

# NON-BASIC NEEDS

Making Space for Incommensurability  
in the Structure of Well-Being

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## Declaration

I, Benjamin Patrick Fardell, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## Abstract

The concept of need is commonly overlooked by philosophers and social scientists. Often considered exclusively instrumental and/or demarcating minimal attainments, needs are commonly allowed only a minor role in accounts of well-being and related moral and political theories. While this may be true of some conceptions of needs, this thesis defends the critical importance of a different kind of need. These ‘personal needs’ fulfil all necessary conditions for genuine needs, but instead mark out ultimate ends that are far from basic. Moreover, rather than representing preconditions for the lives of human beings in general, personal needs are specific to individuals. Yet also unlike subjective preferences and aims, personal needs are the requirements of things a person is objectively committed to and cannot give up.

Personal needs directly relate to a person’s private evaluation of their own life. Yet they also have wide relevance to other contexts of evaluation within and without philosophy. They play a structural role in a new framework for conceptualising well-being and its role in ethics and policy. In particular, personal needs introduce incommensurability into the fundamental structure of persons’ interests. Located in the same context of individual choice as utility theory, they represent a direct, fundamental challenge to formally monistic teleological conceptions of well-being prevailing in much of social science, policy, and philosophy. Among various potential connections, this framework promises to (a) make sense of some people’s claims that they cannot be compensated for certain losses, (b) help motivate the incommensurability claimed to exist between dimensions in multidimensional well-being measurement (including those drawing on the capabilities approach), and (c) inform approaches to interpersonal distribution that oppose aggregation. This thesis also touches on issues concerning the concept of well-being, the objectivity or subjectivity of well-being, axiology, and coherentist practical reason.

## Impact statement

Need—of a non-instrumental sort—is a concept that has long and unfairly been neglected in philosophy, political theory, economics, and beyond, and this study aspires to rekindle interest in it. Its prime objective is to make fully intelligible and thereby vindicate the notion that ultimate values are plural and non-substitutable. A particular focus is to draw connections between philosophy and the social sciences, in particular with development and basic economic theory. It promises to help advance debates in the philosophy of well-being, including in the way philosophical and social scientific concepts of well-being and need relate to each other—both in theory and in practice. It offers fresh resources to positions in debates concerning distributive justice that resist the aggregation of benefits and harms to different persons. In rigorously defending well-being pluralism it offers certain deeper theoretical foundations for multidimensional approaches to conceptualising and measuring well-being, and to the capabilities approach. Since the existence of non-instrumental needs is anathema to the foundations of mainstream economic theory it has potential to contribute to the movement to rethink those notions. The proposals have extremely wide relevance, but it is very difficult to anticipate the ways and extent to which theoretical notions, if successful, achieve influence. In the first place, findings in the study will be partitioned and published in academic journals in the discipline of philosophy. Avenues for further cross-disciplinary engagement in both academic and non-academic fora will later be explored, but these will be relatively far down the track from the completion of this study.



*To my parents*

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The criticism of teleological theories cannot fruitfully proceed piecemeal. We must attempt another kind of view which has the same virtues of clarity and system but which yields a more discriminating interpretation of our moral sensibilities.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

### 1. Motivations and objectives

Needs play a much larger role in at least many people's well-being than is commonly allowed in philosophy and the social sciences. This has ramifications in theory and practice for ethics, political philosophy, well-being evaluation, and policy. Or so this project argues. It presents a new framework for thinking about well-being, and about how well-being enters into ethical and political questions. As such, it does not primarily aim to establish principles or practical conclusions. Nevertheless, it also has a variety of more specific motivations and ancillary goals that it is worth making explicit at the outset.

A direct and central aim is to defend a plausible and useful concept of need. Needs are relatively neglected in philosophy and they are also out of favour in many other disciplines. Unlike the minimal attainments commonly associated with the term 'need', the 'personal needs' defended here are very much non-basic, connecting with the commitments central to people's lives.

A subsidiary, but important, motivation in this connection is to indicate an alternative to both dominant forms of subjectivist and objectivist accounts of well-being. The account presented here captures advantages, and excludes disadvantages, of each. First, it holds that well-being in respect of personal needs is relative or particular to individual subjects, by virtue of their having different personal needs. Yet this relativity does not depend on different people preferring or enjoying different things; personal needs are not subjective in this sense. What a person needs is a matter of objective fact, independent of what they actually desire, or believe to be good for themselves. Nevertheless, this objectivity does not entail or rely on there being universal facts about well-being; no facts about what is good for all people or for human beings as such need be assumed.

Investigating the nature of incommensurability is another central aim. Besides being an important topic in its own right, as a feature of special goods that resist trading off an adequate account of incommensurability supports a strong form of well-being pluralism. This is pluralism

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<sup>1</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 514.

in the sense that says multiple mutually irreducible kinds of value exist. This stands opposed to formally monistic ‘teleological’ theories that would treat such goods as ultimately fungible. The project argues that the existence of a certain form of incommensurability is explained by structures of necessity in at least some people’s well-being. The approach in this account seeks to make more contact with other debates in philosophy than is typical of accounts of incommensurability. In particular, the proposed account of incommensurable, non-basic needs promises to enlighten and reinforce non-aggregative positions in debates surrounding interpersonal aggregation. These positions argue for certain gains and losses that cannot be traded off across persons, but much less often interrogate *intrapersonal* commensurability and aggregation.<sup>2</sup>

This project also contributes to bringing the philosophical theory of well-being and related topics closer to disciplines beyond academic philosophy and to policy. As it stands, philosophical discussions of interpersonal aggregation in which intrapersonal commensurability is standardly assumed—and value theory in general—have in recent years increasingly approached mainstream welfare-economic theory. However, there is a shortage of philosophical work questioning commensurability at the fundamental level connecting with fields in the social sciences where the dominance of mainstream economic rationality is often lamented and opposed, and well-being pluralism is often taken as a given (*e.g.*, in environmental economics, development, and multidimensional well-being measurement). Incidentally, these fields also often find more direct application than mainstream welfare economics.

## 2. Methodology

This project’s entry point is a defence of a sort of realism about incommensurability in the structure of at least some people’s well-being. The basis for this realist case is the testimony of individuals, including direct statements about how their well-being seems to them to be structured, as well as more oblique inferences we can draw. Whereas philosophical arguments for the existence of incommensurability are sometimes motivated by appeals to works of literature, especially depictions of tragic choices,<sup>3</sup> the evidence here is taken largely from policy and social-scientific contexts. Inevitably, this author’s own reflection on the structure of his personal values influences the interpretation of these results. It is incontrovertible, nevertheless, that incommensurability forms part of some people’s ethical experience. On this basis, I argue that it is necessary to have an account of well-being that can accommodate it. I propose a systematic account of its nature and ethical consequences.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. David Sobel, “Full Information Accounts of Well-Being,” in *From Valuing to Value: A Defense of Subjectivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 44, 45n.

<sup>3</sup> *E.g.*, Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Henry S. Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 111-8.

The argumentative strategy could be characterised as part transcendental, part inference to the best explanation. It bears the following hallmarks of the former.<sup>4</sup> First, it has an anti-sceptical objective, namely to rebut a form of scepticism about incommensurability (commonly associated with teleological theory) that denies the intelligibility of its instantiation. Second, it starts from the standpoint of personal experience as described above. Third, it relies on phenomenological data I expect the sceptic also to accept. Where it diverges is that it does not claim to supply necessary preconditions for the observed phenomena.<sup>5</sup> The phenomena are taken only to be evidence in support of an explanatory hypothesis. Indeed, this argument's ultimate success or failure depends on the framework's ability to explain the phenomena more plausibly than possible alternatives, in particular, teleological accounts—the latter also treated as systems reliant for their justification on their explanatory merits. Both types of account are answerable to the phenomenology.<sup>6</sup>

Since the viability of this proposal depends on adopting a systematic approach and its explanatory reach, it is necessary to discuss a broad swathe of topics. A disadvantage is that this precludes, in this study, exhaustive discussion of these at every stage. The argument depends, therefore, most crucially on the overall coherence of the system.

Another defining feature of this project's approach is that it locates the needs it proposes in what could be called the micro structure of well-being. Whereas incommensurable well-being dimensions (including capabilities and needs) are typically pitched at a macro context relatively abstracted from individual choice, the core of this account lies in the same context as utility theory.<sup>7</sup> Personal needs concern *fine-grained, circumstantial* objectives of *particular* individuals, rather than broad categories of human well-being. Thus this proposal is at once oriented towards both practice and confronting the foundations of teleological theory on its own territory.

It is more modest than this may sound. Similar again to utility theory,<sup>8</sup> it advances only a *structural* thesis that is neutral as to contents of people's well-being, compatible with arbitrarily great variation across persons in such contents. In itself, it also assumes no moral content in persons' values; adding this is an optional theoretical choice. The account does not even claim that incommensurability exists in the structure of all persons' well-being; the well-being of many other persons may be teleologically structured. Thus as far as it is concerned, not only may different people have different personal needs; some people's well-being might not even incorpor-

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Stern, "Transcendental Arguments," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2016 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/transcendental-arguments/>.

<sup>5</sup> Certain arguments in Chapters 3 and 5 notwithstanding.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. David Wiggins, "Incommensurability: Four Proposals", in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 65-6.

<sup>7</sup> On that interpretation on which utility names substantive well-being; not that interpretation on which the theory is a formalistic representation of choice. See Ch. 5 §1.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. John Broome, *Weighing Goods: Equality, Uncertainty, and Time* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 19-20.

ate personal needs, and consequently lack pluralist structure. It has no need to dispute the appearances of those whose ethical experience contains no suggestion of this structure.

As a general rule it seeks to minimise theoretical commitments that are more than strictly necessary for establishing the possibility of the formal structure it proposes. Indeed, the intention is less to advance a set of conclusions on particular topics than a broad framework that is compatible with accounts that are rivals in matters of substance and any other issues irrelevant to this aim. A fuller account of well-being could fill out areas on which this framework is uncommitted in different ways. Furthermore, although I argue that adapting this framework promises to be fruitful, and suggest some applications, there is no claim that it solves problems in any areas at one stroke.

### **3. Outline**

Chapter 1 examines evidence for incommensurability found in resistance to controversial applications of cost-benefit analysis and other closely related policy evaluation tools. These procedures often recommend policies and projects that some of those they affect claim fail to recognise the significance of certain aspects of their own lives and the things they value, and in going ahead would impose on them irrevocable losses. I consider different interpretations of these attitudes, including various accounts of incommensurability. The alternative I defend is the relatively minimal claim that the incommensurability of the relevant goods consists in their non-equivalence and substitutability by other things. This suggests, I argue, a formal connection with necessity; that is, that the goods are in some sense necessary for the people concerned.

Chapter 2 finds that in a second area of social science and policy—multidimensional well-being evaluation—non-substitutability across dimensions is indeed the form of incommensurability often incorporated into relevant accounts. The existence of this form of incommensurability is further supported by survey evidence of people considering various valuable aspects of their lives to be non-substitutable. It is also interesting what the theorists who collect this data understand it to show. Another of the chapter's claims is that needs are already formally implicated in many multidimensional accounts, whether or not they are actually described as accounts of needs. It sets up one of the chief problems with such accounts of needs and otherwise incommensurable dimensions, namely that of how to evaluate a person's overall well-being if multiple dimensions do not reduce to a single dimension.

Chapter 3 develops the concept of personal needs and defends their status as genuine needs, as against the prevailing philosophical consensus that needs are decidedly not personal. It reconstructs a number of conditions often held to be essential to needs, and argues that only some of these are necessary. The others are optional and may be differently specified. Drawing on recent work on the concept of well-being, it argues that the semantic contents of needs-statements vary

across evaluative contexts. Whereas personal needs are appropriate to the context of a person's private evaluation of their own well-being and not for interpersonal comparisons for the purposes of morality and politics, so too may other need concepts be appropriate only to public and not private contexts. Concepts suited to different evaluative contexts are thus not typically in direct competition. They are not, however, unconnected. In particular, I suggest that personal needs might sometimes *inform* the construction of more public need concepts.

Chapter 4 defends personal needs from outstanding objections that they lack the objectivity and inescapability essential to genuine needs. After an extended discussion of different meanings associated with 'subjective' and 'objective', it concludes that the only sense in which personal needs must be 'objective' is simply that there is a matter of fact about which personal needs an individual has. This form of objectivity is entirely compatible with individual persons' needs also being 'subjective' just in the sense of particular or relative to themselves. They may or may not also be subjective in the different sense of being ultimately dependent on persons' attitudes (beliefs and desires). The chapter also argues that needs may be no less inescapable for being personal. A person's personal needs are entailed by central aspects of their lives to which they are in a strong sense committed.

Chapter 5 lays out the structural role personal needs play via a discussion that questions two axioms fundamental to teleological theory: Continuity and Independence. This discussion generates two formal conditions that personal needs satisfy; in other words, these define the two aspects of the form of incommensurability personal needs possess. The first concerns the relation between personal needs and non-needs. Whereas non-needs correspond to trivial goods, needs are non-trivial in the sense that they are "strongly superior" to non-needs. This means that there is no amount of trivial goods that can be more important than living up to one's commitments and the personal needs those entail. Plausible candidates for goods that are trivial, I argue, are purely experiential goods that have no connection to needs. Yet in fact, nonetheless, many experiences that might be expected to fall into this category *are* related to needs. More important than the relation between personal needs and non-needs are the relations between different personal needs. This relation, I argue, is negatively defined as the absence of any systematically determined ratios of exchange between them. Somewhat more positively, the importance of choosing to meet one need over another when they conflict is holistically determined, depending on which other considerations are at stake in the particular circumstances at hand. In some way the relative circumstantial importance of a need is determined non-algorithmically, depending rather on interactive effects between it and other needs in that context.

Chapter 6 turns to how decisions between alternatives involving personal needs are to be made. It develops a coherentist account of intrapersonal practical reason with personal needs in which the method of specification is especially prominent. It shows how when the requirements

a person's commitments entail are characterised in relatively general terms, conflicting personal needs can often be reconciled by specifying those general requirements differently. The chapter subsequently considers how intrapersonal practical coherence may bear on the interpersonal domains of democratic deliberation and in philosophical debates about distribution. These proposed applications are relatively speculative, however, and do not purport to definitively resolve the issues there. Their purpose is to further illustrate the potential fruitfulness of conceiving of well-being as structured by non-basic needs.



Social science must always begin with an attempt to understand the ‘target group’s’ own interpretation of their condition.<sup>9</sup>

Suppose, for example, that the suffering which a worker’s partner will experience if he or she dies is equivalent to  $-\ell x$ .<sup>10</sup>

## Chapter 1

### Incommensurability as phenomenon (a)

#### – Resistance to cost-benefit analysis

This chapter introduces evidence for incommensurability: actual cases of resistance by members of the public to the use of cost-benefit analysis (CBA) and similar methods in the evaluation of certain policies and projects. It considers various interpretations of this opposition, and identifies the specific aspect of the phenomenon that is of interest here.

The bulk of the chapter consists of a survey and critical discussion of competing accounts of how incommensurability might lie behind this opposition. Some authors have strong views about what incommensurability ‘really’ means or ought to mean.<sup>11</sup> However, my argument is not for a unique definition; formally, commensurability may fail in many different ways. Incommensurability is best conceived as a genus comprising several different species. The form of incommensurability I defend is the one that best describes the particular evidence in question. The evidence supports the existence of a form of incommensurability that is especially interesting, one that appears to occupy a central place in the structure of at least many people’s values. The chief aim is not to comprehensively rebut alternative interpretations, especially as there are elements of truth in most of them that I wish to draw out and retain, but to contextualise and make a start on the basic approach I am taking.

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People: Social Science, Values and Ethical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 251.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Layard and Stephen Glaister, “Introduction,” in *Cost-Benefit Analysis*, ed. Richard Layard and Stephen Glaister, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 24.

<sup>11</sup> *E.g.*, James Griffin, “Incommensurability: What’s the Problem?,” in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, 36; David Wiggins, “Incommensurability: Four Proposals,” in *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 358.

## 1. An introduction to cost-benefit analysis

The objective of a cost-benefit analysis is to compute an overall value for each of the various policy options under consideration (including maintaining the status quo). This involves something more than simply weighing pros and cons in an unspecific way, aggregation of a weak sort, as the phrase ‘cost-benefit analysis’ is now often incorrectly used in wider society. Rather, the value of each pro and con is represented in explicit, quantitative terms using a common currency, a ‘numéraire’, typically money. However, this monetary valuation does not mean that CBA aims to cover only traditional economic impacts (that is, impacts on amounts of goods and services actually traded in markets). Classically, CBA purports to take into account and measure, in money terms, *all* of the costs and benefits impacting the welfare of those affected by a policy or project. Now, of course, monetary value is conceptually distinct from welfare. Nevertheless, since it is difficult to measure welfare directly, welfare economists and other proponents of CBA hold that changes in monetary valuation are a good proxy for welfare changes. The first part of the rationale for this is simply that they understand welfare as preference satisfaction. Next they assume that the prices people would be willing to pay or accept for non-marketed things—if only they *were* openly traded—represent people’s preferences over them. More precisely, these relative valuations are taken to represent the relevant goods’ marginal rates of substitution at different levels of the respective person’s endowment with bundles of them. One way of estimating these is to infer them from observed market behaviour, from the prices (it is supposed) people implicitly assign when they make certain trade-offs (‘shadow prices’). For example, the values of residential property at varying distances from an airport might be supposed (in part) to reveal preferences concerning noise levels.<sup>12</sup> A more widely applicable method is known as contingent valuation (CV). This method directly surveys potentially affected people, asking them how much money they would be willing to pay to preserve some valued thing (for example, some social ‘asset’ such as a natural habitat or community) that would be lost or damaged if the policy went ahead (alternatively, but far less commonly, to accept in compensation for this damage to occur).

There are two ways of proceeding from here in justifying the calculation of aggregate welfare changes. The traditional rationale stems from the dominant approach in welfare economics. Following immensely influential work by Lionel Robbins in the 1930s,<sup>13</sup> economists have typically regarded comparisons of one person’s welfare with another’s as “untestable subjective value judgements that are scientifically illegitimate”.<sup>14</sup> Officially, welfare economics thus restricts wel-

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Wolff and Dirk Haubrich, “Economism and Its Limits,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy*, Robert E. Goodin, Michael Moran, and Martin Rein, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 751; Daniel M. Hausman and Daniel S. McPherson, *Economic Analysis, Moral Philosophy, and Public Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 146. For a survey of methods, see Nick Hanley and Clive Spash, *Cost-Benefit Analysis and the Environment* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1935), ch. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Hausman and McPherson, *Economic Analysis, Moral Philosophy, and Public Policy*, 137.

fare comparisons between possible alternatives to judgements of Pareto superiority, where an alternative is Pareto superior to another if and only if moving from the latter to the former would leave no person worse off (according to their preferences) and at least one person better off. Needless to say, the Pareto standard is extremely limiting for almost any practical purpose. To get around this, John Hicks<sup>15</sup> and Nicholas Kaldor<sup>16</sup> developed the idea of a “potential Pareto improvement” (PPI). For outcome A to be a PPI over outcome B there must only be a way in which the goods produced in A *could* be redistributed in such a way that A *would* be an actual Pareto improvement over B. This can be understood in terms of the possibility of compensation. Whereas in an actual Pareto improvement no one loses, after a PPI some people are in a state they prefer less. Outcome A would nonetheless be considered to produce greater total welfare than B, because the winners in A gain enough that they could fully compensate the losers and still be better off than they were in B.<sup>17</sup> Another rationale for CBA breaks with orthodoxy—explicitly or implicitly—and considers monetary values to constitute indirect measures of individual and overall welfare changes;<sup>18</sup> it is effectively a form of “applied utilitarianism”.<sup>19</sup> On either justification, the monetary values all affected parties assign to all relevant potential costs and benefits are the inputs to the calculation of the various policy options’ potential overall benefits. An essential feature of CBA is that this calculation is additive: costs and benefits are summed together, and net values calculated simply by deducting the former from the latter.<sup>20</sup> Although modified modes of aggregation are possible, the default procedure would be to maximise this aggregate; CBA typically recommends the policy that would realise the outcome with the greatest net benefit. It is thus the paradigmatic aggregative method of policy evaluation.

CBA has some strong attractions, and its use in policy evaluation is ubiquitous in high-income countries. First, similarly to Jeremy Bentham’s argument for utilitarianism over more intuitive modes of moral reasoning,<sup>21</sup> CBA makes valuations and the mode of overall comparison explicit. This is advantageous to the extent that it presents a public basis for debate, accountability, and consent—important values in liberal democracies—rather than entrusting evaluation solely to the unscrutinised judgement of leaders and bureaucrats.<sup>22</sup> Another attraction for some is that, as in other areas of economics, defenders of CBA sometimes claim that the Kaldor-Hicks PPI

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<sup>15</sup> J. R. Hicks, “The Foundations of Welfare Economics,” *The Economic Journal* 49 (1939): 696-712.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Kaldor, “Welfare Propositions of Economics and Interpersonal Comparisons of Utility,” *The Economic Journal* 49 (1939): 549-52.

<sup>17</sup> Hausman and McPherson, *Economic Analysis, Moral Philosophy, and Public Policy*, 145.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 146; cf. Richard Layard and Stephen Glaister, “Introduction” in *Cost-Benefit Analysis*, 2nd ed., Richard Layard and Stephen Glaister, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1-2.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Wolff, “Making the World Safe for Utilitarianism,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 58 (2006): 9.

<sup>20</sup> Amartya Sen, “The Discipline of Cost-Benefit Analysis,” *The Journal of Legal Studies* 29 (2000): 138.

<sup>21</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), ch. 1 §14.

<sup>22</sup> Sen, “The Discipline of Cost-Benefit Analysis”: 935; Wolff, “Making the World Safe for Utilitarianism”: 7.

criterion constitutes a scientific, value-free standard—it simply identifies the outcomes that are most ‘efficient’ in the technical economic sense, leaving value judgements about ethical decisions about distribution to elected representatives.<sup>23</sup> Purportedly relying solely on individual preferences also stems from a liberal preference not to pronounce on what is good and right.

Nonetheless, CBA faces a multitude of objections. Many of these are recognised as limitations by thoughtful theorists and practitioners, but these attacks on CBA close to the pure form presented above do not target a straw man; the latter has highly influential defenders<sup>24</sup> and continues to drive policy in some areas in a largely unreconstructed form.<sup>25</sup> Some of these are technical. For instance, the Kaldor-Hicks criterion relies on analysis in terms of a representative agent, and breaks down once two or more divergent agents are included; this means that if CBA is to identify comparisons between alternatives beyond actual Pareto superiority then interpersonal comparisons of utility are unavoidable.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, it was noticed almost immediately that the PPI-relation is intransitive, permitting cycling between alternatives.<sup>27</sup> A directly related point undermines the claim that CBA evaluates only potential gains in efficiency and reserves judgement on value questions such as distribution. This is that the former and the latter are interdependent, with changed patterns of production altering relative prices, and these in turn favouring some people’s preferences to the detriment of others.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, CV surveys willingness to pay within a sort of “lone-ranger” model of the defence of significant goods; that is to say, it standardly fails to gather people’s preferences about how much they would give up if they could be sure that others also contributed.<sup>29</sup> There are further technical and ethical problems with the use of monetary valuation: since wealthier people’s higher ability to pay inflates their willingness to pay, their valuations receive greater weight than those of the less well off, thus attenuating the link between monetary and welfare benefit.<sup>30</sup> The classic ethical objection to the Kaldor-Hicks criterion is that hypothetical compensation is no compensation at all.<sup>31</sup> Other ethical choices practitioners of CBA cannot avoid include whether to count obnoxious or anti-social preferences in the analysis, how to handle endogenous preferences, and which if any manner of time

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<sup>23</sup> Hausman and McPherson, *Economic Analysis, Moral Philosophy, and Public Policy*, 146. Cf. Hicks, “The Foundations of Welfare Economics”: 711-12, and again Robbins, *An Essay*.

<sup>24</sup> Henry S. Richardson, “The Stupidity of the Cost-Benefit Standard,” *The Journal of Legal Studies* 29 (2000): 975. Richardson refers in particular to E. J. Mishan and Yew-Kwang Ng.

<sup>25</sup> John M. Gowdy, “The Revolution in Welfare Economics and Its Implications for Environmental Valuation and Policy,” *Land Economics* 80 (2004): 241.

<sup>26</sup> See *ibid.*: 242-5 for references.

<sup>27</sup> Tibor Scitovsky, “A Note on Welfare Propositions in Economics,” *The Review of Economic Studies* 9 (1941): 77-88, cited in Gowdy, “The Revolution in Welfare Economics”: 242-3.

<sup>28</sup> Gowdy, “The Revolution in Welfare Economics”: 243-4.

<sup>29</sup> Sen, “The Discipline of Cost-Benefit Analysis”: 949-50.

<sup>30</sup> Hausman and McPherson, *Economic Analysis, Moral Philosophy, and Public Policy*, 149.

<sup>31</sup> I. M. D. Little, *A Critique of Welfare Economics*, Rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1950]). Cf. Amartya Sen, *On Ethics and Economics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 33; Layard and Glaister, “Introduction”, 6.

discounting to assume.<sup>32</sup> Employing a preference-satisfaction theory of welfare at all is of course itself ethically controversial, thus representing another often unrecognised value-laden decision; as is the exclusion of the value of rights and freedoms,<sup>33</sup> and of non-human items being valued only to the extent that they impact on human beings' welfare. Finally, CBA's advantages from explicitness may also be less than they appear, if it also overly empowers technocrats and bureaucratic priorities to frame public debate, potentially excluding values that are not easily quantified and relying on calculations that are opaque to the general public.<sup>34</sup> In this connection, over-emphasis of CBA ignores the indispensability of both public debate about priorities and practical judgement.<sup>35</sup>

The reason I catalogue these issues is that it is important to separate them from the central concerns of this project. Moreover, as Amartya Sen argues, many of these could (at least in theory) be addressed by a modified form of CBA. Many stem from using money as the numéraire and relying on the preference-satisfaction account of well-being, which could be abandoned in favour a richer picture. Such a picture might furthermore permit direct interpersonal comparisons. Besides human well-being, the costs and benefits assessed could include effects on freedom, other neglected values, and the interests of animals.<sup>36</sup> CBA could make value judgements about endogenous preferences and similar issues explicit. It could be incorporated into a social choice process that involved much public deliberation. Finally, it could insist on actual compensation where appropriate for those who would lose out.<sup>37</sup> Needless to say, this would depart drastically from CBA as typically practised. Yet the kind of resistance to CBA that I evidence in the next section would confront even a much modified form. It does not concern an optional feature of CBA, but one that, as Sen notes, is absolutely essential to it: additive accounting.<sup>38</sup> This feature retains the implication that in calculating total values for alternative outcomes it is appropriate for aggregate benefits to straightforwardly offset losses. Resistance to CBA in some cases seems precisely to reject the reductive comparison that involves. Now, a moderate defender may accept a need to limit the application of CBA, arguing that it is not essential for it to have an unrestricted domain; they could concede that it is inappropriate for it cover many of the goods in contested cases. Cost-benefit analysis (of an improved form) could form but part of an approach to policy evaluation, with policy responses justified in other ways working in parallel to cover gaps

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<sup>32</sup> Gowdy, "The Revolution in Welfare Economics": 249-250.

<sup>33</sup> Sen, "The Discipline of Cost-Benefit Analysis": 943-4.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Maria de Fátima Ferreiro, Maria Eduarda Gonçalves, and Ana Costa, "Conflicting Values and Public Decision: The Foz Côa Case," *Ecological Economics* 86 (2013): 132.

<sup>35</sup> Richardson, "The Stupidity of the Cost-Benefit Standard": *passim*.

<sup>36</sup> See Soran Reader, *Needs and Moral Necessity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) for the idea that even landscapes could have needs that should be counted.

<sup>37</sup> Sen, "The Discipline of Cost-Benefit Analysis": 943-950.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*: 938.

and alleviate negative side-effects.<sup>39</sup> The objections to come could thus be framed not as problems with CBA as such, but with its inappropriate extension to all goods and values. This reply would be compatible with my purposes, however, since evidence accepted to demonstrate the inappropriateness of CBA's aggregation in some cases would remain evidence for the phenomenon I want to investigate: a form of incommensurability existing in the structure of some people's values. That would remain important to acknowledge and explain. It would also be necessary to detail how that supplementary evaluation would work, as well as the extent of its remit relative to that of CBA. Furthermore, that remit might be considerably greater than even advocates of more modest CBA might assume. The next section turns to the evidence.

## 2. Interpreting the evidence

The principal data here are what are known as "protest bids" submitted by some respondents to contingent valuation surveys. In these, respondents report colossal or even infinite valuations of precious things that would be damaged or destroyed if the project in question went ahead. Examples from the environmental economics literature include cases of protecting ancient woodlands and bird species in Scotland,<sup>40</sup> the value of reintroducing a number of species in New England,<sup>41</sup> the protection of the pygmy possum in New South Wales,<sup>42</sup> and preserving unobscured views of landscape from air pollution.<sup>43</sup> In cases of compulsory land acquisitions to make way for infrastructure such as airports and dams, some people respond that no amount of money could compensate for the loss of the places in which they live or of other socially valuable goods.<sup>44</sup> Participation in many CV exercises is voluntary (such as by postal survey) and one might choose to interpret significant non-participation rates as owing exclusively to lack of interest; however, where people are actively prompted to participate, they often refuse to cooperate at all in exercises of monetary valuation. Where there are things that some people consider especially significant or precious at stake it is entirely typical that significant percentages register these

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Wolff, "Making the World Safe for Utilitarianism": 18-20.

