assumptions are thus revealed to be sites of struggle between worker and capitalist, struggles that are endemic to and produced by the terms that set up the relationship between worker and capitalist in the first place. Marx thus draws attention to the ways in which workers and capitalists battle it out to define the 'normal', 'standard', 'average', and so on, exploring – often in minute detail – how this actually plays out over the form of work, the intensity of work, the length of the working day, the conditions in the workplace, the standard of living workers can expect, and so on. Social standards, averages, etc. do not, therefore, simply hang in the air, neatly and uncontroversially settling disputes over capitalism's vague terms: instead, they are given a determinate quality only through series of struggles that play out in people's everyday social practice, a playing out that occurs outside the formal terms of the wage contract, and which is premised on a confrontation between capitalist and worker that is coded into those very terms. And it was because, furthermore, people had failed to recognise this, that they had missed the ways in which capital had – through a series of historic victories in those struggles – steadily bent capitalism's vaguely defined 'laws' to its advantage, thereby forcing the worker to toil for longer hours at greater intensity in ever-worsening conditions⁷². The result, therefore, is that Marx's apparently innocuous holding assumptions turn out, on closer inspection, to be little more than whitewashes for the wretched, dehumanising conditions capital has successfully imposed on the worker as a direct extension of their ongoing subjugation.

In identifying and emphasising those struggles over the specification of needs, Marx's analysis parallels some familiar themes in contemporary needs theory. As I touched on in section 6.2.1, and examined in detail in section 2.2, it is widely recognised that the abstract, generic needs posited by many needs theorists tell us very little unless and until they are concretely specified in some particular way. But whilst most contemporary theorists simply abscond at this point, Marx joins a small group of theorists who have emphasised what Fraser calls the 'politics of need interpretation'⁷³. That group highlights, in particular, that an excessive theoretical focus on abstractly specified human needs, alongside a lack of attention towards the murky processes of need specification, has ended up obscuring the politics wrapped up in those very processes.

⁷² EPM: 235-246; MECW, 28: 215; CAP: 375-376, 390, 599, 601

⁷³ Fraser N, 1989: 144–190. See also Dean, 2020; Soper, 1993a, 1993b, 2007

What is unique about Marx's account, however, is that it does more than simply point to the politics of need interpretation, but shows instead how these conflicts and struggles are entangled with, and directly produced by, the very performative social practices which constitute the category 'need' in the first place. In other words, he does not posit that there is this or that need, before then highlighting struggles over the interpretation of that need, as if needs were things 'out there' that people merely struggle to 'interpret' in practice. Instead, for Marx those struggles are essential parts of contemporary needs rather than merely adjuncts, and embedded from the start into the very practices which performatively constitute those needs. Antagonism and struggle are, therefore, direct and native products of capitalistic needs from the get-go, and there is no way to resolve or complete those struggles without fundamentally altering the social practices that produce the category 'need'.

6.3.2 *Indifference*

Next, Marx argues that the performative everyday social practices that constitute people's needs are also – paradoxically – indifferent as to whether many of those needs are actually met. To reach that conclusion, Marx argues, firstly, that capitalistic social processes generate a certain crude indifference or insensitivity that gets carried out in people's social actions. Highlighting this point in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx comments on an analogy made by Ricardo between the cost of human subsistence and cost of production of – of all things – hats. As Ricardo had put it, just as when the 'cost of production of hats' diminishes, the price of those hats 'will ultimately fall to their new natural price', so it is with 'the cost of subsistence of men' and their 'wages': those wages similarly 'will ultimately fall' when the price of the various articles 'by which life is sustained' diminishes⁷⁴. Some socialists⁷⁵ had, as Marx points out, used passages like this to chide the political economists for their 'cynical language', suggesting that those authors had absurdly and unjustifiably dehumanised people by treating them as mere commodities on the market; as just like hats.

Marx, however, pours scorn on this critique. What those socialist economists had failed to recognise was that the reduction of people to commodities was not a fiat of Ricardo's language, but a reality of 19th century capitalism. Whilst Ricardo's 'language is as cynical as can be', such language is nothing more than a reflection of a 'crudity' inherent in capitalistic

⁷⁴ Ricardo, quoted in Marx (PP: 124-125).

⁷⁵ Marx picks out Blanqui, Droz, and Rossi (PP: 125).

social practices themselves. What should anger the socialist economists, therefore, is not Ricardo's choice of language, but what Ricardo's analysis reveals about 'economic relations exposed in all their crudity', since it is capitalist relations themselves that are crude and cynical: '[t]he cynicism', as Marx puts it, is in 'the facts'⁷⁶.

But whilst the cynicism is in 'the facts', those facts are – crucially – social-historical facts. The nature of the 'crudity' Marx points to is an indifference displayed by capitalistic social processes themselves, and indifference towards anything that does not register in capitalism's formal categories, meaning that the operation of those processes does not (and cannot) draw distinctions and show sensitivities to any differences that fall outside of capitalism's categories and relations. Just as, for instance, gravity is indifferent as to the nature of the objects it operates on beyond the fact that they have mass, so the 'laws' of the market apply identically to things that are otherwise different. But unlike gravity, this indifference is not a property of an extra-human physical force, but is instead a palpable reality only because it gets generated and then played out in people's social practices. As Marx argued, in performatively constituting capitalism people had brought about a social reality in which their social actions are inexorably trammelled by an immanently necessary social logic they themselves had a hand in creating⁷⁷, a logic that – crucially – is *itself* crude, cynical, and indifferent. Because people's choices get hemmed in by that (crude, cynical, indifferent) logic, their actions end up being unavoidably geared towards social abstracts – firms aim to make money, not things; people work to make a wage, not useful products; and so on – with the upshot being that anything which does not shift those social abstracts cannot be factored into people's choice of social actions, whatever anyone happens to think or feel about it. Anything that does not get captured in capital's formal categorisations thus simply does not (and cannot) enter into people's deliberations and judgements, shaping their ensuing choice of social actions, with the result that this crudity, cynicism, and indifference gets played out in tangible ways. Capitalistic indifference is not, therefore, traceable to the propensities or attitudes of any particular individual or individuals, or simply a funny way of thinking and talking that has come about under capitalism, but is instead a feature of capitalistic social practices that people cannot avoid playing out in their choices and actions.

⁷⁶ PP: 125

⁷⁷ As examined in section 5.2.1.

In picking out this odd example – the indifference between men and hats – Marx’s goal is to get people to question the social reality they had built for themselves by making that world appear strange, problematic, and even baffling. These indifferences are thus, as he wants to highlight, actualities precisely and only because people have made – performatively – the weird social world they then inhabit and act within. And the results – as Marx is repeatedly highlights – are often bewildering: under capitalism, people’s social practices treat human beings like horses⁷⁸; workers as if they are just machines⁷⁹; human labour like fermenting wine⁸⁰; wages for workers like oil for wheels⁸¹; and so on.

Having identified this capitalistic indifference, Marx argues that it has a profound impact on the needs of the worker. By highlighting this, the political point Marx makes is that these indifferences are not mere happenstances, but the direct, native products of the social world people have built for themselves, products which are – crucially – geared towards the interests of capital, and which undermine the interests of the worker. Capitalistic indifferences are thus, in short, not mere accidents of contemporary life, but political realities indelibly connected to capitalism’s basic operation.

The nub of that case was that whilst needs under capitalism hinge – as I showed in section 6.2.1 – around the performance of the role of wage-labour, that role itself only matters to the extent that it plays a part in the formal valorisation process: the ‘proletarian’, the ‘man who... lives purely by labour’ is, as Marx puts it, ‘considered by political economy only as a *worker*’, and never ‘consider[s] him when he is not working, as a human being’⁸².

Capitalism, in other words, is only concerned for the wage-labourer to the extent that the performance of their role serves capital’s valorisation, and is otherwise insensitive to the worker’s health, life, and – indeed – needs. Capitalism is not, therefore, geared towards the meeting of needs, but geared towards capital’s valorisation, a process which sometimes requires that people’s needs are met, and which – crucially – sometimes doesn’t. The end

⁷⁸ EPM: 241; CAP: 341, 406, 481

⁷⁹ EPM: 256; CAP: 742

⁸⁰ CAP: 292

⁸¹ EPM: 284

⁸² EPM: 241

result was that whilst capitalism posits a range of needs, it is often indifference as to whether those needs are actually met.

This includes, firstly, the indifference of capitalistic social processes towards the needs of the non-waged. Whilst capitalism – as I have shown – is premised on denying people the means to meet their needs, it offers no universal guarantee that those means will be recovered: no aspect of capitalism’s formal processes requires that all the labour-power offered on the market will be consumed, and quite often the demands of the valorisation process are less than the total quantity of labour-power available⁸³. As a result, the worker must ‘struggle to get work’, to acquire ‘the possibility, the means, to perform his activity’⁸⁴. And since it is only in and through their performance of wage-labour that people’s needs register in capitalism’s formal processes, those workers who fail to find work enter into ‘social, and therefore actual, non-existence’, an ‘absolute void’ where they cease even to count as needy beings⁸⁵. Because, in other words, the worker has, under capitalism, ‘no existence as a human being but only as a worker’, the worker with ‘no work, hence no wages’ simply does not register in capitalism’s formal processes, and ‘can go and bury himself, starve to death, etc.’⁸⁶.

Secondly, capitalism is indifferent to the needs of the non-normal. As I showed in section 6.3.1, the exchange of labour-power is grounded in a series of social averages concerning the normal life of a worker, the expected level of skill, intensity of work, length of the working day, and so on. That exchange thus pivots on what a normal worker needs, and is indifferent to what *this worker* needs: workers must supply a homogenous product at an anticipated rate for a predictable cost, and workers unable to fulfil those conditions simply will not be (and cannot be) accommodated⁸⁷. Thus the needs of those with, say, disabilities, or large families,

⁸³ Famously, Marx argues that capitalism has a tendency to generate a ‘reserve army’ of the unemployed it then comes to systematically rely on: see CAP: 781-802

⁸⁴ EPM: 237

⁸⁵ EPM: 285

⁸⁶ EPM: 283, see also EPM: 241, CAP: 277, 568, 601, 608

⁸⁷ CAP: 694

or who simply differ from the anticipated normal standard (a standard, it should be remembered, that capital itself often imposes) simply drop out of the picture⁸⁸.

Finally, capitalistic needs are aimed solely at the continued performance of the role ‘wage-labour’, rather than the life of the individual wage-labourer: so long as the quantity and kind of wage-labour at time [t] appears again at time [t+1], capital is wholly indifferent as to which actual persons occupy that role. What capital registers, in other words, is not the personage of the individual worker, but the ‘supply of a commodity like any other’⁸⁹, a supply that may or may not require that this or that wage-labourer is actually maintained. The continual extraction of labour-power by capital is thus compatible with individual workers themselves being exhausted and then replaced. And the result, therefore, is that capital deploys its command of the workplace to gradually intensify work⁹⁰ and extend the working day⁹¹, destroying the health of the worker⁹², denying them safe working conditions⁹³, and even access to air⁹⁴, warmth⁹⁵ and light⁹⁶. And whilst the inevitable result is to compromise the long-term capacity of the individual worker⁹⁷, that loss of capacity simply does not register in the formal valorisation process so long as capital can find someone else to take the worker’s place⁹⁸. Individual workers, therefore, get used up, discarded, and replaced, with these ‘corpses upon the industrial battle-field’ offered the following solace: ‘[y]ou thousands of workers who are perishing, do not despair! You can die with an easy conscience. Your *class* will not perish’⁹⁹.

⁸⁸ On this basis, Marx famously argues that the bourgeois notion of ‘fairness’ is in fact a ‘right to inequality’.

See MECW, 24: 81-99. For discussion, see Lebowitz, 2015: 42–75

⁸⁹ EPM: 283, emphasis removed

⁹⁰ CAP: 795

⁹¹ CAP: 375-6

⁹² CAP: 637

⁹³ CAP: 552, 591

⁹⁴ EPM: 307-309; CAP: 612, 844

⁹⁵ CAP: 596

⁹⁶ CAP: 552

⁹⁷ CAP: 795

⁹⁸ CAP: 375-6, 381, 390

⁹⁹ MECW, 6: 462, emphasis added

The significant political upshot was to show that capitalism *both* posits certain needs, *and* is often indifferent as to whether, how, and for whom those needs are met. By pointing to this capitalistic indifference, Marx is, therefore, not only drawing attention to capitalism's general neglect of needs, or highlighting a mere accident of the way in which needs are treated in contemporary social processes, but is instead demonstrating that capitalistic indifference to the meeting of needs is a direct, native product of the very social processes that performatively constitute that category in the first place.

6.4 Following needs

This final section draws a contrast between Marx's conception of needs as systems and the practice – ubiquitous amongst contemporary needs theorists – of listing normatively important needs¹⁰⁰. Such lists – which I examined in chapter 2 – are standardly presented as handy summaries of all the essentials requisite for some minimally satisfactory level of human existence, and tend to be posited alongside a normative injunction stating that the various items on the list take precedence over other, less essential features of people's lives. Through such lists, needs are presented as a series of discrete, isolated normative requirements that are presumed to lie prior to and/or outside of the broader social system in which those needs appear. Such a presentation draws a tidy distinction between needs themselves and the social practices that surround those needs, and through which those needs are met. And as a direct consequence, when those needs do in fact go unmet, this is interpreted as an individual, social, and/or moral failure that is entirely separable from the listed needs themselves.

Marx's approach is very different: for him, needs are series of nested and inter-related requirements and practices that are inseparable constituent parts of a dynamic social system, a system that simultaneously produces needs and directs the activity to meet those needs, and whose operation is not necessarily smooth, coherent, or even rational. Deploying that understanding, this section examines Marx's account of the capitalistic 'system of need'¹⁰¹.

¹⁰⁰ See, for instance, Doyal and Gough, 1991: 157–158; Miller SC, 2012: 41–42; Nussbaum, 2000: 77–80; Ramsay, 1992: 153

¹⁰¹ PP: 119. The phrase 'system of need' has often been used to draw a parallel between Marx's understanding of need and that of Hegel (Fraser I, 1998, 2000; Heller, 1978: 96–130; Springborg, 1981: 73–117). Marx

By tracing the category ‘need’ through its various systematic interconnections, the politically potent conclusion Marx draws – as I will show – is that the capitalistic system of needs generates various requirements, tendencies, and practices which are – when taken together – non-integrable. Consequently, he shows that the everyday social practices which constitute people’s needs are unable to meet the very needs that they themselves produce.

6.4.1 From needs as lists to needs as systems

As I showed in section 6.2.1, capitalistic needs emerge in and through the performance of the role of wage-labour. That role follows from the exchange of the worker’s labour-power for a wage, a wage whose level is set – Marx argues – by the socially-necessary labour-time required to produce the worker’s necessary subsistence. And that subsistence, furthermore, is itself defined by what is necessary to maintain the worker as a worker, including various specific forms of provision which Marx handily spells out on several occasions, noting down a range of specific needs, such as those for nutrition; for education; for the means to support their family; and so on¹⁰².

Such passages might easily be viewed as shorthand summaries of all the needs the wage-labourer has under capitalism. Braybrooke, for instance, argues that Marx had a theory of ‘primary’ or ‘natural’ needs, understood as the needs that must be met in order that the labour force ‘survive[s] and procreate[s]’. It is this ‘restrictive’ conception of need – Braybrooke claims – that underpins the cost of production of labour-power, and thus the wage. In such a view, therefore, human beings have a discrete set of needs – the basic requirements for the continuation of life, for the maintenance and reproduction of the owner of labour-power as a living individual, and for the propagation of future workers – and that since the worker must be able to live in order to work, those minimal life-requirements are reflected in the level of subsistence, and thus the wage-rate. In this particular sense the worker can be conceived of as just another producer, manufacturing a commodity – labour-power – for sale on the market. In this guise the worker takes in certain inputs (in the form of the ‘means of subsistence’), converting those inputs into saleable labour-capacity – labour-power – by consuming them, before returning to the market as a seller of labour-power once again. This is, in general, how

himself, however, barely uses the term, and I deploy it simply to stress the systematic character of Marx’s understanding of need, and do not, therefore, mean to imply or endorse the term’s Hegelian undertones.

¹⁰² MECW, 9: 198-204; MECW, 30: 42-46; CAP: 274-276

the production of other commodities works, and it does indeed apply (in a certain narrow sense) to labour-power¹⁰³.

It would be wrong, however, to equate the needs of wage-labour with the cost of production of labour-power, since such a reading wrongly frames the needs of the wage-labourer as contained within one narrow social moment – the exchange that underpins the wage contract – and thus expressed entirely through their role as the producer and seller of labour-power. In doing so, those positing this reading imagine that an account of the needs of wage-labour can be fully circumscribed within one part of the dynamic social system that is capitalism. Marx, by contrast, conceives of capitalism as an interconnected totality of relations: its concepts and logics are, he contends, intimately interconnected in such a way that each element can only be understood as part of a system in its entirety, and are meaningless or nonsensical in abstraction from that system¹⁰⁴. As a result, when one pretends one can fully analyse needs within one part of that whole, the result is to sever those systematic interconnections, reducing and distorting the concept, and thus utterly failing to analyse it in its full complexity. Against, therefore, authors like Braybrooke, who imagine that the category ‘need’ can be contained within one clearly bounded social moment, Marx’s position is that the production, sale, and purchase of labour-power is only the first chapter in a much larger story about the needs of wage-labour.

The remainder of this section will, therefore, retrace Marx’s telling of that story, the early part of which does indeed take place in the sphere of commodity exchange. That sphere – as Marx makes clear – closely approximates the political economists’ vision of capitalism as a liberal idyll of free, spontaneous interactions between equals, driven by their mutual benefit¹⁰⁵. And it is in this sphere, furthermore, where the seemingly innocent act of exchange between the buyer and seller of labour-power takes place. But whilst that exchange itself is ostensibly innocuous, the problem with labour-power is that it is not – unlike the other commodities – easily separable from its producer, since this particular commodity only exist

¹⁰³ CAP: 717-718

¹⁰⁴ See, in particular, TOM: 56-71. For discussion of that passage, see Carver in TOM: 114-129; Chambers, 2014: 93–98. See also section 5.2.2. For further commentary, see Lebowitz, 2003: 59–63, 2010; Rubinstein, 1981: 142; Shiell, 1987

¹⁰⁵ CAP: 280

as the capacity of a living individual: the labouring-capacity of the individual worker¹⁰⁶. In contrast to other commodities, therefore, which can be straightforwardly handed over from one individual and consumed by another, the use of the commodity labour-power is only possible through the continued presence and activity of the worker themselves¹⁰⁷.

As a result, even after the worker and the capitalist have completed their transaction in the marketplace, their relationship continues, and it is on the basis of these arguments that Marx famously shifts his analysis from the sphere of commodity exchange to the sphere of production¹⁰⁸. And what he find in that new sphere is that our two commodity owners have now entered an entirely new relationship: the relationship between worker and capitalist. And this new relationship – as Marx points out – is wholly different in character from the one we encountered in the sphere of exchange: rather than being based on equality, freedom, and mutual benefit, it is instead a two-sided relationship in which one party leverages their position of advantage to dominate, subjugate, and exploit the other¹⁰⁹. Thus by tracing forward capitalism’s interconnections and relations in this way, what Marx shows is that the wage-labourer is *both* the seller of a commodity ‘labour-power’ in the egalitarian sphere of commodity exchange, *and* the subjugated worker in the class-based sphere of production.

Having traced forward capitalism’s relations in this way, the subject of need resurfaces. In this new aspect of their role – as a worker taking part in a production process – our wage-labourer is now potentially subject to working conditions and practices that limit their ability to continue in their role. Returning, for instance, to the subject of the working day, Marx argues that the worker exchanges their labour-power on the basis that the price paid for that commodity is sufficient to ‘reproduce it everyday’, to ‘sell it again’: the price paid, in other words, is meant to reflect the cost of the continual and future production of labour-power. Given this, the sale of labour-power presupposes not just that the worker has everything they need to take part in the production process today, but that they are ‘able to work tomorrow with the same normal amount of strength, health, and freshness as today’. The problem, however, is that by ‘unlimited expansion of the working day’, the capitalist may ‘in one day

¹⁰⁶ CAP: 279-280

¹⁰⁷ CAP: 277, see also 675

¹⁰⁸ CAP: 280

¹⁰⁹ CAP: 415-416. See also section 5.2.2.

use up a quantity of labour power' greater than the worker can 'restore in three'. What the capitalist thereby 'gain[s] in labour' the worker loses in 'substance of labour', and there is a crucial difference, therefore, between 'using' labour and 'despoiling' it¹¹⁰. The point made, therefore, is that receiving the 'means of subsistence' in exchange for labour-power is not in-itself enough to ensure the needs of wage-labour are met, since the worker can subsequently be made to labour under conditions that destroy their capacity to reproduce their labour-power, and thus sell it tomorrow. What one finds, therefore, is that beyond the means of subsistence the workers receive in exchange for labour-power, workers have numerous other needs – for rest, for safety in the workplace, for light and air, and so on¹¹¹ – that are located primarily in the sphere of production.

As Marx continues to trace systematic interconnections, the wage-labourer reappears once more in a third guise: that of the consumer. The process of valorisation of capital requires not only that surplus value is pumped out in the sphere of production, but that those values are realised through exchange: to make a profit, the capitalist cannot just produce valuable commodities; they also have to sell them. Here, then, the worker reappears once again, and at this stage 'each capitalist' approaches the 'the total mass of all workers... not as workers, but as consumers, possessors of... money, which they exchange for his commodity'¹¹². Thus wage-labourers go from 'shar[ing] in production in the form of wage-labour' to 'shar[ing] in the products... in the form of wages'¹¹³. And as capital accumulates and capitalistic production expands, capital finds itself having to seek out ever new sources of demand for its products. This occurs both by expansion – where capital drives into fresh terrain¹¹⁴ – and by intensification, whereby new needs are stimulated in the workers, thereby 'produc[ing]' for capital the 'new consumption' it requires¹¹⁵.

The result of is that as one traces needs through capital's systematic interconnections, a surprising picture emerges. Marx takes on, in particular, an orderly account of worker's needs

¹¹⁰ CAP: 343, see also 375-6

¹¹¹ CAP: 552, 591, 596, 612, 844

¹¹² MECW, 28: 346

¹¹³ TOM: 65, see also CM, 491; CAP: 567.

¹¹⁴ CM: 487-488

¹¹⁵ MECW, 28: 335, see also EPM: 117; 306-309; MECW, 28: 217, 335-336, 418, 451. For discussion, see Lebowitz, 2003: 27-50, 161-177, 2010: 13-46

that confines the question of needs to the moment of exchange, arguing instead that the role ‘wage-labour’ is in fact a cluster of nested roles, each positing different needs, resulting in a diverse and even far-flung range of needs, *all* of which constitute the needs of wage-labour. And what is more, these various roles posit different forms of needs-meeting activities which interact in various ways, not all of which are harmonious, and which can overlap and even – as we shall see – contradict. The result is that the needs of wage-labour become a series of criss-crossing relations that are not easily resolvable into one stable, independent, clearly bounded set of needs.

6.4.2 Radical needs

Marx’s conception of needs as systems stands in stark contrast to the prevailing conception of needs as lists. That list conception – as I highlighted at the start of this section – takes needs to be static, isolated normative requirements that are extra-socially given, and which are neatly separable from the social system in which they are encountered, and in which they must be met. Marx’s understanding of need, by contrast, treats needs and needs-meeting and needs-making practices as just one part of a vast, interconnected, ever-shifting social totality. As a result, Marx presents capitalistic needs as posited in different ways in different parts of that totality, generating a dynamic, constantly evolving system of need that can be chaotic, and even contradictory. And this leads him, furthermore, to a significant political conclusion: that capitalism’s systematic interconnections often prevent it from satisfying the very needs that capitalistic social practices themselves posit. What Marx contends, in other words, is that the failure to satisfy need is a native feature of the capitalistic system of need built into that system from the ground up. And in this way, he argues that capitalism generates what Heller calls ‘radical needs’: needs that are generated by capitalistically constituted social relations, but which are impossible to satisfy within those relations, and whose satisfaction requires, therefore, a radical transformation of existing social arrangements¹¹⁶.

The capitalistic system of need, Marx argues, generates such radical needs in two distinct ways. Firstly, they emerge because that system contains contradictions. In the sphere of

¹¹⁶ Heller’s most famously examines radical needs in the context of her reading of Marx (Heller, 1978: 74–95). However, the notion I draw upon here is more closely associated with her later work, in which she adopts the same radicalism without – as she puts it – a teleological ‘messianism’ (Heller, 1993). For discussion, see Beilharz, 2015; Fraser I, 1998: 154–159; Johnson P, 2019; Schaap, 2010

production, for instance, the individual capitalist confronts their own employees merely as workers, seeking to pay them – consequently – as little as possible. Later on, those same capitalists confront the great mass of wage-labourers as consumers in the sphere of circulation, where the requirement instead is that those consumers have enough pay in their pockets to provide the requisite demand for their products. Capitalism thus simultaneously posits needs whilst eroding the basis on which those very needs are met¹¹⁷. The end result – as Marx points out – is a pattern of behaviour that is individually rational but collectively insane, producing ‘epidemic[s] of over-production’ that are resolved only through repeated economic crises¹¹⁸. What this analysis reveals, therefore, is that the different needs and needs-meeting activities posited across the totality of capitalistic social relations can often contradict, and are thus, taken as a whole, non-integrable. This entails the persistence and ineluctability of at least some unmet need within capitalism.

Secondly, the continual presence of unmet need is not only the result of contradictions, but a necessary prerequisite for many of capitalism’s social process. It would, therefore, be false to assume that when capitalism posits a need it does so because it requires – in some general sense – that that need is met: instead, many of the needs capitalism generates only perform their systematic function when those needs remain unmet for at least some people. The wage-contract, for instance, is premised on the denying people the capacity to independently meet their own needs: it is, as I discussed in section 6.2, the weaponisation of those very circumstances that drives the worker into the wage-contract. Consequently, if all people *including the non-waged* had their needs met, then the basic exchange at the heart of the capitalistic system of needs would never take place. Similarly, the consumerist needs capitalism posits in the sphere of circulation are necessarily insatiable. Marx’s view is that capitalism possesses an inherent expansionary tendency, since its existence is premised on the capacity of capital to ‘valorise’ itself: to expand by taking in a given set of inputs and turning them into more valuable outputs. The rise of capital had thus unleashed an expansionary social logic that drives social actors to pursue ceaseless growth, with any failure to expand in this way resulting in destruction through competition¹¹⁹. Because of this

¹¹⁷ Albritton, 2009: 25–26; Lebowitz, 2003: 10–12, 2015: 17; Soper, 1981: 59–62

¹¹⁸ CM: 490, see also MECW, 29: 134, 158; CAP: 103, 568-569, 635

¹¹⁹ CAP: 381, 436, 480, 605, 739

endless hunger for ever-more surplus value, capitalism possesses a dynamic, ever-increasing requirement for new consumption. Constantly haunted, therefore, by the threat of under-consumption, capital is continually driven to stimulate new needs, needs which – crucially – only fulfil their systematic function by expanding along a near-constant upward trajectory, increasing beyond a level where those needs can be easily satisfied by current production. The satisfaction of need is not, therefore, the goal of capitalistic social practices: instead, the ultimate satisfaction of people’s needs is anathema to capitalism’s successful operation, and even continued survival.

The significant political upshot of these arguments is to reveal that the failure to meet need is endemic to capitalism as a social system: capitalism simply cannot coexist with the satisfaction of everyone’s needs, and the social horror of ubiquitous unmet need is native to the very social practices that constitute capitalistic needs in the first place¹²⁰. Thus the widespread failure to meet need that Marx observed in his own time – the ubiquitous poverty, ill-health, undernourishment, exhaustion, and so on that were commonplace in then-contemporary capitalism – were far from unfortunate accidents, but instead indelibly built into the very fabric of the capitalistic system of need. There is, in other words, no way to distil the horror of unmet need out of capitalism’s categories and relations, and capitalistic needs are, therefore, an inseparable constituent component of a social system whose very existence presupposes a persistent and horrific failure to meet need. And because of the endemic nature of such unmet needs, many of the needs performatively constituted under capitalism end up as radical needs: needs which are the direct product of capitalistic social practices themselves, but whose satisfaction cannot be achieved within capitalism.

6.5 Marx, theory, and politics of need

This chapter has shown that Marx not only conceptualises needs in a way that reveals their political nature and potential, but also understands theory in a way that sees that theory as political action, and uses his own theory – crucially – to do politics. Deploying that approach, Marx analyses the performatively constituted social reality he found himself in, bring to the surface the political stakes, struggles, and possibilities that were present within that reality, but which had previously been obscured. And in doing so, his explicit goal is political and

¹²⁰ For further examples, see CAP: 612, 797-799, 811, 821, 835

partisan: the end-result, Marx hopes, is to fuel extant struggles, providing conceptual resources to be deployed in those struggles, prompting certain forms of political action, and thereby realising – it is hoped – certain political possibilities rather than others. The resulting Marxian, performative, political account of need thus offers – I argue – a viable alternative to contemporary theoretical orthodoxies, an alternative which – crucially – theorises needs without thereby doing away with the politics.

7. The politics of need

This dissertation has examined one central question: the question of which needs matter. My response to that question is that it cannot be addressed via reference to some extra-political, simply given normative foundation, but instead can only be answered in and through political processes and actual political practices. Needs, I thus contend, are political all-the-way-down. That answer raised questions I have examined throughout this dissertation, questions about how one should understand the political nature of needs; how the political theorist can analyse needs without doing away with the politics; and the place of theoretical activity in the political to-and-fro itself. Addressing those questions, I have argued that a characteristically Marxian account of needs offers a promising alternative to the flawed prevailing orthodoxies.

This final chapter draws together all those themes, offering a presentation and defence of the Marxian account of need I have developed. That account contains, as I will show, three main elements. Firstly, it posits a political conception of need: a way of understanding that concept that stresses its fundamentally political nature. Marx, I contend, has just such a conception; but as I argue in section 7.1, he is not the *only* theorist who does so. The broader contention I defend, however, is that whilst the Marxian account is not the only one available that stresses the politics of need, it is the best one. In particular, I argue in section 7.2 that the Marxian approach has a distinctive understanding of political *theories* of need, conceiving of such theories as political acts taking place within the politics of need itself. By embedding theoretical activity in actual political processes and practices, that approach constitutes – as I will show – the only successful attempt to theorise needs without (in one way or another) undermining the politics of need. Section 7.3 then builds on that conclusion, deploying that Marxian understanding of the nature and purpose of theory to develop a political analysis and critique of contemporary needs. In doing so, I borrow, update, and redeploy innovations drawn from Marx’s critique of political economy, showing how those reworked innovations can be applied in contemporary contexts, with results that are both robust and revealing.

7.1 Conceptualising needs politically

I begin by examining how certain approaches to need conceptualise needs politically. Chief amongst those approaches – as this dissertation has argued – is the Marxian one; but as this section highlights, several other contemporary theorists have also posited conceptions of need

that are similarly political, and follow roughly Marx's lines¹. To give a general account of such political conceptions, I break them down into five main components. Whilst not all of these are endorsed by all those who stress – in one way or another – the politics surrounding needs, my contention is that the most thoroughgoing political conceptions of need endorse all five, and that Marx has such a thoroughgoing conception.

The political conception of need begins by stressing that needs are socially-historically changeable products of human practices (1). This understanding contrasts with the dominant approaches to need in contemporary analytical political theory. There, the tendency has been – as I showed in chapter 3 – to equate needs with some or other extra-political grounding: to posit, in other words, that there is some important set of needs that is just 'there', and which one should take to be simply present, given, *de facto* authoritative matters-of-fact. Under a political conception, by contrast, needs are understood as products of human thought and action that differ between places and through time. The bases for that understanding are many and varied. Some, for instance, deploy an ontological form of argument, suggesting that nature itself is never stable or pristine, but instead transformed by human practice in ways that react back on human nature itself². Others, by contrast, make an epistemological argument, stating that categories like 'human', 'nature', and 'need' are products of a concretely situated human mind that is fundamentally shaped by the conceptual, linguistic, and discursive resources that are available³. Marx, meanwhile, reaches a similar conclusion by understanding needs as performatives: as constituted through repetitive citational social practices, and representing no reality beyond that pattern⁴. What these various arguments have in common, however, is that they stress the social-historical variability of need, presenting that category as – at least in part – a product of human activity and thought that varies between places and times.

¹ These include Dean, 2020; Fraser N, 1989; Hamilton, 2003; McInnes, 1977; Pitkin, 1981; Schaap, 2010; Soper, 1981, 1993a, 2007

² See, for instance, Pitkin 1981. This view has also been attributed to Marx (Fox, 2015; Hewitt, 2000: 105–117; Lebowitz, 2010: 47–63).

³ Fraser N, 1989: 144–187; Heller, 1993; Pitkin, 1981; Soper, 1981: 1–19

⁴ Chapter 5.

This social-historical changeability raises certain basic political questions about needs (2). Because needs are viewed as not just ‘there’, but instead as (in some sense or other) *made*, one has to consider not just what people’s needs are, but why they are how they are; and furthermore, whether they should be this way. As products of human thought and action, needs are placed irrevocably in a social-historical frame: one can never abstract from history and thereby identify timeless, trans-contextually important needs, since all needs have been shaped by historical action and thought, and are inextricably tied up with the present practices that are shaping future needs⁵. This raises questions about how we got to where we are and – in a parallel fashion – how today’s practices are shaping tomorrow’s needs: one might ask, for instance, what historical human practices generated our present needs; how power, conflict, and struggle were involved; how winners and losers were created in the process; how such processes are occurring today; what this means for future needs; and so on (and indeed it is exactly this variety of question that Marx reveals, scrutinises, and addresses in his account of people’s needs under capitalism⁶). And the emphasis on the social-historical changeability of needs results, furthermore, in fundamental changes to the basic questions that frame attempts to specify important needs: to say which needs matter, one must not only describe the sort of beings we are, but consider the sort of beings we should be or aspire to be⁷.

Having posited those questions, the political conception of need goes on to contend that they can only be answered in and through political processes. This is to assert, firstly, that those questions are the subject of ineradicable, ongoing contestation that cannot be tidily resolved in abstraction from, or prior to, the actual conduct of politics (3). In asserting this, the political conception of need shares strong affinities with agonistic trends in contemporary political theory, in that it takes the perpetuity of conflict as a starting point, strongly rebuking any theories or discourses that aim to eliminate political dissonance⁸. Agonists tend to establish that conclusion, however, by asserting something fundamental about the nature of the political: by positing some or other ontological claim or general guiding principle from

⁵ See, for instance, Hamilton, 2003: 53–62

⁶ Chapter 6.