<sup>40</sup> Clive L. Spash and Nick Hanley, "Preferences, Information and Biodiversity Preservation," *Ecological Economics* 12 (1995): 191-208; Nick Hanley, "Ethical Beliefs and Behaviour in Contingent Valuation Surveys," *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 39 (1996): 255-72.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas H. Stevens et al., "Measuring the Existence Value of Wildlife: What Do CVM Estimates Really Show?," *Land Economics* 67 (1991): 390-400.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Lockwood, "Integrated Value Assessment Using Paired Comparisons," *Ecological Economics* 25 (1998): 73-87.

<sup>43</sup> Robert D. Rowe and Lauraine G. Chestnut, *The Value of Visibility: Economic Theory and Applications for Air Pollution Control* (Cambridge, MA: Abt Books, 1982).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. the Roskill commission on Heathrow expansion, cited in Robert E. Goodin, "Theories of Compensation," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 9 (1989): 56-75. For an airport case in popular fiction, see the 1997 Australian film *The Castle*.

and the other forms of protest above.<sup>45</sup> In addition to the fact that these bids are made, we can also pay close attention to the explanations people offer for them.

I focus on resistance to CBA, and the literature surrounding this typically concerns policies and projects in high-income countries where it is practised. This focus has the advantage of making explicit the best arguments for aggregation in applied contexts, enabling us to isolate in formal terms their basic premises. However, protest responses to policies and projects with less formal justification, as is more common in low-income countries, also supply us with interesting evidence. These are indeed the most egregious cases—of people’s lives being destroyed by those appealing to the ‘greater good’. These often affect indigenous and other marginalised people powerless to oppose nation-building agendas and corporate interests. They are depressingly common, but one especially prominent example is the massive dam project on the Narmada River and its tributaries, spanning the Indian states of Gujarat, Madhya-Pradesh, and Maharashtra. The dams themselves promised to supply an enormous electricity generation capacity, and the diversion of the river system into canals promised to provide irrigation over wide swathes of the states covered. But the project displaced tens of thousands of tribal adivasi (aboriginal) people living in areas due to be submerged, and went ahead despite a high-profile opposition campaign that culminated in a Supreme Court challenge. Much of the outrage over the Narmada project stemmed from the inadequacy of the governments’ “rehabilitation package” even on its own terms: it was mishandled, not enabling villagers to earn income and meet their needs to an equivalent extent, with fertile land substituted for plots of equal area but that were stony and difficult to cultivate. There were reports of forced relocations involving deliberate cruelty.<sup>46</sup> Although these facts constitute a large part of the project’s injustice, the relevance of the case here is the moving testimony we can take from it from someone on the wrong side of the claimed overriding greater aggregate good, paying attention to the language of this kind of objection. The example is a letter from a displaced adivasi to the Gujarat Chief Minister:

You tell us to take compensation. What is the state compensating us for? For our land, for our fields, for the trees along our fields. But we don’t live only by this. Are you going to compensate us for our forest? ... Or are you going to compensate us for our great river – for fish, her water, for vegetables that grow along her banks, for the joy of living beside her? What is the price of this? ... How are you compensating us for fields either – we didn’t buy this land; our forefathers cleared it and settled here. What

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<sup>45</sup> Clive Spash, “Multiple Value Expression in Contingent Valuation: Economics and Ethics,” *Environmental Science & Technology* 34 (2000): 1433-1438.

<sup>46</sup> Arundhati Roy, “The Greater Common Good”, in *The Cost of Living* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), 61-71. Many adivasis displaced up to forty-five years ago have still not been resettled. See Dipanjan Sinha, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Invisible Adivasis of Gujarat,” *Hindustan Times*, 17 December, 2017, accessed 20 January, 2018, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-the-invisible-adivasis-of-gujarat/story-zWlrs9U4XAF9qPv8fqWWVN.html>.

price this land? Our gods, the support of those who are our kin – what price do you have for these? Our adivasi life – what price do you put on it?<sup>47</sup>

If the prospective gains were large enough there is no reason in principle why massive projects such as Narmada, with similarly dire consequences for minorities, could not be justified using CBAs that met high technical standards.<sup>48</sup>

Despite how familiar protest bids and other forms of resistance are, as Jonathan Aldred notes, the preferences they express “have proved notoriously difficult to interpret”.<sup>49</sup> In the following subsections I consider, and reject, several competing interpretations that have been proposed. In order these are: a response that attempts to explain away the appearances; an appeal to a distinction between consumers and citizens; “constitutive” incommensurability; two kinds of formal representation—incomparability and lexicographic preference structures, and; the attribution of rights to precious goods. I then propose another interpretation, invoking necessity, that is more consistent with the evidence, and, as I argue over the course of this study, is supported by wider theoretical considerations.

## 2.1 Irrationality

A “rational choice” approach—its name clearly begging the question of what rationality consists in—provides a ready-made filter through which to view any observed choice behaviour, protest bids included. It assumes a rational agent to be one with extendible preferences conforming to the axioms of standard utility theory. What this means and entails will be explored more thoroughly in Chapter 5, but for now the essential idea is that for the ideal rational agent all valued goods can be ranked and traded off at the margin at different ratios of substitution. In actual agents this ranking may be incomplete, and this substitutability bounded to some extent—perhaps certain death will not be tradable with some other goods—but in general even precious goods are assumed to be comparable and to have their price.<sup>50</sup> Applying this account to the present cases, this interpretation considers a person’s protest bid to be either a false representation of their preferences (perhaps due to disingenuousness or naïve delusion), or else the genu-

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<sup>47</sup> Bava Mahalia, “Letter from a Tribal Village”, *Lokayan Bulletin* 11 (1994), cited in John O’Neill, *Markets, Deliberation and Environment* (London: Routledge, 2007), 23. Full text also available at <http://narmada.org/sardar-sarovar/loss.html>, accessed 20 January 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Wendy Espeland describes a similar dam case, of the Yavapai people of Arizona refusing any amount of compensation for the flooding of their ancestral land. They are reported to have said, “The land is our mother. You don’t sell your mother”. See Espeland, *The Struggle for Water: Politics, Rationality, and Identity in the American Southwest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 183.

<sup>49</sup> Aldred, “Incommensurability and Monetary Valuation”: 141.

<sup>50</sup> Economists indeed often do believe exchangeability is bounded. See, for example, Kenneth Arrow, “Invaluable Goods,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 35 (1997): 759. However, (i) I, along with many others, argue that they are more pervasive than economists suppose (not only limiting cases), and (ii) a principled, general explanation for such boundedness is wanting, within a theory, not only relatively ad hoc limits.



ine expression of preferences that are irrational. The rationality of considering things to be incommensurable with money is excluded.

Despite—or perhaps because of—its prevalence, this position is commonly assumed rather than defended, and it is necessary to reconstruct arguments in its support before we can point out their deficiencies. Aldred is helpful here, identifying several basic propositions that might be offered, even if “it is rare to find an economist defending any of them in any detail, so obvious is their supposed appeal”.<sup>51</sup> Three of these are relevant here, lightly paraphrased as follows:

- *Direct Valuation.* Although typically a minority do submit protest bids, most respondents in CV studies offer finite and ‘reasonable’ willingness to pay figures for ostensibly monetarily incommensurable goods. This is *prima facie* evidence that people are in fact able to value alternatives in money terms.
- *Revealed Monetary Commensurability.* The everyday choices people make, including those involving ostensibly monetarily incommensurable goods no less, reveal that goods are monetarily commensurable.
- *Trade-offs Required.* Trade-offs are required for rational decision making.<sup>52</sup>

Direct Valuation and Revealed Monetary Commensurability claim that monetary commensurability can be inferred from survey responses and other observed choice behaviour. In the case of Direct Valuation, the question it faces does not concern methodological doubts about the accuracy or reliability of CV estimates, about which there is a vast literature.<sup>53</sup> The issue is rather the significance of the fact that many people seem capable of assigning monetary values to ostensibly specially significant things at all, and are generally willing to do so when asked. Revealed Monetary Commensurability would be put forward as a general observation about human behaviour: that when confronted with mutually exclusive alternatives, as we continually are, people do make reasoned choices, and (so the argument goes) these imply certain ‘trade-offs’. For example, people choose increases in risk to their lives and health for monetary gains, and they sometimes make career choices that seemingly put promotions before family and friends. For proponents of the rational choice interpretation, description seems easily to blend into prescription. Economist Robert H. Frank argues, “Scarcity is a simple fact of the human condition. To have more of one good thing, we must settle for less of another. Claiming that different values are incommensurable simply hinders clear thinking about difficult trade-offs”.<sup>54</sup> Trade-offs Required is the claim that we *have* to choose this way, that trading-off is the only possible rational response to the need

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<sup>51</sup> Aldred, “Incommensurability and Monetary Valuation”: 147.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*: 145.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*: 146.

<sup>54</sup> Robert H. Frank, “Why Is Cost-Benefit Analysis so Controversial?,” *The Journal of Legal Studies* 29 (2000): 914.

for choice.<sup>55</sup> Given the necessity of choice—that everything has its ‘opportunity cost’—to many there does not seem any way of interpreting what is going on here other than as trading off one thing for another.

Needless to say, all three of these contentions are highly disputable, and they are represented here not primarily because they are especially philosophically compelling but because they are influential. A problem for Revealed Monetary Commensurability is that any inference from observed choices to preferences is far from straightforward, even if we assume full relevant information on the part of the chooser. The fact that A rather than B is chosen does not entail that A is in itself preferable to B, unless it is ruled out that circumstantial factors besides the intrinsic properties of each had any influence on the decision. Moreover, a choice of A over B in itself tells us nothing about *why* it was made. In particular, it does not follow from this alone that the value of A is representable as being greater than B in terms of some common value in terms of which they are both measurable, money included. Certain axioms must be assumed before that conclusion may be drawn, as mentioned above, and these are open to question. In this connection, it is indeed practically a commonplace in some quarters of philosophy that ‘Trade-offs Required is false, that is, that rational preference does not necessitate commensuration. Many alternative accounts of practical reason are defended. Direct Valuation is not a deductive argument, so cannot be rejected in the same manner; however, it faces the counter-evidence that even many respondents who register positive, finite, and ‘reasonable’ sums may often at the same time describe the worth to them of the good as not exhausted by how much money they would be willing to pay for it. Moreover, far from registering indifference, some respondents submitting zero bids report intending even these as protests.<sup>56</sup> We could add the following point against the general thrust of this sceptical attitude towards monetary incommensurability: that even if we granted that some people’s responses constituted meaningful monetary representations of their values, this could at best show that the goods in question are monetarily commensurable *for those people*. We could allow that goods may matter to different people to different extents and in different ways, such that for some people they are indeed monetarily incommensurable, and for others not. If economists are right to be non-judgemental about a potentially radical diversity in the contents of people’s preferences, perhaps they ought to extend this to preferences’ structural properties. In this vein, some critics argue that to base CBA on CV disenfranchises people with legitimately non-standard preference structures.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> James Wood Bailey makes a similar assertion, claiming also that incommensurability is an “illusion”. See his “Is It Rational to Maximize?” *Utilitas* 10 (1998): 201, 198.

<sup>56</sup> Clive Spash, “Multiple Value Expression in Contingent Valuation: Economics and Ethics,” *Environmental Science & Technology* 34 (2000): 1437-8; Nick Hanley and Jennifer Milne, “Ethical Beliefs and Behaviour in Contingent Valuation Surveys,” *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 39 (1996): 262.

<sup>57</sup> Spash, “Multiple Value Expression in Contingent Valuation”: 1435.

Although Direct Valuation faces strong counter-evidence, and Revealed Monetary Commensurability cannot be deduced from observed choices, and Trade-offs Required is neither obvious nor a necessary truth, the rational choice interpretation might nevertheless be correct. It is possible that people are deluded and that their choices are based on trade-offs that imply monetary commensurability. It is possible that trade-offs of the relevant kind are indeed necessary given the ways human beings' values are actually structured, and/or that all alternative accounts of rational choice turn out to be false, incoherent, or incomplete. For all its faults, the rational choice approach is definitely still in the running, and there is a reason for this. It draws its strength from its system and explanatory power across a wide range of applications. Opposition to it is largely piecemeal and often merely negative. The thought motivating this project, on the other hand, is that for the rational choice approach to be displaced, an alternative of comparable system and explanatory reach is necessary. Otherwise, to many it may seem the most promising way forward to patch up the rational choice model where possible and continue to employ it despite certain acknowledged limitations and imperfections. The relevance of protest evidence here is that, other things being equal, an explanation that takes such evidence at face value will be superior to an account that attempts to explain it away. It supplies a clue, a starting point, for what an alternative might be like; but a wider-ranging framework—that *makes* other things equal—must be forthcoming in order to press this point effectively, and to decisively close off the possibility that for all people all goods are monetarily commensurable.

A full response that details why rational choice does not require commensurability—how incommensurability does not preclude it—will have to wait until Chapters 5 and 6. For now I proceed to the alternative interpretations.

## 2.2 Citizens and social values

If we want to attempt to see how refusals to trade might be rational, where could we start? Some critics of CBA argue that it inappropriately attempts to assimilate two distinct social roles that people inhabit.<sup>58</sup> On the one hand people are consumers, on the other they are citizens. This can be seen as one type of 'commodification' objection, holding that where consumers operate in the market, under market norms, these norms should not be allowed to intrude on the political domain. This objection does not appear to be essentially about the involvement of money; I discuss that concern in the following section. It also does not appear primarily to rest on the different outward qualities of the actions involved in each, the consumer buying and selling things, the citizen voting and participating in politics in other ways. Rather, on this objection the distinction appears to rest on the different qualities of intention, with the former aiming to benefit them-

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<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), 209-10; Mark Sagoff, *The Economy of the Earth: Philosophy, Law, and the Environment*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ch. 4.

selves, the latter aiming at the common good. Thus the distinction is alternately characterised as a contrast between “preferences” and “values” (in special senses), where the former represent a person’s private interests and the latter their concern for social and intrinsic goods. Protest respondents, on this interpretation, reject the notion that the value of the good in question is expressible in terms of its personal utility, rather than the benefit it contributes to society and/or its intrinsic value. The alleged problem does not end at this non-recognition by CV/CBA of these distinct ways of valuing, however. A corollary is that the mode of taking into account the worth of the goods (exclusively in terms of preferences) that CBA uses is also inappropriate. Although a procedure that aggregates and maximises is appropriate to private preferences, in the case of “values”, political processes are necessary, perhaps involving participation and public deliberation.

A problem with this interpretation is that it is implausible that protest respondents have the split personality it attributes to them. Consumers do not tend to act only like *homo economicus*, exclusively pursuing their own interests. Certainly the kinds of people who are liable to protest about the environment, community, and so on do not. Many people boycott products, buy products they believe are more ethical, and support local businesses. While people’s aim in their purchasing decisions is indeed primarily to further their own well-being, they often also balance this against ethical concerns, at least when they can afford to. This is in fact recognised by proponents of adopting the utility theory framework, not to mention its long-standing place in consumer theory. Utility theory alone does not itself portray agents as necessarily only self-interested; it makes no judgement about the contents of people’s preferences and allows them to be altruistic. Likewise, people’s political action may legitimately be directed in part towards the defence of their private well-being. For example, one might understandably vote for party A rather than party B, despite party B aligning on the whole more closely with one’s political ideals, if A has policies that would protect one’s livelihood and B ones that would drastically undermine it.

We can agree that CBA’s aggregation is inappropriate (and perhaps argue that deliberation and political procedures are more appropriate instead) without this artificial distinction. The problem with aggregating certain goods more plausibly has to do with the values of those things themselves (to us), not depending upon, nor altered by, adopting the perspectives of supposedly distinct social roles. If goods are somehow such as to be unsuitable for aggregation, they could not appropriately be regarded otherwise from any standpoint.

### 2.3 Constitutive incommensurability and the significance of money

Another interpretation does concentrate on money, proposing that the social role of monetary transaction informs protest responses to CV. This could make sense of cases in which respond-

ents describe their objection as, for example, to “being bought off to permit pollution”.<sup>59</sup> On this account, an unwillingness to contemplate exchange for money is essential to the value of certain goods to a person. Joseph Raz has argued that such attitudes are constitutive of certain pursuits and types of personal relationship, such that, for instance, “only those who would not even consider exchanges of money for friendship are capable of having friends.”<sup>60</sup> Theorists such as John O’Neill have applied this idea to environmental and community goods. For both, to consider such goods as exchangeable with money would be a betrayal and would lead to a loss of personal integrity. O’Neill asserts that attempting to value certain goods in money terms corrupts them.<sup>61</sup> This common type of concern is also often considered under the heading of ‘commodification’.<sup>62</sup> Certain interrelated issues need to be separated out here, however. One is that we should not understand refusals of monetary valuation and compensation as necessarily or in all cases essentially being about monetary exchange, but rather, at bottom, about exchangeability as such. Now, there is no denying that money does have a highly distinctive symbolism in this respect. Furthermore, it is possible that monetary exchange is in a way genealogically prior to attitudes permitting exchangeability: Karl Marx<sup>63</sup> and Joseph Schumpeter<sup>64</sup> both plausibly identified capitalism’s exaltation of the money metric as a driving force behind the extension of exchangeability to non-commercial aspects of life. There are also extremely important issues specifically concerning the extent of the market.<sup>65</sup> Yet, as is displayed in an observation made by Raz himself, the reason money exchange has unparalleled symbolic significance is that it is “the mark of liquidity, of easy, fast exchangeability”.<sup>66</sup> At root, then, the problem with money, and its symbolism, stem from its unparalleled functionality.<sup>67</sup> In essential function money is a medium for the exchange of goods and services. (Except to collectors of coins and banknotes, money does not have any value if it cannot be used to perform this function—if it is no longer

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<sup>59</sup> Robert Rowe, Ralph D’Arge, and David Brookshire, “An Experiment on the Economic Value of Visibility,” *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management* 7 (1980): 9, cited in Clive Spash, “Multiple Value Expression in Contingent Valuation: Economics and Ethics,” *Environmental Science & Technology* 34 (2000): 1434.

<sup>60</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 352.

<sup>61</sup> O’Neill, *Markets, Deliberation and Environment* (London: Routledge, 2007), 25-6.

<sup>62</sup> E.g., Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*; Margaret Radin, *Contested Commodities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>63</sup> Marx, “Utilitarianism”, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow, 1964), partially reprinted in David McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 202.

<sup>64</sup> Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 6th ed. (London: Unwin, 1987), 123-4.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Debra Satz, *Why Some Things Should Not Be for Sale: The Moral Limits of Markets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>66</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 350.

<sup>67</sup> On this point I am with James Griffin. See his “Are There Incommensurable Values?,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 7 (1977): 52. Given money’s tremendous symbolism, however, I do not, like him, assume that it has no significance whether money is used or not.

*current*.<sup>68</sup>) But it is equally problematic in cases in which I am interested to offer or accept non-monetary exchanges of certain precious goods for other goods. In the case of the adivasi displaced from their ancestral land, for example, they are equally appalled by the idea of accepting different plots of land in exchange. Disdain for those who regard personal relationships as disposable, too—not for money but in favour of other partners or fresh pastures—has a cultural prominence that rivals specific dislike for money’s involvement. So we do well to keep before us that we are the dealing with the same underlying issue of the exchangeability of centrally important goods. The Environmental Impact Assessment procedures mandated under European Union law differ from CBA both by (i) employing multiple qualitatively distinguished dimensions, and (ii) using a non-monetary numéraire; but they nevertheless continue, problematically for critics, to assume that all costs so-represented are comparable and can be offset by compensating benefits without loss, even across dimensions.<sup>69</sup> As a result of these considerations, we can draw conclusions from protest response evidence not only about monetary incommensurability, but about incommensurability as such. This is not to deny that we must take care distinguishing these.

Neither should we take the symbolism of, and expressive attitudes concerning, exchangeability to be the fundamental issue. We need to distinguish the value of things to a person, and the form they take, from the attitudes the person expresses towards and about those things. The metaethical issues here are large, and they will only be discussed adequately in Chapter 4, but the important point here is that a gap can all too easily open up between the true substance and form of a person’s values on the one hand, and the attitudes the person actually expresses on the other. Raz is right that there is a relation of constitution between friendship and non-exchangeability, but it is one which I would describe simply like so: for A to be a friend of B, A must be of non-exchangeable value to B; if A is not, then A fails to be B’s friend. We should not, as Raz seems to, take this value to be constituted by A’s *attitudes* concerning non-exchangeability (or not at least their *present, actual* beliefs, desires, and judgements). What is primary must be the reality, the fact that A *is* non-exchangeable for B. (This does not foreclose the possibility of ultimately giving account of this reality in terms of patterns or dispositions of attitudes, but that is not the point.) This gap allows there to be such a thing as the correctness and incorrectness of B’s attitudes and behaviours about and towards A. B may think about or treat A in ways that do not reflect A’s true non-exchangeable value to themselves. If there were no gap, B could not strictly betray either A or themselves: if ever B treated A as less than non-exchangeable, this would not wrong A but simply entail that A was not or was no longer in fact B’s friend. A could at most

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<sup>68</sup> For something to be a currency it is neither necessary nor sufficient that it is money. American cigarettes were used in the world wars and during the hyperinflation of 1920s Germany. I anticipate that identical objections to commodification would be directed towards certain transactions using non-monetary currencies.

<sup>69</sup> Ana Costa et al., “The Building of a Dam: Value Conflicts in Public Decision-Making,” *Environmental Values* 25 (2016): 221-222, 224.

feel aggrieved that B had for some period misrepresented themselves as a friend or suddenly stopped being so at the point of ‘betrayal’. None of this is to deny that there are limits to how far this gap can open, since betrayal and neglect inevitably weaken and may eventually shatter a friendship, perhaps in an instant if a single betrayal is great enough.

We can respond similarly to O’Neill’s interpretation of an actual CV survey respondent’s hostility to putting a price on an environmental good constituting (in the respondent’s own words) “a heritage”, a price on “what you’re going to leave for your children’s children”. O’Neill writes that

an environment matters because it expresses a set of relations to one’s children that would be betrayed if a price were accepted upon it. The treatment of the natural world is expressive of one’s attitude to those who will follow you.<sup>70</sup>

The second sentence seems true. However, the first goes wrong in the way we have just seen is possible. In this case we do better if we understand the case simply in terms of the following propositions: (i) the environment matters to the person, (ii) its value is not exchangeable for other things, and (iii) the person is under an obligation to pass it on to their grandchildren intact. We do not need to understand (i) as holding in virtue of expressive attitudes—let it just be a truth about the form and/or content of the person’s values without commitment to any particular account of what values are and why they have them. We can explain the betrayal without that as follows. The person betrays their grandchildren if they despoil the environment (for the sake of, say, bestowing them with a greater degree of economic prosperity), because, given (ii), if they do so then they fail to fulfil their obligation.<sup>71</sup> This is because (ii) entails that it is not possible for the person to bestow the value owed by bestowing anything other than that specific good. So, it is not in the first place any attitude they express by despoiling the environment that means they betray their grandchildren, but the failure itself to treat the environment for what it is (non-exchangeable) and thus to correctly fulfil their obligation to their grandchildren.<sup>72</sup>

These qualifications and limitations for present purposes notwithstanding, Raz’s and O’Neill’s discussions suggest an important connection between non-exchangeability and commitment that I return to in Chapter 4.

## 2.4 Incomparability

### 2.4.1 *The idea*

For Raz, constitutive incommensurables represent an especially significant subclass of a more general class of incommensurable goods. For him, the former are marked out by the constitutive

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<sup>70</sup> O’Neill, *Markets, Deliberation and Environment*, 26.

<sup>71</sup> This assumes that there is no overriding obligation that entails despoiling the environment.

<sup>72</sup> We could note that the act of attributing some monetary equivalent to the environmental feature does not clearly signify whether the person has failed in this way or else that (ii) is not in fact true of the person’s values.

conditions just discussed, but that is additional to their being *incomparable*, a second, more widely shared feature. So the incomparability relation can be decoupled from Raz's constitutive conditions and discussed separately. (He uses the terms 'incommensurable' and 'incomparable' interchangeably; but of course since I am considering different notions of incommensurability I do not follow him in this.) A and B are incomparable if and only if it is the case neither that A is better than B, that B is better than A, nor that A and B are equally good. Raz and other proponents of incomparability believe that besides certain exceedingly significant goods there may also be many things of relatively trivial value that are incomparable so-defined; however, for the present study only the former goods are relevant.

Raz takes refusals to compare to be evidence that the items in question are incomparable.<sup>73</sup> We should be clear, however, that since it is possible that people refuse for different reasons, we cannot simply read off this value relation from the observation. Moreover, since incomparability seems by its nature a severe complication for rational deliberation, alternative explanations are worth exploring. As I will argue, the items concerned may stand for people in more subtle value relations than the incomparability Raz and others endorse. As we have already seen, one thing that does seem crucial for many people is non-exchangeability. It is true that incomparability entails non-exchangeability; if two items cannot be ordered vis-à-vis each other then there is no question of one substituting for the other in value. Yet although incomparability may be a sufficient condition for non-exchangeability, it is not a necessary condition. There are other possible grounds for non-exchangeability, which we will see below. Moreover, a person's refusal to compare or submit a bid may be based on reasons other than that they believe the things in question are incomparable. In particular, it may be that they reject the purpose they understand the request to bid or compare to have, namely, to determine an exchange equivalent—again, where the grounds for non-exchangeability are not that the things are incomparable.

#### 2.4.2 *Scepticism about incomparability*

How then might some things be non-exchangeable and yet comparable? It has puzzled some commentators how, on Raz's apparent view, friendship has a special value that both (i) should not be given up for money and yet (ii) is not better than money. The possibility of rational choice in the presence of genuinely incomparable options has also appeared mysterious to some.<sup>74</sup> One factor that Raz appeals to is the constitutive relations detailed above, which he suggests produce a conservative bias towards retaining the relationships we already have.<sup>75</sup> However, a more appealing explanation than this is Ruth Chang's suggestion that some avowals of 'incomparability'

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<sup>73</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 336-7.

<sup>74</sup> Ruth Chang, "Against Constitutive Incommensurability, or Buying and Selling Friends," *Noûs* 35 (2001): 43-4; Donald Regan, "Value, Comparability, and Choice," in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 144.

<sup>75</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 346-7.



are in fact metaphorical, serving to express strength of feeling about just how superior something is—indicated by common usages such as “incomparably better”. This “emphatic comparability” tends to accompany judgements ranking friendships (or communities, or features of the environment) above any amount of money. This, then, is one way something might be non-exchangeable yet comparable. The potential loss of the better is clearly comparable with the purported gains of the alternative: it is indeed categorically worse, such that no amount of it could ever be at least as good as the specially important good.<sup>76</sup> I consider this suggestion at greater length in section 2.5.

Raz has several replies to the denial of incomparability. To the constitutive features we have already seen, he adds the observation that typically people will not contemplate paying for friendship or children. If a friendship or a child were for sale, and truly emphatically better than money, one might expect that we would at least sometimes be willing to buy them. This reply is unsuccessful, however, because the reasons against purchasing friendships and children do not turn on their comparability or otherwise. In the case of friendships, like other commitments to communities, environments and so on, it simply is not possible to buy them—not only because they are not actually marketed, but because their very existence as the kinds of things they are precludes their being bought and sold. One aspect of their nature is that they develop organically, and cannot be fully initiated at will. I might rent or buy and move into a house in some neighbourhood, but do not just in doing so, and cannot in any way instantly, develop attachment and commitment to the community there, even if I hope that that will eventually happen. Similarly, while conceivably a person might well commission someone for ‘companionship services’, this necessarily will fail to constitute a friendship. It is possible that a friendship may eventually emerge from the arrangement, but it cannot be purchased, because genuine friendships are necessarily not artificial. In the case of children, it is not possible to ‘buy’ a child, if that means owning it like property (though unrecognised by law), without treating it like a pet or a slave, which is wrong. A person’s intention behind such a purchase cannot but be self-serving in a way that similarly is a wrong way to treat any person. Anyone with a moral sensibility will naturally be revolted by the idea of treating a child in this way, and this is more plausibly the reason that they would refuse to contemplate such an exchange. One reason people are thus not exchangeable in the sense of a transfer of ownership is that they cannot be owned. The envisaged cases of ‘buying’ a child may be the exchanges made in commercial surrogacy, and payments involved in adopting children. In these cases, again, if the prospective parents conceive of what they are doing as purchasing ownership of the child like a pet or a slave, then their act is morally revolting. However, that need not be what they are doing at all. The intention of a would-be adoptive parent is more likely to be the altruistic one of providing an orphaned child with a safe and nurtur-

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<sup>76</sup> Chang, “Against Constitutive Incommensurability”: 44-5, 55.

ing home. If there is a fee involved, that will not be to secure ownership of the child—that is not possible—but rather to cover the costs involved in the transition. Again because it is not possible to own a child like a slave or a pet, surrogacy may also be conceived better as prospective parents commissioning the labour of the surrogate.<sup>77</sup>

Raz also objects that if we judged friendship as superior to money, thus comparable, then this “would amount to a condemnation of those who forgo the possibility of friendship for money as people who act wrongly and against reason.” He goes on to argue that most people do not, however, believe that people who choose not to make friendship a central aspect of their lives necessarily blight their lives; that is, that they forgo an aspect that is a necessary part of a good life. Such people might put a demanding career decisively ahead of friendship, perhaps, or choose a life of solitary contemplation. Raz argues that such cases are similar to instances of people choosing not to pursue musical or other creative interests. He seems to believe that the diversity of possible valuable pursuits itself requires them to be incomparable: not inherently better or worse than other courses of life, and nor equal, because in fact their value to people is not assessed in terms of their inherent value at all.<sup>78</sup> However, implicating incomparability does not seem to be a necessary part of the explanation of a belief that lacking meaningful friendships, and other interests, may not be an irreplaceable component of any good life, nor the most likely explanation. Raz seems to think it would make sense, if friendship and other interests were comparable, to condemn the willingly friendless. However, it is difficult to see how this conclusion could be reached without the assumption that in order for one person to have reason to pursue one interest over another anyone must also have this reason (if identically situated, perhaps). The assumption that rational comparability must rest on reasons that everyone has is not mandatory, however. It may be enough that the determinant of a person’s life being good (and as such of what they have reason to pursue), in one important way of looking at the matter, is whether they are successfully meeting or respecting the commitments that *matter to them in particular*. In this I invoke a notion of the good life according to which a life is going well if and only if it is going well by the person’s own lights; as I say, according to what somehow matters to them in particular—rather than according to externally imposed standards. I say *a* notion, because comparisons by external measures are of course intelligible and may be appropriate to some other purposes. There are, again, large metaethical issues here, which I pick up in Chapter 4. There are also large issues surrounding the concept of well-being, which are the subject of Chapter 3.