⁷ Dean, 2020: 25; Pitkin, 1981; Soper, 1981: 1–19

⁸ Galston, 2010; Honig, 1993; Humphrey et al., 2014; Maxwell et al., 2019; White, 2021

which it then follows that political conflict is ineradicable⁹. Marx, by contrast, reaches this conclusion negatively, and via an ontological and epistemological framework that is political and social-historical all-the-way-down. His claim is instead, then, that needs only performatively arises in and through everyday social practices that are themselves shot through with antagonism, contestation, and struggle; and that consequently, the existence of that category is indelibly wrapped up with those conflicts¹⁰. What these approaches share, however, is the contention that the basic political questions surrounding needs are the subject of endemic, ongoing contestation that cannot be eradicated via a theory that purports to resolve the issue for all times and all peoples¹¹.

The political conception of need does not, however, simply assert ongoing political contestation about needs, and then leave it at that: if, after all, needs really do matter, then the requirement to take coordinated collective decisions and actions regarding them is unavoidable (4). Describing this or that as political requires that the assertion of ongoing, ineradicable conflict goes hand-in-hand with a contrasting impulse towards coordination, since in the absence of such an impulse, differences never result in political conflict¹². Thus for the politics of need to constitute a politics – and not just a chaotic mishmash of different views and valuations – it must involve some attempt to bring those various views and valuations together, producing some form of coordination. The point, then, is that the assertion of endemic conflict over need (3) and the contrary impulse towards coordination (4) are not binary alternatives, but constitutive yet warring elements of the political: conflict without coordination is not politics; coordination without conflict is not politics.

Finally, the political conception of need holds that coordinated collective actions and decisions concerning needs rest on what I call political settlements, rather than ultimate resolutions (5). By contrast, the prevailing assumption in contemporary needs theory has been that any such coordination requires some kind of closure of political contestation: there is, in other words, a widespread assumption that the only way to avoid an anarchic free-for-all is to find some ‘solution’ that somehow transcends, eradicates, or forever completes the

⁹ White, 2021

¹⁰ Section 5.2.

¹¹ Dean, 2020: 151–159; Fraser N, 1989: 157; Hamilton, 2003: 1–20, 2006b

¹² Galston, 2010; Honig, 1993: 200–211; White, 2021

political contestation over needs¹³. Against such a quest for closure, the political conception of need holds that the bases for coordinated action are settlements rather than solutions, settlements that are – crucially – the outcomes of actual political processes: the result, in other words, of *doing* politics, rather than solutions to politics. And because settlements are the outputs of political processes, and because those processes are themselves the scene of ineradicable conflict, settlements do not put an end to conflicts over need, but instead provide a basis for coordinated action despite the continued presence of that conflict.

Exactly how these settlements get (politically) brought about is, of course, an open question. Whilst some paint a rosy picture in which all the warring parties come together to form a common agreement¹⁴, the advocates of the political conception of need have tended to emphasise power and imposition over deliberation and consensus, stressing that even the most supposedly consensual political outcomes will never put an end to contestation, and must, therefore, be enforced through power¹⁵. And this was, furthermore, very much Marx's take on the matter: his view, as I have shown, was that the performative accomplishment of capitalistic needs was a political accomplishment; that that accomplishment was shot-through with power; and that it continued only so long as it was successfully imposed through the victory of one party over another in a process of struggle¹⁶.

Whatever way settlements do in fact get achieved, the ongoing nature of political conflict means that the achievement of any settlement is always accompanied by the possibility of further dissent. The making of settlements, in other words, always goes hand-in-hand with possibilities for their own resistance. Because settlements generate resistances in this way, it is notably the case that not just their production but also their continuation is a political process: settlements always coexist with contrary tendencies that have to be lived with and dealt with, and given this the potential disruption of settlements is a fact of their existence. Honigian agonism, for instance, captures this point through the notion of 'remainders': as Honig highlights, it follows from the ineradicable nature of political dissonance that any

¹³ See, for instance, Doyal and Gough, 1991: 7–34; Gough, 2014; Nussbaum, 1992, 2000: 48–49, 2003

¹⁴ See section 7.2.1.

¹⁵ As emphasised by Hamilton, 2003: 103–133, 2006a: 265, 2013

¹⁶ Chapters 5 and 6.

settlement of the political produces an outside, and thereby its own resistances¹⁷. Marx, by contrast, points to the way in which the performative accomplishment of capitalistic needs generates immanent resources for their own opposition and critique¹⁸. But whatever one's particular tack, the crucial contention here is that settlements live alongside conflict, rather than ending it. Consequently, whenever the political theorist imagines that their theoretical solutions can fully eradicate political dissonance, they can in fact only achieve a simulacrum of that eradication by suppressing, masking, excluding, or otherwise disappearing the resistances, struggles, and outsides those very 'solutions' entail¹⁹.

7.2 Political theory and the politics of need

There are two puzzles that follow from the previous section. The first is that the political conception of need might look, at first glance, like an argument for abandoning theorising about needs altogether. It follows from my analysis above that the theoretical attempts to avoid, solve, circumvent, or otherwise escape the political take needs away from the very processes which determine their nature and ascribe them their value. The political conception of needs posits, therefore, that there are insurmountable limits to what theory can do; this might, however, leave one to wonder what theory *can* do. Secondly, given that Marx is not the only theorist who holds a political conception of need, one might ask why we should opt for the Marxian approach I endorse, rather than one of the others.

My response to these puzzles is that they answer each other: that what makes Marx's approach superior to the alternatives is that he develops an understanding of the nature, purpose, and methods of theory that fits coherently with a thoroughgoing political conception of need, and that this is lacking in other approaches. To defend that contention, this section examines three alternative accounts of the place of political theory in the politics of need, which I will call theories 'of', 'for', and 'in' the politics of need. My argument is that the first and second approaches only succeed by abandoning or softening their commitment to the political conception of need. I thus defend the third approach, an approach which has Marx as its major proponent.

¹⁷ Honig, 1993

¹⁸ Chapter 6.

¹⁹ Such as the 'naturalisations' Marx argues are commonplace in political economy (see section 6.1).

7.2.1 Solving politics: theories ‘of’ the politics of need

One theoretical approach views the politics of need as a problem requiring a theoretical solution. Such theories begin – ostensibly at least – by affirming the political nature of need, and the presence of ongoing political conflicts over need. But having done so, they then take that political nature and those political conflicts to be the product of certain conditions that are themselves plastic; that, consequently, one could alter those conditions; that in doing so, needs would thereby lose their political character; and that should this happen, we would (in some way or other) be better for it. I call these theories ‘of’ the politics of need, in that they take the politics of need as their object, but views that politic as somehow problematic, before then positing that the goal of theory is to solve, complete, or otherwise be rid of that politics.

Theories of this type come in different forms. Political utopianism, for instance, begins by characterising needs according to the political dynamics outlined above (1)-(5), before going on to contend that there is some possible state of affairs in which conflicts around need (3) evaporate. This approach contends, therefore, that the politics of need is a product of specific, changeable social-historical circumstances, and that by altering those circumstances the generation and satisfaction of needs will cease to constitute a political problem. To take an example, a view of this kind has (wrongly, I contend) been attributed to Marx²⁰. According to this interpretation, whilst Marx’s account successfully de-naturalises, historicises, and politicises need, he also treats that politicisation as a problem, arguing that that politics only emerges under certain social-historical circumstances, circumstances that can be, will be, and should be eradicated in a forthcoming post-political utopia. Deliberative democrats, by contrast, look forward from political conflicts, rather than backwards to the conditions that create them in the first place. Influenced by, amongst others, Habermas’s theory of ideal speech²¹, Sen’s account of public reasoning²², and Richardson’s theory of deliberative practical reasoning²³, such theorists have argued that the continuation of dissonance surrounding need is not a necessary feature of needs-talk and needs-practice, but the result, in essence, of procedural failures. Their view, then, is that successfully constructed procedures

²⁰ Hamilton, 2003: 53–62; Heller, 1978: 96–130; Soper, 1981: 188–219

²¹ Habermas, 1986. For an application, see Doyal and Gough, 1991: 116–147

²² Sen, 1993b, 1999b, 2010. For discussion see section 3.2.2.

²³ Richardson, 2003. For an application, see Crocker, 2009

can recognise the ongoing conflict over need whilst also successfully overcoming that conflict, thereby producing shared positions endorsable by all parties.

What draws these accounts together are their shared contentions that the politics of needs is eradicable; that theory is able to plot some sort of path to that eradication; and that that eradication would be – in some sense or other – a good thing. Against that approach, I will offer the following argument: that in coming up with these sorts of theoretical fixes, theories ‘of’ the politics of need end up having to both – firstly – establish the possibility of such fixes, and – secondly – justify those fixes, and that the arguments they use to do both the former and the latter end up resting on certain extra-contextual theoretical premises and arguments that are held to be true in abstraction from the messy conduct of actual politics. Consequently, as I will show, this type of theory presupposes a variety of timeless, extra-political normativism that is incompatible with a thoroughgoing commitment to the politics of need.

This can be seen, for instance, with political utopianism²⁴. The case for political utopianism rests on the theorists identifying some possible state of affairs in which the social-historical practices that constitute needs can be conducted both harmoniously and freely, since it is only when both these requirements are in place that needs lose their political character: needs and needs-practice must be harmonious, or else political conflicts over need will re-emerge; and that harmony must not itself be the result of suppressing conflict via an exercise of political power. One might wonder, however, whether those two elements contradict one another: given that needs can be generated and met freely, what prevents different people developing oppositional sets of needs, or engaging in behaviours that frustrate the meeting of other peoples’ needs? Consider, for instance, the productive activity required to meet needs. If all activity surrounding need is truly free, then what is to stop people refusing to engage in such onerous productive activity? Unless one supposes that in this future utopia such burdensome productive activities are no longer necessary, or are somehow no longer burdensome, then the assumption of harmonious free activity surrounding needs looks to be quixotic.

To address this problem, political utopians revert to some sort of substantive vision of a ‘truly human’ or ‘flourishing’ form of existence. The assumption is made that should the human

²⁴ My argument here follows Hamilton (2003: 53–62) and Soper (1981: 188–219).

activities which generate and meet needs occur in some liberated, perfectly free manner, some particular form of human life will emerge spontaneously; and in *that* form of life, human activity surrounding needs will be fully harmonious, conflicts over needs will never emerge, and needs will cease to have their political character. Heller argues, for instance, that Marx's vision of communism includes a 'need for labour' that resolves the aforementioned tension between spontaneity and the burdensome requirements of activities to meet need²⁵. The point, then, is that the political utopian can only claim a consistency (or indeed, co-implication) between freedom and harmony by positing some substantive account of the content of free human activity. And significantly, that account is posited theoretically rather than politically: it hinges on a set of theoretical contentions about the nature of human beings and the content of their supposedly 'free', spontaneous activity, rather than the outcome of any actual political processes. Political utopianism, therefore, resolves the politics of need only through an anti-political theoretical fiat.

Something similar can be said about deliberative democracy. Indeed, such a line of attack closely parallels the criticisms I levelled against Sen's public reasoning approach in section 3.2.2. What I argued there was that these sorts of approach confront a 'democratic dilemma', since they rest on two contentions which are – when fully spelled out – incompatible: there is, firstly, the contention that there is a certain domain of political decision-making in which the people themselves are ultimately authoritative, and should get to decide; and secondly, there is the contention that those decisions should be made in accordance with a particular democratic procedure. The problem I highlighted in my examination of Sen (and which I summarise here) is that the sorts of normative arguments required to make and defend the latter contention – to argue for democratic procedures themselves – end up encroaching on the domain of the political and thus of democratic decision-making. The consequence is that the normative visions of democracy these sorts of theories require end up demanding that we put in place a range of democratic institutions, practices, minimal social standards, and so on, and do so on the basis of timeless normative democratic principles, rather than in and through democratic practice. And this applies, crucially, to needs themselves, resulting in a core of important needs whose significance is established via an extra-political timeless normativism, rather than through any sort of actual political process.

²⁵ Heller, 1978: 118

What brings these arguments together, then, is a broader problem characteristic of this type of theoretical approach to needs. That problem, in summary, is that in attempting to offer some or other theoretical fix for the politics of need, those fixes must themselves be defended and justified; and those sorts of defences and justifications are only possible when one grounds one's theory in extra-contextual theoretical principles, positing those theories – furthermore – in abstraction from the politics of need itself. And in going down this path, the theorist finds themselves offering the sort of extra-political judgements about needs a political conception of needs renounces. The result, then, is that theories 'of' the politics of need only succeed by debasing that politics.

7.2.2 Assessing politics: theories 'for' the politics of need

A second type of theory seeks to improve the manner in which the politics of need is conducted. Beginning with a strong affirmation of the political conception of need, this approach then posits the following question: given that needs are always produced in and through political processes, what form do these processes take, and – crucially – what form *should* they take? Such an approach thus draws into focus the manner in which those political processes occur, taking as its starting point the intuition that not all political processes are equal; that whilst the politics of need cannot be solved, it can be conducted in better or worse ways; and that the theorist has some role to play in making that conduct better. I call such approaches theories 'for' the politics of need, in that they do not attempt to get around or finally solve the political, but instead to use theory to improve political processes.

This approach has been taken by the most vocal and sophisticated proponent of the political conception of need active today: namely, Hamilton²⁶. This section examines, therefore, Hamilton's account, challenging it on the basis of the following problem: that Hamilton's theory – despite its numerous strengths – rests on an attempt to analyse, assess, and improve the conduct of the politics of need from an extra-political theoretical perspective.

Hamilton begins by putting forward a strongly political conception of needs²⁷. Central to that conception is the supposition that needs are always simultaneously both abstract, general, and universal; and specific, concrete, contextually-determined, and actually experienced²⁸.

²⁶ In particular Hamilton, 2003. See also Hamilton, 2006a, 2006b, 2009a, 2013, 2017

²⁷ Hamilton, 2003: 21–62

²⁸ Hamilton, 2003: 60–62, 2006b: 228, 2017: 63

Drawing on his readings of Marx²⁹ and Hegel³⁰, Hamilton argues that those particular and general forms can never be tidily separated, and are entangled and causally inter-related in ways that make wholly abstract or wholly contextual specifications of needs untenable. Both the general and the particular forms of need are, in other words, inexorably incomplete, and attempts to disentangle those elements, and analyse them in abstraction from one another, are both theoretically implausible³¹ and politically dangerous³². On that basis, therefore, Hamilton rules out attempts to specify needs from some ‘Archimedean point’³³ or through appeal to ‘*meta*-political Reason’³⁴, emphasising instead that the normativity and objectivity of need is never just universal and abstractly human, but also always historical, social, and contextual³⁵.

The result is a strong emphasis on the social-historical circumstances in which needs are generated, interpreted, legitimated, and met. Building on his reading of Marx, Hamilton develops his notion of need ‘trajectories’, arguing that human activity – including activity aimed at meeting needs – transforms the world and human nature itself in ways that beget new needs, setting off developmental trajectories that can head down different possible paths³⁶. Having offered this picture, Hamilton goes on to argue that these social-historical processes of generating, interpreting, legitimating, and satisfying need are inexorably and fundamentally political, emphasising the political nature of choices of need trajectory³⁷; the inexorable conflicts over needs³⁸; the ever-presence of power³⁹; the impossibility of extra-

²⁹ Hamilton, 2003: 53–62

³⁰ Hamilton, 2003: 25–27

³¹ Hamilton, 2003: 47–53

³² Hamilton, 2003: 147, 2013: 55–56

³³ Hamilton, 2006b: 228–9

³⁴ Hamilton, 2006a: 266

³⁵ Hamilton, 2003: 47–62, 2006b: 228, 2009a: 48–51

³⁶ Hamilton, 2003: 53–55

³⁷ Hamilton, 2003: 61–62

³⁸ Hamilton, 2003: 144, 2006a: 265, 2006b: 226

³⁹ Hamilton, 2013

political bases for coordinated human action⁴⁰; and the incomplete, contextual, and dynamic nature of those bases⁴¹.

Having established this, Hamilton takes a distinctive turn towards the conduct of the politics of need. As he argues, whilst needs themselves always emerge in political circumstances containing power relations, those relations can be more or less evenly distributed, and thus more or less influenced by the presence of ‘oppression’⁴² and/or ‘domination’⁴³. He further argues that the greater the inequality in those distributions – the more oppressed or dominated people are – the more ‘distorted’ the ensuing needs will be⁴⁴. And he goes on to extend that argument, furthermore, to people’s deliberative reflections on their own needs, thereby questioning the sorts of tidy deliberative solutions offered by theorists like Sen⁴⁵. The consequence of this analysis is that the circumstances within which the politics of need takes place can undermine and distort political processes, resulting in needs, and contextual judgements and deliberations concerning needs, that can be judged better or worse.

It is in making such judgements, then, that Hamilton finds an important place for theory. Whilst the theorist cannot offer solutions to political problems, what they can do – says Hamilton – is analyse the conditions in which political processes take place, and identify – crucially – how to *improve* those conditions⁴⁶. The aim of such interventions is, therefore, to undo the distorting influence of oppression and/or domination, thereby improving the circumstances in which the politics of need occurs, and consequently the needs-generating processes, acts of interpretation, deliberations, judgements, and needs-meeting activities that take place within those circumstances⁴⁷. Having explicated this approach in theoretical terms, Hamilton’s account culminates in the identification of a practical agent for conducting these evaluations – and subsequent transformations – of the social-historical terrain: what he calls the ‘state of needs’. It is, then, under the auspices of that state that theoretical evaluations take

⁴⁰ Hamilton, 2003: 1–20, 2006a, 2006b

⁴¹ Hamilton, 2003: 47–102

⁴² Hamilton, 2003: 86–88

⁴³ Hamilton, 2013

⁴⁴ Hamilton, 2003: 86–88, 2013: 55–58, 2017: 64

⁴⁵ See, in particular, his account of ‘true interests’ (Hamilton, 2003: 88–102).

⁴⁶ Hamilton, 2003: 101–133, 2013: 55–58, 2017: 61

⁴⁷ See, for instance, his theory of ‘institutional consequentialism’ (Hamilton, 2003: 116–125).

place in practice; that political judgements are made between needs trajectories; that the practical transformation of institutions and practices is conducted; and so on⁴⁸.

In many ways, Hamilton's political philosophy of needs represents the most sophisticated and compelling contemporary defence of the political conception of need. My contention, however, is that despite its many merits, that account rests on a disjointed approach to two levels of analyses: the levels of (a) the politics of need, and of (b) the political philosophy of needs. As Hamilton makes clear, analyses of needs themselves occur at level (a), and are – he claims – always and unavoidably political. At level (b), however, Hamilton's account appears to suggest that one can step outside of political processes, taking the perspective of an external observer, thereby evaluating those processes and their conduct according to substantive theoretical criteria. Indeed, the differences between Hamilton's treatments of those two levels is often striking: when it comes to (a), Hamilton riles against theoretical attempts to circumvent politics, rules out viewpoints that transcend political processes, and emphasises that all attempts to analyse needs must be contextual. When, however, he turns his attention to (b), the language shifts to 'improving'⁴⁹, 'rectifying'⁵⁰, and 'correcting'⁵¹ political processes according to criteria that are posited to be 'objective'⁵² and 'external'⁵³. Analyses of need themselves – at level (a) – are thus presented as bound within a social-historical terrain characterised by conflict, coercion, and the interplay of power, with the consequence that any such analysis will always be plagued by the distorting influence of those contextual vagaries. Such distortions, however, appear to be absent from the evaluation of that terrain at level (b), where the theoretical evaluator can seemingly reach objective judgements about that terrain, and describe the needs generated within it as more or less 'distorted'⁵⁴ or even 'pathological'⁵⁵, without those judgements *themselves* being subject to the political vagaries that distort and pathologise needs-talk and needs-practice itself.

⁴⁸ Hamilton, 2003: 134–170

⁴⁹ Hamilton, 2003: 117, 132, 170

⁵⁰ Hamilton, 2003: 122, 143

⁵¹ Hamilton, 2003: 140, 144, 146

⁵² Hamilton, 2003: 103, 122, 127

⁵³ Hamilton, 2003: 118, 122

⁵⁴ Hamilton, 2003: 86, see also 63-102

⁵⁵ Hamilton, 2003: 65, 73–74, 81

Hamilton's political philosophy of need rests, therefore, on a bifurcation between the types of analyses and claims that are possible at level (a) and (b).

The question, then, is whether such a bifurcation is itself tenable: whether it really is the case that the claims and analyses possible at these two levels are of different sorts. The problem, however, is that the arguments Hamilton himself uses to politicise analyses at the level of needs themselves (a), also apply to the theoretical judgements he makes at level (b).

Hamilton's account thus presupposes, I argue, a problematic disjoint between people as needy beings caught up in a political to-and-fro, and people who – in one capacity or another – have put on their theoretical hats, and are thereby able to make extra-contextual and extra-political judgements above that to-and-fro. Consider, for instance, the way in which Hamilton's account posits that the theorist can and should aim to make 'objective' assessments of oppression and/or domination at level (b). Hamilton's claims that the political philosophy of need, alongside contextual data ascertained through various methods⁵⁶, can act as an 'objective means' to 'understand' and 'transform' the conditions under which needs are generated, interpreted, legitimated, deliberatively evaluated, and met⁵⁷. Presented that way, the judgement of disadvantage at level (b) is deemed to be possible via some objective theoretical and/or empirical process that is transparent to the evaluator, allowing said evaluator to offer a range of theoretically-derived solutions for the distorting influence of oppression and domination⁵⁸. But the problem with that approach, I argue, is that the history and nature of disadvantage tells a different story. A characteristic feature of ingrained disadvantage is a failure by dominant discourses and groups to recognise in their various discourses the prevailing structures of disadvantage as constitutive of disadvantage in the first place. When, therefore, the theorist treats disadvantage as something hanging in the air that they can transparently observe and judge, this neglects the fact that a constitutive element of disadvantage is the way such supposedly objective acts of observation and judgement frame and treat disadvantaged groups. Disadvantage, in short, is often strongly present in exactly the sorts of observations and judgements Hamilton's theoretical evaluator conducts.

⁵⁶ In particular a decennial census (Hamilton, 2003: 125–133).

⁵⁷ Hamilton, 2003: 103

⁵⁸ See, for instance, the institutional schemata laid out in his later work (Hamilton, 2013, 2017).

Hamilton's bifurcation between (a) and (b) results, furthermore, in internal tensions within his account. Those tensions emerge because whilst Hamilton posits a dichotomy between those two levels, it is more difficult to tidily separate them in practice, with the upshot being that certain issues presented as indelibly political at level (a) are often characterised quite differently when they appear again at the level of theoretical analysis (b). This happens, for instance, in Hamilton's account of 'vital' and 'agency' needs. As Hamilton argues, people caught up in the politics of need itself can never reach extra-contextual, apolitical, wholly undistorted judgements of these basic needs⁵⁹. But later on, Hamilton also contends that his theoretical evaluator must make exactly those sorts of judgements, and that – crucially – this is something they are *able to do*. The theoretical evaluator, one thus finds, possesses abilities that Hamilton denies to those caught up in the political-to-and-fro itself: they can, for instance, know and indeed measure the 'objective state of one's vital and agency need development'⁶⁰, thereby deploying the 'requirements and objectives instantiated in the general vital and agency needs' as evaluative 'criteria that stand above context'⁶¹. Hamilton, it seems, finds himself getting into the business of 'objectively' assessing different states of affairs according to needs posited as extra-contextual theoretical criteria, thereby claiming for the theorist the sort of extra-political, contextless knowledge-about-needs that he repudiates elsewhere.

These problems come to a head in Hamilton's account of the state of needs. The difficulty with that state is that Hamilton wants it to be both, on the one hand, a concrete, real-world institution, and thus a part of the social-historical story in which needs get generated, interpreted, legitimated, deliberatively evaluated, and met; and, on the other hand, a theoretical evaluator that steps outside of that story. Hamilton thus argues, in a significant passage, that the state can only act as a 'legitimate evaluator' if it 'institutionalises' the theoretical evaluations proposed in his political philosophy. The state has, therefore, only the 'potential' to act as a state of needs, and to realise that potential it must competently 'assess the value' of institutions and practices according to Hamilton's theoretical schema. 'If',

⁵⁹ I describe these needs as 'basic' because Hamilton presents them as elementary forms of people's important needs, and as the 'normative basis' for the evaluation of contextual needs (Hamilton, 2003: 23–25, 88–89, 120–121, 171–173, 2009a: 46–51, 2009b).

⁶⁰ Hamilton, 2003: 127

⁶¹ Hamilton, 2003: 133

however, it is unable to fulfil this task, it is ‘in danger of being reduced to simply another power within a field of powers’⁶². Hamilton thus claims that the state of need has a unique function as a theoretical evaluator, conducting those evaluations by ‘institutionalis[ing]’ the theoretical principles and processes Hamilton proposes. In successfully performing that role, what is more, the state of needs appears to transcend the ‘field of powers’, ceasing to be just ‘another power’, and becoming, it would appear, something else entirely. So whilst Hamilton sometimes presents the state of needs as simply another real-world institution, its basic activity, and even existence, is premised on it conducting and institutionalising processes of evaluation that occur outside and above the political fray. It would seem, therefore, that whilst the ever-presence of political conflicts and the distorting influence of power unavoidably permeate all other real-world institutions and social practices, these can – and indeed must – stop at the door of the state of needs. That state thus embodies, I argue, the problematic duality outlined above: it is at once a practical agent and a theoretical evaluator, a real-world institution that attains a special place in Hamilton’s account only by stepping outside political processes, and thus ceasing to act in the manner of other real-world institutions. That state thus represents, I argue, the theoretical evaluator brought problematically back down to earth.

Despite, therefore, his significant contribution to the contemporary political philosophy of need, Hamilton’s account contains something of a paradox, resting as it does on a problematic bifurcation between the politics of need (a) and to the political philosophy of need (b). And these issues with Hamilton’s account point at the fundamental problem with this type of theory. That problem, I contend, is that theories ‘for’ the politics of need must presuppose Hamilton’s problematic bifurcation from the off, since their approach rests on analysing and improving the conduct of political processes from an extra-political theoretical perspective.

7.2.3 Doing politics: theories ‘in’ the politics of need

This section outlines and endorses a third approach to the political theory of need: what I call theories ‘in’ the politics of need. That approach – in summary – offers an immanent analysis and critique of the contemporary politics of need; does so from the perspective of a political

⁶² Hamilton, 2003: 144

participant enmeshed in that politics; and views the output of theoretical activity as a politically-charged representation of that politics⁶³.

Let me begin by considering the subject matter of such a theory, and the theoretical possibilities and impossibilities latent within that subject matter. I argued in section 7.1 that needs are embedded in a dynamic, fundamentally political, social-historical process of transformation. An important lesson that can be extracted from my arguments in sections 7.2.1 and 7.2.2 is that political theorists should abandon the attempt to solve, transcend, or otherwise escape the politics of need, and should recognised instead that they themselves are inexorably embedded in that politics. Once one rejects the possibility of theoretically stepping outside these social-historical processes that generate needs, it follows that the theorist never confronts needs, the basic political questions surrounding needs, or the politics of need itself in a naked or pristine form. The questions, ideas, and motivations that underpin theoretical activity are, therefore, always embedded in an ongoing social-historical and – crucially – political story.

This perspective – as I have argued – rules out certain forms of theorising about needs. But it also offers the following theoretical possibility: the immanent analysis of the politics of need in the here-and-now, and that is going on around the theorist in contemporary everyday life. Such an analysis takes as its subject matter the political settlements that actually take place; the political processes by which settlements are produced; the various conflicting positions on need; the relationship between those positions and contemporary settlements (are they dominant, excluded, etc.); the winners and losers, resistances and struggles generated by those settlements; the role played by power; the historical processes lying behind these contemporary dynamics; and so on. Thus rather than asking themselves, abstractly, ‘which need matter?’, or ‘what are the real needs?’, the theorist explores how the politics of need has actually been conducted; how we respond to that history and to present political practice; and where we go from here.

One might be left wondering, however, how theoretical activity fits into this social-historical and political story. To understand this, it is useful to begin with a contrast. As this

⁶³ Whilst Marx offers the best model of this form of theory, there are similarities with the accounts offered by Dean (2020) and N. Fraser (1989: 144–187). For wider parallels, see Galston, 2010; Honig, 1993; Shapiro, 1988; Young, 1994

dissertation has explored⁶⁴, there is a tendency amongst contemporary needs theory to see needs as ‘things’ inhabiting some or other extra-theoretical space, with the goal of theory being to delineate some sort of schemata that corresponds – in some sense or other – to the ‘things’ in that extra-theoretical space. My response to that tendency – which hinges on a Wittgensteinian reading of Marx⁶⁵ as well as a Marxian/Butlerian performative understanding of need⁶⁶ – is to bring these two worlds closer together through the notion of everyday practice. As I have shown, Marx argues that the category ‘need’ is not a picture of some external thing, but instead is a performative: a category that gets constituted through repetitive citation in everyday social practice⁶⁷.

This understanding helps to embed ideas-about-needs and theories-of-needs into the social-historical dynamics described earlier. The Marxian performative approach highlights, in particular, that the very possibility of coherent ideas-about-needs and theories-about-needs itself rest on prior performative acts: whenever one puts forward a ‘theory of need’ such a theory already presupposes that some shared set of ideas concerning need, some common language, assumptions, a general conceptual framework, and so on, and for these to be present, some performative possibility or other must already have been accomplished⁶⁸. The upshot of this is that the kinds of coherent theoretical perspective represented by, for instance, the basic human needs approach are not taken to be primarily theoretical achievements, but instead *political* achievements, in that they are made possible because some political process or other has already been successfully carried out, thereby generating (politically) a point of stability in the ongoing conflicts over needs. Theoretical activity, in other words, takes place within settlements, drawing on categories, language, assumptions, and so on that are only there to be drawn on because a settlement has been achieved.

Consequently, when the political theorist sets out to offer a theory of needs, the objects they are examining – needs themselves – are taken to be fundamentally political objects, objects that are only present in the way that they are because some political settlement or other has

⁶⁴ Chapter 3.

⁶⁵ Chapter 4.

⁶⁶ Chapter 5.

⁶⁷ Section 5.1.

⁶⁸ Section 6.1.

been achieved in an ongoing political process. By understanding their theoretical subject matter this way, this approach identifies and stresses the political struggles, stakes, and possibilities for agency that are continually wrapped up with people's needs and needs-meeting activities: struggles, because conflict over needs is ongoing and ineradicable; stakes, because whichever settlement is achieved, this will always bring about some particular distribution of harms, burdens, powers, and benefits; and agency, because the achievement of settlements depends on the continuation of a pattern of human practice that could, in principle, be done differently⁶⁹.

But more than just embedding itself in the politics of need, or taking that politics as its subject matter, this type of theory contributes to that politics: it does politics, in other words, by doing theory. Political theory is not, therefore, taken to be an attempt to analyse from some exterior standpoint the politics going in the world of human thought and action that performatively accomplishes people needs, but is instead seen as being part of that world. Theoretical activity, in short, is not just about politics: it *is* politics.

That claim presents, however, something of a paradox. If, after all, the theorist only has to hand the conceptual tools – as it were – native to a given political settlement, then how can those tools do anything other than prop up that settlement? Or to put this another way, if – as I have argued – all theoretical accounts of need are the product of some performatively accomplished settlement or other, how can those theoretical accounts ever be *unsettling*?

The ostensible problem here is that whilst the political theorist stresses the ongoing nature of conflict and the ever-present possibility of political agency, the possibilities for that agency and for any sort of disruptive political struggle seem to be immediately foreclosed by the nature of their theoretical subject matter. It would appear, in other words, that by ruling out appeals to any sort of 'outside', the political theorist finds themselves trapped within one particular extant social-historical context, with no tools available that would ever allow them to critique the needs and attendant practices already found there, or to plot a path to an alternative⁷⁰. Given this, it becomes difficult to understand how theory can be 'political' at

⁶⁹ Section 5.2.

⁷⁰ I consider a version of this critique in sections 5.2 and 6.1.

all, since theory seems utterly unable to engage in the kind of contestation and opposition that are – as I have argued – constitutive of the political.

What is wrong with this argument is that it (a) supposes that a given political settlement never contains its own critical tendencies, and that (b) it presumes theory to be simply a passive mirror of its theoretical subject-matter. The Marxian approach denies, however, both those presuppositions. To begin with the former, the notion of immanent critique played a central role in the Marxian analysis of need presented in chapters 5 and 6. As that analysis highlighted, one can find struggles, resistances, incompletenesses, and critical tendencies that are fully native to contemporary everyday social practices surrounding needs. Political settlements, in other words, contain the tools for their own criticism, tools that are very much available to the theories grounded in those settlements. By pointing to these immanent critical tendencies, the Marxian approach highlights that the performative accomplishment of a stable set of categories, assumptions, terms etc. surrounding needs goes hand-in-hand with the possibility of political opposition to these very accomplishments. Such possibilities are, therefore, not parachuted in from the theoretical outside, but native to the very acts that performatively accomplish peoples' needs in the first place.

Turning to (b), the notion that theory simply mirrors settlements has its root in a traditional understanding of the purpose of theory, an understanding in which the theorist attempts to reveal some underlying reality or truth, before then using that revelation to examine, analyse, and explain various phenomena. The goal of such a theory, therefore, is to mirror, express, or capture as perfectly as possible that underlying reality or truth. Against that understanding, the approach I defend here takes theories to be representations rather than mirrors, emphasising description over-and-above explanation. That approach again draws on the Marx-Wittgenstein parallel I made in chapter 4: theoretical activity, I argue, always contains some representation or other of contemporary everyday life and of extant political settlements, but such representations are never simply neutral or passive. Instead, the conceptual resources, frameworks, and possibilities found in everyday social practices can, if deployed one way, ossify and reinforce prevailing norms – by, say, naturalising and justifying capitalism in the manner Marx attributes to political economy⁷¹ – or they can alternatively draw on native critical tendencies to destabilise those prevailing norms. The

⁷¹ Section 6.1.

point, then, is that rather than seeing the act of representing one's social world as an attempt to mirror it, the Marxian framework highlights that even those seemingly innocuous knowledge practices always serve some political purpose⁷².