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<sup>77</sup> I am grateful to Polly Mitchell for this point. The matter is a little more complicated than this, but I believe this claim is essentially correct. A second point: If there is ‘commodification’ in this case, it is in the innocuous sense of the surrogate receiving payment for her work. (—Innocuous, that is, unless one thinks there is something *necessarily* exploitative or otherwise immoral about labour that involves people’s reproductive functions, which seems doubtful to me.)

<sup>78</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 352-3.

But my suggestion is that the appropriateness of reserving judgement about the willingly friendless can be explained using more conservative assumptions about the nature of reasons and comparability. I return to these issues.

#### 2.4.3 *Non-comparability*

The failure of comparability is a part of the picture, but I suggest that this failure is different from incomparability. Much discussion of incomparability and incommensurability, including Raz's, is couched in the unqualified terms of "value", "better than", "as good as", and so on. Taken in isolation, and unqualified, the question 'Is A better than B?', may seem to presuppose there being such a thing as 'good' (period) or a relational property 'betterness' (period), a sort of formal monism. John Broome, whose ideas I discuss in Chapter 5, holds such a view.<sup>79</sup> But many philosophers reject value monism, and indeed Raz explicitly disavows it. He writes:

It is crucial to avoid the misleading picture of there being something, enigmatically known as 'value', the quantity of which is increased by people having rewarding friendships, enriching occupations, etc. There are only people, with their relationships, careers, interests, etc.<sup>80</sup>

Several other philosophers argue similarly that there is no intelligible unqualified sense in which things are good or better than other things, and that they are only ever so in some quite particular way or another.<sup>81</sup> In a discussion now taken as seminal in the incomparability literature, Chang argues in a similar vein that comparability always requires a "covering value", some particular respect in which the compared items stand in some "positive value relation" with others.<sup>82</sup> (The positive value relations include 'better than', 'worse than', 'equal to', and possibly also 'roughly equal to' or 'on a par with', the latter of which Chang defends. In these terms, incomparability is defined as there being no positive value relation holding between goods.) Although it is only in Chapter 5 that I address this issue directly, I believe the denial of goodness or betterness as such, and keeping in view the keying of comparison always to particular ways, respects, or dimensions of value, should be central to an interpretation of protest responses that less radically problematises rational evaluation than positing incomparability.

Specifically, what may be implicated in the best interpretation of at least some protest responses is a relation that Chang calls "non-comparability". Unlike incomparability, Chang calls non-comparability a "formal failure of comparability". It is not where the goods in question are incomparable with respect to some covering value, but where the purported value fails to cover, by being an inappropriate respect in which to compare them. Curiously, Chang denies that

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<sup>79</sup> Broome, *Weighing Goods*.

<sup>80</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 344.

<sup>81</sup> Peter Geach, "Good and Evil," *Analysis* 17 (1956): 33-42; Paul Ziff, *Semantic Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960); Georg Henrik von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963); Judith Jarvis Thomson, "The Right and the Good," *The Journal of Philosophy* 94 (1997): 273-98.

<sup>82</sup> Ruth Chang, "Introduction," in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, 6.

“[p]ractical reason [ever] confronts agents with comparisons that could formally fail”. In the first instance, she offers the example of a comparison of “French toast and the city of Chicago for breakfast”, which seems rightly absurd.<sup>83</sup> But in other cases it may be less obvious that some covering value is inappropriate, such as the case of comparing (for the purpose of choosing a birthday gift) a “handsome copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and an elegant chiffon scarf” according to their relative intrinsic value. In such a case, Chang thinks, as indeed in all cases of apparent non-comparability, we have “misconceived the choice situation as requiring such a comparison”—the appropriate covering value, with respect to which the gifts are comparable, is more likely suitability to the recipient’s aesthetic tastes.<sup>84</sup> Now in regard to CBA, what some protest respondents may be doing is rejecting the covering value in terms of which they understand CV surveys to be demanding they frame their comparison. The (community, environmental, residential, ...) good in question may indeed be comparable in other ways, with respect to other covering values; yet the problem may be that the surveyors misconceive the respondents’ values, failing to see that they value the goods in particular ways that cannot be captured by the covering value they offer. If this is right, then respondents are entirely rational to reject such misconceived comparisons. Compatibly with this account, some respondents who describe the goods as ‘incomparable’ may intend this just in the sense of ‘not comparable’, a natural-language use which does not respect Chang’s technical distinction between ‘non-comparability’ and ‘incomparability’ defined in special ways. (This would be additional to the emphatic comparability sense of ‘incomparably better’ that also seems to be used.)

Now, in the cases in question, respondents are asked to value items in terms of money; so money is proposed as an appropriate covering value. As we have seen, some interpreters and respondents frame protests in terms of a rejection of commodification, which we can now phrase as (at least including) the judgement that money is an inappropriate covering value in such cases. Yet, as I argued in section 2.3, the fundamental problem with monetary valuation would be the exchangeability it implies and enables. This suggests—indeed, if correct, entails—the deeper rejection of *any* covering value which would permit this exchangeability of certain significant goods with others. A non-monetary example of an inappropriate covering value might be ‘land area’ (measured by, *e.g.*, hectares), where among the plots compared are areas of ancestral land or community sites. This was the situation of the adivasi, whom were offered land of equivalent dimensions in exchange for their lost land. The value of the land to the adivasi cannot be described in terms of its area, however. If the purpose of the valuation exercise is to compare how valuable different plots are to them, then they cannot appropriately be compared using this measure. The land is not best described as incomparable, because there are other values in terms

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<sup>83</sup> Chang, “Introduction”, 29.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

of which it can appropriately be compared; it might rank categorically above just any piece of land in terms of sacredness, for example. What is also likely is that the comparative value of land and other significant goods with others cannot be captured in terms of just one covering value. They are more likely valued in several, mutually irreducible ways, in terms of each of which it may be appropriate to compare them—where each comparison assesses only one aspect of their value. A peculiar feature money is sometimes thought to have is that it can summarise all aspects of the value of a thing. The CBA practitioner and/or the respondents surveyed may understand the demand to submit a monetary value to be the demand to cite a figure representing the thing's value *tout court*.<sup>85</sup> Monetary valuation may thus in essence represent to the respondent a demand to value the thing in question in terms of unqualified goodness, a value that is comprehensive both in that it (i) covers everything, and (ii) exhaustively summarises the value of a thing. Some people's protest bids may thus express an inchoate sense that the value of the things that matter to them cannot be expressed in these comprehensive terms, because the particular ways they value those things cannot be summarised together with all other ways they are valued. This thought may help to make sense of respondents seen above in section 2.1 who submit money bids, but express reservations about how comprehensively their bids value the evaluated good: perhaps while *some* of the value the goods have for them is comparable with others in money terms, other parts of its value are not at all like that.

While this interpretation is certainly rather constructive, it is less radical than the attribution of incomparability. On the incomparability interpretation, the appropriateness of the covering value itself is not questioned; the claim is only that no positive value relation holds between the things with respect to it. On the non-comparability interpretation, it is the appropriateness or even intelligibility of the covering value that is rejected, and there is no need to posit exotic value relations. If money stands in for comprehensive, homogeneous good, and the money measure is rejected, this implies that the person's protest response expresses belief that a kind of pluralism holds of their values—not a relatively superficial one that permits judgements of *tout court* betterness after all, but one that involves a strong kind of non-exchangeability across types of value. To further support this hypothesis, in the following chapter's discussion of multi-dimensional well-being I introduce some direct empirical evidence for robustly pluralist attitudes of this kind.

This and the previous subsection 2.4.2 each present a way in which the comparability of goods may be complicated in ways that fall short of incomparability, but still act as a block on exchangeability. The former was a kind of categorical superiority (which I discuss further in the

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<sup>85</sup> On the practitioner's part the identification would come via the connection between willingness-to-pay and preference-satisfaction that is supposed to make money a good proxy for welfare—however in reality decidedly strained it is—, together with the assumption that people's preferences are structured such as to allow trade-offs without restriction over all of the goods in question.

next section); the latter the illegitimacy of applying a non-covering metric. As will emerge in Chapter 5, each plays a role in the complete account of incommensurability I propose.

## 2.5 Lexicographic preferences and rights

An interpretation of protest responses akin to Chang's emphatic comparability account is popular in the CBA literature, termed as respondents having 'lexicographic' preferences for some goods over others. A person's preference for A over B is lexicographic if and only if they prefer some A to any amount of B, as in preferring to preserve an environmental good over all market goods. Some interpreters propose that attributing this formal preference structure is necessary in order to take literally conclusions such as "67% wanted as much wildlife as possible preserved regardless of the cost".<sup>86</sup> On its own this is a relatively conservative move, potentially leaving much of standard utility theory in place; I discuss more technically the modifications it necessitates in Chapter 5. As Aldred comments, however, like suggestions of incomparability and the pluralist hypothesis, although "formal possibilities offer ways of representing or characterizing incommensurability, ... alone, they cannot justify or explain it".<sup>87</sup> If the existence of lexical or emphatic priorities is to form part of a deep understanding of protest responses, we need a general account of where and why they lie. Moreover, a serious concern is also that a lexicographic ordering may be too rigid: it is plausible that the relevant preferences are not absolute; that even extremely valuable goods will not take priority in all circumstances. Many argue that this problem becomes even more acute when risk is introduced, the thought being that it becomes steadily less plausible that avoiding some loss takes absolute priority over other things the less likely it is that it will occur.<sup>88</sup> In the environmental economics literature a prominent explanation for apparently lexicographic preferences is that protest respondents attribute rights to the goods they are asked to evaluate.<sup>89</sup> The lexicographic preferences interpretation does at first seem a very promising explanation of refusals to trade in this context. Rights and other strict requirements are indeed one classic kind of block on aggregation, as it is of their essence that upholding them cannot simply be traded-off. Rights also have the attraction of being irreducibly plural. So this interpretation would appear to be on the right track, at least if objections to the possibility of lexical/emphatic priority could be overcome. However, although I will later defend a role for the sort of categorical superiority lexical/emphatic priority exhibits, the rights account does not quite get to deepest ground for these in the structure of (at least many) people's values.

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<sup>86</sup> Clive Spash, "Multiple Value Expression in Contingent Valuation": 1434.

<sup>87</sup> Aldred, "Incommensurability and Monetary Valuation": 145.

<sup>88</sup> This is another issue I return to in Chapter 5.

<sup>89</sup> Hanley and Milne, "Ethical Beliefs and Behaviour in Contingent Valuation Surveys"; Spash, "Multiple Value Expression in Contingent Valuation"; Thomas H. Stevens, Thomas A. More, and Ronald J. Glass, "Measuring the Existence Value of Wildlife: Reply," *Land Economics* 69 (1993): 309-312.

Let us continue with environmental cases. There are indeed many people who ascribe rights to features of the environment, when they speak of having respect for, or reverence towards, nature—attitudes that are common in both traditional societies and in some quarters of environmental movements in non-traditional societies.<sup>90</sup> Mount Taranaki in Aotearoa/New Zealand, which is sacred to some Māori, recently acquired legal personhood and the rights entailed by that recognition (the third geographical feature in that country to do so).<sup>91</sup> Some defenders of nature, such as deep ecologists, may view such rights as grounded in environmental features possessing an intrinsic value that is independent of human interests. Such a view represents a reaction to the common belief that the environment has merely instrumental value for human purposes.<sup>92</sup> That purely instrumental outlook may be a part not only of an unremittingly rapacious approach to nature: nature may also be seen as essentially only instrumentally valuable by an anthropocentric environmentalism, that seeks to conserve it just so that its exploitation is ‘sustainable’, that is, that human beings can continue to be benefited by it. Such is the view also of many practitioners of CBA. However, in resisting the instrumentalist outlook, as it appears some protest respondents do, we do not need to take the step of attributing human-independent value to natural features, nor personhood in any metaphysical sense—which is, in any case, unhelpfully controversial.<sup>93</sup> There is a middle position we can adopt.

Things can be valuable *to us*, and not independently of us, in a way that is not instrumental. That is to say, we can value things for their own sakes, without the intention to advance any purposes we have that they might serve, nor even merely because it brings us pleasure to experience or interact with them. It may be helpful to understand this possibility in the terms of a distinction between two distinctions that Christine Korsgaard draws. She argues that it is not intrinsic value that is the opposite of instrumental value, but rather “final” value. Something has final value if and only if it is to be pursued (or promoted, protected, or ...) for its own sake, and instrumental value if and only if it is pursued (or ...) for the sake of some further end.<sup>94</sup> The opposite of intrinsic value is “extrinsic” value, and this distinction has to do with the source or

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<sup>90</sup> Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

<sup>91</sup> Derek Cheng, “Mt Taranaki Will Be Granted Special Legal Status Similar to Te Urewera and the Whanganui River,” *New Zealand Herald*, December 20, 2017, accessed 7 March, 2018, [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=11963982](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11963982).

<sup>92</sup> David Wiggins, “Nature, Respect for Nature, and the Human Scale of Values,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100 (2000): 6-7. As against, e.g., Richard Kraut, *What Is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 211:

Gardeners love tending to their gardens, and it is good for them that they do so (it gives their sensory systems a treat); it is for the good of human beings (and perhaps animals as well) that we tend to the plant world.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *N.B.*: Nothing precludes something being of final value but *also* instrumentally valuable for some other end. Strictly, it seems for Korsgaard there is no such thing as instrumental value as such; value is ‘located’ in the final ends instrumental goods serve.

ground of a thing's value. Something is intrinsically valuable if and only if it relies on nothing else for its possession of value, if it has value in and of itself. Extrinsically valuable things are valuable in virtue of their relations to other things. These distinctions cut across each other. Korsgaard gives the example of appreciatively contemplating a beautiful sunset. This has final value, being something pursued for its own sake (we are to suppose here that the aesthetic value transcends any mere sensory gratification), and yet its value is extrinsic, since its value depends on something else, namely someone perceiving it and (when seeing it aright) finding it beautiful. For Korsgaard, it is the person's good will (in the Kantian sense; their "humanity") that is intrinsically valuable and confers extrinsic value on its objects.<sup>95</sup> I do not endorse the distinctively Kantian elements of Korsgaard's account, only that a thing can be valuable for its own sake, where that yet derives in some yet to be spelt out way from its having a valuer. Applying these distinctions, we can say that those aspects of the natural environment that are of special importance can be valuable for their own sake, where this nevertheless depends on their mattering to human beings. As Bernard Williams writes similarly,

Our attitudes to these further kinds of effect [on the environment] are not directed simply to human interests, and in that sense they are not anthropocentric. But they are still our attitudes, expressing our values.<sup>96</sup>

A parallel is the fatal flaw of the psychological egoist's position on the status of altruism. The psychological egoist argues that acting for others' sake (altruism) is impossible. Because all of our actions are exclusively motivated by our own desires, they hold, they are necessarily selfish, always directed solely at our own interests. The problem with this view, of course, is that it is of the essence of non-selfish action that one *wants* to benefit others, that other people's weal and woe *matters to one*, where this often may have costs for other of one's interests that are only self-regarding.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Christine M. Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness," *The Philosophical Review* 92 (1983): 169-95. See also Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, "A Distinction in Value: Intrinsic and for Its Own Sake," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100 (2000): 33-51. W. D. Ross is a classic example of a philosopher who does not separate these two distinctions. He writes, "The intrinsically good is best defined as that which is good apart from any of the results it produces". However, Ross *also* thinks, following G. E. Moore, that intrinsically good things are all and only the things that would be good even if nothing else existed. See *The Right and the Good*, 68, 75. I presume that this identity, in his view, stems from including among "results" in the quotation our coming to desire the thing in question. Ross and other moralists are concerned not to make moral values extrinsic, in particular, to depend on us in some way. (They would otherwise lack the necessity, the thought presumably goes, that distinctively moral authority requires.) I conjecture that Ross thinks that *the way* in which the value of some *x* would 'depend on us' is: *x* is good if and only if apprehending *x* in normal circumstances causes a person to desire it. If Ross were right about this, then value being intrinsic, independent of human beings' valuations, would therefore be one and the same as its independence from producing the "effect" of producing desires in human beings. However – philosophers have developed other accounts on which something's being valuable for its own sake may depend on us without depending on desire in this or other problematic ways.

<sup>96</sup> Williams, "Must a concern for the environment be centred on human beings?", in *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers, 1982-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 235.

<sup>97</sup> Joel Feinberg, "Psychological Egoism," in *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy*, ed. Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau, 12th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2004), 476-88.



With these clarifications in hand, we should understand rights in this context as *ascribed*, expressions of a person's valuing the things, not intrinsic to the things, and yet nonetheless designed to *suit the form* of their final value to the person. That relevant form here is the non-exchangeable character of their value to the person. Mount Taranaki is important because it matters *to* certain Māori people; it is of precious value *to* them. And it is because the form its value to them takes is one of non-exchangeability that it makes sense to defend it by granting strict legal protections over it.<sup>98</sup>

If rights to protect non-exchangeable value are most plausibly only ascribed, this still leaves us with the question of what non-exchangeable value itself involves. The next interpretation, my own, answers it directly.

## 2.6 Non-equivalence and necessity

On many interpretations, as we have seen, protest respondents refuse to exchange certain precious goods because they judge that it would be *wrong* to do so. They are seen as making a kind of moral judgement: that such exchanges would violate rights, or compromise certain norms or values, as in the account of constitutive incommensurabilities. As I interpret them, however, respondents refuse to trade because they believe the things that would be traded are non-equivalent. It is true that respondents judge that such exchange is wrong, but the underlying reason they do so is that they think that doing so would be grievously wrongheaded; it necessarily could not accomplish the apparent objective of the exchange, namely to attain something that is at least as good as the thing relinquished, because the value of each is such that it is simply not possible to make up losses in the one by gains in the other. This is to say that the respondents regard the thing they refuse to exchange to be 'priceless', in the sense Kant defined—as lacking an equivalent (where the 'price' of a thing (if it has one) is its equivalent).<sup>99</sup> People speak in this way. Because the things in question are so precious, protest respondents are often aghast or offended, that anyone would make the mistake of treating them otherwise. And it is no small error. But a distinction is in order. In the radical case that Kant wanted to draw attention to, a thing might be non-equivalent to and non-substitutable by *anything* else. But note also the formal possibility of a thing's being priceless as against some types of thing, but not others. And again, as in earlier sections, note that we should understand this pricelessness more abstractly than the inapplicability of monetary pricing.

Non-equivalence has already made an implicit appearance at three points in the foregoing discussion. First, my reinterpretation of O'Neill's heritage case effectively held that we should

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<sup>98</sup> We should remember that *legal* personhood does not require sentience or human-independent agency, but is an institutional construction: consider the joint-stock company.

<sup>99</sup> Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 42 (*Ak.* 4:434).

understand a requirement to conserve parts of the environment in terms of non-equivalence. Other things such as economic benefits simply would not do as well in fulfilling an obligation to pass the environment on to future generations. In the background, moreover, there is the sense that the reason future generations are owed *specifically* the conservation of the environment (and not just anything) is that *it* is of non-equivalent value to future generations themselves. (As I will suggest in a moment, such things may be *needed* both by us in the present and no less by people yet to come.<sup>100</sup>)

Second, in my suggestion about non-comparability, non-equivalence may be a third feature that is key to respondents' rejection of goodness, represented by proxy by money, as an inappropriate covering value. The problem with goodness is likely not only its claim to comprehensively summarise and cover all values, but that it may be understood to have the structural property of being, like money, homogeneous. If goodness so-conceived both covered an ostensibly precious thing vis-à-vis all other things, and comprehensively summarised its value, that would unacceptably ensure that it was perfectly equivalent in value with, and hence substitutable by, anything else bearing or realising that value to the same degree. Some things are non-comparable with money, and many (if not, in some cases, all) other goods, because in fact no such universal metric of equivalence appropriately covers them.

Third, in the lexical priority view, if some A is better than any number of Bs,<sup>101</sup> this is just to say that no number of Bs can be equivalent to having that A. Rights seemed suitable candidates for explaining some cases of this priority, because non-equivalence is essential to them too. They require specific performance: one cannot uphold a right by failing to do what it requires but offering compensation instead. Nothing will do as well. Though partial reparations will often be in order, among other reasons to mitigate damage caused by the violation of a right, compensation does not offset that violation itself.

I said that rights were on the right track. But a more plausible solution, I argue, posits a form of non-equivalence that is instantiated more generally—formally represented as *necessity*. Necessity is really just the abstract form of requirement that non-equivalence logically entails. To say that nothing else will do as well as A just is to say that A is necessary; and if A is necessary, then nothing else will do as well; there is no substitute for it. This does not itself specify in what sense and why A is necessary, non-equivalent, non-substitutable, but this is its abstract form.

Certain interpreters have, it seems, implicitly appealed to necessity in proposing certain modified lexicographic preference structures, on which a person only lexically prefers a good to an-

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<sup>100</sup> Ian Gough argues that obligations to conserve the environment for future generations derive from the latter needing the former. See his "Climate Change and Sustainable Welfare: The Centrality of Human Needs," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 39 (2015): 1191-214.

<sup>101</sup> At least given some threshold attainment of As and Bs, perhaps: cf. James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 85.

other if they are at or above a threshold standard of living or level of well-being. If they are below the threshold they are willing to trade off the important goods for money in order to be able to maintain themselves.<sup>102</sup> The idea appears to be that the person can only ‘afford’ to forgo material goods in order to preserve the precious good if they have reached the threshold. Such an explanation cannot avoid appeal to necessity. Below the threshold, the person does not have enough, hence they need whatever material goods they can get in order to maintain a decent standard of living. Above it, the person has everything they need to reach that standard and more, and that is why they can afford to protect the precious good. This might explicitly be described in terms of ‘basic’ needs, which are indeed commonly defined as the goods necessary for a minimally decent standard of living in the relevant society (see Chapters 2 and 3). It does indeed seem plausible that the non-exchangeability of precious goods has limits—but significantly here, imposed not by gains of enough trivial goods but by other necessities. This is of critical importance to Chapters 5 and 6. Equally, however, for many the value of precious goods themselves, which they would like to protect so long as they can afford to, can *also* be understood as entailing needs for them—other needs which are not basic, not confined to minimal attainments. The adivasi man in the Narmada case is not complaining simply of the loss of his material livelihood. His place and traditional lifestyle, of living beside the river on his ancestors’ land, is as essential to his life as basics such as housing, nutrition, and other material amenities. Indeed, he seems to regard the former as even more important. He reports enduring beatings and he promises to drown rather than leave his village to be submerged without him.<sup>103</sup> As in protest responses to CV, however, it is unlikely that he values everything about his land and community because it benefits him. I propose that we can interpret these and other things that we feel required to do for things beyond ourselves, are valued for their own sakes, and are non-negotiable (on account of being non-equivalent), in some sense as also figuring among our needs. As we will see in Chapter 3, some philosophers fiercely contest the idea that interests above and beyond a person’s own basic needs can count as genuine needs. Nonetheless, the notion of needs that I am developing is general and expansive. It includes interests that are the person’s own, but which extend above and beyond what in other contexts we would normally count as determining their well-being. I have taken the clashes of vital interests in project evaluation as a useful starting point, because they provide dramatic cases that it is difficult to explain away as involving covert trading off, of goods ‘really’ being substitutable despite the rhetoric. However, one of this project’s prime objectives, as it unfolds in the following chapters, is to demonstrate the plausibility

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<sup>102</sup> *E.g.*, Clive Spash, “Investigating Individual Motives for Environment Action: Lexicographic Preferences, Beliefs and Attitudes,” in *Ecological Sustainability and Integrity: Concepts and Approaches*, ed. John Lemons, Laura Westra, and Robert Goodland (Dordrecht; London: Springer, 1998), 52-3; Stevens et al., “Measuring the Existence Value of Wildlife”: 398.

<sup>103</sup> Mahalia, *op. cit.*

that these are not isolated cases, and that necessity structures values central to many people's lives.

### 3. Conclusion: next steps

I now leave off this discussion of resistance to CBA, and the non-equivalence, needs-based interpretation of protest responses to CV that I have introduced. I do not claim to have decisively established that that interpretation and it alone underlies all protest responses, but I believe that I have presented a plausible case that it is a very common factor. That is enough for now. For that claim to be firmly established it would also need to cohere with the best theory of the structure of such people's values. In particular, much more needs to be said about what the needs I have begun to characterise are like, how they relate to various different conceptions of needs, and how they fit into a broader understanding of well-being. These questions are taken up in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. The strongest negative challenge to the plausibility of appeal to needs concerns how they are to enter practical reasoning. This returns us to the argument in section 2.1 that 'there is no alternative' to trading off, explicitly or implicitly, even the most precious goods. I said there that that is far from obviously true, but its possibility is nonetheless worth taking seriously—especially as so many in academia and wider society do. Despite strong objections, I will later argue that involving needs does support one lexical ordering or relation of emphatic comparability—of needs over non-needs. However, this could only be one part of an account of the place incommensurability in the structure of people's values. There is the further question of how clashes between needs could be arbitrated: as in, in the examples I gave in the previous section, between one's 'basic' needs on the one hand, and those needs given to one by precious things.<sup>104</sup> One suggestion in the environmental economics literature is that there may be further hierarchical relationships between non-trivial goods;<sup>105</sup> this approach would double down on lexical priority. However, although this idea may seem well able explain priorities in some particular circumstances, this is not plausible as a general model of commensurating such incommensurables. Some also suggest that in such conflicts there is no right answer, and that this is moreover just tragic.<sup>106</sup> Again while this may be so in some cases, it is not plausibly our general predicament. This is all to anticipate later chapters, however, 5 and 6 especially.

Before considering anything else, in the following chapter I introduce and discuss recent efforts to represent and measure well-being as having plural components or multiple dimensions. In doing so I find further evidence for incommensurability there—of a kind chiefly about non-

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<sup>104</sup> The problem of arbitrating non-trivial conflicts in the context of CV is recognised in Nick Hanley and Jennifer Milne, "Ethical Beliefs and Behaviour in Contingent Valuation Surveys," *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 39 (1996): 258.

<sup>105</sup> Mika Rekola, "Lexicographic Preferences in Contingent Valuation: A Theoretical Framework with Illustrations," *Land Economics* 79, (2003): 277-291.

<sup>106</sup> Aldred, "Incommensurability and Monetary Valuation": 144.

equivalence, moreover—, and further support for the implication of need in the structure of people's values. We also see that the difficulties of implicating non-equivalence in practical reason confront these proposals too.

At the theoretical level [...] capability scholars neglect to take the philosophy of needs seriously or to draw on the theoretical resources of those theories to strengthen particular capabilitarian theories and applications.<sup>107</sup>

## Chapter 2

### Incommensurability as phenomenon (b)

#### – Multidimensional well-being

The subject of the previous chapter was a procedure for evaluating projects and policies that, at least in its pure form, is premised on the denial of incommensurability. Evidence for the existence of incommensurability in the structure of at least some people's well-being was observed in resistance and objections to it. This chapter turns to accounts that, by contrast, are premised on well-being incorporating multiple incommensurable components or dimensions. I refer to plural/multiple and components/dimensions interchangeably. Although I believe these approaches are on the right track (for the contexts to which they are suited), in this chapter I am not interested in defending any specific pluralist proposals over others. Its main purposes are to present further evidence for the centrality of incommensurability in the structure of well-being and to exhibit the plausibility of involving need in how we account for it. The course of the discussion serves also to demonstrate the flexibility of the notion.