This helps to reveal fundamentally practical and political role of theory, the point of which – again following my reading of Marx⁷³ – is similar to what Wittgenstein called a 'perspicuous representation'⁷⁴ of the contemporary politics of need, but which views those representations as unavoidably – and, in Marx's case, more or less deliberately – loaded towards some or other political objective. Such a representation draws upon the ample and diverse conceptual resources found in everyday social practices to offer some representation or other of those practices, a representation which serves some or other political goal. While that representation can never just be an undiluted reflection of everyday practice as a whole, what it can do is draw attention to – or away from – certain elements, including those elements which are present but not seen, or which have been concealed; it can thereby shape understandings of what features of contemporary practice are considered salient or significant; it can either draw to the surface – or, alternatively, suppress – tendencies present within everyday practice; can make possibilities latent in that practice apparent, or else conceal them; establish or erode boundaries that serve to emphasise or de-emphasise various political realities or possibilities; deploy the conceptual resources at hand to chart a path to an alternative future, or obscure that path; and so on. What such a theory can do, then, is to deploy the conceptual resources available in all these various creative ways to serve political goals.

The role of the political theorist thus markedly shifts from the traditional position of observer or adjudicator to that of participant, with political theory itself reframed as a political practice that goes on in the politics of need. The theorist works, then, not by stepping apart from existing practice, but by staying in the thick of things, with the point of theory being to describe and represent the world in ways that encourages people to get out and act. And this, as I have argued⁷⁵, is exactly how Marx views his own theoretical contribution: he tells us,

⁷² Carver, 2002, 2019a; Kitching, 1988, 2002b; Pleasants, 2002; Read, 2002

⁷³ Section 6.1.

⁷⁴ Wittgenstein, 1968: 49-50. See also Carver, 2002; Hutchinson and Read, 2008; Pleasants, 2002; Read, 2002

⁷⁵ Section 6.1.

for instance, that he is not an abstract theoretician, but the theoretical representative of the proletariat, standing against the theoretical representatives of capital⁷⁶; that theoretical activity does not spontaneously emerge from the outside, but works with existing resources and possibilities found in actual practice⁷⁷; and that the point of theory is not just to interpret the world, but to change it⁷⁸.

A thoroughgoing commitment to the political conception of need leads us, therefore, to theories ‘in’ the politics of need, since that is – as I have shown – the only theoretical approach that can theorise need without thereby doing away with the politics.

7.3 A Marxian politics of need

Having established that conclusion, this final section explores how such an approach can be applied in contemporary contexts. The examination and critique I offer on that basis draws on innovations developed by Marx in his economic works, and which I examined in chapter 6; borrowing from, repurposing, and updating those innovations in order to shed a new light on a range of contemporary problems. Given the space available, my goal is to show the potential of such an approach: to highlight its theoretical and political potential, to show it can expose currently suppressed political realities, reconsider accepted wisdom, and be illuminating, innovative, and potentially impactful. This section will outline, therefore, various promising and politically potent new lines of inquiry, whilst also recognising that far more work is required beyond this initial sketch.

7.3.1 *Preconditions*

With that proviso in mind, I begin by considering the politics surrounding preconditions: the specific social-historical circumstances that must be in place for needs to emerge in the manner that they do in contemporary everyday social practices. Such preconditions get scant attention in the contemporary approaches to theorising needs, which have tended to take the world as it is, focusing solely on needs required to thrive in that particular world⁷⁹. Indeed, this feature of contemporary approaches follows from their most basic presuppositions: if,

⁷⁶ PP: 177

⁷⁷ MECW, 5: 326; PP: 169-170, 177-178; CM: 518

⁷⁸ TF: 5

⁷⁹ This is an explicate contention made by many prominent needs theorists (Braybrooke, 1987: 77–79; Gough, 2014: 378; Nussbaum, 2000: 77).

after all, the needs that matter are traceable to our very natures, then the question of origins is moot; or alternatively, if they are traceable to culture, then they are *de facto* authoritative, with any scrutiny of their origins considered an unjustifiable imposition. By taking contemporary needs simply to be given, the result has been to obscure a series of political questions about need, including: what features of the world make it the case that these things are needed in the first place? What, furthermore, brought those features about? What sort of political reality does the making and remaking of those features represent? And what other sorts of reality could be realised if people thought and acted differently?

The Marxian approach, by contrast, brings these questions to the fore. As I showed in section 6.2, by placing needs in a social-historical frame, and by arguing that the performative accomplishment of contemporary needs is a fundamentally political process, Marx prompts us to consider how the extant needs found in contemporary life got to be there in the first place, thereby drawing attention to the peculiar social-historical circumstances that had to be there for those needs to arise, and the political processes – crucially – that put those circumstances in place.

A similar sort of analysis can be applied to contemporary needs. Several theorists have questioned, in particular, the way in which dominant needs theories are undergirded by a certain worldview, characterised by a range of presuppositions regarding individuality and individualism, the centrality of agency, the nature of human embodiment, and the human-nature relationship. As these theorists go on to point out, that worldview itself has a history, one that is rooted in and dominated by – so the argument goes – colonialism, patriarchy, ableism, and – of course – capitalism. The ensuing contention is that that worldview is fundamentally partisan, ethnocentric, gendered, and/or exclusionary, and thus that the theories which take such a worldview for granted are – despite their ostensible claims – far from neutral in their presuppositions or their connotations⁸⁰.

⁸⁰ This has, for instance, been a common criticism of Nussbaum's account (Deneulin, 2002; Fabre and Miller D, 2003; Menon, 2002; Nelson, 2008), though Nussbaum and others have responded that the concepts and presuppositions that underpin her account are not confined to the west (Nussbaum, 2000: 36–41; Sen, 1999b: 227–248; Wolff, 2013: 21–27). For a broader literature on this theme, see Devlin and Pothier, 2006; Dossa, 2007; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Robb and Harris, 2013; Shilliam, 2011

This argument, I contend, is characteristically Marxian, and suggests a characteristically Marxian political response. In challenging contemporary needs on the basis of their social-historical roots, the argument made is not – crucially – that those contemporary needs are somehow not ‘real’ needs, but that the presence of those needs presupposes that one’s social world has already been built, and built politically. The point, then, is that whilst certain needs might indeed be necessary to thrive in a social world constructed along certain lines, this does not alter the fact that those needs only pertain because that world has been accomplished (politically) in a particular way, and to the exclusion of other possible social worlds.

This applies, for instance, to the need for education. Contemporary needs theorists have treated that need as representing some common ‘thing’ that is specified differently in different places. As Heller points out, however, there is no such common thing: people never simply bear ‘the need for education’, but a cluster of needs to acquire certain knowledge, skills, and/or propensities specific to their circumstances⁸¹. The problem, however, is that within that cluster are various ways to conceive of the need for education that are mutually incompatible, meaning that any attempt to say what that need actually entails ends up favouring one way of life over others⁸². Thus having and meeting *that* need for education – which is a very real prerequisite to survive and thrive in *this* world – is always to build the social world one way, and to rule out other ways. Lying beneath the seemingly innocuous need for education is, then, a set of political choices, conflicts, and consequences, all of which get obscured by contemporary needs theory.

These issues come to head in the ongoing debates concerning Indigenous education. Challenging historical attempts to use education as a tool for assimilation into dominant cultures, numerous educationalist and Indigenous peoples have called for forms of education that focus on Indigenous methods, forms of knowledge, language, and practices. That call has been widely successful, leading to a range of programmes and numerous policy responses⁸³. Notably, however, the call for such Indigenous educational practice has often rested on

⁸¹ Heller, 1993

⁸² Soper, 1993a: 122

⁸³ Notably, the right to Indigenous education has been codified in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, articles 13-15 (United Nations, 2007). For a recent survey of relevant programmes, see McKinley and Smith, 2019

something like the timeless universalism of the basic human needs approach. There are those, for instance, who defend Indigenous education on the basis that it closes education gaps and improves outcomes, pointing to the way in which such programmes have enhanced Indigenous children's engagement, behaviour, and attainment⁸⁴. Alternatively, there are others who pin the need for Indigenous education on people's right to meet their basic human needs in ways that are sensitive to their distinctive cultures⁸⁵. What draws these arguments together, however, is the suggestion that Indigenous education is a necessary mode of satisfaction for a basic human need: that the failure to satisfy those needs in this particular way would either leave the need unmet, or – in some sense or other – be inappropriate.

As the Marxian approach pinpoints, however, the difficulty is that in taking basic human needs themselves for granted, these approaches fail to see that tweaks in the mode of satisfaction for needs cannot erase the inevitable political choices, conflicts, and consequences wrapped up in the needs themselves. As a number of Indigenous educationalists have highlighted, whilst education is always a process of teaching, learning, and enabling, it is also – inevitably and inexorably – a disciplining process: a process that promulgates and embeds certain worldviews at the expense of others⁸⁶. The challenge to education presented by the politics of Indigeneity is not, then, just about cultural sensitivity or individual educational outcomes (however important those things are) but the politics involved in propagating one worldview at the expense of others. That challenge is, then a fundamentally political challenge, and one cannot take the politics out of it without missing the point.

On that basis, a number of authors have challenged existing policy responses and programmes for Indigenous education, arguing that they – as Ahenakew et al. put it – are insufficient because they narrowly focus on the 'inclusion' of Indigenous practice, forms of knowledge, and so on in a 'predefined normalised order of schooling'⁸⁷, rather than a ground-up re-examination, critique, and political response to that order itself. What is required, therefore, is not simply an Indigenous educational bolt-on, but a broader revisioning of

⁸⁴ For an overview of the evidence, see Castagno and Brayboy, 2008

⁸⁵ Brock, 2002

⁸⁶ Mika and Stewart, 2018

⁸⁷ Ahenakew et al., 2014: 220

educational systems that brings to the surface the inevitable political choices, conflicts over those choices, and partisan consequences of those choices wrapped up with this thing people call the ‘need for education’⁸⁸. In questioning, then, the broader frameworks, preconditions, and social-historical circumstances that lie behind seemingly innocuous needs; in emphasising political choice and conflict; and in calling for a ground-up revisioning of those needs, this constitutes a characteristically Marxian argument and political response.

7.3.2 Enactments

Next, the Marxian approach draws attention to the politics wrapped up in enacting needs: in taking the abstract categories performatively constituted in contemporary life and deploying those social abstracts in concrete social actions. Contemporary needs theory – as I argued in sections 2.2 and 6.3 – has dodged that politics by narrowly focusing on abstract, indeterminate needs, and leaving the concrete determination of those needs to murky processes of specification. The Marxian approach, by contrast, emphasises the way in which needs are performatives that get actualised in people’s everyday social practice, and which possess an indeterminacy that generates endless interminable struggles over exactly when, how, and in what form they do in fact get played out.

Consider, for instance, the need for health. That need is a catch-all for many different sorts of specific requirements and practices, a catch-all that – crucially – leaves a vast range of questions unanswered. On a most basic level, those questions concern the length and quality of life people can standardly expect, and that can be used to generate burdensome duties on others (at what point do we say, for instance, that a particular medical intervention is too costly?⁸⁹). But beyond that level, there are innumerable questions about what exactly that need is, and what it requires of us: consider, for instance, how those questions have been raised by the sort of policy measures deployed during the coronavirus pandemic, which have had to seek out some sort of balance between peoples’ health needs, their freedoms, their other needs (for education, for employment, for social interaction, etc.), the other things that they might value (travel, going to church, etc.), and so on. Now one might, of course, look at this as simply a tragic, exceptional set of circumstances that has generated a range of dilemmas we do not normally or necessarily encounter. The Marxian approach, however,

⁸⁸ Ahenakew et al., 2014; Deloria and Wildcat, 2001; Lambe, 2003; Pratt et al., 2018

⁸⁹ For discussion, see Braybrooke, 1987: 293–301; Copp, 1992, 1998; Miller D, 2007: 185–194

stresses that needs are *always* like this, and that the coronavirus pandemic has simply brought these political conflict and tensions to the surface. The argument, then, is that need for health is fundamentally indeterminate; there is constant and irrevocable antagonism and political choice over how exactly those needs play out; and when we pretend otherwise, this merely conceals political processes that are inevitably going on.

To build on that example, I want to consider the detailed account of the human right to health given by Wolff⁹⁰. In that account, Wolff shows how historical political interventions – particularly by HIV/AIDS sufferers and activists – have fundamentally shaped the form of people’s contemporary health needs⁹¹. He argues, in particular, that the contemporary consensus regarding the human right to health – as enshrined in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁹² – is indebted to a historical political process, a process in which committed political participants had a fundamental role in reshaping international perceptions, practices, and laws to establish what we now recognise to be *the* human right to health. But as Wolff further notes, that outcome has itself generated a series of further political conundrums: does, for instance, the human right to health empower NGOs to assert other peoples’ rights for them? What do we do when widely practiced traditional forms of healthcare seem to undermine peoples’ health rights? Has the success of HIV/AIDS activists ended up diverting attention and resources from other areas, such as maternity and new-born healthcare? And so on⁹³. What Wolff’s account brings to the surface, I argue, are the political processes that have fundamentally shaped the contemporary need for health, and which are still playing out today. To borrow from and modify Wolff’s argument⁹⁴, combine it with my earlier observations, and give it a Marxian spin, I argue that what that account reveals is that the need for health always goes hand-in-hand with a politics of need enactment, a politics which inevitably involves antagonism, conflict, and political choice.

⁹⁰ Wolff, 2013

⁹¹ Wolff, 2013: 39–91

⁹² United Nations, 1948

⁹³ Wolff, 2013: 27–38, 92–129

⁹⁴ Wolff himself defends something like a basic human needs framework (Wolff, 2013: 13–38).

Turning to a second example, I want to consider the significant role of welfare politics in shaping how people's indeterminate needs get enacted in political practice⁹⁵. At the root of that shaping is, I argue, the way in which the performative constitution of contemporary needs always posits certain indifferences. As I argued in section 6.3.2, there are always aspects of contemporary life that our performatively constituted needs are insensitive to, and which people are, consequently, indifferent to in the social actions they carry out. Now according to the dominant approaches in contemporary needs theory, these sorts of indifferences reflect extra-political, simply present and given differences between the needs that matter, and the needs that don't: when, for instance, needs are purported to matter simply *qua* one's humanity, then it follows that there can be no reality to any needs other than human needs, and no genuine form of human neediness that fails to correspond to this generic humanness. According to my Marxian account, by contrast, these indifferences are indifferences to outsides that are themselves produced performatively and politically. They do not, therefore, reflect some sort of extra-political, 'real world' difference, but instead follow from the fact that one set of categories and relations has been performatively and politically accomplished, rather than some other one.

In the contemporary politics of need, those indifferences and exclusions come in two forms. There are, firstly, needs that are ostensibly important to at least some people, but which are excluded from the lists of important needs: one might consider, for instance, those who value certain religious or spiritual needs ahead of their human needs⁹⁶. Because these needs are not, supposedly, real or genuine needs, they have historically been dismissed in welfare practices, with their proponents cast as mistaken, irrational, confused, or nonsensical. And whilst this has begun to change⁹⁷, what the Marxian approach highlights is that indifference to at least some needs is coded into the very terms that performatively constitute needs in the first place: that indifference to some needs is, in other words, inevitable, and that those indifferences are the products of unavoidable political conflicts and choices. Welfare practices cannot, therefore, solve all these difficulties by simply tackling – one by one – indifference after

⁹⁵ Following in the footsteps of N. Fraser's seminal account on this topic (Fraser N, 1989: 144–187, 2016).

⁹⁶ For some of the theoretical issues surrounding such needs, see Fabre and Miller D, 2003; Jaggar, 2006; Miller D, 2007: 163–200, 2012; Nussbaum, 2000: 167–240

⁹⁷ Canda, 2013; Oxhandler and Pargament, 2014; Sheila and Philip, 2010

indifference, but must recognise instead that those practices are themselves political practices that are unavoidably in the business of generating, reconstituting, and enacting indifferences.

Secondly, there are indifferences to the non-normal. As the Marxian approach highlights, people in their social practice both – on the one hand – performatively and politically establish the standard and type of human life that is taken to be ‘normal’, ‘adequate’, ‘sufficient’, and so on, and – on the other hand – display an indifference towards the non-normal. Both the construction of the normal and indifference to the non-normal are, therefore, unavoidable attendant consequences of our everyday social practices: indeed, such indifference has been widely, if reluctantly, recognised in the theoretical literature on need⁹⁸. The dominant theoretical approaches have, however, failed to recognise that the exclusive notions of ‘normality’ they inevitably posit are *political* notions: both because the selection of the ‘normal’ functions, roles, and activities inevitably involves political choice; and because people’s capacity to perform those functions, roles, and activities is not a straightforward function of their natures operating in abstraction from social context⁹⁹. Thus whilst notions of normality are built into the basic fabric of contemporary theories of need, those theories also obscure the political processes that go into deciding what constitutes the ‘normal’ in the first place.

The upshot of this has been – firstly – to ignore and downplay the role of social practices themselves play in constructing the normal, and to fail to recognise – secondly – that that construction is itself a political process. This has, for instance, been observed in the recent furore over what the UK government has called the ‘removal of the spare bedroom subsidy’, and what almost everyone else calls the ‘bedroom tax’: a policy by which entitlements for housing benefits are reduced for those deemed to have ‘spare’ bedrooms. The failings surrounding this policy are well documented¹⁰⁰, and it has been argued – in particular – that it is grounded on normalised conceptions of individuals and families that are inevitably exclusionary¹⁰¹. What a Marxian approach emphasises, crucially, is how these normalising,

⁹⁸ Braybrooke, 1987: 41–44; Copp, 2005; de Campos, 2012; Miller SC, 2012: 36–39; Nussbaum, 2006a: 179–195

⁹⁹ As emphasised by the social model of disability: see Garbutt and Saltiel, 2020

¹⁰⁰ Gibb, 2015

¹⁰¹ Greenstein et al., 2016; Nowicki, 2018

indifferent aspects of welfare politics and practice are indelibly connected to needs themselves. It is not the case, then, that people have some extra-social, extra-political ‘need for housing’, and that this particular welfare practice fails because it misses or distorts that reality. Instead, the Marxian approach highlights that that abstract need – ‘the need for housing’ – only exists because it gets played out – performatively – in people’s social practices, and this playing out is always and indelibly a process that normalises and displays indifference. The point, then, is to show that those normalising, indifferent aspects of welfare policy and practice are not the result of some or other technocratic policy failure, but instead an unavoidable political problem and choice wrapped up with needs themselves.

7.3.3 *Systems*

As I argued in section 6.4, by taking needs to be discrete, extra-social or arbitrary cultural ‘things’, contemporary theoretical approaches to need have failed to connect needs to their broader social consequences, thereby assuming that the important needs they pick out are *ipso facto* integrable with one another, and with the broader social system in which those needs are generated, encountered, and met. Marx’s approach, by contrast, was to view people’s needs as an inseparable part of a dynamic social whole, and inexorably connected to a range of systematic tendencies, circumstances, and consequences. Such systems of need, furthermore, are not necessarily very good at meeting the needs they themselves generate: they can contain tensions and contradictions between different needs, different social roles and practices, or between needs-making and needs-meeting activities, producing various failures to meet the very needs that arise as that system itself is performatively accomplished.

This can be seen, for instance, in Nussbaum’s list of central capabilities. That list, as has been noted, contains elements that are ostensibly contradictory: she posits, for instance, strong assumptions about individualism and autonomy alongside a defence of religious freedom; argues that such ‘freedom of religious exercise’ can be realised alongside – amongst other things – ‘choice in matters of reproduction’; proffers, furthermore, a universal capacity to ‘hold property’ and exercise ‘property rights’ without considering whether those capacities are compatible with the capabilities to ‘work as a human being’ or live ‘with concern for and in relation to animals, plants and the world of nature’; and so on¹⁰². Nussbaum, to her credit,

¹⁰² For discussion of these tensions, see Fabre and Miller D, 2003; Fleaurbaey, 2002; Menon, 2002; Noonan, 2011. For the list of central capabilities, see Nussbaum, 2000: 78–80

has recognised the seriousness of some of these tensions, highlighting – for instance – the dilemmas inherent in balancing religious needs and freedoms against other ones¹⁰³. The difficulty, however, is that Nussbaum’s approach presupposes a basic consistency, and thus disassociates her theory from its troublesome incoherencies, often by disappearing features of the world that might bring these contradictions to a head. She argues, for instance, for a ‘principle of moral constraint’ that places a limit on the extent of religious toleration based on whether religious practices impact the other central capabilities¹⁰⁴. She is, then, willing to accept religious freedom only to the extent that such freedoms cohere with her broader substantive doctrine, ruling out other forms of belief as – supposedly – not really worthy of the name ‘religion’ in the first place¹⁰⁵. Thus whilst Nussbaum recognises the internal tensions in her list, she also disappears and excludes, through theoretical fiat, those whose existence might prove troublesome. The Marxian approach, by contrast, holds that a system of need can both be internally incoherent *and* a powerful reality, with those incoherencies playing out – often with damaging consequences – in people’s everyday social practice.

Consider, for instance, the need for nutrition. As the theoretical story usually goes, people have a need for nutrition; that need itself can be satisfied in various ways, depending on people’s culture, their broader context, their individual choices, and so on; and all those modes of satisfaction are themselves generated through various forms of needs-meeting activity. What the Marxian approach prompts us to consider, however, are the incoherencies and contradictions that emerge when one considers all those components as an interconnected, dynamic system, and as part of a larger social totality, rather than as a discrete, tidily separable series of linearly arranged elements.

A number of authors have, for instance, pointed to how the inner logic of contemporary systems of food production and consumption directly produces the twin tragedies of obesity and starvation¹⁰⁶. What the Marxian approach points to – I suggest, and against the positions of some authors¹⁰⁷ – is that one has to connect those failures to meet need to the broader

¹⁰³ Nussbaum, 2000: 167–240

¹⁰⁴ Nussbaum, 2000: 190–194

¹⁰⁵ Nussbaum, 2000: 194–198

¹⁰⁶ Albritton, 2009; Patel, 2008; Wells, 2012

¹⁰⁷ Albritton, for instance, argues one can democratise and rationalise the capitalistic system of need without upending it (Albritton, 2009).

system of needs itself, a system that gives rise to the very need that it then thwarts. In this way, the failure to meet can be traced – as it were – all-the-way down to needs themselves. This involves recognising that the failures, tensions, and incoherencies one finds in contemporary activities directed at meeting needs are part of an interconnected, dynamic system that arises as it is performed, and that needs themselves are constituted in those very performative practices. And it is because contemporary needs theories fail to see needs as systems, instead separating out needs themselves from the satisfiers for those needs, and from the activities required to generate those satisfiers, that those theories have been unable to critically examine how needs and needs-meeting practices here are inexorably connected to thwarted needs there. The Marxian emphasis on systems of needs highlights, by contrast, that one cannot detach these ‘periphery’ issues from the ‘core’ theory, with the upshot being that all these costs and consequences – including those that come in the form of unmet need – have to be confronted as part of the political stakes wrapped up in building one system of need, rather than some other one.

What is required, therefore, is an overhaul of the basic dynamics of the contemporary system of need, since it is the direct, native consequence of that system *itself* to generate these failures to meet need. Any supposed solution that leaves the dynamics of that system in place is, therefore, ultimately nugatory. Such an approach is, I argue, the only plausible way forward in a world where the needs posited to be essential to the advantaged are beyond the reach of many others, and require activities to meet needs that have potentially disastrous consequences for the rest of the world. As the above argument suggests, for instance, the contemporary system of need is *reliant* on starvation and obesity as necessary perquisites to its systematic function. And beyond the need for nutrition, we could return to the need for health, and ask whether the ever-increasing healthcare needs generated by aging populations will ever be integrable with the health needs of the less fortunate, or alternatively whether the entire healthcare system only functions by generating ever-expanding needs at one pole whilst neglecting needs at other¹⁰⁸. More broadly, some authors have pointed to the seeming ambivalence of contemporary theorists towards the ecological costs needs necessitate: indeed, one might even go so far as to suggest that the contemporary system of need posits activities to meet need that fundamentally call into question the capacity of all future

¹⁰⁸ Braybrooke, 1987: 293–301

generations to meet their needs¹⁰⁹. Each of these issues raises new lines of enquiry that I cannot do justice to in the space available: instead, what I am pointing to is how a focus on systems of need brings to the surface political conflicts, dilemmas, and choices that have to be confronted, and which contemporary needs theories have thus far ignored and suppressed. In identifying these three themes from Marx, and considering their application to contemporary needs, needs-theory, and needs-practices, my aim has been to offer the first steps towards a Marxian politics of need. Given the space available, that aim has been limited to exemplifying the potential of such an approach. Nevertheless, I have shown how a Marxian approach to need – characterised by, in particular, its performativity, and its emphasis on politics as going all-the-way-down to needs themselves – can be both robust and revealing. My conclusion, then, is that to answer my central question – the question of which needs matter – we have to turn away from existing orthodoxies, and embrace instead an alternative sort of political theory: one that is deeply political, and characteristically Marxian.

¹⁰⁹ Soper, 1993a, 2007

Abbreviations of Marx's texts

CAP – Marx K (1990) *Capital: Volume 1* (translated by Fowkes B). London: Penguin

CM – Manifesto of the Communist Party. MECW, 6: 477-519

EPM – *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. MECW, 3: 229-346

GI – Marx K, Engels E, and Weydemeyer J (2014) Rough Notes, formerly known as “I. Feuerbach,” drawn from “the German ideology” manuscripts. In: Carver T and Blank D, *Marx and Engels's 'German Ideology' Manuscripts: Presentation and Analysis of the 'Feuerbach Chapter'*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 34-381.

n.b. for references to the text usually known as ‘the German ideology’ not from ‘I. Feuerbach’ I use the relevant volume of *Marx and Engels's Collected Works* (5).

PP – *The Poverty of Philosophy*. MECW, 6: 105-212

MECW – *Marx and Engels's Collected Works*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

(Displayed as volume: pages i.e. MECW, 5: 10-20)

TF – These on Feuerbach. MECW, 5: 3-5

TOM – Marx K (1975) Marx's *Introduction* (1857) to the *Grundrisse*. In: Carver T (ed) *Karl Marx: Text on Method*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 1-158.

WAG - Marx K (2012) ‘Notes’ on Adolph Wagner. In: Carver T (ed) *Marx: Later Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 227-257

References

- Ahenakew C, Andreotti VDO, Cooper G, and Hireme H (2014) Beyond epistemic provincialism: De-provincializing Indigenous resistance. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 10(3): 216–231. DOI: 10.1177/117718011401000302.
- Albritton R (2009) *Let Them Eat Junk: How Capitalism Creates Hunger and Obesity*. London: Pluto Press.
- Alexander JM (2008) *Capabilities and Social Justice: The Political Philosophy of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum*. London: Routledge.
- Alexander JM (2014) Social justice and Nussbaum's concept of the person. In: Comim F and Nussbaum M (eds) *Capabilities, Gender, Equality: Towards Fundamental Entitlements*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 414–436.
- Alkire S (2002) *Valuing Freedoms: Sen's Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Alkire S (2005) Needs and capabilities. In: Reader S (ed.) *The Philosophy of Need*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 229–251.
- Althusser L (2005) *For Marx* (translated by Brewster B and Fernbach D). London: Verso.
- Althusser L (2015) *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition* (translated by Brewster B). London: Verso.
- Alvarez A (2009) The cross-cultural importance of satisfying vital needs. *Bioethics* 23(9): 486–496. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8519.2009.01761.x.
- Anderson ES (1999) What is the point of equality? *Ethics* 109(2): 287–337. DOI: 10.1086/233897.
- Andrews D (2002) Commodity fetishism as a form of life. In: Kitching G and Pleasants N (eds) *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics*. London: Routledge, pp. 78–94.

- Arneson R (2005) Distributive justice and basic capability equality: ‘Good enough’ is not good enough. In: Kaufman A (ed.) *Capabilities Equality: Basic Issues and Problems*. London: Routledge, pp. 17–43.
- Arneson R (2010) Two cheers for capabilities. In: Brighthouse H and Robeyns I (eds) *Measuring Justice: Primary Goods and Capabilities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 101–127.
- Ashcraft R (1984) Marx and political theory. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26(4): 637–671. DOI: 10.1017/S0010417500011208
- Austin A (2018) Turning capabilities into functionings: Practical reason as an activation factor. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 19(1): 24–37. DOI: 10.1080/19452829.2017.1364225.
- Bagg S (2018) Beyond the search for the subject: An anti-essentialist ontology for liberal democracy. *European Journal of Political Theory* 20(2): 208–231. DOI: 10.1177/1474885118763881.
- Barker G (2015) *Beyond Biofatalism: Human Nature for an Evolving World*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Barry B (1965) *Political Argument*. London: Routledge.
- Baujard A and Gilardone M (2017) Sen is not a capability theorist. *Journal of Economic Methodology* 24(1): 1–19. DOI: 10.1080/1350178X.2016.1257821.
- Beilharz P (2015) Agnes Heller: From Marx to the dictatorship over needs. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 273(3): 269–277.
- Benhabib S, Butler J, Fraser N, and Cornell D (1995) *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge.
- Benton T (1988) Humanism = speciesism: Marx on humans and animals. *Radical Philosophy* 50: 4–18.

- Best B (2010) *Marx and the Dynamic of the Capital Formation: An Aesthetics of Political Economy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Blau A (ed.) (2017) *Methods in Analytical Political Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bonefeld W (2001) The permanence of primitive accumulation: Commodity fetishism and social constitution. In: *The Commoner* (2). Available at: <https://thecommoner.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/The-Permanence-of-Primitive-Accumulation-Bonefeld.pdf> (accessed 23 August 2021).
- Bonefeld W (2011) Primitive accumulation and capitalist accumulation: Notes on social constitution and expropriation. *Science & Society* 75(3): 379–399. DOI: 10.1521/viso.2011.75.3.379.
- Boss G (2021) Basic human needs: Abstraction, indeterminacy and the political account of need. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*. DOI: 10.1080/13698230.2021.1880199.
- Bradley B (2012) Doing away with harm. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85(2): 390–412. DOI: 10.1111/j.1933-1592.2012.00615.x.
- Braybrooke D (1987) *Meeting Needs*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Braybrooke D (1998a) The concept of need, with a heartwarming offer of aid to utilitarianism. In: Brock G (ed.) *Necessary Goods: Our Responsibilities to Meet Others' Needs*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 57–72.
- Braybrooke D (1998b) Two conceptions of needs in Marx's writings. In: *Moral Objectives, Rules, and the Forms of Social Change*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 15–31.
- Braybrooke D (2005) Where does the moral force of the concept of needs reside and when? In: Reader S (ed.) *The Philosophy of Need*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 209–228.
- Brock G (1994) Braybrooke on needs. *Ethics* 104(4): 811–823. DOI: 10.1086/293656.

- Brock G (1998a) Introduction. In: Brock G (ed.) *Necessary Goods: Our Responsibilities to Meet Others' Needs*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 1–18.
- Brock G (1998b) Is redistribution to help the needy unjust? In: Brock G (ed.) *Necessary Goods: Our Responsibilities to Meet Others' Needs*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 173–184.
- Brock G (1998c) Morally important needs. *Philosophia* 26: 165–178. DOI: 10.1007/BF02380064.
- Brock G (1999) Just deserts and needs. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 37(2): 165–188. DOI: 10.1111/j.2041-6962.1999.tb00863.x.
- Brock G (2002) Are there any defensible indigenous rights? *Contemporary Political Theory* 1(3): 285–305. DOI: 10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300052.
- Brock G (2005) Needs and global justice. In: Reader S (ed.) *The Philosophy of Need*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 51–72.
- Brock G (2009) *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brock G (2012) Needs and distributive justice. In: Gaus GF and D'Agostino F (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Social and Political Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, pp. 444–455.
- Brock G (2018) Sufficiency and needs-based approaches. In: Olsaretti S (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Distributive Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 86–108.
- Brock G and Reader S (2002) Needs-centered ethical theory. *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 36(4): 425–434. DOI: 10.1023/A:1021910832459
- Browning G (1994) The German Ideology: The theory of history and the history of theory. *History of Political Thought* 14(3): 455–473.
- Burchardt T (2009) Agency goals, adaptation and capability sets. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 10(1): 3–19. DOI: 10.1080/14649880802675044.
- Burkett P (2014) *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective*. Chicago: Haymarket.