In section 1 I survey the range of proposals to shift away from measurement along a unidimensional scale, towards viewing well-being as having multiple components or dimensions. I narrow this range down to those of interest to this project: accounts of dimensions which are incommensurable and which represent components of well-being that are of final value. In section 2 I consider evidence for the incommensurability of plural components of well-being, and discuss which form of incommensurability this evidence supports. As in the previous chapter it is non-equivalence or non-substitutability, not incomparability. In section 3 I discuss the difficulty of squaring the incommensurability of dimensions with a practical need to arrive at comparisons of 'overall' well-being. This problem is recognised by many working in multidimensional measurement, but responses consist largely in practical methods for avoiding the problem rather than addressing it in a philosophically satisfactory way. Over and above positing an array

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<sup>107</sup> Ingrid Robeyns, *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2017), 179.

of essentially separate dimensions, in section 4 I argue that many multidimensional accounts of well-being already formally represent their dimensions as needs, despite this fact passing unacknowledged and their proponents' official aversion to talk of need. This aversion appears to stem from the mistaken belief that needs refer only to basic (in the sense of minimal) and merely instrumentally valuable attainments. Yet far from this, needs may also describe non-minimal, finally valuable goods; moreover, with respect to the Capabilities Approach, they may describe capabilities as well as functionings. Section 5 concludes with an outline of the advantages employing concepts of need has, and foreshadows the manner I intend to implicate needs as my account unfolds.

### 1. The diversity of multidimensional approaches

In many quarters outside mainstream economics, attributing multidimensionality to well-being, poverty, the 'standard of living', and similar notions is entirely uncontroversial. The inadequacy of the unidimensional nature of the GDP per capita measure of population-level well-being has been noted since at least a 1954 United Nations report concluded that well-being has several different components.<sup>108</sup> Multidimensionality was central to influential work during the pre-1980s height of European social democracy, including Swedish quality of life measurement and Peter Townsend's landmark study *Poverty in the United Kingdom*.<sup>109</sup> The similarly disaggregated Basic Needs Approach to development (BNA) recognised a reality that is indeed most manifest in situations of dire need—that diverse goods are severally necessary, not made up for by others, and not necessarily evened out by economic growth.<sup>110</sup> Although the BNA was later largely overtaken by the Capabilities Approach (CA), it provided some of the initial theoretical basis for the United Nations Development Program's influential Human Development Reports from the 1990s and its subsequent development goals, and it continues to be influential.<sup>111</sup> Not least, the phrase 'basic need' is by now ubiquitous in common speech, though mostly only casually or implicitly defined. Multidimensional approaches to well-being in the global north have recently also received renewed attention, likely in part due to the increasingly apparent shortcomings of the turn to globalised market-liberal fundamentalism, which has seen post-industrial decline, flat real wages growth, increased wealth and income inequality and poverty despite very high and increas-

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<sup>108</sup> United Nations, *International Definition and Measurement of Standards and Levels of Living* (New York: United Nations Publications, 1954).

<sup>109</sup> Cf. Robert Erikson, "Descriptions of Inequality: The Swedish Approach to Welfare Research," in *The Quality of Life*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 67-83; Peter Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom: A Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

<sup>110</sup> Frances Stewart, "Basic Needs Approach," in *The Elgar Companion to Development Studies*, ed. David Clark (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2006), 14; Sabina Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms: Sen's Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14.

<sup>111</sup> Stewart, "Basic Needs Approach", 18.

ing average GDP per capita. Many of these measures draw inspiration and normative rationale from the CA, which as a recent World Bank report notes often constitute “operationalization[s] of [it]”.<sup>112</sup> Together with highly prominent work such as the 2009 Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi report for the French government on alternatives to using GDP,<sup>113</sup> these show signs of gradually penetrating the mainstream. National statistical bureaux are increasingly adopting multidimensional measures, both portfolio or ‘dashboard’ approaches that present various disaggregated measures and composite indices.<sup>114</sup>

However, another observation from that World Bank report is that:

In considering the rationale for [these proposals] one has to begin with the fact that broad support for a multidimensional approach, in fact, reflects a diversity of concerns, and that one has to distinguish a number of perspectives [...] In particular, a contrast may be drawn between the standard of living perspective, on one side, and the capabilities/minimum rights perspectives, on the other side. Moreover, the reasons for adopting a multidimensional approach may be either instrumental or intrinsic.<sup>115</sup>

A multidimensional approach may be instrumentally valued if it is taken simply to be practically useful to separately present a range of measures. The measures may be understood as indicators of various preconditions for a further end, which may itself be unidimensional. For example, a standard of living defined only in terms of income may be the end, with the importance of health and education measures in that context being their tendency to increase or diminish income. Alternatively, economists may choose to take a multidimensional approach simply because income is in practice not a good proxy for unidimensional well-being, due, for example, to imperfect competition in important markets and the public and non-marketable nature of some goods.<sup>116</sup> On a different but still instrumental approach, it may be that disaggregation is important because people are held to have a right to or need of some standard of attainment of each of several different material and social goods—and so it is important to keep track of these separately; but where it is yet assumed that those goods are only instrumentally valuable for their recipients’ well-being. A potential issue here with listing dimensions separately is that doing so

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<sup>112</sup> World Bank, *Monitoring Global Poverty: Report of the Commission on Global Poverty* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2017), 135. Sabina Alkire and colleagues’ work is especially explicit in this, see Sabina Alkire et al., *Multidimensional Poverty Measurement and Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), and the Multidimensional Poverty Peer Network (MPPN), which links presently 60 countries who either have begun or are working towards measuring poverty multidimensionally (<https://www.mppn.org>, accessed March 28, 2018).

<sup>113</sup> Joseph E. Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress* (Paris: Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE), 2009). Subsequently published as Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi, *Mismeasuring Our Lives: Why GDP Doesn’t Add Up* (New York: New Press, 2010).

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Sabina Alkire, “The Capability Approach and Well-Being Measurement for Public Policy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Well-Being and Public Policy*, ed. Matthew Adler and Marc Fleurbaey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 615n.

<sup>115</sup> *Monitoring Global Poverty*, 154.

<sup>116</sup> Koen Decanq, Marc Fleurbaey, and François Maniquet, *Multidimensional Poverty Measurement with Individual Preferences* (Louvain-la-Neuve: CORE, 2015), 2.



will not alone represent any interdependencies between them.<sup>117</sup> The World Bank report therefore proposes to supplement a dashboard with a “Complementarity Indicator” that in some way summarises these.<sup>118</sup>

It is of course uncontroversial that there are multiple kinds of thing that contribute as *preconditions* for well-being in these and other ways. So when philosophers attribute plural components or dimensions to value or well-being it is usually to claim that those components or dimensions are valuable intrinsically and/or finally. It is multidimensionality of this kind that is of interest to this project. Given Korsgaard’s distinctions discussed in the previous chapter, we must remember not to identify value that is final with value that is intrinsic as well as final, but for present purposes pluralist accounts of final and intrinsic values face exactly similar issues. In both cases, rather than being preconditions, the multiple values *constitute* a person’s well-being when possessed or realised in their life. A defining feature of the CA, claimed by Sen to be one advantage over the BNA, is that valuable capabilities are each taken to be different dimensions of final value in this way (though see §4.1 below). For her version of the CA Martha Nussbaum finds inspiration in Aristotle, who similarly held that there are different kinds of good things that are each valued for their own sake.<sup>119</sup> (As Sen makes clear, however, an Aristotelian basis for the CA is optional.<sup>120</sup>) To the extent that multidimensional accounts of well-being outside of philosophy are in part operationalisations of the CA, their dimensions must similarly refer or at least relate closely to plural finally or intrinsically valued aspects of well-being. Other philosophers endorsing plural finally or intrinsically valuable dimensions include Richard Arneson,<sup>121</sup> John Finnis,<sup>122</sup> Guy Fletcher,<sup>123</sup> James Griffin,<sup>124</sup> Brad Hooker,<sup>125</sup> Thomas Hurka,<sup>126</sup> and Michael Stocker.<sup>127</sup> Some accounts of plural values—such as G. E. Moore’s<sup>128</sup> and W. D. Ross’s<sup>129</sup>—concern not well-being but the non-relational values of states of affairs and possible worlds; that is, their val-

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<sup>117</sup> Satya Chakravati and Maria Ana Lugo, “Multidimensional Indicators of Inequality and Poverty,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Well-Being and Public Policy*, ed. Matthew Adler and Marc Fleurbaey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 247-8.

<sup>118</sup> *Monitoring Global Poverty*, 168-70.

<sup>119</sup> Nussbaum, “Nature, Function, and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution,” ed. Julia Annas and Robert H. Grimm, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (supplementary volume) (1988); Nussbaum, “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach,” *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 13 (1988): 32-53; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Bk. I Ch. 7.

<sup>120</sup> Amartya Sen, “Capabilities and Well-Being,” in *The Quality of Life*, n, 47.

<sup>121</sup> Arneson, “Human Flourishing Versus Desire Satisfaction,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16 (1999): 113-42.

<sup>122</sup> Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>123</sup> Fletcher, “A Fresh Start for the Objective-List Theory of Well-Being,” *Utilitas* 25 (2013): 206-220.

<sup>124</sup> Griffin, *Well-Being*.

<sup>125</sup> Hooker, “The Elements of Well-Being,” *Journal of Practical Ethics* 3 (2015): 15-35.

<sup>126</sup> Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>127</sup> Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>128</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).

<sup>129</sup> Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930).

ues apart from whether they are good or bad *for* anyone.<sup>130</sup> In this chapter at least, the topic is only well-being pluralism, and references to ‘values’ and ‘valuable’ mean value and valuable in or to people’s lives. Whereas typically philosophers propose lists that are not sensitive to context, Sen for one believes an account of dimensions, in his case capabilities, should not be so fixed (see §4.2.2). The salience of context is a major theme in the following chapters.

Other theorists mix instrumental and intrinsic/final values in their lists. John Rawls’ primary goods are an example, although they are explicitly intended to represent not well-being from the perspective of citizens’ own values but rather their *social* advantage.<sup>131</sup> Besides income and wealth (plausibly only instrumentally valuable) they include “social primary goods” such rights, liberties, opportunities, and, most importantly, self-respect. Health, intelligence, and imagination are also “natural” primary goods, although the “basic structure” of society cannot as easily regulate them.<sup>132</sup> Other examples are the lists of Len Doyal and Ian Gough,<sup>133</sup> Mozaffar Qizilbash,<sup>134</sup> and of the psychologists Robert Cummins<sup>135</sup> and Shalom Schwartz.<sup>136</sup>

## 2. Pluralism and incommensurability

Besides possible pragmatic reasons I pointed to in the previous section, very often the purpose of disaggregating well-being is to call attention to the chosen dimensions’ alleged incommensurability with each other. This is the division between the different kinds of multidimensional account of chief interest to this project. If the dimensions selected are instrumental preconditions for well-being, a reason for disaggregating them may be to highlight that each is indispensable for well-being, such as material or social needs. The common rationale for pluralist accounts of final or intrinsic dimensions is similarly to lay out how some aspects of well-being cannot be

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<sup>130</sup> Some philosophers collapse these or eliminate one of them. For example, Moore considers, “What, then, is meant by ‘my own good’? In what sense can a thing be good *for me*?”, and concludes “that my possession of it is good *simply*”. See *Principia*, 98. Contrariwise, others think that the ostensibly non-relational values of states of affairs and possible worlds can be analysed relationally, in terms of what is valuable for or to people. A third kind of view does not reduce one of non-relational or relational value to the other but denies its intelligibility. On these possibilities see Chris Heathwood, “Monism and Pluralism about Value,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Value Theory*, ed. Iwao Hirose and Jonas Olson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 139. My suspicion is that some references to non-relational value can be reduced to relational value, but also that others that cannot—where, however, the latter cases fail to refer (an error theory).

<sup>131</sup> I discuss this point again in Chapter 5 §4.

<sup>132</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 54.

<sup>133</sup> Doyal and Gough, *A Theory of Human Need* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991).

<sup>134</sup> Qizilbash, “Capabilities, Well-Being and Human Development: A Survey,” *The Journal of Development Studies* 33 (1996): 143-62.

<sup>135</sup> Cummins, “The Domains of Life Satisfaction: An Attempt to Order Chaos,” *Social Indicators Research* 38 (1996): 303-328.

<sup>136</sup> Schwartz, “Are There Universal Aspects in the Structure and Contents of Human Values?,” *Journal of Social Issues* 50 (1994): 19-45. I owe some of the foregoing examples to Alkire’s catalogue of multidimensional accounts in *Valuing Freedoms*, ch. 2.

traded off against each other. Of chief interest to this project is the incommensurability of plural dimensions of final value.

There do not seem to be many attempts to empirically support the claim that dimensions of well-being are incommensurable. There have been studies with the aim of showing that people's well-being has *multiple* dimensions, notably Deepa Narayan and colleagues' *Voices of the Poor* series, which interviewed tens of thousands of people in many different countries. However, their goal was only to listen to how poor people identify dimensions of poverty, as well as proposing certain practical measures for addressing them.<sup>137</sup> Whether dimensions are incommensurable is something of a philosopher's question, and philosophers rarely engage in empirical work.<sup>138</sup> Sabina Alkire's *Valuing Freedoms* is an excellent example of philosophically informed empirical work, significantly one that stresses the incommensurability of capabilities. However, she justifies this assumption by appeal to intuitive, non-empirical arguments Sen makes,<sup>139</sup> and her participatory work with subjects on the ground does not involve consulting them on that particular question. Her focus there is rather on how to arrive at weightings of the impacts of different development projects, with the apparent assumption that incommensurability presents no obstacle to this (see §3.2 for worries about this). Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit are exceptional in supporting their contention that dimensions are incommensurable with empirical evidence. For their book *Disadvantage* they conducted in-depth interviews with a selected group of 98 people in Israel and England with intimate experience of great disadvantage, some of whom have suffered it and others of whom were working in welfare service provision and social policy. The primary purpose of this empirical part of their study was to identify dimensions: in particular, to try to validate, with some extensions and adjustments, Nussbaum's list of central human capabilities. They wanted to test its adequacy against the perspectives of those most familiar with disadvantage, not to rely, as many theorists do, only on the intuition and 'expert' opinion of philosophers about dimensions.<sup>140</sup> However, in the course of their interviews they also found that "virtually every interviewee" attributed incommensurability to different elements of their conceptions of what is good and bad in life.<sup>141</sup>

A danger here is that people other than philosophers do not not much consider the content of the idea of incommensurability either, which is in any case heavily theory-laden and disputed by philosophers as we have seen. We have to be very careful about what we read into this evid-

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<sup>137</sup> Narayan et al., *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* (Oxford: World Bank-Oxford University Press, 2000); Narayan et al., *Voices of the Poor: Crying Out for Change* (Oxford: World Bank-Oxford University Press, 2000); Deepa Narayan and Patti Petesch, ed., *Voices of the Poor: From Many Lands* (Oxford: World Bank-Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>138</sup> Given their training they are typically wise not to.

<sup>139</sup> Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 102-5.

<sup>140</sup> Wolff and de-Shalit, *Disadvantage*, ch. 2; cf. *ibid.*, 25-6.

<sup>141</sup> Wolff and de-Shalit, *Disadvantage*, 23.

ence, then, and pay attention to precisely what interviewees intended by their responses. One thing we must be careful not to sway us is the language of ‘incomparability’ that was frequently used,<sup>142</sup> from which we might conclude that the philosophers’ notion of incomparability is the sense in which people understand dimensions to be incommensurable. As I urged in the previous chapter, however, the technical definition given to the term by authors such as Raz and Chang does not clearly correspond to natural-language use, and the best philosophical interpretation of this phenomenon is precisely what is at stake. Our characterisation must be based on the total balance of considerations, and one point counting against the philosophers’ ‘incomparability’ interpretation is that its attribution threatens to problematise rational comparison to an implausibly great extent—likely more than interviewees intend. More explicit and unambiguous was interviewees’ characterisation of dimensions as “essentially different” and “not reducible to a single category”;<sup>143</sup> moreover, as I will discuss at length in section 4, much of the interviews concerned the question of whether having less or none at all of a dimension could be compensated by having more of others. So a definite take-away is that the non-substitutability of components of the good life is not just a philosopher’s fancy—and as I pointed out in the last chapter non-substitutability or -equivalence does not imply incomparability.<sup>144</sup> Wolff and de-Shalit term non-substitutability “substitution pluralism”—as opposed to “substitution monism”, on which degrees of attainment along any dimension are substitutable by sufficient degrees of attainment along any other dimension, “at least before a ‘saturation’ point kicks in and additional units bring no further satisfaction”.<sup>145</sup> I find these terms useful and use ‘non-substitutability’, ‘non-equivalence’, and “substitution pluralism” interchangeably.

Another way of putting the reason why non-substitutability is a better characterisation of the incommensurability at stake than incomparability is that comparability appears to be a must for anyone who wants to be able to make interpersonal comparisons of well-being. Most plausibly this includes Wolff and de-Shalit’s interviewees. Most proponents of multidimensional well-being evaluation want to be able to compare different bundles of attainments on different dimensions. However, those who are substitution pluralists want to be able to do this without those comparisons being based on trade-offs between dimensions—that is, without letting go of their pluralism. Indeed, if an account does not hold its dimensions to be incommensurable then its pluralism becomes relatively superficial: if they are substitutable then we can reduce the values of bundles of attainments along different dimensions to single overall values and order states of

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 23n.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Cf. ibid.*, 24.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, Wolff and de-Shalit, *Disadvantage*, 25.

well-being accordingly along one dimension after all.<sup>146</sup> The challenge these proponents of multidimensional well-being set for themselves is to be able somehow to commensurate the incommensurable. I approach this directly in the immediately following section 3.1.

There is room for scepticism about theorists' prospects of success with this project, which I turn to in section 3.2, but Wolff and de-Shalit's evidence strongly suggests that any misapprehension about this would extend beyond the academy. Despite the fact that theirs is just one study, there is no obvious reason to disbelieve the reports of Wolff and de-Shalit's interviewees. Although being small and selective, their sample is not and was not intended to be representative, and we do not need to be able to draw any universal conclusions or establish the relative incidence of substitution pluralist vis-à-vis substitution monist self-conceptions (I also have no interest in coming up with a substantive list of dimensions). Not only do we not need to assume that the same things matter to everyone in substance, neither do we need to assume that the things that matter to people are all structured in the same way. That being said, prima facie the near-unanimity of the sample's self-reported pluralism is a reason to expect similar attitudes to be widespread beyond it. But even if it turns out that such attitudes are less prevalent in wider society than that, its existence would still cohere well with the evidence of resistance to aggregation that I presented in the previous chapter—a finding that, as I showed, has been repeated numerous times, if sometimes not intentionally. Any significant proportion of substitution pluralists would call for explanation.

### **3. Commensurating incommensurable dimensions**

#### **3.1 The indexing problem**

Attributing plural, incommensurable dimensions or components to well-being presents a practical challenge that does not exist for unidimensional accounts. On the one hand, pluralism enables a more detailed and realistic account of well-being's complex nature. On the other hand, it is not so straightforward to compare different states of well-being when dimensions are mutually irreducible and no notion of 'overall amount' of well-being is available. Sen has characterised this as a tension between "richness" and "usability";<sup>147</sup> Wolff and de-Shalit describe it as a collision between "realism" about pluralism as a phenomenon and what they call the "indexing

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<sup>146</sup> This is not to suggest that its pluralism would be pointless. As Sen points out, disaggregation can supply useful information even if the various dimensions are commensurable. See his "Plural Utility," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 81 (1980-1): 198.

<sup>147</sup> Sen, "The Standard of Living: Lecture II, Lives and Capabilities," in *The Standard of Living*, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 20. See also Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 239.

problem”.<sup>148</sup> Pluralists thus seem to need a kind of coexistence between incommensurability and the ability to compare. Comparison must somehow not depend on trading off.

What one makes of this tension will depend on one’s antecedent intuitions and theoretical commitments. If one considers commensuration a prerequisite for rational comparison then this ‘challenge’ will look more like an unanswerable objection. If one is more confident, however, that as evidence suggests substitution pluralism is true of the structure of at least many people’s conceptions of their well-being, it will instead be more a puzzle to be solved. Sen thus recommends that “while we have to face the conflict squarely, we must not make heavy weather of it”.<sup>149</sup> Both he and Wolff and de-Shalit point to our individual ability to choose, for the most part effortlessly, between alternatives that we suppose involve plural incommensurable values:<sup>150</sup> despite functionings’ substitution pluralism, “alternative functioning sets are comparable, at least for a given individual”.<sup>151</sup> It is the interpersonal case that is most tricky. To be clear, however, this seems not to be due to its interpersonality as such—the challenge at hand is still about dimensional plurality, and for present purposes in principle it does not matter whose sets of attainments along different dimensions we are attempting to order. It is only that, whereas in the individual, intrapersonal case our implicit capacity for the most part does just fine, for the purposes for which we need to make interpersonal comparisons we need to be able to say something more explicit about our procedure. The comparisons are often far less obvious there, and we need to be able to justify them to each other in a way we usually do not have to justify our own choices to ourselves.<sup>152</sup> Yet, given that here it is dealing with multidimensionality, not interpersonality per se, that is the issue, if we are sufficiently confident in both the existence of multidimensionality and our ability to deal with it in the individual case, then we can justifiably be confident that solutions in the interpersonal context exist also. Still, no such solution is immediately obvious.

With increasing interest in multidimensional well-being, the literature on how to manage this indexing issue is rapidly growing. In its precise details it is also highly technical. As such I cannot hope to adequately survey the field’s current state, but in what follows I outline in general terms some leading responses, in order to indicate the place in which I hope philosophy might contribute.

Perhaps the most prominent approach is to attach weights to each dimension then aggregate, thus constructing a summary “multidimensional index” (which becomes, in fact,

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<sup>148</sup> Wolff and de-Shalit, *Disadvantage*, 21. The term “index problem” comes from Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 80. There it relates to primary goods. Alkire also explicitly adverts to the issue in *Valuing Freedoms* at 85-6 and 115.

<sup>149</sup> Sen, “The Standard of Living: Lecture II, Lives and Capabilities”, 20.

<sup>150</sup> Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 240-1.

<sup>151</sup> Wolff and de-Shalit, *Disadvantage*, 97.

<sup>152</sup> Cf. Bernard Williams, “Conflicts in Values,” in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 82.

unidimensional).<sup>153</sup> Summary indices are understandably highly appealing for practical use.<sup>154</sup> However, a dispute exists between their proponents and those who advocate a portfolio approach,<sup>155</sup> and it is clear why: multidimensional indices appear not so much to solve the indexing problem as to abandon substitution pluralism. Yet Alkire and colleagues regard the name ‘indexing problem’ “unfortunate”, because it has “wrongly implied that value judgements are a ‘problem’ rather than an inherent component of measurement design”. They point to the unavoidability of normative choices about, among other things, weighting dimensions.<sup>156</sup> While this may be true, it does not make the problem of holding on to substitution pluralism any easier. There is a variety of proposals about how and by whom such choices can be made. Sen and those influenced by him point to how, in practice, to a significant extent accepting substitution pluralism does not require assigning entirely determinate weights. They argue that dominance partial ordering is quite often enough: for example, if it is agreed by all those party to a specific evaluation that the relative weight of some  $x$  with respect to some  $y$  should fall within a range of  $1/2$  to  $1/5$  (where they have various views about exactly where in this range), then that is enough to agree that having  $1x$  and  $2y$  is better than having  $2x$  and  $1y$ .<sup>157</sup> For many purposes, these authors hold, we do not need to be able to rank all possible combinations of attainments in order to reach agreement on comparisons between the alternatives at issue; often we require no more than the intersections of different individuals’ rankings.<sup>158</sup> This approach does without making explicit exactly how comparisons operating over incommensurable dimensions can be made, effectively by deferring to the ostensibly unproblematic nature of individual choice and limiting the range of problems to be solved. In this respect, Koen Decanq, Marc Fleurbaey, and François Maniquet similarly propose deferring to the individual’s judgement in their method for measuring the incidence of multidimensional poverty. They suggest demarcating the poverty line by a single bundle of attainments across the target population, but counting each person as poor if and only if they prefer that bundle to their existing set of attainments. Individuals’ preferences reflect their own weighing-up of different dimensions’ marginal importance to them (an assumption being that this is stable across contexts of decision).<sup>159</sup> On other views, for groups jointly evaluating specific projects, participatory exercises may be convened to decide which dimensions are relevant and how to weight them.<sup>160</sup> Wolff and de-Shalit’s own approach, “complex evaluation”,

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<sup>153</sup> Koen Decanq and María Ana Lugo survey extant methods in their “Weights in Multidimensional Indices of Wellbeing: An Overview,” *Econometric Reviews* 32 (2013): 7-34.

<sup>154</sup> Stiglitz *et al.*, *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*, 59.

<sup>155</sup> World Bank, *Monitoring Global Poverty*, 167.

<sup>156</sup> Alkire *et al.*, *Multidimensional Poverty Measurement and Analysis*, 187n.

<sup>157</sup> Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 46. For discussion see Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 30.

<sup>158</sup> Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 243.

<sup>159</sup> Decanq, Fleurbaey, and Maniquet, *Multidimensional Poverty Measurement with Individual Preferences*, 3.

<sup>160</sup> *E.g.*, Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 226-7.

begins by taking many different proposals about how to weight dimensions of disadvantage, gained through democratic consultation with different groups of citizens, organisations, expert bodies, representative bodies and so on. It then looks to see to what degree these intersect, such that there is an observed section of the population that counts as the worst-off whichever weighting is used (that is to say, whether the identification is robust to altering weights within this range). This may be either because proposed weighting sets themselves converge to a great degree on whom they rank as disadvantaged, or else if in the population disadvantages “cluster”, such that those who are poorly off tend to be so in all types of disadvantage. In this way, a policymaker may evaluate disadvantage without needing themselves to judge the relative importance of incommensurable dimensions.<sup>161</sup> Alkire and colleagues commend Wolff and de-Shalit’s proposed approach to arriving at robust social rankings.<sup>162</sup> The problem of indexing or aggregating across dimensions is eased for all these authors by focusing only on the identification of a discrete group of the worst off, although there are debates about how exclusive that focus should be. Another possible approach to well-being evaluation more generally might not attempt to arrive at judgements of overall well-being at all. Instead, policymakers could use multiple measures to assess various kinds of well-being impact—portfolios, various indices, data decomposed by region and social section, and so on—, treating them as inputs to overall judgements about what to do.<sup>163</sup> I should reemphasise that the foregoing approaches do not exhaust existing proposals and unrealised possibilities.

### 3.2 Scepticism about ‘solutions’

Proponents of these approaches are clearly most concerned with the practice of well-being and poverty measurement—with *what works*—and, as Wolff and de-Shalit put it in their case, “are not [...] looking for a definition of the least advantaged in the sense of a philosophical analysis”. Wolff and de-Shalit want to hold on to their substitution pluralism realism, and yet, at the same time, are

conscious that there is a sense in which insisting on incommensurability is a type of philosophical indulgence which is all very well in the seminar room, but very obstructive outside, given the practical problems governments face in designing social policies.<sup>164</sup>

Now, I am very sympathetic to the opinion that the urgent task of measurement should not be held up by intractable philosophical puzzles. However, we should be very clear that these approaches do not solve so much as evade the problem of comparing bundles of incommensurable dimensions. So I also have some sympathy with Richard Arneson, when he argues (directly

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<sup>161</sup> *Disadvantage*, 101-3.

<sup>162</sup> Alkire et al., *Multidimensional Poverty Measurement and Analysis*, 212.

<sup>163</sup> Compare Daniel M. Haybron and Valerie Tiberius, “Well-Being Policy: What Standard of Well-Being?,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1 (2015): 728-9.

<sup>164</sup> Wolff and de-Shalit, *Disadvantage*, 97-8.



criticising Wolff and de-Shalit on this point) that “[i]f a certain kind of comparison or assessment of values cannot be made, then it cannot be made anywhere, and politicians and citizens should be told that there is no sense in trying to square the circle”.<sup>165</sup> “No sense” is surely too strong. However, if Wolff and de-Shalit genuinely “do not expect that there is a metaphysically true answer” to questions of comparing bundles of incommensurables, then this should to some extent undermine “confidence in the judgement that a group is among the least advantaged”,<sup>166</sup> along with overall judgements about multidimensional well-being generally. It would be a different matter if the problem were epistemic, if proponents of ‘solutions’ knew in principle how to rank bundles of incommensurable attainments, and sourcing a variety of rankings from different societal sectors was viewed only as a matter of consulting the ‘wisdom of crowds’. But that is not how it is presented here.

There is a more general worry about assigning weights in making overall judgements. How does selecting weights not, like multidimensional indices appear to, dissolve the indexing problem at the cost of accepting substitution monism? Dimensions are weighted in terms of... what? If we take our pluralism seriously, as it appears many multidimensional theorists want to, especially those operating with the capabilities approach, then there is nothing. That is, unless this means with respect to some determinate common end. Yet the essence of a pluralist conception of well-being is that attainments along different dimensions are separately valued ends. Alternatively, if what we are doing is ranking by current priorities—that is, what to do here and now—, then the ideas of ‘betterness, period’ and of ‘increases’ and ‘decreases’ in well-being have no place. It may seem that if theorists want to ‘solve’ the indexing problem, and be able to rank bundles of attainments by how overall better and worse they are, then they have no choice other than letting go of substitution pluralism.<sup>167</sup>

This predicament finds an interesting contrast in Griffin’s account of well-being, since Griffin effectively denies that anything like the indexing problem exists. He takes his pluralism very seriously, asserting that the dimensions of “prudential value” he lists are “irreducibly plural”, and that there can be “uncompensated loss of value” when one is forced to choose between different attainments of one over another kind.<sup>168</sup> Yet he denies that well-being pluralism requires or entails incommensurability. More than that, he argues that the possibility of ranking goods, even if they are irreducibly plural, entails a unidimensional notion of well-being:

All that we need for the all-encompassing scale is the possibility of ranking items on the basis of their nature. And we can, in fact, rank them in that way. We can work out trade-offs between

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<sup>165</sup> Arneson, “Book Review: Disadvantage, Capability, Commensurability, and Policy,” *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 9 (2010): 341.

<sup>166</sup> Wolff and de-Shalit, *Disadvantage*, 98.

<sup>167</sup> N.B.: This position is provisional. I revise it in Chapter 5 §4.2.

<sup>168</sup> Griffin, “Incommensurability: What’s the Problem?,” in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, 38.

different dimensions of pleasure or happiness. And when we do, we rank in a strong sense: not just choose one rather than the other, but regard it as worth more. That is the ultimate scale here: worth to one's life.<sup>169</sup>

Griffin is adamant that “worth to one's life” does not constitute a “super-value (fortunately, since there is none)”, but that it nevertheless names “an attribute that is quantitative” that extends variously along the unidimensional scale of prudential value.<sup>170</sup>

Griffin's contention here—to the effect that indexing is in fact a non-problem—is false. As I argued in the previous chapter, one reason for this is that one may choose something over another for reasons that do not depend on its turning out to be better in the sense at hand. Chapter 5 later shows how ranking only entails the existence of a quantitative measure of well-being, as opposed to circumstantial weight, if, among other conditions, it obeys a certain condition we may have reason to question in this area. I also believe that Arneson's sceptical doubts can eventually be assuaged. However, Griffin and Arneson point to real challenges that the foregoing methods of measurement do not confront. The greatest is simply how substitution pluralism can possibly cohere with weighting, and a quantitative notion of overall well-being that ‘increases’ and ‘decreases’ like a single magnitude. In other words, we need to know what basis there exists for arriving at such weights, at such judgements of overall well-being over incommensurable dimensions. This relates to the question of what they to whose judgement we might defer are doing when *they* collate dimensions; that is, what participants in deliberation exercises, those submitting rankings for complex evaluation, those who prefer bundles over others, and policy makers are doing. If we only knew, would that be a better model for interpersonal comparison than aggregation? These might seem merely philosophical puzzles; however, to the extent that practice-oriented procedures aspire to be “philosophically grounded mechanisms”,<sup>171</sup> there is a decent chance that more satisfactory responses to these puzzles could make some difference. Such responses might also help to defend, or at least make even less deniable, the general idea of the incommensurability of dimensions from those who would dismiss it in preference for the at-present better fundamentally grounded economic welfare conception.

The possibility that this project explores is that the incommensurability, the genuine plurality, of dimensions can be supported by an account of deliberation and the structure of well-being that gives a central place to needs. This task extends over the subsequent chapters. But in the following section I argue that we can see that some of the dimensions in multidimensional well-being and other pluralist conceptions already count as needs. I start with a particular focus on capabilities. As mentioned in section 1, however, many multidimensional accounts have been de-

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<sup>169</sup> Griffin, *Well-Being*, 90.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 98. He does not require, however, that the ranking is complete, and allows that there may be pockets of incomparability, rough equality, and vagueness.

<sup>171</sup> Wolff and de-Shalit, *Disadvantage*, 98.

scribed as being effectively operationalisations of the capabilities approach, so this possibility has fairly wide relevance.

#### 4. Dimensions as needs

##### 4.1 Capabilities as needs

Sen and others contend that a shift to capabilities has numerous advantages over a focus on needs. Whereas needs are characterised as being the relatively minimal, instrumental, possibly entirely passively received preconditions for flourishing, (certain) capabilities relate to the ends such preconditions serve—flourishing itself, which is higher and active.<sup>172</sup> I separate this complaint into two separate claims as follows, and rebut them in order:

- (i) Need in the context of well-being (and related notions such as ‘quality of life’) is an exclusively instrumental relation that defines a relatively minimal level of attainment.
- (ii) A focus on needs cannot provide a sufficient role for freedom and activity.

The thought behind claim (i) is that need is a notion that is fundamentally ill-suited to describing final human goods. ‘Needs’ may be capable of describing preconditions for these but not ‘valuable functionings’ and ‘valuable capabilities’ themselves. To reject (i) it is enough to examine the real nature of the BNA, rather than the way Sen and others have unfairly characterised it. The BNA appears in fact to have been home to at least two different understandings of what “basic needs” are. Its main proponents admit that the needs aimed at in practice were indeed almost entirely instrumental and relatively minimal. The BNA was proposed as part of an urgent response to dire poverty in low-income countries that the then-prevailing GNP-growth development paradigm was failing to address, and from the start many of its theoretical priorities were pragmatic and technical, focused on application and delivery.<sup>173</sup> For its leading theorists, however, ‘basic’ does not mean ‘minimal’, but, it seems, ‘fundamental’, as in essential, to living a distinctively human life. Basic needs, for them, encompass all of the necessary conditions for having a “full life”, where this includes “non-material” needs that are ends, as well as material needs that are prerequisites for those.<sup>174</sup> As I interpret it, this full-life notion is possible because *instrumental* necessity is not the only, nor even the most significant, form of necessity in the domain of values. I discuss different forms of necessity at length in following chapter, but for the moment it is enough to point to *constitutive* necessity. An account may hold that there are certain elements that no good life can do without, that is, that are constitutively necessary for well-being. This is a claim that there are things people need that are of final value: necessary, but not pursued for any

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<sup>172</sup> See, e.g., Amartya Sen, *Resources, Values, and Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 513-4.

<sup>173</sup> Frances Stewart, “Basic Needs Approach”, 16; Paul Streeten, “Basic Needs: Some Unsettled Questions,” *World Development* 12 (1984): 976.

<sup>174</sup> Frances Stewart, *Basic Needs in Developing Countries* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 2-5; Streeten, “Basic Needs: Some Unsettled Questions”: 974.

further end beyond the good life *of which they are part*. BNA theorists freely admit that practice outstripped theory, and that its conceptual foundations are under-developed relative to the CA.<sup>175</sup> It is nevertheless fairly clear that, as BNA advocate Frances Stewart writes,

In its reductionist form, the capability approach is very similar to the BNA: the objective of enhancing what people can be or do (a person's capabilities) is virtually identical with the full-life objective of the BNA; and in order to achieve this for the most deprived, a subset of basic capabilities has been identified.<sup>176</sup>

We see, then, that the “basic needs” of the BNA are not fully determinate, but rather open to different interpretations. One of these is far from minimal, and embraces the final ends of life as well as the means to those.

Now consider the charge that an account in terms of needs will leave too little room for freedom and activity. Sen's capability theory emphasises freedom in two ways. One is how, as on all capability theories, freedom is built into the notion of a capability itself, which is of a real ability to function in some way: to have a capability is to have the freedom to function or not to function in that way.<sup>177</sup> The second way in which freedom is a part of Sen's capability theory is that a person's capabilities include not only freedoms to function that affect their own well-being proper, but also their “agency” goals—that is, the goals people have to act beyond themselves, deriving from their values more broadly.<sup>178</sup> Assessing a person's “quality of life”, as opposed to just their well-being, will often require looking additionally at their agency. Capabilities are able thus to exceed needs, on Sen's view, because needs (a) describe only things a person needs to possess, rather than what they do and are able to do with them, and (b) are limited to a person's well-being, not their agency.<sup>179</sup> However, although it is possible to define a class of needs that way, it is crucial to notice that, more generally, needs do not always or even usually refer to *having*

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<sup>175</sup> Streeten, “Basic Needs: Some Unsettled Questions”: 976; Stewart, “Basic Needs Approach”, 18.

<sup>176</sup> Stewart, “Basic Needs Approach”, 18. Compare Alkire's conclusion that “It would seem that the basic needs approach, while perhaps lacking an adequate philosophical framework, did have all of the elements of the capabilities approach in view (this is not to say that all so-called ‘basic needs’ programmes exemplified these elements.” See *Valuing Freedoms*, 173.

<sup>177</sup> Robeyns notes that in Sen's earlier work the term “capability” designates the *entire set* of functionings which are open to a person to choose, some actual and the others possible. The notion of a “capability” as a particular freedom to function in one particular way or narrow set of ways (and of a person hence having a range of “capabilities”) comes from other authors, and which Sen only later partly adopted. I follow the later, now more standard usage, not the original sense, allowing for plural ‘capabilities’. See Robeyns, *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice*, 91-2.

<sup>178</sup> Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 287-9. For Sen, making an assessment of a person's advantage in different contexts may involve either a comparison of their “well-being” (as distinct from agency) functionings, well-being capabilities, agency functionings, and/or agency capabilities. See Sen, “Capabilities and Well-Being,” in *The Quality of Life*, ed. Nussbaum and Sen, 35. Different notions of ‘well-being’ and the importance of context is the topic of the following Chapter 3.

<sup>179</sup> Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 251-2.

things. One often also needs to *do* certain things and to *be* certain kinds of person.<sup>180</sup> Thus conceptualising development in terms of needs need not mean aiming to furnish people with the components of a full life directly, treating them only as patients.<sup>181</sup> This possibility is again evident in the actual concepts of need in the BNA. As Paul Streeten wrote in 1979, “The objective of a basic needs approach is to provide *opportunities* for the full development for the individual”.<sup>182</sup> It is true that certain formulations of the BNA are open to criticism about the way they seek to incorporate concern for freedom—namely, including ‘autonomy’ as a separate dimension alongside other needs—where the criticism is that freedom should be a factor in each individual attainment.<sup>183</sup> This seems a valid point to make against the design of some specific BNA proposals. But at issue for the present project is not whether the BNA as actually proposed is adequate either as an account of needs or an approach to development. There is no need for needs to be formulated in its specific ways. What it demonstrates, nevertheless, is the flexibility of the notion of a need—that it can allow, besides needing to have and to do certain things, that people also *need to be capable of doing and have the freedom to do* certain things.

Some proponents of capabilities do already recognise, implicitly and explicitly to varying degrees, that some capabilities are needs—or, equivalently, that some needs are capabilities—, however little acknowledged this appears beyond the following remarks. At least as he characterised it in an early statement, and notwithstanding his objections to the BNA, Sen explained that the concept of capability is an “interpretation of needs”, and “a natural extension of Rawls’s concern with primary goods”.<sup>184</sup> (Where Rawls in turn held that primary goods are “citizens’ needs”, what people “in general need as citizens in a just society”.<sup>185</sup>) Alkire has similarly characterised the CA as “framing needs in terms of human capabilities”.<sup>186</sup> This is clearest where, parallel to basic needs (minimally construed), capabilities theorists have developed a notion of basic capabilities for the purposes of poverty evaluation. In that context, “basic

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<sup>180</sup> E.g., David Wiggins, “An Idea We Cannot Do Without: What Difference Will It Make (e.g. to Moral, Political and Environmental Philosophy) to Recognize and Put to Use a Substantial Conception of Need?,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 57 (2005): 32. Needing to do and be certain things and ways is central also to Max-Neef’s approach to needs, see Manfred Max-Neef, Antonio Elizalde, and Martín Hopenhayn, “Human Scale Development: An Option for the Future,” *Development Dialogue* 1 (1989): 7-80.

<sup>181</sup> Contrary to Sen, *Resources, Values, and Development*, 514.

<sup>182</sup> Paul Streeten, “Basic Needs: Premises and Promises,” *Journal of Policy Modeling* 1 (1979): 136. My emphasis.

<sup>183</sup> Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 170.

<sup>184</sup> Sen, “Equality of What?,” in *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 218. In that text Sen uses the term “basic capability”. As Robeyns explains, at that point basic capability referred to what he later simply called ‘capability’, reserving basic capability for something different, roughly capability corresponding a threshold level of deprivation. See Robeyns, *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice*, 94, also for other conflicting ways that ‘basic capability’ has been used; Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, 45n.

<sup>185</sup> Rawls, “Social Unity and Primary Goods,” in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, ed. Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 172-3, 183.

<sup>186</sup> Alkire, ‘Needs and Capabilities’, in *The Philosophy of Need*, 248. Cf. John O’Neill, “The Overshadowing of Needs,” in *Sustainable Development: Capabilities, Needs, and Well-Being*, ed. Felix Rauschmayer, Ines Omann, and Johannes Frühmann (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 28.

capabilities' refers to the real opportunity to avoid poverty or to meet or exceed a threshold of wellbeing".<sup>187</sup> Alkire in particular defines these not in terms of just any threshold but as retaining a tight link with basic needs. For her a basic capability is "a capability to enjoy a functioning that is defined at a general level and refers to a basic need, in other words a *capability to meet a basic need*".<sup>188</sup> Yet logically there is, in fact, a tighter link than even this. If having some set of basic capabilities defines a threshold of what is *necessary* to avoid poverty (where these are already capabilities to meet basic needs), then it follows that these are capabilities that in one basic sense are things a person needs.<sup>189</sup> In another place Alkire explicitly asserts this, albeit avoiding using the *term* 'need': they are "capabilities which are indispensable to human flourishing".<sup>190</sup> Clearly, by convention in this domain the term 'basic needs' is reserved for *functionings* that are basic, in a minimal sense. But if both basic capabilities and functionings are needs, then it would be natural to redefine a person's basic needs as *comprising both basic capabilities and basic functionings*. Of course, we cannot easily wind back entrenched uses of terms, but if it were possible this proposal would more clearly regiment these concepts, also bringing into the open the legitimacy of using 'need' to refer to things other than what are conventionally designated 'basic needs'.

Even more than this, as we saw in the case of the BNA as actually theorised by its proponents, needs can extend far beyond minimal attainments to include ends. If certain non-basic capabilities are among the constitutively necessary elements of a good human life, then they *eo ipso* count as things that a person needs in that sense. There is a point in a discussion of basic needs at which Sen does seem alive to the idea that basic needs might not yet be so fully specified as to exclude capabilities and valuable ends (although by the end of that discussion he seems to have made his mind up that basic needs are only instrumental commodity requirements). He writes there that if finally valuable functionings and capabilities were included, a basic needs approach would look rather a lot like a capabilities approach.<sup>191</sup> This seems right. By the same token, however, it would also mean that this kind of capabilities account already looks rather a lot like an account of needs—an enriched account, compared to basic needs conceived in minimal, exclusively commodity terms, but a needs account all the same. So we should give up the prejudice that needs = minimally construed basic needs. Concepts of need (and even basic need) are, and should be recognised to be, more flexible than appears commonly supposed. None of this is at all to disparage the concept of capability; as the misconstrual of the concept of basic need demonstrates, it is crucial not to overlook the fact that people need much more than bare necessities, but certain non-minimal capabilities and functionings also.

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<sup>187</sup> Robeyns, *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice*, 95.

<sup>188</sup> Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 163. Alkire's emphasis.

<sup>189</sup> See the following chapter for other senses.

<sup>190</sup> Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 166.

<sup>191</sup> Sen, "The Standard of Living: Lecture II, Lives and Capabilities", 25.

Moreover, this is far from saying that all capabilities are needs. As Ingrid Robeyns shows, the capabilities approach is not monolithic; it can be and is specified in numerous different ways for different purposes. As such, she argues that we should distinguish specific ‘capability theories’ from the approach more broadly.<sup>192</sup> For one thing, not all capabilities are valuable. We would probably also hold back from describing a valuable capability, or a dimension of well-being, as a need if we thought that a person could have a good life without it. As it stands, Sen for one might not easily be able to endorse the condition that every non-basic valuable capability is constitutively necessary for a good life, partly because he opposes the idea of adopting a fixed list of capabilities; for him ‘capability’ names an “evaluative space” of different possible sets of valuable functionings and capabilities.<sup>193</sup> This crucially depends on what “valuable” here means: whether that means the space includes only valuable functionings and capabilities referring to ends that are necessary or also those that are of relatively trivial value. Even so, I argue, whether they are designated so or not, *some* capabilities are needs—namely, whenever they are necessary for a good life.

Nussbaum’s account is a clear example of a theory that endorses the constitutive necessity for a good life of the capabilities it identifies, thereby implicitly counting as a theory of needs. Nussbaum lists ten “central capabilities”<sup>194</sup> that “are important for each and every citizen, in each and every nation, and each is to be treated as an end”.<sup>195</sup> They are “certain functionings [that] are particularly central in human life, in the sense that their presence or absence is typically understood to be a mark of the presence or absence of human life”.<sup>196</sup> More specifically, they are such that “beneath a certain level of capability, in each area, a person has not been enabled to live in a truly human way”<sup>197</sup>—“a life that is worthy of the dignity of the human being”.<sup>198</sup> Nussbaum claims that every person has a right to these which “may not be infringed upon to pursue other types of social advantage”.<sup>199</sup> With Bernard Williams she agrees that which rights people have is more likely determined by important features of well-being rather than it being the rights people have picking out which features of well-being are relevant (in her case, to justice).<sup>200</sup> Like my proposal in the previous chapter about the rights of Mount Taranaki, what

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<sup>192</sup> See Robeyns, *Well-Being, Freedom, and Social Justice*, 29-30 and *passim*.

<sup>193</sup> Sen, “Capabilities and Well-Being”, 32.

<sup>194</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 78-80.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-2.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-8. Williams, “The Standard of Living: Interests and Capabilities,” in *The Standard of Living*, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 100. By contrast, Wolff and de-Shalit are sympathetic to the possibility that rights are what define how much of each functioning people must have in order not be deprived. See *Disadvantage*, 40n.

makes rights an appropriate structure for protecting central capabilities is the incommensurability (in the sense of substitution pluralism) of capabilities' special value: "each and every one of a plurality of [these] distinct goods is of central importance"; they are "separate" in a sense that entails that "[w]e cannot satisfy the need for one of them by giving a larger amount of another one".<sup>201</sup> The question arises, then: why stop short of saying explicitly that these are not only "important" and "central", but *necessary*? Indeed, if Nussbaum is right that some attainment of every capability/functioning is required in order to live a fully human life, then by the logic of 'requirement' her central capabilities are needs, whether she prefers to speak in those terms or not. Their several necessity would also be explanatory of why having one capability cannot serve as well as another.

Marco Grix and Philip McKibbin have suggested that objective-list theories of well-being in general might usefully be characterised as theories of which elements are needed for a good, distinctively human life. One advantage they see in this proposal is that it would meet the charge that a list's items are arbitrary. That the items were all necessary for living well would explain which of them should be present on the list.<sup>202</sup> In Nussbaum's case, central capabilities' necessity would explain why people have a right specifically to those capabilities and not others that are not necessary and as such relatively trivial. Despite Wolff and de-Shalit's similarly preferred terminology of "functionings", they follow Nussbaum in regarding each on her list, with two additions, to be required for flourishing,<sup>203</sup> and in their interviews we see them testing their list against precisely this criterion. Their interviewees' "first task was to name what they thought [are] the basic categories for *essential* functionings".<sup>204</sup> One interviewee was even asked, "What do you think are the main necessities [for] one's well-being?"<sup>205</sup> So it is unclear why they are surprised when they remark, "It is interesting then that not everyone felt comfortable discussing categories of functionings, and that some interviewees settled more easily into 'basic need' talk".<sup>206</sup> Throughout Wolff and de-Shalit's interviews, as they recount them, both their interviewees and they themselves constantly turn to the language of need. Mostly, this language passes unacknowledged, slipping in when they write that "some interviewees formulated a distinction between what is needed for a barely acceptable life, and what is needed for a good life".<sup>207</sup> Where interviewees do not believe that some functioning on Wolff and de-Shalit's list is important, they often frame it as something they do not need, or explain that a life could be

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<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>202</sup> Marco Grix and Philip McKibbin, "Needs and Well-Being," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, ed. Guy Fletcher (Routledge, 2015), 302.

<sup>203</sup> Wolff and de-Shalit, *Disadvantage*, 41.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 188. My emphasis.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 61n.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.



good without it.<sup>208</sup> Wolff and de-Shalit do explicitly entertain the idea that belonging is a need, as per Abraham Maslow's view that it is a psychological prerequisite for a feeling of self-worth, and they seem to endorse its spirit because they move on without rejecting it.<sup>209</sup> There is also a general emphasis on the interdependence of functionings, much of which concerns what is jointly necessary for which other things. For a last, especially revealing example:

What became clear in our initial discussions, and, as we shall see, even more so in the interviews, is that while it is true that in order to flourish as an individual one needs to have one's self-referring functionings developed and sustained—one needs to see that one gets things for oneself—it is equally true that one also needs to be a person who has feelings for others, and is able to express them in appropriate ways. Being able to care for others is part of being a person, at least under normal conditions, and therefore part of one's well-being.<sup>210</sup>

Notice the appeal to constitutive necessity here. We can call these well-being functionings if Wolff and de-Shalit prefer, but if they are things that are necessary for a good life, they are *eo ipso* needs and we should not hesitate to designate theories of this kind in those terms.

#### 4.2 Must every dimension be a need?

Unlike Nussbaum and Wolff and de-Shalit, Griffin, Qizilbash, and Alkire explicitly deny that every dimension must be present to some extent in a person's life. Since, as I have said, that is a plausible condition an account must meet in order to count as a needs account, this strongly suggests that for all I have said so far their dimensions are not needs. Given Griffin's and Qizilbash's hostility to basic needs, similar to Sen's in some respects,<sup>211</sup> and the apparent shallowness of their accounts' pluralism (Qizilbash's account of prudential values closely follows Griffin's in fundamentals), it is especially unobvious in their cases. However, in this section I want to disturb this appearance by pointing out how their disavowals of needs are belied by other aspects of their own accounts. In the course of doing so, I hope to show that although plural dimensions are not *necessarily* needs, it is harder to avoid making them count as such than it might seem, and that allowing them to count as needs even has advantages on these theorists' own terms.

##### 4.2.1 *Different people, different needs*

Given how closely Qizilbash follows Griffin I treat the two together.<sup>212</sup> On the face of it, their prudential values do not behave at all like needs. Griffin's list comprises a "profile of components of a valuable life", things which would make anyone's life go better if they had them, and as

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<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, for example at 53.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>211</sup> See Griffin, *Well-Being*, Ch. 3.

<sup>212</sup> Qizilbash's important contribution here is to apply Griffin's prudential value approach to development.

we have seen they can be traded off by how much “worth to one’s life” they add.<sup>213</sup> Nevertheless, Griffin writes things like this:

Pleasure, accomplishment, autonomy, loving relationships are all valuable. A life with only one or two of them, even in large quantities, would not be the best life.<sup>214</sup>

Although Griffin most often describes prudential values only as ‘important’, this here sounds very much like at least some of them are indispensable. Qizilbash also usually writes in terms of generic value, but he also makes revealing slips, such as when he refers to one value (“aspiration”) as being “a necessary condition for the pursuit of the good”, without which one is “deprived”.<sup>215</sup> Elsewhere he writes, “we do not need a great deal of understanding: it is a basic understanding of ourselves and our world that makes our lives go better”.<sup>216</sup> Presumably the implication is *not* that we do not need any understanding, but that we do need some but only to a relatively minor extent. Among certain other departures from Griffin, Qizilbash also includes basic needs on his list of prudential values, although he makes much of renaming them “basic values”—for the reason that they are not necessarily to be prioritised over less basic values in the way he takes to be a feature of basic needs.<sup>217</sup>

Griffin and Qizilbash’s core motivation for denying that all dimensions are necessary is to allow for interpersonal variability. They object to basic needs and other objective-list accounts that are insensitive to personal differences. On the one hand, Griffin’s and Qizilbash’s prudential values are universal and objective, adding value to anyone’s life if they have them, whatever their beliefs and attitudes may be. But on the other, how much worth they add varies from person to person. Since values can come into conflict, this also means “that there may be very special persons for whom any value on the list (say, accomplishment), though valuable for them as for everybody, conflicts enough with another value (say, freedom from anxiety) for it not, all things considered, to be valuable for them to have”.<sup>218</sup> Qizilbash similarly allows that some person might give up everything besides “minimal nourishment, in order to achieve self-discipline”, and that “that also could be a prudentially good life”.<sup>219</sup> Other theorists, those who reject the apparent substitution monism of Griffin’s and Qizilbash’s accounts, might also reject the idea that each dimension is a need on a similar basis. Substitution pluralism follows from necessity, it might be held, but perhaps the reverse does not hold: dimensions might be severally ‘important’, adding value to people’s lives in ways that are somehow fundamentally essentially different, without each being a necessary part of anyone’s. Alkire’s account might appear to be an example

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<sup>213</sup> Griffin, *Well-Being*, 114.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>215</sup> Qizilbash, “The Concept of Well-Being” *Economics and Philosophy* 14 (1998): 68.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*: 65.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*: 66. Compare also Griffin, *Well-Being*, 45.

<sup>218</sup> Griffin, *Well-Being*, 33.

<sup>219</sup> Qizilbash, “The Concept of Well-Being”: 67n.

of this position, as, similarly to Griffin's and Qizilbash's view in this respect, it "allows for the possibility that individuals may be 'flourishing' even if one or more dimensions is not valued or present very much in their lives and commitments".<sup>220</sup>

Allowing for variation between persons is central to the account I develop over the course of this project, so I am highly receptive to Griffin's, Qizilbash's, and Alkire's concern. Still, it leads us astray if we suppose that it is essentially at odds with need. Griffin writes,

All needs accounts rest on a distinction between, on the one hand, things that we aim at simply as normal human beings rather than as the particular human beings we are, things that are both necessary to and sufficient for a recognizably human existence, and, on the other hand, things that, as the individuals we are, we choose to go for.<sup>221</sup>

Rejecting the insensitivity of material basic needs to individual differences is also a core motivation for adopting the capabilities approach. Besides ignoring the variety in people's ends, a focus on needs in terms of commodities risks ignoring differences in how people are able to use them and convert them into valuable functionings and capabilities.<sup>222</sup> However, it is simply not true that a needs theory must propose that one size fits all. We can easily allow that *different people need different things*—in terms of resources required to achieve given ends, yes, but different ends too. This seems a natural thing to say, if we are not in the grip of the prejudice that needs = minimal basic needs. This connects with my suggestion in the previous chapter that certain things that are precious to particular people may be accurately characterised as entailing needs—and needs specifically for them. In this somewhat different context of pluralist theories of well-being, giving up the prejudice means that: (a) 'not every person in a group under evaluation needs all of the items on a list' is compatible with (b) 'those items designate *the kinds of things* that members of that group need'. I am not claiming that (b) follows from (a). But even so, Griffin, Qizilbash, and Alkire may be interpreted as in effect proposing generalisations about needs of this kind.

For Griffin, although there is wide variation between people, he claims that for each person there is a mix of prudential values, different values realised to different extents, that is best or most suited to them.<sup>223</sup> The good life for Griffin's person especially prone to anxiety does not require accomplishment. It follows that it is not a need for them; there are other things that they need to live the life that best suits them but it is not one of them. Griffin describes accomplishment as "giving weight and substance to our lives", alternatively "avoiding wasting our lives".<sup>224</sup> For other persons, then, if the good life suited to them *does* include accomplishment, this certainly sounds like they had better have it. Almost by definition, avoiding wasting it is necessary

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<sup>220</sup> Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 53, 165.

<sup>221</sup> Griffin, *Well-Being*, 53.

<sup>222</sup> Robeyns, *Well-Being, Freedom, and Social Justice*, 113-4.

<sup>223</sup> Griffin, *Well-Being*, 60.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

for a good life, and if for some this requires accomplishment, then that is necessary for them to have good lives. Those things are needs *for them*—in a special, personal sense of needs particular to particular persons.

Although Griffin would likely be unhappy about this proposal to implicate needs in his own account, against his wishes, there is a way they could be very useful for him. For him, the different ‘mixes’ of prudential goods appropriate to different people partly depend on their differing capacities and skills.<sup>225</sup> But they do not only depend on these, nor only on people’s mere likings or tastes for different things. They appear to depend on something more fundamental to themselves. He draws a distinction between, on the one hand, objects of a person’s desires that are “capricious or accidental or arbitrary”, and, on the other hand, a person’s “non-universal, non-neutral values”, the kinds of things that they might have as a life goal or central commitment. He is concerned to distinguish his informed-desire account of well-being (which tends towards objectivity) from other more subjective sorts of desire account. About such non-universal values, he writes, “And it is odd to think even that we choose them; generally they choose us, by being the sorts of values that we only have to perceive clearly to adopt as goals”.<sup>226</sup> It seems, then, that a person can find it somehow crucial or irresistible (essential?) to their life that they are able to pursue some goal they have. The useful role needs can play here is in distinguishing the serious values constituting the good of some person’s life from the satisfaction of their trivial desires—and without any implication that everyone’s serious values, their needs, are the same.

There is another reason well-being pluralists like Griffin and Qizilbash might resist considering their dimensions needs. I mentioned in section 4.1 the Grix-McKibbin procedure for deciding whether an item should be on a list of goods contributing to well-being, and I argued that following it seems to describe some of what the pluralists I discussed earlier are up to. Yet the procedure seems to presuppose operating with such a notion as a ‘good life’ *sans phrase*, without needing to specify how good it is—simply opposed to a life that fails to be good in that way. It suggests the idea of sufficiency, that people must have at least a certain extent of attainment along each dimension in order to have a sufficiently good life, where otherwise we cannot say without qualification that they have or had a good life or not. But this would ignore the method that pluralist philosophers themselves commonly use to justify their lists. This method is to take two lives that are equal in every possible way and consider whether adding attainments of some good make a life *better* than another.<sup>227</sup> Indeed, many well-being pluralists do seem to think of their dimensions as goods that a person can simply have more or less of, like silos that they can fill to greater or lesser extents. This does not contradict the claim that Griffin and Qizilbash im-

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<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>227</sup> *E.g.*, Fletcher, “A Fresh Start”: 218; Hooker, “The Elements of Well-Being”: 19.

plicate needs, however: it could still be that a person needs to have some of level of each of these goods in order to have an unqualifiedly good life. So needs may coexist with silos. Having enough of one dimension may not be substitutable by having more of another of which one already has enough; there could be complete substitution monism across dimensions outside of this constraint. I believe that this is the correct interpretation of Griffin's and Qizilbash's positions. Their prudential goods are like silos, but there is strong evidence that they also believe a person needs at least some threshold degree of each if they are to have the good life suited to them in particular.