- Burns T (2016) “Happy slaves”? The adaptation problem and identity politics in the writings of Amartya Sen. *International Journal of Social Economics* 43(12): 1178–1193. DOI: 10.1108/IJSE-09-2015-0232.
- Butler J (1988) Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal* 40(4): 519-531. DOI: 10.2307/3207893.
- Butler J (1993) *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler J (1999) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 10th anniversary edition. New York: Routledge.
- Butler J (2010) Performative agency. *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3(2): 147–161. DOI: 10.1080/17530350.2010.494117.
- Byron C (2016) Essence and alienation: Marx’s theory of human nature. *Science & Society* 80(3): 375–394. DOI: 10.1521/isis.2016.80.3.375.
- Byskov MF (2017) Democracy, philosophy, and the selection of capabilities. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 18(1): 1–16. DOI: 10.1080/19452829.2015.1091809.
- Callon M (ed.) (1998) *The Laws of the Markets*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Callon M (2008) What does it mean to say that economics is performative? In: MacKenzie DA, Muniesa F, and Siu L (eds) *Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Economics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 311–357.
- Callon M (2010) Performativity, misfires and politics. *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3(2): 163–169. DOI: 10.1080/17530350.2010.494119.
- Canda E (2013) Human needs: Religion and spirituality. In: *Encyclopedia of Social Work*. Available at: <http://socialwork.oxfordre.com/> (accessed 10 February 2021).
- Carver T (1998) *The Postmodern Marx*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- Carver T (2002) Marx, Wittgenstein and postmodernism. In: Kitching G and Pleasants N (eds) *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics*. London: Routledge, pp. 95–110.
- Carver T (2010) ‘The German Ideology’ never took place. *History of Political Thought* 31(1): 107–125.
- Carver T (2015a) Dialectic/ dialectical materialism. In: Segal R and von Stuckrad K (eds) *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion*. Boston: Brill, pp. 412–414.
- Carver T (2015b) ‘Roughing it’: The ‘German ideology’ main manuscript. *History of Political Thought* 36(4): 700–725.
- Carver T (2017) Making Marx Marx. *Journal of Classical Sociology* 17(1): 10–27. DOI: 10.1177/1468795X17691388.
- Carver T (2018) *Marx*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Carver T (2019a) Socializing knowledge and historicizing society: Marx and Engels and the manuscripts of 1845–46. In: Kusch M, Kinzel K, Steizinger J, and Wildschut N (eds) *The Emergence of Relativism: German Thought from the Enlightenment to National Socialism*. New York: Routledge, pp. 216–232.
- Carver T (2019b) Whose hand is the last hand? The new MEGA edition of “The German Ideology”. *New Political Science* 41(1): 140–148. DOI: 10.1080/07393148.2019.1559131
- Carver T (2021) Judith Butler. In: Callinicos A, Kouvélakis E, and Pradella L (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Marxism and Post-Marxism*. New York: Routledge, pp.435–442
- Carver T (In press) Marx’s *Capital*. In: Berger S (ed.) *Bloomsbury History: Theory & Method*.
- Carver T and Blank D (2014a) *A Political History of the Editions of Marx and Engels’s ‘German Ideology’ Manuscripts*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Carver T and Blank D (2014b) *Marx and Engels's 'German Ideology' Manuscripts: Presentation and Analysis of the 'Feuerbach Chapter'*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Castagno AE and Brayboy BMJ (2008) Culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous youth: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research* 78(4): 941–993. DOI: 10.3102/0034654308323036.
- Chambers S (2014) *Bearing Society in Mind: Theories and Politics of the Social Formation*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Chambers S (2018) *There's No Such Thing as the Economy: Essays on Capitalist Value*. Santa Barbara: Punctum Books.
- Chattopadhyay P (2001) Marx on women's question. *Economic and Political Weekly* 36(26): 2455–2457.
- Chitty A (1993) The early Marx on needs. *Radical Philosophy* 64: 22–31.
- Claassen R (2011) Making capability lists: Philosophy versus democracy. *Political Studies* 59(3): 491–508. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9248.2010.00862.x.
- Cleaver H (1979) *Reading Capital Politically*. Brighton: Harvester.
- Cleaver H (2019) *Thirty-Three Lessons on Capital: Reading Marx Politically*. London: Pluto Press.
- Cochoy F, Giraudeau M and McFall L (2010) Performativity, economics and politics: An overview. *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3(2): 139–146. DOI: 10.1080/17530350.2010.494116.
- Cohen GA (1978) *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Coole DH and Frost S (eds) (2010) *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Copp D (1992) The right to an adequate standard of living: Justice, autonomy, and the basic needs. *Social Philosophy and Policy* 9(1): 231–261. DOI: 10.1017/S0265052500003666.
- Copp D (1995) *Morality, Normativity, and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Copp D (1998) Equality, justice and the basic needs. In: Brock G (ed.) *Necessary Goods: Our Responsibilities to Meet Others' Needs*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 113–134.
- Copp D (2005) International justice and the basic needs principle. In: Brock G and Brighouse H (eds) *The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 39–54.
- Coulthard GS (2014) *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Crocker D (2009) *Ethics of Global Development Agency, Capability, and Deliberative Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crocker D and Robeyns I (2009) Capability and agency. In: Morris CW (ed.) *Amartya Sen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- de Broses (2017) On the worship of fetish gods; or, a parallel of the ancient religion of Egypt with the present religion of Nigeria. In: de Broses C, Morris R and Leonard D *The Returns of Fetishism: Charles de Broses and the Afterlives of an Idea*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 44-132.
- de Campos TC (2012) Health as a basic human need: Would this be enough? *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 40(2): 251–267. DOI: 10.1111/j.1748-720X.2012.00662.x.
- Dean H (2009) Critiquing capabilities: The distractions of a beguiling concept. *Critical Social Policy* 29(2): 261–278. DOI: 10.1177/0261018308101629.
- Dean H (2020) *Understanding Human Need*. 2nd edition. Bristol: Policy Press.

- Deloria V and Wildcat DR (2001) *Power and Place: Indian Education in America*. Golden: Fulcrum.
- Deneulin S (2002) Perfectionism, paternalism and liberalism in Sen and Nussbaum's capability approach. *Review of Political Economy* 14(4): 497–518. DOI: 10.1080/0953825022000009924.
- Deneulin S (2011) Advancing human development: Values, groups, power and conflict. In: Fitzgerald EVK, Heyer J, and Thorp R (eds) *Overcoming the Persistence of Inequality and Poverty*. New York: Palgrave, pp. 127–148.
- Deneulin S and McGregor JA (2010) The capability approach and the politics of a social conception of wellbeing. *European Journal of Social Theory* 13(4): 501–519. DOI: 10.1177/1368431010382762.
- Derrida J (1991) Signature event context. In: Kamuf P (ed.) *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 80–111.
- Devlin RF and Pothier D (eds) (2006) *Critical Disability Theory: Essays in Philosophy, Politics, Policy, and Law*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Dossa S (2007) Slicing up 'development': Colonialism, political theory, ethics. *Third World Quarterly* 28(5): 887–899. DOI: 10.1080/01436590701371595.
- Doyal L (1993) Thinking about human need. *New Left Review* 201: 113–128.
- Doyal L (1998) A theory of human need. In: Brock G (ed.) *Necessary Goods: Our Responsibilities to Meet Others' Needs*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 157–172.
- Doyal L and Gough I (1991) *A Theory of Human Need*. London: Macmillan.
- Dudrick D (2005) Foucault, Butler, and the body. *European Journal of Philosophy* 13(2): 226–246. DOI: 10.1111/j.0966-8373.2005.00228.x.
- Fabre C and Miller D (2003) Justice and culture: Rawls, Sen, Nussbaum and O'Neill. *Political Studies Review* 1(1): 4–17. DOI: 10.1111/1478-9299.00002.

- Fausto-Sterling A (2000) *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books.
- Federici S (2004) *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia.
- Fehér F, Heller A and Márkus G (1983) *Dictatorship over Needs*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Fletcher G (2018) Needing and necessity. In: Timmons MC (ed.) *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics: Volume 8*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 170-192
- Fleurbaey M (2002) Development, capabilities, and freedom. *Studies in Comparative International Development* 37(2): 71–77. DOI: 10.1007/BF02686263.
- Fleurbaey M (2014) Capabilities or functionings? Anatomy of a debate. In: Comim F and Nussbaum M (eds) *Capabilities, Gender, Equality: Towards Fundamental Entitlements*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 155–174.
- Floyd J (2016) Analytics and continentals: Divided by nature but united by praxis? *European Journal of Political Theory* 15(2): 155–171. DOI: 10.1177/1474885115582075.
- Floyd J (2017a) *Is Political Philosophy Impossible? Thoughts and Behaviour in Normative Political Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Floyd J (2017b) Rawls' methodological blueprint. *European Journal of Political Theory* 16(3): 367–381. DOI: 10.1177/1474885115605260.
- Floyd R (2011) Why we need needs-based justifications of human rights. *Journal of International Political Theory* 7(1): 103–115. DOI: 10.3366/jipt.2011.0008.
- Foster JB (2000) *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*. New York: Monthly Review.
- Foucault M (1998) *The Will to Knowledge: History of Sexuality (Volume 1)* (translated by R Hurley). London: Penguin.
- Fox JG (2015) *Marx, the Body, and Human Nature*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Frankfurt H (1998a) Comments on Gillian Brock's essay "Morally important needs". *Philosophia* 26: 179–180. DOI: 10.1007/BF02380065.
- Frankfurt H (1998b) Necessity and desire. In: Brock G (ed.) *Necessary Goods: Our Responsibilities to Meet Others' Needs*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 19–32.
- Fraser I (1998) *Hegel and Marx: The Concept of Need*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Fraser I (2000) Hegel and Marx on needs: The making of a monster. In: Burns T and Fraser I (eds) *The Hegel-Marx Connection*. New York: St. Martin's Press, pp. 146–166.
- Fraser N (1989) *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Fraser N (2016) Contradictions of capital and care. *New Left Review* 100: 99–117.
- Friedman DJ (1974) Marx's perspective on the objective class structure. *Polity* 6(3): 318–344. DOI: 10.2307/3233932.
- Frost S (2016) *Biocultural Creatures: Toward a New Theory of the Human*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gakis D (2014) Wittgenstein and Marx on reification, language, and commonality. *Telos* 169: 106–126. DOI: 10.3817/1214169106.
- Gakis D (2015) Wittgenstein, Marx, and Marxism: Some historical connections. *Humanities* 4(4): 924–937. DOI: 10.3390/h4040924.
- Galston WA (2010) Realism in political theory. *European Journal of Political Theory* 9(4): 385–411. DOI: 10.1177/1474885110374001.
- Garbutt R and Saltiel D (2020) Disability. In: Payne G (ed.) *Social Divisions*. 4th edition. Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 200–220.
- Gasper D (1996) Needs and basic needs: A clarification of meanings, levels and different streams of work. In: Koehler G (ed.) *Questioning Development: Essays on the*

Theory, Policies and Practice of Development Interventions. Marburg: Metropolis, pp. 71–101.

Gaspar D (2002) Is Sen's capability approach an adequate basis for considering human development? *Review of Political Economy* 14(4): 435–461. DOI: 10.1080/0953825022000009898.

Gaspar D (2004) *The Ethics of Development: From Economism to Human Development*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Gaspar D (2007) Conceptualising human needs and wellbeing. In: Gough I and McGregor JA (eds) *Wellbeing in Developing Countries*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 47–70.

Gaspar D (2009) Needs and well-being. In: Peil J and Staveren I van (eds) *Handbook of Economics and Ethics*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 348–356.

Geras N (1983) *Marx and Human Nature*. London: New Left Books.

Gibb K (2015) The multiple policy failures of the UK bedroom tax. *International Journal of Housing Policy* 15(2): 148–166. DOI: 10.1080/14616718.2014.992681.

Giri AK (2000) Rethinking human well-being: A dialogue with Amartya Sen. *Journal of International Development* 12(7): 1003–1018. DOI: 10.1002/1099-1328(200010)12:7<1003::AID-JID698>3.0.CO;2-U.

Glassman J (2006) Primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession, accumulation by 'extra-economic' means. *Progress in Human Geography* 30(5): 608–625. DOI: 10.1177/0309132506070172.

Glassman J (2007) Neoliberal primitive accumulation. In: Heynen N, McCarthy J, Prudham S, and Robbins P (eds) *Neoliberal Environments: False Promises and Unnatural Consequences*. London: Routledge, pp. 94–97.

Goodin RE (1988) *Reasons for Welfare: The Political Theory of the Welfare State*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Gough I (2004) Human well-being and social structures: Relating the universal and the local. *Global Social Policy* 4(3): 289–311. DOI: 10.1177/1468018104047489.
- Gough I (2014) Lists and thresholds: Comparing the Doyal–Gough theory of human need with Nussbaum’s capabilities approach. In: Comim F and Nussbaum M (eds) *Capabilities, Gender, Equality: Towards Fundamental Entitlements*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 357–381.
- Gough I (2017) *Heat, Greed and Human Need: Climate Change, Capitalism and Sustainable Wellbeing*. Northampton: Edward Elgar.
- Gouldner AW (1980) *The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory*. London: Macmillan.
- Greenstein A, Burman E, Kalambouka A, and Sapin K (2016) Construction and deconstruction of ‘family’ by the ‘bedroom tax’. *British Politics* 11(4): 508–525. DOI: 10.1057/s41293-016-0033-5.
- Habermas J (1986) *The Theory of Communicative Action* (translated by MacCarthy T). Cambridge: Polity.
- Hamilton L (2003) *The Political Philosophy of Needs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hamilton L (2006a) Needs, rights and political judgement: Replies to commentators. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 25(3): 258–270. DOI: 10.1080/02580136.2006.10878217.
- Hamilton L (2006b) The context and argument of *The Political Philosophy of Needs*. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 25(3): 224–232. DOI: 10.1080/02580136.2006.10878213.
- Hamilton L (2009a) Human needs and political judgement. In: Bruin BP de and Zurn CF (eds) *New Waves in Political Philosophy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 40–62.
- Hamilton L (2009b) Needs and agency. In: Peil J and van Staveren I (eds) *Handbook of Economics and Ethics*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 340–347.

- Hamilton L (2013) Power, domination and human needs. *Thesis Eleven* 119(1): 47–62. DOI: 10.1177/0725513613511308.
- Hamilton L (2017) Representing needs: A new language for politics and economics. In: Aubrey T (ed.) *Beyond Neoliberalism, Nationalism and Socialism: Rethinking the Boundary between State and Market*. Lanham: Policy Network, pp. 59–70.
- Hamilton L (2019) *Amartya Sen*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Hardt M and Negri A (2003) *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harman C (1986) Base and superstructure. *International Socialism* 2(32): 7–54.
- Harvey D (2003) *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey D (2018) *A Companion to Marx's Capital*. Complete edition. London: Verso.
- Heller A (1978) *The Theory of Need in Marx*. London: Allison & Busby.
- Heller A (1993) A theory of needs revisited. *Thesis Eleven* 35(1): 18–35. DOI: 10.1177/072551369303500103.
- Hewitt M (2000) *Welfare and Human Nature: The Human Subject in Twentieth-Century Social Politics*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Holloway J (2015) The tradition of scientific Marxism. In: *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 118–139.
- Holm P (2008) Which way is up on Callon? In: MacKenzie DA, Muniesa F, and Siu L (eds) *Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Economics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 225–243.
- Honig B (1993) *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Hughes J (2000) Capitalism, socialism and the satisfaction of needs. In: *Ecology and Historical Materialism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 161–200.

- Humphrey M, Owen D, Hoover J, Woodford C, Finlayson A, Stears M, and Honig B (2014) Humanism from an agonistic perspective: Themes from the work of Bonnie Honig. *Contemporary Political Theory* 13(2): 168–217. DOI: 10.1057/cpt.2013.40.
- Hutchinson P and Read R (2008) Toward a perspicuous presentation of “perspicuous presentation”. *Philosophical Investigations* 31(2): 141–160. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9205.2007.00339.x.
- Ince OU (2018a) Between equal rights: Primitive accumulation and capital’s violence. *Political Theory* 46(6): 885–914. DOI: 10.1177/0090591717748420.
- Ince OU (2018b) Letters from Sydney. In: *Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 113-157.
- Ingold T and Pálsson G (eds) (2013) *Biosocial Becomings: Integrating Social and Biological Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jaggar AM (2006) Reasoning about well-being: Nussbaum’s methods of justifying the capabilities. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 14(3): 301–322. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9760.2006.00253.x.
- Johnson M (2014) Towards a theory of cultural evaluation. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 17(2): 145–167. DOI: 10.1080/13698230.2012.680753.
- Johnson P (2019) Learning from the Budapest School women. *Thesis Eleven* 151(1): 69–81. DOI: 10.1177/0725513619839245.
- Johnson S (2019) The early life of Marx’s “mode of production”. *Modern Intellectual History* 18(2): 349-378. DOI: 10.1017/S1479244319000374.
- Keller EF (2010) *The Mirage of a Space between Nature and Nurture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kitching G (2002a) Introduction. In: Kitching G and Pleasants N (eds) *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–19.

- Kitching G (2002b) Marxism and reflexivity. In: Kitching G and Pleasants N (eds) *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics*. London: Routledge, pp. 231–253.
- Kitching G and Pleasants N (2002) *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Kitching G (1988) *Karl Marx and the Philosophy of Praxis*. London: Routledge.
- Lambe J (2003) Indigenous education, mainstream education, and native studies: Some considerations when incorporating Indigenous pedagogy into native studies. *American Indian Quarterly* 27(1/2): 308–324. DOI: 10.1353/aiq.2004.0046.
- Lebowitz MA (1979) Heller on Marx's concept of needs. *Science and Society* 43(3): 349–356.
- Lebowitz MA (2003) *Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class*. 2nd edition. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lebowitz MA (2010) *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*. New York: Monthly Review.
- Lebowitz MA (2015) *The Socialist Imperative: From Gotha to Now*. New York: Monthly Review.
- Leiss W (1979) Marx and Macpherson: needs, utilities, and self-development. In: Macpherson CB and Kontos A (eds) *Powers, Possessions, and Freedom: Essays in Honour of C. B. Macpherson*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 119–138.
- Leopold D (2007) *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MacKenzie D (2004) The big, bad wolf and the rational market: Portfolio insurance, the 1987 crash and the performativity of economics. *Economy and Society* 33(3): 303–334. DOI: 10.1080/0308514042000225680.
- MacKenzie DA, Muniesa F and Siu L (eds) (2008) *Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Economics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Marcuse H (2002) *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Routledge classics edition. London: Routledge.
- Marx K (1975) Marx's *Introduction* (1857) to the *Grundrisse*. In: Carver T (ed) *Karl Marx: Text on Method*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 1-158.
- Marx K (1990) *Capital: Volume 1* (translated by Fowkes B). London: Penguin.
- Marx K (2012) 'Notes' on Adolph Wagner. In: Carver T (ed) *Marx: Later Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 227-257
- Marx K and Engels F (various) *Marx and Engels's Collected Works*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Marx K, Engels F, and Weydemeyer J (2014) Rough Notes, formerly known as "I. Feuerbach," drawn from "the German ideology" manuscripts. In: Carver T and Blank D, *Marx and Engels's 'German Ideology' Manuscripts: Presentation and Analysis of the 'Feuerbach Chapter'*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 34-381.
- Maxwell L, Beltrán C, Threadcraft S, White SK, Leonard M, and Honig B (2019) The "agonistic turn": *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* in new contexts. *Contemporary Political Theory* 18 (4), 640-672. DOI: 10.1057/s41296-019-00346-8.
- McDermott D (2008) Analytical political philosophy. In: Leopold D and Stears M (eds) *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 11–28.
- McInnes N (1977) The politics of need - or, who needs politics? In: Fitzgerald R (ed.) *Human Needs and Politics*. Rushcutters Bay: Pergamon, pp. 229–243.
- McKinley EA and Smith LT (eds) (2019) *Handbook of Indigenous Education*. New York: Springer.
- McLellan D (1971) *The Thought of Karl Marx: An Introduction*. London: Macmillan.
- McLellan D (2000) *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- McLeod SK (2011) Knowledge of need. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 19(2): 211–230. DOI: 10.1080/09672559.2011.561616.
- McLeod SK (2015) Two philosophies of need. *Polish Journal of Philosophy* 9(1): 33–50. DOI: 10.5840/pjphil2015912.
- Meloni M (2016) *Political Biology: Science and Social Values in Human Heredity from Eugenics to Epigenetics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Meloni M, Williams SJ and Martin PA (eds) (2016) *Biosocial Matters: Rethinking Sociology-Biology Relations in the Twenty-First Century*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
- Menon N (2002) Universalism without foundations? *Economy and Society* 31(1): 152–169. DOI: 10.1080/03085140120109295.
- Mika C and Stewart G (2018) What is philosophy for indigenous people, in relation to education? *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 50(8): 744–746. DOI: 10.1080/00131857.2017.1311489.
- Miller D (1976) *Social Justice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Miller D (2001) *Principles of Social Justice*. 2nd edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Miller D (2007) *National Responsibility and Global Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miller D (2012) Grounding human rights. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 15(4): 407–427. DOI: 10.1080/13698230.2012.699396.
- Miller SC (2005) Need, care and obligation. In: Reader S (ed.) *The Philosophy of Need*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 137–160.
- Miller SC (2012) *The Ethics of Need: Agency, Dignity, and Obligation*. New York: Routledge.
- Myers JC (2014) Office politics: Reading the business management manual as political theory. *Contemporary Political Theory* 13(3): 221–241. DOI: 10.1057/cpt.2013.17.