#### 4.2.2 *Flexible sets and needs*

Alkire and many other capability theorists follow Sen in rejecting the notion that one fixed list should be chosen.<sup>228</sup> This stands in contrast with Nussbaum, who as I said intends her list to be universally applicable, and claims that in every society people have a right to certain centrally important capabilities. Although Nussbaum is very concerned to account for cross-cultural variation, the way she does this is by appeal to “multiple realizability”: she claims that although the same ten capabilities are central everywhere and to everyone, they are concretely specified in different culturally specific forms.<sup>229</sup> In the contrasting approach of Alkire and others closer to Sen in this respect, the appropriate capability set need not be derived from an all-purpose template of capabilities described at a very high level of generality. Indeed, although Nussbaum's central capabilities might be suited to specifying constitutional principles, which she indeed takes as her main target, their generality and fixity in fact make them unsuited to other purposes, such as well-being or poverty measurement and evaluation.<sup>230</sup> Instead, for Alkire and Sen, the selection of capabilities may be based directly on features specific to the context of measurement and evaluation, influenced also by the purposes of the evaluation and other pragmatic considerations. There is a process of generalisation over personal differences to some extent—some single set of capabilities must be agreed to serve as a standard of measurement or evaluation for the target group as a whole—, but this is something to be undertaken for the purposes of each application.<sup>231</sup> Among other methods for arriving at such sets, Alkire advocates identifying what she terms “general functionings”, which are important general types of valuable functionings that are in a sense multiply realisable, but locally, not necessarily common to all of humanity, upon which inter-personal and perhaps cross-cultural agreement within the group can be reached to serve as a standard. For example, as Sen writes, “there may be more agreement on the need to be entertained, or to have the capability to take part in the life of the community, than on the

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<sup>228</sup> Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 29; Sen, “Capabilities and Well-Being”, 47; Sen, “Capabilities, Lists, and Public Reason: Continuing the Conversation,” *Feminist Economics* 10 (2004): 80.

<sup>229</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 77.

<sup>230</sup> Compare Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 38.

<sup>231</sup> See Alkire, “The Capability Approach and Well-Being Measurement for Public Policy”, 619.

form that entertainment must take or on the particular way the life of the community may be shared”.<sup>232</sup> But in this way the set is chosen from the bottom up, as it were, a generalisation made for a specific purpose, rather than beginning with universals and then interpreting particulars as instances of those from the top down. Which capabilities are valuable may thus be particular to specific individuals and groups in a way unlike accounts of universal lists such as basic needs and Nussbaum’s central capabilities. Crucially, this disconnection of particular selected sets from any universal set overarching all contexts means that not every capability that is important to a person must stand as a capability that is essentially common to all of humanity or even to all of the group only differently manifested. That is to say, and as I quoted Alkire above, even given a set of capabilities selected for a particular application, not every person may need to have every one of those capabilities in order to flourish.<sup>233</sup> And again, this is why such a set could list the kinds of things that *some but not all* members of a group under evaluation need. Some people may have needs particular to themselves and other people similar to themselves, but which are not sufficiently widely shared to be included in a set of functionings and/or capabilities serving as a common basis for certain kinds of evaluation and decision-making taken by or for the wider group of which they are members. But they are still in a particular sense those persons’ needs.

The capabilities approach is highly flexible, and as I have mentioned it would be far too strong to claim that all valuable capabilities selected in this way must be needs—at least if “valuable” is allowed to include gradable and even trivial value alongside essential attainments.<sup>234</sup> One thing we can say, however, is that there is nothing preventing the foregoing approach I have sketched from identifying sets of functionings and/or capabilities that (a) are highly particular to a target group, not based on universals, (b) list functionings and/or capabilities that are needs for members of that group, but that also (c) are not needs for all members of that group. It is highly plausible that the capabilities sets in these contexts often list needs even if they are not explicitly described using that word. If what are at stake in the context are ‘especially valuable’ or “central” capabilities, critical to certain highly specific people’s well-being (and not necessarily to others), without which they could not unqualifiedly flourish, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that such a set lists the kinds of things those people need.

## 5. Conclusion: why needs?

One task of this chapter has been to consider further evidence for the existence of incommensurability in many people’s understandings of the structure of their well-being. In sections 1 and 2 I argued that this is confirmed in the proliferation of accounts that portray well-being as hav-

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<sup>232</sup> Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, 109. See Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 31, 53.

<sup>233</sup> Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 53, 165.

<sup>234</sup> Perhaps not otherwise.

ing plural, incommensurable components or dimensions. The relevant form of incommensurability, found both in lay evidence and in these accounts, is non-substitutability/-equivalence, or “substitution pluralism”. In section 3 I detailed the havoc substitution pluralism appears to play for multidimensional accounts. I alluded to the possibility that needs could play an important role in more adequately addressing these problems. In section 4 I argued that many proponents of multidimensional well-being evaluation already make heavy use of concepts of need, explicitly or implicitly to varying degrees. In effect I have attempted to subvert some of these theorists’ own accounts, drawing conclusions from them that they did not intend and would not necessarily welcome. Well-being pluralists may be theorists of needs, I have argued, unbeknownst to themselves.

Even so, one might wonder what purpose this last argument has. Much of it has been semantic. However, its implications are not *only* semantic. Mostly these have not at all been intended to be hostile. In fact I propose that embracing my interpretations explicitly and giving concepts of need more prominence could strengthen pluralist theories in at least three general ways. One important contribution relates to Alkire’s acknowledgement, following Wiggins, that the rhetorical force of ‘need’ can be a powerful advantage that the terms ‘functioning’ and ‘capability’ lack.<sup>235</sup> This need not be conceded if capabilities, functionings, or dimensional attainments otherwise-conceived are, at least in many important instances, themselves needs. In many cases it can be forcefully and truly asserted that a person needs some functioning or capability even though it is non-minimal and/or particular to that person. Second, need supports an important qualitative distinction between the trivial and the non-trivial that capabilities theorists and other well-being pluralists can readily draw on. Third, understanding certain components or dimensions of well-being as needs vindicates the incommensurability that blocks their being straightforwardly traded off, which is otherwise difficult to justify convincingly. As I argued in Chapter 1, this connection is strongly suggested by the logical relation between need and non-substitutability. We may often be asked, ‘Why can’t a person just have lots of one dimension and none or barely any of another?’; ‘Why could the former not substitute for the latter?’ We can answer, ‘It is because they need to attain the latter one too.’ In the course of my textual arguments I have at the same time tried to show that needs do not necessarily have the negative features so frequently attributed to them—I hope removing barriers to accepting my general proposal. Moreover, despite explicit disavowals of basic needs, capability and other scholars often at times already seem quite comfortable using the language of need.

There is the important question of why a person would need certain finally valuable dimensions or components of well-being—as opposed to them just being generically beneficial or

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<sup>235</sup> Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 162-3. See Wiggins, “Claims of Need,” in *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5-6, and the following chapter.

‘valuable’. We have a somewhat clearer notion of how basic (in the sense of minimal) goods, functionings or capabilities could be necessary, although which goods to include and the minimum thresholds for which they are necessary can be difficult to define. In effect, Nussbaum has an answer for why her central capabilities are necessary, although her account appears limited in its application across contexts. The answer I propose is that the status of many capabilities and dimensions as needs is grounded ultimately in the kind of ‘personal needs’ I hinted at in the previous chapter, which the individual ascribes to themselves in the context of their evaluation of their own well-being. Looking to intrapersonal structure and deliberation may illuminate interpersonal structure and comparison, and indeed, I believe that need is a common thread running through disparate concepts, approaches, and evaluative contexts in the theory of well-being. In the following chapter I turn to the way the concept of need has been treated within philosophy, which potentially presents a serious obstacle to this unifying ambition. Philosophers tend to have quite fixed ideas about what needs are, and for them they are not these. Many would likely object that my proposals stretch the notion of need too far. So it is time to approach the conceptualisation of need more directly than my oblique and unsystematic remarks have so far done.



Simply because we do in fact make interpersonal comparisons of well-being does not mean that we understand the basis of these comparisons or that we should accept them as sound.<sup>236</sup>

The concept of a ‘need’ is extremely elastic.<sup>237</sup>

## Chapter 3

### Concepts of need and well-being

In Chapters 1 and 2 I presented incommensurability as a phenomenon appearing in two types of approach to well-being evaluation. This was not a matter of presenting neutral facts—as if that were possible—but of arguing for certain interpretations over others. In each case I argued that the relevant form of incommensurability observed is that of what we can variously call non-equivalence, non-substitutability, or substitution pluralism. In Chapter 1 I proposed that we can understand at least some opposition to CBA as expressing the view that especially significant things cannot be evaluated in terms that would permit their being traded off against other things. In Chapter 2 I pointed to proponents of many multidimensional well-being constructs understanding increments and decrements along discrete dimensions to be non-compensable. There is certain interview evidence that these theoretical notions are also commonly held in wider society. My interpretation of the apparent non-substitutability evidenced in both areas went further, however, in suggesting that it may be accounted for by positing *need* as an important feature of the structure of well-being—at least, in that of those persons for whom certain highly significant things are non-substitutable. In the case of multidimensional well-being, since many accounts typically hold that a person cannot do without having a sufficient attainment along each dimension, I argued that in a formal sense these already constitute needs accounts. They propose constitutively necessary elements of well-being. I anticipate resistance to all these proposals, already suggested by hostility to the notion of need encountered in the previous chapter; most commonly what are designated a persons’ needs exclude attainments of these kinds. So in this chapter I consider the notion more directly, both to defend these suggestions and to begin to more precisely elaborate the account of personal needs I propose.

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<sup>236</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 78.

<sup>237</sup> Joel Feinberg, *Social Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), 111.

Section 1 introduces the concept of categorical need and distinguishes such needs as philosophers have defended them from the personal needs I foreshadowed in each of the previous chapters. The notion of personal needs appears inconsistent with the dominant form of needs account and objectionable to its defenders. The response to this concern requires a long digression from needs in section 2, into the parallel case of well-being. ‘Well-being’ is taken to refer to a wide variety of concepts, which a recent account explains as owing to its having contextually variable semantic content. Section 3 proposes that ‘need’ is suited to an analogous contextualist treatment. This supports the claim that multiple concepts of need exist that, while different, each count as categorical. They are able to coexist because they pertain to different contexts of evaluation. Although legitimating personal need as a genuine need concept is the chief objective of this chapter, it performs several additional roles. Not least it precisely articulates the concept and the centrality to it of categorical force and objectivity—the reality of which is defended in the following Chapter 4. It also introduces and discusses important relations between concepts, empirical phenomena, and theories in general. Defending the sensitivity of concepts to evaluative context, especially to purpose, is vital for later discussion in Chapter 6. However, while these latter propositions are highly significant, this chapter does not attempt a thoroughgoing defence of the contextual-variantist approach to ‘well-being’. Although I explain its motivation, in the spirit of normal science this project adopts it as a paradigm for understanding the theory and practice of well-being evaluation. My contribution is to adapt it to the concept of ‘need’—which is of course in any case closely related to, if not included under, well-being as a topic. Like many aspects of the main argument of this project, its plausibility depends to a significant extent on its coherence with the whole.

An appendix discusses certain positions in the philosophical literature on needs that the chapter otherwise omits. Although they are irrelevant to the argument (I show there why that is so), I consider them for the sake of completeness.

## 1. The concept of categorical need

### 1.1 Hypothetical and categorical needs

A general schema for something that a person  $P$  might need is:  $P$  attains some valued objective  $O$  only if they fulfil condition  $N$ .<sup>238</sup> Different types of needs are distinguished by how they specify the kinds of things standing in place of  $N$  and  $O$ , and by the reason for which  $N$  is necessary for attaining  $O$ .<sup>239</sup> Most common by far is instrumental necessity, where  $N$  refers to a means without which, in the circumstances, some end cannot be reached.<sup>240</sup> There is also constitutive necessity, as mentioned in the previous chapter, where  $O$  is a composite that in order to obtain requires  $N$  as a part. We might think of other ways a thing may be a necessary precondition for an objective besides being a necessary means or constituent, legal necessity perhaps. For some objective to be lawful the institution of (a) certain statute(s) may be legally necessary. As I also mentioned, although discussion of needs often puts people in mind of things a person must *have*,  $N$  can also stand for something they need to *do*, to *be*, or to *be capable of* having, doing, or being.

Instrumental and constitutive necessity are both hypothetical, in the sense that neither itself presupposes that the relevant  $O$  has any value, that is, that it would be necessary, good, or right for  $O$  itself to obtain. For example, glue may be instrumentally necessary for sticking my pencil to a wall, without this implying that anything is to be gained by my doing or its being so. Based on the belief that all necessity is conditional in this way on the value of the objective it serves, many have disregarded needs as never having any inherent normative significance.<sup>241</sup> The value of needs would consist only in their effectiveness in enabling their objective(s) to be reached or promoted, perhaps also in the positive or negative by-products they have for other objectives.

Traditionally, nevertheless, appeal is also made to a different class of needs. Ostensibly these refer to objective, unimpeachable interests that are of qualitatively greater, if not overriding, importance than fickle desires for relatively trivial ends.<sup>242</sup> Minimal sustenance might be such a

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<sup>238</sup> There is another usage of ‘need’ that does not fit this schema, that of a ‘drive’. A person or creature has such a need if and only if they have an innate impulse motivating them in response to something lacked. The *locus classicus* of this different need concept is A. H. Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 50 (1943): 370-96. I set these ‘needs’ aside, because whereas needs as I am interested in them are normatively relevant, psychologists’ purposes in positing their ‘needs’ are to explain and predict behaviour. Of course, if a person recognises that they need something in a normative sense and acts on that basis, then needs will be explanatory. But needs in the normative sense discussed here are not defined in terms of their tendency to motivate. A person may recognise that they need something in this sense but remain unmoved. A person may also need something in the normative sense that they do not lack. See Garrett Thomson, *Needs* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 13-5.

<sup>239</sup>  $O$  here need not be some one-off attainment; it may instead involve maintaining some state or activity over time. For example, food is needed more or less continually in order not to become hungry. Compare also the “standing needs” I define in Chapter 4 §2.4.

<sup>240</sup> Most often strictly what is instrumentally necessary is that there be *any* member of the set of possible sufficient means to attaining  $O$ .

<sup>241</sup> Grix and McKibbin, “Needs and Well-Being”, 296. *E.g.*, Brian Barry, *Political Argument* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965); Alan R. White, *Modal Thinking* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971).

<sup>242</sup> Thomson, *Needs*, xi.

need. It might also be claimed that people non-instrumentally need such things as being educated, participating in meaningful relationships and communities, involvement in the arts and other creative endeavours, and rewarding employment. Although this concept is widely used it faces influential objectors. Many conservatives and liberals in particular take the view of the previous paragraph, regarding claims to these needs with deep scepticism.<sup>243</sup> For them, appeals to these in politics are typically mendacious, a way of rhetorically dressing up desires for special pleading<sup>244</sup> (consider a child who desperately wants a new toy). At worst this notion of need is dangerous, they think, liable to support paternalists and authoritarians wishing to override people's expressed preferences in the name of their 'true' interests.<sup>245</sup> Yet the fact that it is open to abuse does not impugn a concept; neither does it mean there are no legitimate uses of it. For example, the ideal of instead promoting welfare is not undermined by the possibility that some persons might defraud policies to do so of additional undeserved resources by falsely claiming to have incorrigibly expensive tastes or handicaps.<sup>246</sup> Similarly, questionable claims to possess certain rights do not undermine anyone else's genuinely possessing rights of other kinds. So objectors to categorical needs would do better to target those who misuse it than the concept itself.<sup>247</sup> However, although it may often be co-opted, the most plausible explanation for the rhetorical force 'need' possesses is not that it is contrived but that many people possess a concept of genuinely important ethical considerations of a distinctive kind. It should be no surprise that mainstream economic theory tends to contradict this appearance. That theory has no place for values a rational agent might have that do not trade off, so if it is supposed to represent all of the agent's values then according to it there are no categorical needs. If 'need' is used there at all, Des Gasper writes, it is "merely a synonym for strong preference".<sup>248</sup> Of course, although the concept is current, it is another question whether it is a real possibility, whether it latches onto anything in reality. But then that is the topic of this project. The most serious objections concern the metaphysics of needs, and, as I have already mentioned, how satisfactorily needs can resist aggregation after all. I return to those in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively.

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<sup>243</sup> Ross Fitzgerald, "Introduction," in *Human Needs and Politics*, ed. Ross Fitzgerald (Rushcutters Bay, NSW: Pergamon Press, 1977), xv-vi.

<sup>244</sup> Antony Flew, "Wants or Needs, Choices or Commands," in *Human Needs and Politics*, 216; Wiggins, "Claims of Need", 5.

<sup>245</sup> Flew, "Wants or Needs", 225ff. Herbert Marcuse, heavily influenced by Marx, is probably the most prominent defender of the distinction between the "false" needs "superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression", and the "true" needs referring to the "optimal development of the individual". See his *One Dimensional Man* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964), 4-6.

<sup>246</sup> Cf. Ronald Dworkin, "What Is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 10 (1981): 185-246.

<sup>247</sup> Thomson, *Needs*, 102. Bernard Williams makes the same point about "real interests" in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1985), 40-1.

<sup>248</sup> Gasper, "Needs and Well-Being," in *Handbook of Economics and Ethics*, ed. Jan Peil and Irene van Staveren (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2009), 351.

From a different political quarter, an egalitarian criticism contends that a focus on needs in fact allows conservatives to reduce the scope of the claims of justice they recognise—if needs are minimal, and relatively easily satisfied, an ideal of need satisfaction might permit otherwise vastly unequal socio-economic outcomes above that level. Better focus on inequality, which has a wider reach.<sup>249</sup> My defence of needs does not address this critique, which is largely a matter of rhetoric and strategy—I hope few would argue that both should not or could not be addressed in principle—, but I want to register several polemical replies before moving on. First, it is not as if a focus on equality does not have its own strategic pitfalls: however misplaced, casting egalitarianism as the ‘politics of envy’ has served as effective propaganda for its opponents. Moreover, a focus on the unfairness inequality is produced by or embodies rhetorically downplays the *harms* it *produces*, which in their seriousness needs are well-placed to describe. Need also seems vital in accounting for the value of the environment to humans, and any efforts to theorise and move towards sustainability and sufficiency.<sup>250</sup> Reference to need, under-theorised as it is, is in any case ubiquitous in actual politics and policy discussions.<sup>251</sup> And lastly, crucially, and as this project argues, needs are in fact not limited to minimal attainments in the first place.

Although the notion that certain needs are inherently ethically salient has had defenders in different times and places I focus on the discussions of anglophone analytic philosophers. These philosophers have variously called them “absolute”, “categorical”,<sup>252</sup> “non-contingent”,<sup>253</sup> and “fundamental”<sup>254</sup> needs. I will use “categorical”. In the case of these needs *N* is necessary for an *O* that is not simply desired or desirable, but that is “unforsakeable”,<sup>255</sup> something a person simply “cannot do without”.<sup>256</sup> Garrett Thomson asserts that “seriousness is part of the logic of ‘need’”.<sup>257</sup> The broad consensus is that these needs are those conditions that are somehow indispensable for human life.<sup>258</sup> In this philosophers follow Aristotle, who defined one sense of ‘necessity’ as

that without which, as a joint cause, it is not possible to live, as for instance breathing and nourishment are necessary for an animal, because it is incapable of existing without them.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Robert E. Goodin, “The Priority of Needs,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 45 (1985): 624.

<sup>250</sup> Gough, “Climate Change and Sustainable Welfare: The Centrality of Human Needs”.

<sup>251</sup> Wiggins: “Claims of Need”, 4-5.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>253</sup> Reader, *Needs and Moral Necessity*, 57

<sup>254</sup> Thomson, *Needs*, 8.

<sup>255</sup> Wiggins: “An Idea We Cannot Do Without”: 30.

<sup>256</sup> Thomson, *Needs*, 8.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>258</sup> Soran Reader, “Introduction”, *The Philosophy of Need* (Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 57), Soran Reader, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>259</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* V, 1015a20, cited in Wiggins, “Claims of Need”, 25.

The things a human being “cannot do without” in life include more than merely surviving, however. In Soran Reader’s view, above mere survival we should understand the needs of any organism (or even inanimate object) as those conditions essential to their continued existence as the kind of thing they are.<sup>260</sup> For Gillian Brock, the needs of a person more specifically are those conditions that enable them to continue to “function as an agent”.<sup>261</sup> David Wiggins and David Miller define a person’s categorical needs as those conditions necessary to meet the prevailing standards of a minimally decent standard of living.<sup>262</sup> In this Wiggins and Miller follow Adam Smith’s inclusion among “necessities”

not only the commodities which are indispensable for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without.<sup>263,264</sup>

Although on this view needs are relativised to prevailing social standards, these conditions are supposed to be the same for everyone in that society. This is not to say that each person needs the same specific things irrespective of their circumstances, only that which things those are always refers back to the more general needs of human persons (in that time and place) as such.<sup>265</sup>

I should note that I have deliberately simplified some of these definitions. Some philosophers think that it is vital that the categorical character of categorical need be defined directly in terms of the avoidance of *harm*, which (ostensibly) has an independent definition (*e.g.*, not having a decent standard of living). For this reason, utterances of ‘*P* [categorically] needs *N*’ are supposedly not “elliptical”, standing in for ‘*P* needs *N* in order to avoid some harm’, since the latter on these philosophers view is a tautology. In an appendix to this chapter I argue that in addition to being implausible in themselves, more importantly nothing is lost by eliminating these features. While I consider them there for the sake of thoroughness, I leave them out of the main discussion in the interests of maintaining focus on what is important for the purposes of this study.

## 1.2 Features typically attributed to categorical needs

However conditions ‘necessary for human life’ are filled out specifically, philosophers commonly view categorical needs as having the following essential features:

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<sup>260</sup> Reader, *Needs and Moral Necessity*, 58

<sup>261</sup> Gillian Brock, “Morally Important Needs,” *Philosophia* 26 (1998): 175.

<sup>262</sup> Wiggins, “Claims of Need”, 11ff; David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 212.

<sup>263</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry into Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations*, (1776), cited by Wiggins, “Claims of Need”, 26, and Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, 210.

<sup>264</sup> As a variation on this idea, Joanna Mack and Stewart Lansley define a “socially perceived necessity” to be something that at least half of society believes that all adults should be able to afford. See their *Poor Britain* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985).

<sup>265</sup> See Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, 211.

- (i) *Absolute*. Categorical needs are, or are absolutely necessary for, objectives necessary for their own sake.
- (ii) *Well-Being*. What is necessary for human beings for its own sake here is maintaining a certain state of well-being.
- (iii) *Minimal*. The necessary well-being state is quite minimal.
- (iv) *Universal*. The relevant conception of well-being is one of human persons (at least in some society) as such, and hence these needs are universally shared by such persons (at least within that society).
- (v) *Moral*. A person's needs align with pro tanto obligations on others to respond.

Two further conditions are typically considered essential to categorical needs. They underlie the contrast commonly drawn between needs and wants. Of course, it would be a confusion to think of needs and wants as opposites: there can be things a person both wants and needs, and things they neither want nor need.<sup>266</sup> Nonetheless, the popular contrast points to the sort of objectivity that categorical needs are supposed to possess and subjective desires lack. What this involves is:

- (vi) *Real*. There are facts of the matter about what a person needs independent of their actually, presently being aware of them.
- (vii) *Inescapable*. A person's needs are not subject to their will, at least not directly, in the sense that a person cannot just decide what they do and do not need.

Note that *Real* consists only in what it is explicitly stated above. It does *not* take on any further commitments common to 'realist' positions, such as the value involved being 'external', mind or attitude independent, universal, or intrinsic. As the following chapter confirms, not all of reality meets those conditions and nor is it any worse for that. The last requirement is the other topic that chapter covers in detail, but for now I hope it is intuitive enough to pass without much comment.

### 1.3 Personal needs

Although a common assumption seems to be that categorical needs must satisfy *all* of (i) - (vii), I argue that only (i) *Absolute*, (ii) *Well-Being*, (vi) *Real*, and (vii) *Inescapable*, and not (iii) *Minimal*, (iv) *Universal*, and (v) *Moral*, are essential to the concept. I defend the existence of categorical needs, but I argue that some fulfil only the former and not the latter conditions. First let me explain why (i), (ii), (vi), and (vii) are indeed truly essential. *Absolute* is necessary simply as the starting assumption that there are non-hypothetical needs: for a need to be non-hypothetical the object-

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<sup>266</sup> Some of Griffin's hostility to needs, and possible resistance to my constructive suggestion in the previous chapter, may stem from taking this contrast too seriously. He writes, "There is a lot that falls outside the class of 'basic needs', and so in the class of 'mere desires' ..." (*Well-Being*, 329, emphasis added).

ive *O* must somehow itself be necessary.<sup>267</sup> We should also accept *Well-Being* just because we are interested in what human persons need in living their lives. The objectivity which conditions *Real* and *Inescapable* express also seems genuinely essential: whatever else it means more specifically that a need is not merely hypothetical, it is plausible that it cannot be so contingent as to depend on the person's wanting or being aware of it.

Contemporary philosophers of need have wanted to defend the necessity of *Minimal*, *Universal*, and *Moral* because their interests and purposes are specifically moral and political. So the essential connection with moral obligation, *Moral*, is a basic assumption. Miller and Wiggins seek to identify categorical needs in such a way that they form the basis for certain principles of justice.<sup>268</sup> As above, for the latter authors the determining factors of categorical needs, over and above mere subsistence, are legitimate expectations generated by social standards of decency. These are bounded and made uniform, however, by the fact that such standards are essentially contested.<sup>269</sup> As Miller puts it, the relevant interests must be “validated” by other members of society.<sup>270</sup> This contestability can be expected to ensure that the agreed standard will be minimal.<sup>271</sup> I take Miller and Wiggins to be expressing the dominant view, corresponding roughly with the idea that morally salient needs are the minimally construed basic needs of the human being as such. David Braybrooke's view is another representative example. Although he gives social convention a much smaller role, he similarly distinguishes “adventitious needs”—which in my terms are hypothetical or contingent, since they “come and go with particular projects”—from “course-of-life needs” “which every human being may be expected to have at least at some stage of life”. The former depend on preferences and do not normally generate moral or political demands; the latter do not depend on preferences and do imply obligations.<sup>272</sup> Again similar to Miller and Wiggins, Braybrooke argues that in fixing a concept of needs that are not merely adventitious we must “make sure [...] that [it] can be used effectively to evaluate policies”.<sup>273</sup>

By contrast with this dominant view on which categorical needs are essentially moralised, universal, and minimal, I claim that there is another kind of categorical need people can have,

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<sup>267</sup> Thomson and Wiggins frame needs' absoluteness somewhat differently, but as I argue in the appendix to this chapter this is the better way of understanding it.

<sup>268</sup> Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, 204; Wiggins, “Claims of Need”, 25.

<sup>269</sup> Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, 209-11; Wiggins, “Claims of Need”, 14-5. Compare also T. M. Scanlon, “Preference and Urgency”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975): 655-69.

<sup>270</sup> Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, 209.

<sup>271</sup> As Goodin (“The Priority of Needs”: 624) observes, “A large part of the appeal of notions of needs in liberal democracies surely lies in the fact that, both politically and morally, they constitute a kind of least common denominator which proves enormously useful in building coalitions among diverse interests”.

<sup>272</sup> Braybrooke, *Meeting Needs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 29, 32.

<sup>273</sup> Braybrooke, “The Concept of Needs, with a Heartwarming Offer of Aid to Utilitarianism,” in *Necessary Goods: Our Responsibility to Meet Others' Needs*, ed. Gillian Brock (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 58.



‘personal needs’. These are things a person cannot do without in their lives fulfilling instead conditions that negate (iii)-(v). Taking the first two:

- (iii\*) *Expansive*. Personal needs are required for life as in *Life*, but not only for a minimal standard of living; rather they are constituents of the person’s flourishing.
- (iv\*) *Particular*. Personal needs are not necessarily universally possessed, but may rather be particular to a person, particular to what matters to them personally.

Elizabeth Anscombe also endorsed *Expansive*, explaining that what she meant by the claim that a person or other organism needs something is that “it won’t flourish unless it has it”.<sup>274</sup> Interestingly, Brock and Reader already break with the dominant view on both (iii) and (iv) by arguing that some needs are particular to certain particular persons, and which moreover are “not basic needs in the sense that satisfying them is not, strictly speaking, necessary for the continued life of a human agent”.<sup>275</sup> However, needs for Reader and Brock are still moralised. Reader identifies categorical status with moral demandingness, associating non-moral need with merely hypothetical need for trivial or immoral ends: “like the need of the stew for a carrot, or the need of an addict for a fix”, and “like the need of an abusive husband for a pretext to attack his wife”, respectively.<sup>276</sup> On Reader and Brock’s view the nature of the distinctive harms engendered by a person’s lacking what they need directly entails that categorical needs present urgent moral demands.<sup>277</sup> And indeed, their non-basic needs necessarily generate moral demands; the difference is that they do so not in public morality (basic needs are appropriate there), but in private morality.<sup>278</sup> This suggests that a person’s counting as ‘having their needs met’ means something different in public contexts from private contexts; which persons’ ‘needs’ present demands to which other people may also differ. Yet although we would expect private-morality needs to typically be less minimal than the needs suited to public morality, their moralised nature would still limit them to a significant extent. Since we consider most healthy, adult people on the whole to be responsible for their own flourishing, once certain conditions are in place, moralising the determinants of categorical needs would limit them to consisting in just such basic conditions—except perhaps in the case of people who are utterly dependent on others such as children and those who are severely incapacitated. Brock and Reader’s position is an advance on the dominant view; it is highly plausible that there are notions of non-basic need suited to some moral contexts and

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<sup>274</sup> Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 7, see also 18-9. In the case of human beings the difficulty for her was in having a satisfactory account of human flourishing.

<sup>275</sup> Brock and Reader, “Needs-Centered Ethical Theory,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 36 (2002): 430-1.

<sup>276</sup> Reader, *Needs and Moral Necessity*, 54.

<sup>277</sup> Reader and Brock, “Needs, Moral Demands and Moral Theory,” *Utilitas* 16 (2004): 252.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*: 256-7.

not others. But I propose that the notion of need can differ again in the evaluative context of how a person's life is going *for them*. Thus by contrast the personal needs I identify there are not essentially moralised. That is, their definition is not constrained by any role they may or may not play in moral contexts. They are nevertheless

- (v\*) *Practical*. Personal needs are normatively compelling, in that the person themselves is practically required attain them; however, they are not necessarily anything that others are morally required to help them to attain.<sup>279</sup>

My proposal is that conditions (iii)-(v) are not essential for something to count as a categorical need. Of these, only *Absolute*, *Life*, *Real*, and *Inescapable* alone are necessary, and personal needs satisfy them.

On this account, the conceptual structure of categorical need bears some resemblance to that of capability. In the previous chapter (§4.1) I mentioned Robeyns' distinction between the capabilities approach as a whole and the many capabilities theories within it that are adapted for specific purposes. The approach has an underspecified, "modular" structure, she observes, in having some core commitments that can be spelt out differently depending on purpose and, optionally, supplemented by others. There are "A-modules", which are non-optional for any capabilities theory, "B-modules", which are "non-optional [...] [but] with optional content", as well as entirely optional "C-modules". How a particular theory should fill out the B-modules' content and whether it adds any C-modules depends on what its users want to do with it.<sup>280</sup> As I argue over the following sections, there is an overarching concept of categorical need that is similarly underspecified. I suggest that (i) *Absolute*, (ii) *Life*, (vi) *Real*, and (vii) *Inescapable* are analogous to A-modules, non-optional and with non-optional content as described above. Slots corresponding to (iii) through (v) I suggest are the sites of B-modules, non-optional conditions that are filled out differently depending on the evaluative context. In section 3.3 I entertain a certain candidate C-module.

I anticipate immediate objections to the putative 'necessity' of personal needs. Personal needs' ability to satisfy *Life* is, I think, clear and should be easy to concede. However, many will doubt that what 'matters' to an individual, as I phrase it in (iv\*), has the kind of objectivity necessary for personal needs to satisfy *Absolute*, *Real* and, *Inescapable*. There will also be doubts about the normativity I ascribe to them in (v\*). Again, the following Chapter 4 is dedicated to defending personal needs on these fronts. The purpose of this chapter is to address the different

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<sup>279</sup> Although Anscombe appears to argue that abstaining from injustice is necessary for flourishing, she, like me, does not make it a condition for something being a need that it entails moral obligations on others. See "Modern Moral Philosophy": 18-9.

<sup>280</sup> Robeyns, *Well-Being, Freedom, and Social Justice*, 19.

albeit related concerns of whether, in introducing personal needs, I am either challenging essentially moralised needs or else simply changing the subject and talking about something different from needs proper. My aim is neither to refute nor defend the existence of essentially moralised categorical needs, but to argue that personal need may be another legitimate type of categorical need. I argue that, parallel to the case of well-being, different conceptual variants and theories of needs are appropriately adapted to different evaluative contexts. This allows us to see that despite apparent disagreements both essentially moralised needs and personal needs count as categorical needs. The following digression to discuss the concept of well-being is a necessary preliminary to that argument.

## 2. Contextual variation in the concept of well-being

### 2.1 Conceptual diversity

Some philosophers have noted that there is ambiguity in the concept of ‘well-being’. Shelley Kagan has argued that debates commonly run together how ‘well-off a person is’ with ‘how well their life is going for them’. Kagan suggests calling only the former the person’s well-being, and the latter something else, their “quality of life”.<sup>281</sup> Stephen Campbell highlights a tendency to think that a person’s well-being must be at once independent of and intimately dependent upon their attitudes: we often feel pity for people and care about their well-being for reasons that they may not themselves care about in the least. Yet on the other hand it seems natural to suppose that a person must gain or lose something they do care about if certain apparent changes in well-being are to count as rewards, punishments, or self-sacrifice.<sup>282</sup> He and Griffin each observe that it is also difficult to account for countervailing tendencies to think that how a person’s life is going both depends and does not depend on how they conduct themselves morally. They suggest that standard approaches to well-being may conflate multiple concepts.<sup>283</sup> Griffin distinguishes a “broad” notion of well-being, which counts all of a person’s fulfilled informed desires, from a “narrow” conception that “suits morality”, “more finely focused on the vital interests, the basic needs, the central human concerns, that create obligations”.<sup>284</sup> Yet we might still hope that there is some univocal concept to be found—perhaps we must simply persevere in separating it out from other concepts. T. M. Scanlon distinguishes the notion of well-being he is interested in from “material and social conditions”, “experiential quality”, a life’s “worthiness” or “value”, and a life’s overall “choiceworthiness”.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Kagan, “Me and My Life,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 94 (1994): 309-24.

<sup>282</sup> Campbell, “The Concept of Well-Being,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, ed. Guy Fletcher (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 410-1.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*; Griffin, “What Do Happiness Studies Study?,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 8 (2007): 139-48.

<sup>284</sup> *Well-Being*, 39-40.

<sup>285</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 111.

Philosophers identifying diverse notions of well-being find good company with investigators working in other disciplines. Anna Alexandrova draws attention to what she calls “construct pluralism”: across the range of fields in which well-being is studied it is held to consist in a remarkable variety of different things, most often highly particular to the investigators’ foci.<sup>286</sup> ‘Construct’ is a term used in the sciences referring to the phenomenon studied, that which a particular inquiry takes itself to be investigating, evaluating, measuring—in all these diverse fields, referred to as ‘well-being’.<sup>287</sup> (Since, again, observation is not theoretically neutral, constructs are explicitly or implicitly informed by theory—see §2.4 to come.) In the health sciences, studying people living with disability, chronic illness, and old age, “well-being [...] is a combination of subjective satisfaction and objective functioning, where the latter is understood as the ability to go through one’s day reasonably autonomously”. Moreover, “the standard of functioning is adjusted specifically by age and the specific health condition”.<sup>288</sup> Multiple well-being constructs are used in psychology, all concerning subjects’ experience. These include ‘hedonic balance’ (“the ratio of positive to negative affect”), life satisfaction, and ‘positive functioning’ (“having a sense of autonomy, mastery, purpose, connectedness to people”).<sup>289</sup> The well-being of children must be defined very differently from that of adults.<sup>290</sup> As we have already seen, some investigators in development define well-being in ways that include factors such as private consumption, health, autonomy, education, and preservation and/or access to natural and common property resources.<sup>291</sup> Nonetheless, this variety does not simply represent a proliferation of different concepts, but a different way of doing things. While sometimes certain differences are lamented as representing gulfs between disciplinary cultures,<sup>292</sup> by and large the various definitions are not in competition.<sup>293</sup> The variety is not due to ambiguity, but, Alexandrova argues, owes rather to a difference between general and contextual evaluation. Philosophers in particular typically take the evaluation of a person’s well-being to consider how well a person’s life is going in general, all things considered.<sup>294</sup> However exactly it should be distinguished, in this standpoint, whenever we

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<sup>286</sup> Alexandrova, *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3. Gasper also details this at length in Gasper, “Human Well-Being: Concepts and Conceptualizations,” in *Human Well-Being: Concept and Measurement*, ed. Mark McGillivray (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan & United Nations University-WIDER, 2007), 23-64.

<sup>287</sup> Alexandrova, *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, xxxi.

<sup>288</sup> Alexandrova, “The Science of Well-Being,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, ed. Guy Fletcher (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 395.

<sup>289</sup> Alexandrova, “Values and the Science of Well-Being: A Recipe for Mixing,” in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Social Science*, ed. Harold Kincaid (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 635.

<sup>290</sup> Ramesh Raghavan and Anna Alexandrova, “Toward a Theory of Child Well-Being,” *Social Indicators Research* 121 (2015): 887-902; Alexandrova, *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, ch. 3.

<sup>291</sup> Cf. Gasper, “Human well-being”, 42-51; Alkire *Valuing Freedoms*, 59-71.

<sup>292</sup> Alexandrova, “Well-Being,” in *Philosophy of Social Science: A New Introduction*, ed. Nancy Cartwright and Eleonora Montuschi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 17.

<sup>293</sup> Alexandrova, “The Science of Well-Being”, 398.

<sup>294</sup> Alexandrova, *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, xxxiii.

speak of a person's 'well-being' we are, or at least should be, referring to all of the ways they are well and not well—and this is *the* concept of well-being. I would add another way in which the generality of this view manifests itself. It stands besides generality in the sense of concerning overall or global evaluation, although it may be necessitated by it. This is that the ingredients for well-being that philosophers propose for this purpose are *described* at a very high level of generality. By contrast, typically the well-being constructs that medical and social scientists design and use differ from philosophical accounts in both these ways. They do not aspire to represent anything grander than what well-being consists in in the particular contexts they investigate, and they describe it in terms specific to those contexts.<sup>295</sup>

In some places in philosophy the influence of context on the application of 'well-being' has been recognised. Griffin is outstanding in endorsing the idea in theoretical contexts on page 1 of his book *Well-Being*:

Our job is not to describe an idea already in existence independently of our search. Before we can properly explain well-being, we have to know the context in which it is to appear and the work it needs to do there. It may be that different notions of well-being are needed in different theoretical contexts.

Scanlon argues that the standards appropriate for judging whether a person is 'doing well' often depend upon the evaluator's perspective on that person, as determined by their relation to them. In my own perspective on myself, and my life, how well I am doing presently will likely in large part depend directly on how successfully I am currently pursuing the particular aims I have. This will include other-involving aims, such as maintaining and honouring the particular relationships I have.<sup>296</sup> From the third-personal perspective of my parents, a judgement that I am doing well will more likely turn on whether I am succeeding in my projects whatever they may be. They might assist me in them, but for reasons different from mine: I am motivated by, and measure myself directly against the particular goals I have; they do it because they are my projects<sup>297</sup>—as far as they are concerned other goals may do as well 'so long as I am happy'. A friend close enough to the person to see her projects through her own eyes and share her appreciation of their value, may be yet another perspective somewhere in between. For different purposes it may be appropriate to include only a person's purely 'self-interested' concerns. Alexandrova observes other differences in standards according to normative perspective. In the case of a stranger helping another person after an accident on the footpath: "So long as she is not terribly in pain and can get home alright, the Good Samaritan is, at least plausibly, justified in thinking that she is doing well." This will probably be different from the standard the person's partner applies when she gets home, and different again from that a social worker may use in assessing their client's condi-

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<sup>295</sup> Alexandrova, "Well-Being", 14-5.

<sup>296</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 126-9.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-5.

tion.<sup>298</sup> An overall ‘impersonal assessment’ perspective seems possible, referring for example to an ‘objective list’ (on the death-bed, perhaps): where we step back even from the specific purposes we identify with and assess how valuable our life is or has been according to how much accomplishment, understanding, deep personal relations, and so on it contains or contained. But this and other kinds of ‘global’ evaluation appear to be some among many types of evaluation.

## 2.2 Responses

One response to this diversity is to reject the interpretation of context-specific notions and constructs as referring to people’s well-being, and to maintain that well-being judgement is to be made exclusively in general terms. On this view, well-being proper is described by whichever philosophical theory the proponent of this response favours, with context-specific uses representing concepts that are in fact only related to but distinct from well-being, such as health, quality of life, comfort, basic physical ability, or perhaps only a *part* or *aspect* of well-being, or only measuring prerequisites for, causes of, or indicators of well-being.<sup>299</sup> We have seen some such conceptual circumscription already in philosophy, and *some* measure of this is no doubt appropriate.<sup>300</sup> However, one significant obstacle to applying this Circumscription strategy across the board is that most ostensible well-being evaluations made in life, science, and policy are simply not made in a global, all-things-considered mode.<sup>301</sup> Other things being equal, an approach that accepts the prevalence of adaptation to context at face value will be more plausible. An effort to circumscribe appropriate use of ‘well-being’ generally would require, Alexandrova argues, an “error theory specifying reasons why, in practical contexts, both everyday and scientific, so many competent people use ‘well-being’ and its cognates the wrong way”.<sup>302</sup> Although such lack of fit could not be established decisively without linguistic study, this is not the only problem Circumscription faces. The more we restrict its application, the less significant ‘well-being’ becomes for practical purposes of most kinds. It also attenuates the relevance of philosophical theory to well-being inquiry and evaluation outside of philosophy.<sup>303</sup>

If we do want to take such apparent contextual variability in well-being constructs at face value, how might we account for it? Alexandrova proposes two possibilities. One is that well-being refers to elements of a person or their life fulfilling a more abstract condition: for example, “suitability”, or being “that which we have a reason to promote for the sake of the person in

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<sup>298</sup> Alexandrova, “Doing Well in the Circumstances,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 10 (2013): 312.

<sup>299</sup> Raffaele Rodogno, “Well-Being, Science, and Philosophy,” in *Well-Being in Contemporary Society*, ed. Johnny H. Søraker et al. (Cham, CH: Springer, 2015), 50-2; *ibid.*: 309, 313-5; Alexandrova, “Values and the Science of Well-Being”, 631.

<sup>300</sup> Cf. Gasper, “Human Well-Being”, 11.

<sup>301</sup> Alexandrova, “Doing Well in the Circumstances”: 309; “Well-Being”, 14-5.

<sup>302</sup> Alexandrova, “Doing Well in the Circumstances”: 314.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*: 315.

question”.<sup>304</sup> On this view, ‘well-being’ refers to the same thing across all evaluative contexts. What changes across contexts is which features fulfil this condition and thereby make well-being evaluations true or false. This Differential Realisation view (DR) explains variation in how it is applied in different contexts, but also retains the attraction of Circumscription, in that ‘well-being’ maintains a stable, unitary meaning. Yet a different, contrasting, possibility is a third view, Contextualism, which Alexandrova defends, on which “the semantic content of sentences in which ‘well-being’ and its cognates occur depends on the context in which [they are] uttered”.<sup>305</sup> Here it is not the truth-makers of the stranger’s and the partner’s well-being evaluations that alter, as in DR, but their meaning. The difference may seem subtle, but Contextualism has an advantage the following consideration serves to draw out. On DR there is such a thing as a person’s well-being simpliciter, and the degree to which it is realised changes as context changes. Yet DR seems to entail a strange consequence, namely that the well-being of the person who fell, and was doing fine in the stranger’s evaluative context, declines when they enter their partner’s evaluative context. By contrast, on Contextualism it is not how well one is doing that changes by context, but what counts as doing well from the evaluator’s standpoint.<sup>306</sup> One part of this is what Alexandrova calls “threshold dependence”: how well one must be in order to be judged as ‘doing well’ depends on who is doing the comparing and who is being compared with whom. However, more significantly there is also “constitutive dependence”: the sense in which one is counted as doing well or otherwise also depends on context.<sup>307</sup> On Contextualism, unlike DR, what shifts is *the sense* in which the person who fell is counted as doing well or otherwise, not the extent to which they are doing well in a context-independent sense. An important consequence of Contextualism, then, is the denial that there is any such thing as ‘well-being’ simpliciter.<sup>308</sup> It is also important, however, that context-dependence is not construed as something we are free to specify however we like. It is an objective matter which contextual factors determine the semantic content of ‘well-being’ appropriate to an evaluator’s assessment.<sup>309</sup> These include:

- (i) the theoretical or practical purpose of the evaluation (recovery from bone-disease, government policy planning, an elderly person’s well-being, ...), and;
- (ii) the normative relationship between the evaluator and the subject (clinician-to-patient, scientist-to-subject, maternal/paternal, impartial-moral, government-to-citizen, ...)<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*: 310. Cf. Alexandrova, *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, 14.

<sup>306</sup> Alexandrova, “Doing Well in the Circumstances”: 322-4.

<sup>307</sup> Alexandrova, *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, 14.

<sup>308</sup> Alexandrova, “Doing Well in the Circumstances”: 310.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*: 322, 326-7.

<sup>310</sup> Alexandrova, *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, 11.

(although these categories may overlap). In fact we see explicit declarations from investigators of the importance of adjusting their conceptualisation of well-being in respect of these considerations. For example, Alkire and colleagues outline the following desiderata for an adequate well-being measure:

- Understandable and easy to describe
- Conforms to “common-sense” notions of well-being
- Fits the purpose for which it is being developed
- Technically solid
- Operationally viable
- Easily replicable<sup>311</sup>

They assert that, “Of these, ‘purpose’ is particularly influential in shaping the measure”.<sup>312</sup> Compare too Griffin again:

Nor can we first fix on the best account of ‘well-being’ and independently ask about its measurement. One proper ground for choosing between conceptions of well-being would be that one lends itself to the deliberation that we must do and another does not.<sup>313</sup>

The capability approach exhibits a great range of other examples. Different capabilities theories are adapted to a great variety of contexts,<sup>314</sup> with what counts as improving people’s capability in some application being intimately shaped by purpose in this way. Indeed, a key argument for adopting a capabilities analysis for many purposes is the demonstrable usefulness of doing so.<sup>315</sup>

Sen’s initiation of the turn to capabilities is a case study in patterns of both circumscription and conceptual context-sensitivity. Importantly, those making use of capabilities often understand valuable capabilities to concern not only or always well-being—that ostensibly it is about “advantage” more generally. I want to pause to consider why that is, and to argue that while in some senses of ‘well-being’ valuable capabilities do extend beyond well-being, in other senses they do not. In the previous chapter (§4.1) I referred to Sen’s decision to distinguish persons’ “well-being” from their more encompassing “agency goals”, and functionings from capabilities, yielding a fourfold distinction between well-being functionings, agency functionings, well-being

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<sup>311</sup> This list was drawn up by an expert committee advising the Mexican Secretary of Social Development in the development of a new national poverty measure. See Miguel Székely, ed., *Números Que Mueven Al Mundo: La Medición de La Pobreza En México* (Mexico City: Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2005), 10, 19, cited and translated by Alkire et al., *Multidimensional Poverty Measurement and Analysis*, 194. The latter authors report that many similar sets of design principles exist, such as those used in formulating the Australian National Development Index (ANDI).

<sup>312</sup> Alkire et al., *Multidimensional Poverty Measurement and Analysis*, 186. They cite Martin Ravallion as also stating, “One wants the method of measurement to be consistent with the purpose of measurement”. Martin Ravallion, *Poverty Lines in Theory and Practice*, Living standards measurement study (LSMS) working paper no. LSM 133. (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1998), 1. Sen relates similar reflections in Amartya Sen and James E. Foster, *On Economic Inequality*, enlarged ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1997), 187.

<sup>313</sup> Griffin, *Well-Being*, 1.

<sup>314</sup> Robeyns, *Well-Being, Freedom, and Social Justice*, 29-30, 60-1.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-8.



capabilities, and agency capabilities. We see again here Sen's acute awareness of the importance of evaluative context in the design of constructs for specific applications, in his suggestion that in different contexts, for different purposes, one might choose one or the other of these in the evaluation of a person's "advantage".<sup>316</sup> But we also see an exercise in circumscription. The purpose in mind is very clear: for evaluations in the service of interventions that are *emancipatory*—demonstrated explicitly already in the title of what is perhaps Sen's most well-known work on capabilities, *Development as Freedom*.<sup>317</sup> Capabilities are an appropriate standard for a benefactor to use in assessing beneficiaries' conditions if promoting the latter's freedom is a value appropriately informing the benefactor's intervention. The benefactor may also limit their concern to, in Sen's terms, "well-being capabilities", excluding "agency capabilities", if they do not regard their role as assisting them in projects that are in some sense 'external' to their 'own' condition. These standards may be very different from the standards appropriate to beneficiaries' assessments of their own well-being. Although some freedoms may be important to a person to have in themselves, whether or not they are realised, persons mostly measure their own lives by what they actually manage to maintain and attain.

These are very useful distinctions to make. Yet we should resist a tendency to circumscribe 'well-being', 'capabilities', and 'agency' on the basis of these, to distinguish them too sharply. Robeyns defines a person's advantage as "those aspects of that person's interests that matter (generally, or in a specific context)".<sup>318</sup> Although this definition is wisely cautious, in that it refrains from pronouncing that well-being consists in anything in particular, we should not even assume that there is anything that this definition catches that cannot, or indeed does not, count among a person's well-being in some context or another. For example, suppose for some purpose it makes sense to compare countries' national well-being in material terms, leaving out other considerations, or "advantages", such as political liberties perhaps. We then judge people to be better off in countries with higher material living standards and perhaps also how equally those resources and the particular capabilities they enable are distributed. Suppose, however, someone draws our attention to two particular countries: country A in which people have a high degree of political freedom and moderately high and moderately equally distributed material living standards, and country B in which people at every socio-economic level have a proportionally significantly higher material living standard but limited political liberties. Suppose also B's citizens score at least as high on measures of life satisfaction, in part because its unelected leaders are benevolent, highly competent technocrats. Now we might judge that people in A are better off than people in B, notwithstanding the lesser material resources and capabilities they enjoy. But if we

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<sup>316</sup> Sen, "Capability and Well-Being", 35-6.

<sup>317</sup> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>318</sup> *Well-Being, Freedom, and Social Justice*, 25.

do, I suggest, we are including political liberties amongst their well-being. On Circumscription, this would be inconsistent with calling our material well-being measure a measure of well-being in the first place. On Contextualism, however, this need not be the case; what has happened is that we have entered a different evaluative context. The lesson of this example is that even if, for legitimate pragmatic reasons in the context we occupy or assume, we choose to distinguish certain kinds of “advantage” from well-being (leaving the former out or comparing them separately perhaps) that is a choice given by the purposes we adopt, not a mandatory constraint given by fixed meanings of ‘well-being’ and ‘liberties’, for example. On the other hand, if we *are* including a kind of advantage in comparisons of how well off different people are then that kind of advantage is, consequently, in a strong sense a constituent of their well-being even if we choose not to use the word.

A sharp distinction between well-being and agency likewise cannot be sustained: as per the previous subsection many people do make assessments of their own lives in (large) part by reference to how their projects and interpersonal relations are going. This difference need not impugn the claim of either standard to represent a standard of well-being, albeit one appropriate to some but not other evaluative contexts. Neither is it mandatory to stipulate that well-being is something “achieved”, presumably in the sense that it is limited to functionings, just as we saw one should not assume that capabilities cannot be needs. Both “agency” and valuable capabilities in some contexts count among people’s well-being. Again, of course, it might be useful and appropriate to make terminological stipulations in certain contexts. I do not insist that valuable capabilities must always and everywhere be *called* constituents of well-being. The relatively small point of this discussion is only that one should not *base* any reticence to designate certain types of “advantages” and associated capabilities as constituents of well-being in some context on the assumption that one cannot sensibly or should not ever do so.

### 2.3 Theory diversity

In her most recent writings Alexandrova has integrated her contextualist semantic thesis with another position on how well-being can, is, and/or should be *theorised*—which she calls Well-Being Variantism. Although this wider view is not directly germane to the parallel I am drawing with the concept of needs in this chapter, I mention it both for the sake of completeness, and because it will be helpful for later discussion to note certain important distinctions and relations between concepts, theories, constructs, and measures of well-being that Alexandrova draws. Well-Being Variantism is directly opposed to a combination of two theses Alexandrova calls Well-Being Invariantism:

WBI1 [Circumscription]: The concept of well-being concerns the most general evaluation of the value of a state to a person and not anything else.

WBI2 [Uniqueness]: The full substantive theory of well-being will specify the unique set of conditions that apply in all and only cases of well-being.

On Well-Being Variantism, by contrast:

WBV1 [Concept Diversity/Contextualism]: The term ‘well-being’ (and its cognates) can invoke either general or contextual concepts of well-being depending on context.

WBV2 [Theory Diversity]: No single substantive theory specifies the realisers of every concept of well-being.<sup>319</sup>

The distinction between Uniqueness and Theory Diversity is different from that which we just saw between Circumscription and Contextualism. On Uniqueness the construct representing the instantiation of ‘well-being’ in any evaluative context can be derived from a single, universally applicable theory plus the specific features of that context. On Theory Diversity there are different theories identifying well-being constructs in different evaluative contexts, and these cannot be derived from any single theory. We see here the closeness between theories and constructs: we note once again that what an investigator takes themselves to be studying cannot be identified in any theory-neutral way. But they are distinct, and they differ again from concepts and measures. A single construct can be measured in different ways. And it is also conceivable for Uniqueness to be combined with Contextualism: it may be understood that the ‘well-being’ of a person qua patient may mean something different from their ‘well-being’ qua friend, for example, but maintained nonetheless that there is one theory of well-being that determines what it consists in in each evaluative context.<sup>320</sup> Nevertheless, one would expect that resistance to Contextualism and Theory Diversity will normally come together.

It should be noted that Well-Being Variantism denies neither the validity nor the usefulness of the general theories philosophers develop qua general theories, which Alexandrova calls “high theories”. However, the relation between these and “mid-level” theories that identify constructs in particular contexts is characterised not by a “vending machine” model of scientific theorising but rather a “toolbox” model—the distinction between these approaches is developed by Nancy Cartwright and colleagues.<sup>321</sup> On the vending machine model of scientific theorising a theory *deductively implies* the empirical phenomena it concerns via bridge principles that link circumstantial facts with theoretical concepts. It was once common to believe that Newtonian mechanics could in principle work this way: given enough knowledge about a state of affairs the motion of any object could be predicted with complete accuracy. Uniqueness represents a vending machine approach to well-being: given the right principles linking context-specific features with concept-

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<sup>319</sup> Alexandrova, *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, 42-3.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxviii.

<sup>321</sup> Alexandrova cites Nancy Cartwright, *The Dappled World: A Study of the Boundaries of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 185 and Nancy Cartwright, Towfic Shomar, and Mauricio Suárez, “The Toolbox of Science: Tools for the Building of Models with a Superconductivity Example,” *Poznan Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities* 44 (1995): 137-49.

al elements of the correct theory, that theory specifies the construct representing well-being in that context. On the toolbox model, on the other hand, investigators work from the bottom up, as it were. Applied to well-being theory, they draw on various parts of high theory in the construction of mid-level theories, but they do so opportunistically, theorising constructs with close reference to the specific features of their subjects and their evaluative context. The relation between high theories and mid-level theories is one of “inspiration”, Alexandrova argues, not derivation.<sup>322</sup> The latter have a certain degree of independence from the former; there is no master theory.

#### 2.4 Concepts and relations between concepts

I should also comment on the plausibility of the kind of view of semantics and concepts Contextualism requires. Certainly it is unfriendly to one traditional view of concepts on which they are precisely specified by necessary and sufficient conditions fixed across all time—and where for them to be correctly applied, language and use must bend to them. Holding to this view may constitute principled grounds for some to resist Contextualism. However, multiple alternative positions are available. On other views at least many concepts do not have firm borders that it is the task of our best conceptual analysis to discover. They may be indeterminate, with differing contextual conditions, respecified and policed in evolving ways.<sup>323</sup> Many social-scientific concepts are indeed “*Ballung*” concepts similar to these possibilities, in that their shape owes largely to the way they have been constructed for investigators’ purposes.<sup>324</sup> Alexandrova suggests that ‘well-being’ concepts are precisely like this.<sup>325</sup>

This does not yet answer the question of how different contextual meanings relate to each other. One possibility Alexandrova rejects is that semantic variation is due to polysemy; or at least, she thinks that even if there is some polysemy that that would not sufficiently explain observed variation.<sup>326</sup> This is to say that ‘well-being’ in one context is not, in cases relevant here, related to ‘well-being’ in other contexts in the same way that ‘in’ in ‘Ben is in a bad mood’ is related to ‘in’ in ‘Ben is in the United Kingdom’—these meanings of ‘in’ are certainly related but they are also very different, more different than is plausible in the case of different well-being concepts.<sup>327</sup> Rather, the semantic variation in ‘well-being’ owes, Alexandrova argues, “to changes

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<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, xl; Alexandrova, “Values and the Science of Well-Being”, 637.

<sup>323</sup> Mark Wilson, *Wandering Significance: An Essay on Conceptual Behavior* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>324</sup> Nancy Cartwright and Rosa Runhardt, “Measurement,” in *Philosophy of Social Science: A New Introduction*, ed. Nancy Cartwright and Eleonora Montuschi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 268-9. The term comes from Otto von Neurath.