- Nelson E (2008) From primary goods to capabilities: Distributive justice and the problem of neutrality. *Political Theory* 36(1): 93–122.
- Nelson L (1999) Bodies (and spaces) do matter: The limits of performativity. *Gender, Place & Culture* 6(4): 331–353. DOI: 10.1080/09663699924926.
- Nichols R (2015) Disaggregating primitive accumulation. *Radical Philosophy* 194: 18–28.
- Noonan J (2011) The contradictions of Nussbaum’s liberalism. *International Critical Thought* 1(4): 427–436. DOI: 10.1080/21598282.2011.640163.
- Nowicki M (2018) A Britain that everyone is proud to call home? The bedroom tax, political rhetoric and home unmaking in U.K. housing policy. *Social & Cultural Geography* 19(5): 647–667. DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2017.1296179.
- Nussbaum M (1988) Nature, function, and capability: Aristotle on political distribution. In: Annas J and Grimm RH (eds) *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy: Supplementary Volume*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 145-184.
- Nussbaum M (1992) Human functioning and social justice: In defense of Aristotelian essentialism. *Political Theory* 20(2): 202–246.
- Nussbaum M (1993) Non-Relative virtues: An Aristotelian approach. In: Nussbaum M and Sen A (eds) *The Quality of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 242–269.
- Nussbaum M (2000) *Women and Human Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum M (2001) Symposium on Amartya Sen’s philosophy: 5 Adaptive preferences and women’s options. *Economics and Philosophy* 17(1): 67-88. DOI: 10.1017/S0266267101000153.
- Nussbaum M (2003) Capabilities as fundamental entitlements: Sen and social justice. *Feminist Economics* 9(2–3): 33–59. DOI: 10.1080/1354570022000077926.
- Nussbaum M (2004) On hearing women’s voices: A reply to Susan Okin. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 32(2): 193–205. DOI: 10.1111/j.1088-4963.2004.00011.x.

- Nussbaum M (2005) Women's bodies: Violence, security, capabilities. *Journal of Human Development* 6(2): 167–183. DOI: 10.1080/14649880500120509.
- Nussbaum M (2006a) *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nussbaum M (2006b) Reply: In defence of global political liberalism. *Development and Change* 37(6): 1313–1328. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7660.2006.00527.x.
- Nussbaum M (2011a) *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nussbaum M (2011b) Perfectionist liberalism and political liberalism. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39(1): 3–45. DOI: 10.1111/j.1088-4963.2011.01200.x.
- Nussbaum M (2014) Introduction: Capabilities, challenges, and the omnipresence of political liberalism. In: Comim F and Nussbaum M (eds) *Capabilities, Gender, Equality: Towards Fundamental Entitlements*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–16.
- Okin SM (2003) Poverty, well-being, and gender: What counts, who's heard? *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 31(3): 280–316. DOI: 10.1111/j.1088-4963.2003.00280.x.
- O'Neill J (2005) Need, humiliation and independence. In: Reader S (ed.) *The Philosophy of Need*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 73–98.
- O'Neill J (2011) The overshadowing of needs. In: Rauschmayer F, Omann I, and Frühmann J (eds) *Sustainable Development: Capabilities, Needs, and Well-Being*. London: Routledge, pp. 25–42.
- Oxhandler HK and Pargament KI (2014) Social work practitioners' integration of clients' religion and spirituality in practice: A literature review. *Social Work* 59(3): 271–279. DOI: 10.1093/sw/swu018.
- Patel R (2008) *Stuffed and Starved: Markets, Power and the Hidden Battle for the World Food System*. London: Portobello Books.

- Philip B (2001) Marxism, neoclassical economics and the length of the working day. *Review of Political Economy* 13(1): 27–39. DOI: 10.1080/09538250150210568.
- Pitkin HF (1981) Justice: On relating private and public. *Political Theory* 9(3): 327–352. DOI: 10.1177/009059178100900304.
- Plant R (2002) Needs, agency and welfare rights. In: Wellman C (ed.) *Rights and Duties*. New York: Routledge, pp. 157–176.
- Pleasants N (2002) Towards a critical use of Marx and Wittgenstein. In: Kitching G and Pleasants N (eds) *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics*. London: Routledge, pp. 160–181.
- Pratt YP, Louie DW, Hanson AJ, and Ottmann J (2018) Indigenous education and decolonization. In: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. Available at: <https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-240#acrefore-9780190264093-e-240-div1-8> (accessed 23 August 2021).
- Qizilbash M (2012) Utilitarianism, ‘adaptation’ and paternalism. In: Clark D (ed.) *Adaptation, Poverty and Development: The Dynamics of Subjective Well-Being*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 35–60.
- Qizilbash M (2016) Capability, objectivity and “false consciousness”: On Sen, Marx and J.S. Mill. *International Journal of Social Economics* 43(12): 1207–1218. DOI: 10.1108/IJSE-04-2016-0127.
- Raekstad P (2018) Human development and alienation in the thought of Karl Marx. *European Journal of Political Theory* 17(3): 300–323. DOI: 10.1177/1474885115613735.
- Ramsay M (1992) *Human Needs and the Market*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- Read R (2002) Marx and Wittgenstein on vampires and parasites. In: Kitching G and Pleasants N (eds) *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics*. London: Routledge, pp. 254–281.

- Reader S (2005a) Aristotle on necessities and needs. In: Reader S (ed.) *The Philosophy of Need*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 113–136.
- Reader S (2005b) Introduction. In: Reader S (ed.) *The Philosophy of Need*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–24.
- Reader S (2006) Does a basic needs approach need capabilities? *Journal of Political Philosophy* 14(3): 337–350. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9760.2006.00259.x.
- Reader S (2007) *Needs and Moral Necessity*. London: Routledge.
- Reader S (2011) Ethical Necessities. *Philosophy* 86(4): 589–607. DOI: 10.1017/S0031819111000404.
- Reader S and Brock G (2004) Needs, moral demands and moral theory. *Utilitas* 16(3): 251–266. DOI: 10.1017/S0953820804001165.
- Richardson HS (2003) *Democratic Autonomy: Public Reasoning about the Ends of Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rist G (1980) Basic questions about basic human needs. In: Lederer K (ed.) *Human Needs: A Contribution to the Current Debate*. Cambridge, MA: Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain, pp. 233–253.
- Robb J and Harris OJT (eds) (2013) *The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Roberts WC (2009) Abstraction and productivity: Structures of intentionality and action in Marx's *Capital*. In: Chitty A and McIvor M (eds) *Karl Marx and Contemporary Philosophy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 188–201.
- Roberts WC (2018) *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Roberts WC (2019) Reading *Capital* as political theory. In: Musto M (ed.) *Marx's Capital after 150 Years: Critique and Alternative to Capitalism*. Oxford: Routledge, pp. 219–231.

- Roberts WC (2020) What was primitive accumulation? Reconstructing the origin of a critical concept. *European Journal of Political Theory* 19(4): 532–552. DOI: 10.1177/1474885117735961.
- Robeyns I (2016) Capabilitarianism. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 17(3): 397–414. DOI: 10.1080/19452829.2016.1145631.
- Robeyns I (2017) *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.
- Rojahn J (2002) The emergence of a theory: The importance of Marx’s notebooks exemplified by those from 1844. *Rethinking Marxism* 14(4): 29–46. DOI: 10.1080/008935690212331340931.
- Rose N (2013) The human sciences in a biological age. *Theory, Culture & Society* 30(1): 3–34. DOI: 10.1177/0263276412456569.
- Rosenthal I (2016) Ontology and political theory: A critical encounter between Rawls and Foucault. *European Journal of Political Theory* 18(2): 238–258. DOI: 10.1177/1474885116659633.
- Rossi-Landi F (2002) Towards a Marxian use of Wittgenstein. In: Kitching G and Pleasants N (eds) *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics*. London: Routledge, pp. 185–212.
- Rubinstein D (1981) *Marx and Wittgenstein: Social Praxis and Social Explanation*. London: Routledge.
- Rubinstein D (2002) Marx and Wittgenstein: culture and practical reason. In: Kitching G and Pleasants N (eds) *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics*. London: Routledge, pp. 63–77.
- Saito K (2017) *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism: Capitalism, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy*. New York: Monthly Review.
- Saito K (2020) Marx’s theory of metabolism in the age of global ecological crisis. *Historical Materialism* 28(2): 3–24. DOI: 10.1163/1569206X-20202802.

- Saito K (2021) *Reexamining Engels's Legacy in the 21st Century*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Salih S (2007) On Judith Butler and performativity. In: Lovaas K and Jenkins MM (eds) *Sexualities & Communication in Everyday Life: A Reader*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, pp. 55–68.
- Sayers S (1998) *Marxism and Human Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Sayers S (2011) *Marx and Alienation: Essays on Hegelian Themes*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sayers S (2019) Marx and teleology. *Science & Society* 83(1): 37–63. DOI: 10.1521/asis.2019.83.1.37.
- Scanlon TM (1975) Preference and urgency. *The Journal of Philosophy* 72(19): 655–669. DOI: 10.2307/2024630.
- Schaap A (2010) The politics of need. In: Celermajer D, Karalis V, and Schaap A (eds) *Power, Judgment and Political Evil: In Conversation with Hannah Arendt*. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 157–170.
- Schatzki T (2002) Marx and Wittgenstein as natural historians. In: Kitching G and Pleasants N (eds) *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics*. London: Routledge, pp. 49–62.
- Schuppert F (2013) Distinguishing basic needs and fundamental interests. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 16(1): 24–44. DOI: 10.1080/13698230.2011.583532.
- Sen A (1980) Equality of what? In: McMurrin SM (ed) *Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Volume 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.195-220.
- Sen A (1987a) *Commodities and Capabilities*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sen A (1987b) *The Standard of Living*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sen A (1993a) Capability and well-being. In: Nussbaum M and Sen A (eds) *The Quality of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp: 30-53.

- Sen A (1993b) Positional objectivity. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 22(2): 126–145.
- Sen A (1995) *Inequality Reexamined*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sen A (1999a) Democracy as a universal value. *Journal of Democracy* 10(3): 3–17. DOI: 10.1353/jod.1999.0055.
- Sen A (1999b) *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sen A (2003) Development as capability expansion. In: Fukuda-Parr S and Shiva Kumar AK (eds) *Readings in Human Development*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 3–16.
- Sen A (2004a) Capabilities, lists, and public reason: Continuing the conversation. *Feminist Economics* 10(3): 77–80. DOI: 10.1080/1354570042000315163.
- Sen A (2004b) Elements of a theory of human rights. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 32(4): 315–356. DOI: 10.1111/j.1088-4963.2004.00017.x.
- Sen A (2005) Human rights and capabilities. *Journal of Human Development* 6(2): 151–166. DOI: 10.1080/14649880500120491.
- Sen A (2009) Capability: Reach and limits. In: Chiappero Martinetti E (ed.) *Debating Global Society: Reach and Limits of the Capability Approach*. Milan: Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, pp. 15–28.
- Sen A (2010) *The Idea of Justice*. London: Penguin.
- Sen A and Drèze J (1995) *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Shapiro MJ (1988) *The Politics of Representation: Writing Practices in Biography, Photography, and Policy Analysis*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Sheila F and Philip G (2010) *Religion, Belief and Social Work: Making a Difference*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Shiell T (1987) On Marx’s holism. *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 4(2): 235–246.

- Shilliam R (ed.) (2011) *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity*. London: Routledge.
- Shilling C (2005) The rise of the body and the development of sociology. *Sociology* 39(4): 761–767. DOI: 10.1177/0038038505056034.
- Siebel M and Schramme T (2020) Need-based justice from the perspective of philosophy. In: Traub S and Kittel B (eds) *Need-Based Distributive Justice*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 21–58.
- Soper K (1981) *On Human Needs: Open and Closed Theories in a Marxist Perspective*. Brighton: Harvester Press.
- Soper K (1993a) A theory of human need. *New Left Review* 197: 113–128.
- Soper K (1993b) The thick and thin of human needing. In: Drover G and Kerans P (eds) *New Approaches to Welfare Theory*. Aldershot: Edward Elgar, pp. 69–81.
- Soper K (2007) Conceptualizing needs in the context of consumer politics. *Journal of Consumer Policy* 29(4): 355–372. DOI: 10.1007/s10603-006-9017-y.
- Springborg P (1981) *The Problem of Human Needs and the Critique of Civilisation*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Stedman Jones G (2016) *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*. London: Allen Lane.
- Stewart F (1996) Basic needs, capabilities, and human development. In: Offer A (ed) *In Pursuit of the Quality of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 46–65.
- Stewart F (2001) Women and human development: The capabilities approach, by Martha Nussbaum. *Journal of International Development* 13(8): 1191–1192. DOI: 10.1002/jid.773.
- Stewart F and Deneulin S (2002) Amartya Sen’s contribution to development thinking. *Studies in Comparative International Development* 37(2): 61–70. DOI: 10.1007/BF02686262.

- Stillman PG (1983) Scarcity, sufficiency, and abundance: Hegel and Marx on material needs and satisfactions. *International Political Science Review* 4(3): 295–310. DOI: 10.1177/019251218300400304.
- Terlazzo R (2019) How politically liberal should the capabilities approach want to be? *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 18(3): 282–304. DOI: 10.1177/1470594X19825495.
- Thomson G (1987) *Needs*. London: Routledge.
- Thomson G (2005) Fundamental Needs. In: Reader S (ed.) *The Philosophy of Need*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 175–186.
- Thomson G (2012) Needs and justice. In: Chadwick R (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*. 2nd edition. Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp. 208–215.
- Townsend P (1962) The meaning of poverty. *The British Journal of Sociology* 13(3): 210–227.
- Townsend P (2013) *The International Analysis of Poverty*. London: Routledge.
- United Nations (1948) *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> (accessed 18 August 2021).
- United Nations (2007) *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> (accessed 18 August 2021).
- Uschanov TP (2002) Ernest Gellner’s criticisms of Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy. In: Kitching G and Pleasants N (eds) *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics*. London: Routledge, pp. 23–46.
- Vallentyne P (2005) Debate: Capabilities versus opportunities for well-being. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 13(3): 359–371. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9760.2005.00227.x.

- Vinten R (2015) Eagleton's Wittgenstein. *Critique* 43(2): 261–276. DOI: 10.1080/03017605.2015.1046723.
- Wakefield EG (1968) *The Collected Works of Edward Gibbon Wakefield*. Glasgow: Collins.
- Wells JCK (2012) Obesity as malnutrition: The role of capitalism in the obesity global epidemic. *American Journal of Human Biology* 24(3): 261–276. DOI: 10.1002/ajhb.22253.
- When F (2006) *Marx's Das Kapital: A Biography*. London: Atlantic Books.
- White SK (2000) *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- White SK (2021) Agonism, democracy, and the moral equality of voice. *Political Theory*. DOI: 10.1177/0090591721993862.
- Wiggins D (1998) *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*. 3rd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wiggins D (2005) An idea we cannot do without. In: Reader S (ed.) *The Philosophy of Need*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 25–50.
- Williams R (2000) *Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Winter Y (2014) Debating violence on the desert island: Engels, Dühring and Robinson Crusoe. *Contemporary Political Theory* 13(4): 318–338. DOI: 10.1057/cpt.2013.28.
- Wittgenstein L (1968) *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Wolff J (2013) *The Human Right to Health*. London: W.W. Norton.
- Wolff J (2015) The content of the human right to health. In: Cruft R, Liao SM, and Renzo M (eds) *Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 491–501.
- Wolff J (2019) Poverty. *Philosophy Compass* 14(12). DOI: 10.1111/phc3.12635.

Wolff J (2020) Beyond poverty. In: Beck V, Hahn H, and Lepenies R (eds) *Dimensions of Poverty: Measurement, Epistemic Injustices, Activism*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 23–39.

Young IM (1994) Gender as seriality: Thinking about women as a social collective. *Signs* 19(3): 713–738.