<sup>325</sup> Alexandrova, “Well-Being”, 14.

<sup>326</sup> Alexandrova, *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, 19.

<sup>327</sup> Cf. Adam Sennet, “Polysemy,” *Oxford Handbooks Online* (2016), accessed 12 June, 2018, <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935314.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935314-e-32>.

in extra-linguistic context”.<sup>328</sup> But what is this, and how does it help? A possibility she allows is that the concepts of well-being of interest here share a common core. She tentatively proposes that “well-being is a summary value of goods important to the agent for reasons other than moral, aesthetic and political”.<sup>329</sup> Although I do not offer an alternative here I doubt that well-being *necessarily* (i.e. in *all* evaluative contexts) excludes those latter considerations. I also think we should be open to the possibility that some well-being concepts are related only by family resemblance, with characteristics that are “criss-crossing” but with none shared by all.<sup>330</sup> Nevertheless, it is plausible that a great many do share certain features, however they are to be specified. An attractive characterisation of how at least some well-being concepts could be related is that core features delineate a single highly abstract concept of well-being that is *underdetermined*, with the role of context being to complete it in numerous ways according to, among other things, purpose.<sup>331</sup> Different ways of completing that concept would form new, distinct concepts. As I mentioned in section 1.3, Robeyns appears to hold this view of the concept of capability, and I think the same holds of need. I expand on this thought below in section 4.1.

Investigating these possibilities in the concept of well-being further would take this project too far afield, but it is enough to demonstrate that as a semantic thesis Contextualism can find plausible theoretical foundations.

### 3. Context and need

#### 3.1 Diversity and differential realisation

Where needs constructs have been developed there is also great diversity across disciplines. Gasper observes that in social policy, psychology, sociology, development, anthropology, “each area of research and each forum of public debate tends to establish its own set of working simplifications to match its context-specific concerns”.<sup>332</sup> Constructs of basic needs applied to development are different from constructs describing the educational needs of children, for example, and different again from the special needs of schoolchildren with learning difficulties and other impairments.

The stated positions of some defenders of essentially moralised needs in philosophy (§1.1) suggest that they might favour a response that insists that only needs satisfying conditions (i) -

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<sup>328</sup> Alexandrova, *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, 19.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>330</sup> Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §65ff. I am grateful to Polly Mitchell for these references to Wittgenstein and Mark Wilson.

<sup>331</sup> Cf. Peter Ludlow, *Living Words: Meaning Underdetermination and the Dynamic Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>332</sup> Gasper, “Conceptualising Human Needs and Wellbeing,” in *Wellbeing in Developing Countries: From Theory to Research*, ed. Ian Gough and J. Allister McGregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 48.

(vii) constitute inherently ethically salient—categorical—needs.<sup>333</sup> This could involve some circumscription, with some constructs held to represent merely instrumental needs lacking the necessary absolute character; recall that merely instrumental and other hypothetical needs are substitutable by anything else that is functionally equivalent. But this could be combined with accepting many context-specific constructs through interpreting them as different realisations of categorical needs as they define them. As Miller argues, similar to CA theorists’ emphasis on differences in people’s abilities to convert resources into capabilities (Ch. 2 §4.2.1),

it should be obvious that each person’s concrete needs will differ from everyone else’s even though we are judging them all in terms of the same functionings. The specific educational resources that I require to achieve basic literacy won’t be the same as the resources you require.<sup>334</sup>

Differing from other places and times, the necessities for the decency of a man’s life in Adam Smith’s society reportedly included, among other things, having a linen shirt and a serviceable pair of leather boots.<sup>335</sup> Doyal and Gough develop this general idea more extensively and in great detail in their account of similarly essentially moralised “human needs”. They follow Manfred Max-Neef and colleagues in using the term “satisfiers” to describe particular ways in which needs can appropriately be met in some specific place and time.<sup>336</sup> Concrete and culture-specific satisfiers are specific to contexts but are nevertheless identified by the “universal satisfier characteristics” they share, even cross-culturally, with others, in virtue of which they fall under the same universally shared “intermediate needs”.<sup>337</sup> Although the two accounts were developed independently Gough notes the close similarity of this view with Nussbaum’s argument that her central capabilities are multiply realisable.<sup>338</sup>

### 3.2 Further proliferation

It is highly plausible that the foregoing Circumscription+DR approach to ‘need’ could get far. However, its prospects for serving as a complete account of the concept are poor. Proponents of categorical needs such as Doyal and Gough, Miller, and Wiggins explicitly specify the purposes they design their accounts to serve, namely for politics and policy. To the extent that they furthermore set as criteria for a good account that it serves these purposes well, these authors recognise the importance of context in shaping their constructs. Crucially, then, although a Circumscription+DR approach may promise to account for much of the diversity across many

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<sup>333</sup> See further the way Thomson and Wiggins present their accounts in the appendix to this chapter.

<sup>334</sup> Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, 211.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 210; Wiggins, “Claims of Need”, 13, 26.

<sup>336</sup> Max-Neef et al., ‘Human Scale Development’.

<sup>337</sup> Doyal and Gough, *A Theory of Human Need*, 155-7.

<sup>338</sup> Ian Gough, “Lists and Thresholds: Comparing the Doyal-Gough Theory of Human Need with Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach,” in *Capabilities, Gender, Equality: Towards Fundamental Entitlements*, ed. Flavio Comim and Martha Nussbaum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 357-81. Gough contends, however, that his and Doyal’s “theory and operationalisation of human need is in certain respects theoretically more robust and empirically more realistic than Nussbaum’s better-known approach” (358).

fields evaluating needs in contexts partly shaped by political purposes, it deliberately leaves out uses of the concept in other contexts, for different kinds of evaluation. Already within the broad domain of moral-political evaluation there is scope for variation across contexts: we saw Brock and Reader pointing out that there is a sense of need suitable to private morality that differs from those senses used for more public concerns. They relax or at least reinterpret *Minimal* and drop *Universal*. One might in still other contexts keep *Universal* but drop *Minimal*: for example, in a context in which well-being should in part be understood in terms of needs, but in which it aims at well-being promotion more expansively, not only to ensure minimal provision. Indeed, I argued in the previous chapter that some multidimensional accounts of well-being or “prudential value” are formally theories of needs, of what people as such need, constitutively, if they are to flourish in an expansive sense. These may keep *Moral*, defining flourishing in a way constrained by moral considerations, or else they may not, and impose no such constraint—whether it is appropriate to do so or not will depend on the purpose they serve. So needs may not need to be essentially moralised in order to be relevant to moral and political argument. There is no conceptual or theoretical obstacle to admitting these to be different concepts of needs that are nevertheless all categorical.

We see, then, that the personal needs I propose are not unique in dropping *Minimal*, *Universal*, or *Moral*—only in dropping all three. They are appropriate to the context of first-personal evaluation we saw Scanlon advert to in section 2.1, in which he argues moralised constructs are usually inappropriate:

From an individual’s own perspective, these criteria [“various standards that have been proposed as measures of distributive shares for assessing claims of justice”] offer very incomplete measures of how well his or her life is going. ... This divergence is due to the fact that these criteria are supposed to measure only those aspects of a life that, according to the theories in question, it is the responsibility of basic social institutions to provide for.<sup>339</sup>

Personal needs describe ways in terms of which at least many people think about how their own lives are going *for them in particular*. Although these needs are most pertinent and accessible to such a person themselves, they may also sometimes be indirectly perceptible by others with intimate knowledge of them.<sup>340</sup> Such concepts are not vulnerable to Circumscription if a critic acknowledges the importance of evaluative context, purpose in particular, in shaping a construct.

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<sup>339</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 110. Compare also his “Preference and Urgency”: 667: “In defending the use of objective criteria one must claim that what is appropriate in these [personal] situations is not the right basis for adjudication between competing interests in a more impersonal situation”. I return briefly to this point in Ch. 5 §4.3.

<sup>340</sup> Another variety of categorical need that I believe exists but will not much discuss in this thesis is that of needs that are second-personal, representing categorical demands on others due to special commitments, but private. These would be not moral, but partial requirements (unless one interprets all obligation as moral, which I do not).

The appropriateness to a given purpose of any well-being construct does not depend on its also being appropriate in other contexts; for example, on its ability to serve as well as an acceptable standard of minimum provision. Constructs of categorical need for different purposes do not have to do that same work in order to each count as categorical needs.

Of course, it is open to an objector to argue that no need construct corresponds to these contexts of well-being evaluation, because well-being in these contexts is best thought of as an aggregate like ‘utility’. The argument for understanding well-being in that context as structured by need only comes in the following Chapter 4 and is reinforced in Chapter 5. Remaining doubts about the acceptability of dropping *Minimal*, *Universal*, and *Moral*, and about personal needs’ claim to objectivity, are also addressed there. At this point the argument is only that there is no barrier internal to the definition of categorical need preventing the constructs appropriate to the contexts of first-personal evaluation and other non-moralised purposes being ones of need. As promised at the end of section 1.3 this account enables us to see that personal needs are at once (a) not something else entirely from existing concepts categorical needs, not in fact needs, and yet at the same time are (b) not direct challengers to the legitimacy of those other constructs.

### 3.3 A common core for categorical need concepts

The previous subsection concludes that categorical needs cannot be characterised as all being different realisations of conditions fulfilling all of (i) through (vii). Only conditions (i) *Absolute*, (ii) *Life*, (vi) *Real*, and (vii) *Inescapable* are necessary in the sense of being, in Robeyns’ terms, A-modules—essential as-formulated to any categorical need concept. In some contexts it is necessary to drop (iii) *Minimal*, (iv) *Universal*, and (v) *Moral*, or even all three. More precisely, these conditions—together with (iii\*) *Expansive*, (iv\*) *Particular*, and (v\*) *Practical*—are optional ways of filling out three of the overarching concept of categorical need’s B-modules—“non-optional modules with optional content”. Suitably neutral tags for those three modules might respectively be:

- (iii\*\*) *Level*
- (iv\*\*) *Scope*
- (v\*\*) *Normative Source*

In effect, how *Level* and *Scope* are specified determines the referent of ‘a certain kind of life’ in the fixed content of *Life*. The content of *Absolute* is also fixed, but *Normative Source* explains where such absoluteness comes from: it may be from the practical demands of what matters to the person themselves (*Practical*), or instead derive in the first place from the bindingness of the requirement on able benefactors to assist the person in need (*Moral*). I said I envisaged a possible C-module, and this, I propose, is:



- (viii) *Capability*. In addition to or in place of needing to have, do, and be certain things, there are things the persons under evaluation need to be capable of doing, having, and being (whether or not they in fact choose to do so).

I should reiterate that not all valuable capabilities need be categorical needs; they only count as such if they are conditioned by the concept of 'categorical needs' other modules.

The question is still open as to whether we should interpret categorical needs concepts with this core as being differentially realised or with a contextualist semantics. Perhaps not a lot depends on this—it is enough for this project's purposes that constructs such as personal needs are vindicated by way of contextual variation, however that is explained. Still, needs Contextualism is more plausible than DR about needs, for exactly similar reasons to Contextualism's superiority in the case of well-being. The Contextualist view is that the semantic content of 'what a person needs', 'a person's needs', and similar expressions varies according to evaluators' theoretical and practical purposes and normative relationships to their subjects.<sup>341</sup> On the DR view, on the other hand, those expressions have a stable, context-independent meaning, only with different truth-makers in different contexts. Contextualism does away with such a thing as 'what a person needs' simpliciter, where DR retains it. Again, DR should be rejected because it has the curious implication that if 'a person's needs are unfulfilled' is true in one evaluative context, then we can falsify that statement simply by shifting to another evaluative context in which we appropriately judge them to count as being fulfilled. The better characterisation is that what it means for a person to 'have needs' that are fulfilled or not is different in different contexts, however intimately related those different concepts are. We see it is much easier to specify this relation in the case of need than in the case of well-being. Whereas for well-being it is plausible that there is a common core but it is not clear what it is, we know what is common to categorical needs.

#### **4. Conclusion: the significance and role of personal needs**

This chapter has served multiple purposes, including sharpening the concept of personal need this project defends, distinguishing it from the moralised concepts typical in philosophy, and providing useful discussions of the nature of and relations between concepts, constructs, and theories of well-being and need. Ultimately, however, its chief role in the project's overall argument is to demonstrate how personal need can be accommodated as a legitimate species of the concept of categorical need. The context-dependent nature of the concept entails that there is no fully specified concept of 'need' as such. A further consequence is that one cannot criticise personal needs, refusing to admit that they are needs, on the basis that they would make an un-

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<sup>341</sup> This is not to deny that a certain amount of circumscription may be appropriate as a first step. In particular, as before, it would be appropriate to treat 'needs' as drives as a separate concept from needs as necessary constituents of well-being (contextually understood).

suitable standard for the moral/political purposes to which proponents of needs have tended to want to put their accounts. It is true that personal needs would be unsuitable for those purposes, but that does not prevent them from being an appropriate concept of need for another evaluative context—in which contexts moralised concepts of need are usually themselves likewise inappropriate.

Yet at this point one might wonder why it is especially important to delineate personal needs. Precisely by definition, on this account, personal needs are directly relevant only to first personal contexts, and therefore of limited direct relevance to those interested in moral and political matters. ‘Direct’ is the right word, however. This project argues that the appearance of need in the structure of a person’s well-being as seen from their own perspective is of great indirect importance. Although they are themselves unsuited to serving as a standard for most evaluative exercises, they are a useful, if not necessary, high-theory component of the toolbox of investigators designing well-being constructs with a non-aggregating structure. This might only be implicit, in the same way a different theorist may implicitly rely on a utility-maximising conception of the first-personal context in the design of a construct that commensurates multiple aspects of well-being. At very least personal needs may form part only of a sort of auxiliary toolbox to fall back on in the face of critics or competitors arguing for too much aggregation. Ultimately, if the best account of a person’s well-being from their own personal standpoint were something like the utility-maximising conception, on which important aspects were substitutable, then it would be hard to argue that those seeking to benefit them in moral and political contexts should treat those aspects as non-substitutable. As I argue further in later chapters, an account of personal needs would strengthen capabilities and other pluralist approaches’ positions as “counter theories”<sup>342</sup> to those that hold aggregation to be in general, in principle unproblematic. But there might be more direct ways in which a theorist can draw on personal needs: in the example I discussed in the previous chapter (§§4.2.1-4.2.2) a set of the capabilities or needs of some particular group or population might be arrived at in part through making *generalisations* about what its members’ personal needs are. I return later to this topic of the relation between personal needs and the concepts and theories that suit interpersonal evaluation and comparison—but in the meantime it is important to continue the defence of personal needs’ status as needs: their objectivity, necessity, and normativity in the following chapter; and subsequently in Chapter 5 their non-aggregative nature and role in the structure of well-being.

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<sup>342</sup> As Nussbaum and Robeyns put it. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), ch. 3; Robeyns, *Well-Being, Freedom, and Social Justice*, 10.

## Appendix: Harm and ellipsis

Some philosophers, in particular Thomson and Wiggins, argue that categorical necessity is explained by a conceptual connection with harm. Harm plays a mediating role, standing between the idea of categorical necessity on the one hand, and their favoured standards on the other. Their initial step is to adopt as their definition of categorical need Joel Feinberg's suggestion that needs are 'conditions necessary to avoid harm'.<sup>343</sup> Harm is then spelt out as failing to attain certain conditions—call them  $x$ . It is through this connection that what is needed is attaining  $x$ —that attaining  $x$  has its status as being indispensable.<sup>344</sup> For Thomson and Wiggins, the necessity of averting or removing harm is the source of categorical needs' "absoluteness", explaining the sense in which a thing could be something a person simply cannot do without, something without which their life is or will be "blighted", as well as the normative force of obligations to prevent this.<sup>345</sup> They also consider it very important that categorical needs are not simply special cases of otherwise only hypothetical need, uses of essentially the same concept but *only*, in the schema  $P$  needs  $N$  in order for  $O$ , having the especially important  $O$  of 'avoiding harm'. Rather, for them 'avoiding harm' being the relevant  $O$  is "fixed logically" by the meaning of the word 'need' when uttered normatively. All other utterances of 'need' beside these are non-normative, as in merely instrumental needs as above. This difference can be clearly seen, Thomson and Wiggins argue, in the way that, whereas in the case of merely hypothetical needs ' $P$  needs  $N$ ' is "elliptical" (implying, but suppressing, the end for which  $N$  is hypothetically necessary), a categorical need claim that ' $P$  needs  $N$ ' is not elliptical. When we use 'need' in the categorical sense we do not ever need to supply or imply 'in order to avoid harm' as the relevant end;<sup>346</sup> indeed, doing so is tautologous.<sup>347</sup>

One truth in the non-elliptical reading is that some things are categorically necessary though not for a further material end, a point that Thomson and Wiggins are very concerned to defend. Wiggins notes that the elliptical reading is commonly associated with opponents of categorical needs,<sup>348</sup> so his and Thomson's anxiety to distance themselves from that view is understandable. Where Brian Barry asserts that "it always makes sense to ask what purpose [something] is needed for" Thomson and Wiggins reply by distinguishing between categorical need (for them logically harm-connected) and instrumental need.<sup>349</sup> It is because 'one needs water in order not to be

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<sup>343</sup> Feinberg, *Social Philosophy*, 111.

<sup>344</sup> Wiggins, "Claims of Need", 10-3.

<sup>345</sup> Thomson, *Needs*, 8, 38-9; Wiggins, "Claims of Need", 9.

<sup>346</sup> Thomson, *Needs*, 7-9, 15; Wiggins, *ibid.*, 10-1.

<sup>347</sup> Braybrooke takes roughly the same view but it does not play such a prominent role in his account. See *Meeting Needs*, 31-2.

<sup>348</sup> Wiggins cites Barry, *Political Argument*, ch. 3 §5a; Antony Flew, *The Politics of Procrustes: Contradictions of Enforced Equality* (London: Temple Smith, 1981), 120; White, *Modal Thinking*, 105-6.

<sup>349</sup> Barry, *Political Argument*, 48; Thomson, *Needs*, 15-6; Wiggins, "Claims of Need", 9-10.

harmed' is tautological, on Thomson's and Wiggins' accounts, that it makes no sense to enquire further why a person needs water. However, by assigning the *word* 'need' in claims of categorical need a distinct, special meaning I argue they choose the wrong place to make their cut.

One problem is that harm is not able to do the work they want it to, since the intermediary role it plays is purely formal. This can be seen quite explicitly in Thomson's account, for example, where he writes:

Need is tied to the absence of certain primary [*i.e.*, in Thomson's terminology, finally valuable] goods rather than to their loss, and so, to characterise 'need' in terms of harm, we should explain harm the following way: a person is harmed whenever this level of well-being is below a certain level or norm, even if it has not actually fallen.<sup>350</sup>

There is no reason here or anywhere else a theorist cannot do without the intermediate step and instead present definitions of categorical needs directly in terms of attaining their favoured indispensable condition, as I do in section 1.1.<sup>351</sup> In Wiggins' account a person's needs can be defined directly in terms of their maintaining a minimally decent standard of living; in Thomson's account, directly in terms of achieving and retaining certain "primary goods". I do not want to offer any worked-out account of harm, but despite Thomson's protestations to the contrary,<sup>352</sup> it seems more promising to define it in terms of having one's needs (on some satisfactory prior specification of them) going unmet or being compromised rather than the other way around. In any case, it is unclear what would be lost in doing so.

Whether in terms of harm-avoidance or otherwise, it is anyway unnecessary to assign a special meaning of any kind to the word 'need' in order to defend categorically needs. A better account of the practical force implied by a categorical need is that the objective(s) for which it is necessary have a certain special status, in particular that *they themselves* are necessary. Both '*P* [hypothetically] needs *N*' and '*P* [categorically] needs *N*' elide some *O*; but what distinguishes the latter on this account is that the *O* in its case is necessary. So it is not in virtue of the word 'need' that '*P* needs water' is so obviously a categorical need claim, but in virtue of the fact that having water is unambiguously necessary for further ends that are themselves necessary. Of course, so far this is not yet enough; there must be a principled point at which such a regress of necessity relations comes to an end. Where it stops, I believe, is with final values that exert, *in themselves*, practically necessary requirements to respond in various ways. In theories of morality certain ends are represented as morally necessary in themselves. In the first-personal context, as I argue

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<sup>350</sup> Thomson, *Needs*, 93. *N.B.*: This is not Rawlsian terminology. Thomson's explanation of what he means by "primary goods" (at 39) is not entirely clear, but as in my interpolation they seem to be something like the finally valuable things that make a life good.

<sup>351</sup> Brad Hooker argues this point at greater length in his "Fairness, Needs, and Desert," in *The Legacy of H. L. A. Hart: Legal, Political, and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Matthew H. Kramer et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 189.

<sup>352</sup> Thomson, *Needs*, 89.

in the following Chapter 4, ends necessary in themselves are rather the requirements entailed by those things that matter to the relevant person in a special way (by their commitments). In both cases we can call the ends ‘finally necessary’, exactly similar to final value or goodness. With these points in place we can say that categorical needs get their necessity via a chain of inheritance from final needs. The class of categorical needs includes all utterly indispensable preconditions along the way for final needs to be satisfied; they also include all the things that are circumstantially necessary for final needs. The latter needs are those otherwise merely hypothetical necessities (*i.e.*, instrumental, constitutive, ...) which in the circumstances become actual necessities; that is, they become things without which, things being the way they are, it is not possible to meet relevant requirements. These are distinct from things which are utterly or circumstantially necessary for unnecessary objectives, that is, for those which do not inherit necessity from any finally necessary requirements. The latter never have categorical status.

As I point out in section 1.1, it is important not to identify instrumental necessity with hypothetical necessity in general—as Thomson, Wiggins, and many other authors writing on needs appear to do<sup>353</sup>—because doing so leaves out the possibility of constitutive necessity and other forms of non-instrumental necessary precondition.<sup>354</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter (§4.1) something can be necessary *but not for any further material end* if it is partially constitutive of attaining the objective(s) for which it is necessary. In such cases, the relevant *N* and *O* come to coincide, since when the *N* forms a part of the *O* it does not contribute to something detached from itself. Yet although *N* is not a further material end, its necessity is explained by the necessity of the objective it partially constitutes. For example, to adapt the later Miller’s and Wiggins’ accounts, the final necessity of ensuring a minimally decent living standard (a practical requirement on fellow citizens in the form of a moral duty) would entail a need for adequate clothing. But this would not be because adequate clothing is instrumental to having a minimally decent living standard but rather because a minimally decent living standard is (in that time and place) partly constituted by having adequate clothing. Similarly, friendship could be necessary for flourishing not because it is instrumental to it but because it is partially constitutive of it. In each case, ‘*P* needs *N*’ does elide the objective for which *N* is a necessary prerequisite; it is the elided *O* that explains (and is needed to explain) the categorical necessity of the *N*, not the meaning of the word ‘need’.

Another reason Thomson and Wiggins are attracted to the non-elliptical reading is that they want the appearance of the word ‘need’ itself to convey the normative force of categorical need claims. Wiggins insists that

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<sup>353</sup> Thomson, *Needs*, 15-6; Wiggins, “Claims of Need”, 9-10.

<sup>354</sup> See also E. P. Brandon on this point, in his “Is ‘A Needs X’ Elliptical?,” *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 45 (1993): 128-9.

it is in virtue of what is carried along by this sense itself of the word ‘need’, not in virtue of context (whatever part context plays in determining that this is the sense intended), that appeal is made to the necessary conditions of harm’s being avoided.<sup>355</sup>

But there does not seem to be any reason why it could not be supplied by the context of utterance. Pragmatic considerations are indeed sufficient to indicate that someone is intending ‘need’ in a normative way. And most plausibly whether we should accept any claim that ‘*P* needs *N*’ depends on nothing more than judging: (i) whether the *O* for which *N* is purportedly needed (which may be either stated explicitly or else elided and inferred from context) really is itself necessary, and; (ii) whether *N* really is a necessary prerequisite for *O*. Again, ‘needs’ in that sentence does not require a special sense.

One final comment. Although Thomson and Wiggins seize on Feinberg’s suggestion that need is related to harm, Feinberg himself describes the harm-avoidance sense as “*a* general sense”. This chapter’s second epigraph is the sentence immediately before that: “The concept of a ‘need’ is extremely elastic”.<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Wiggins, “Claims of Need”, 10.

<sup>356</sup> Feinberg, *Social Philosophy*, 111. Emphasis added.

[T]he impersonal standpoint should be able to accommodate all phenomena from the personal standpoint, including facts about the subject himself.<sup>357</sup>

[...] morality [...] misunderstands practical necessity, thinking it particular to the ethical [...] morality makes people think that, without its very special obligation, there is only inclination [...]<sup>358</sup>

## Chapter 4

### Objectivity, subjectivity, inescapability

The previous chapter argued that there is no conceptual barrier to personal needs constituting genuine categorical needs, albeit ones appropriate to different evaluative contexts from those of other concepts of need. Nevertheless, it remains to be confirmed whether personal needs can in fact fulfil all of the requisite conceptual conditions. This chapter considers how, in particular, they can possess the ‘objectivity’ and distinctive normative salience essential to all forms of categorical need. It addresses a serious concern about personal needs that develops roughly along the following lines:

1. By definition, personal needs are a kind of good particular to individual persons.
2. Presumably, if a good is particular to individual persons it is in some sense ‘subjective’.
3. If it is to count as a categorical need a need must be inescapable, in the sense of presenting a non-negotiable practical requirement.
4. Subjective goods cannot generate or represent inescapable requirements.

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Personal needs are not categorical needs.

The central issue here is that of the extent of a person’s *control*. Implicit in 2. and 4. above is the thought that, to the extent to which individual persons have standards of well-being particular to themselves (if they do), that is something they choose for themselves. But if that is so then those things are never necessary, because they are contingent on the person’s willing them. As Harry

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<sup>357</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 101.

<sup>358</sup> Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1985), 196.

Frankfurt puts it, although a person may “need the object, since it is indispensable to an end that he desires”,

his need for it is his own concoction. The object’s indispensability to the end touches him only insofar as he wants it to do so. It does not affect him unless, by his own free choice, he adopts the pertinent desire.<sup>359</sup>

This line of thought probably underlies much scepticism about categorical needs. Objections based on it will most likely come from those who endorse the subjectivity of well-being, in the form of preference satisfaction or similar, rejecting the objectivity they suppose needs’ necessity requires. Personal needs may also face an objection from another direction, coming from those who endorse the objectivity of well-being, and who may even be sympathetic to the possibility of genuine categorical needs. They might maintain that needs cannot be personal because the reality of well-being is not subjective.

This chapter dispels these concerns and in the course of doing so further elaborates the account of personal needs. Even so, it challenges neither premise 3 (which is to say, (vii) *Inescapable*), nor the requirement that personal needs would have to be in some sense ‘objective’. On the other hand, nor does it reject the description of personal needs as in certain senses potentially ‘subjective’. But confusion surrounding these terms does much to obscure what is at stake: here the success or failure of the argument I began with turns on which way the ambiguity of ‘subjective’ is resolved. The first part of the chapter interrogates the meaning of these terms, disentangling different senses of value ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’ that might—favourably or unfavourably—be attributed to needs. This represents a long and involved digression, but one which actually has only a single and very simple purpose: to isolate precisely the only senses in which personal needs must be objective and subjective. Where they need to be objective, it is only in the sense that they are things a person *as a matter of fact* needs (that is, fulfil condition (vi) *Real* of the previous chapter). This does not require any commitment to being objective in other senses. *Real* is also consistent with needs being *particular to particular persons*, which is the only sort of subjectivity, if it is such, that personal needs must possess. (This is to say personal needs may be (iv\*) *Particular* in the terms of the previous chapter, here termed ‘subject relativity’.) This implies no commitment to being subjective in other senses. I should also emphasise that for the most part I identify possible ways the terms have or might be used only to set them aside. I do not intend much, if anything, to depend on their precise formulations. Neither am I aiming to legislate which or how the terms ought to be used. Here as elsewhere I want to be as ecumenical as possible, setting out only what I take to be the minimal requirements for the existence of personal needs as a structural feature of first-personal context well-being. Wherever possible this

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<sup>359</sup> Frankfurt, “Necessity and Desire”, in *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 111; compare also Thomson, *Needs*, 88.



project tries to avoid staking claims on questions of the substance, definition, or metaphysics of well-being. To this end, in section 1.5 I take special pains to demonstrate that needs' being particular to particular persons, or 'subject relative', does not entail that they depend ultimately on people's having different *attitudes* from each other. They may or may not have such an ultimate basis, and this project is neutral on that question.

The second part presents an account of personal needs' inescapability, the *necessity* of the normative requirements they represent. It argues that a person's personal needs represent the normative requirements entailed by central elements of their particular life, which I term their commitments. Commitment is distinct from other characterisations of what matters to a person, in that it is not defined in terms of the actual attitudes they have, such as of valuing or caring (nor even, as per §1.5, hypothetical attitudes). Although commitments are relative to individual persons, they are not concerns a person is free to abandon at will, even if their choices have played a part in their becoming so committed. Another feature of commitment is that it can be and often is a radically particular, direct relation towards particular objects. As sources of requirements commitments are also independent of each other; the requirements of different commitments are hence irreducibly plural. The inescapability of a person's commitments, and the personal needs they entail, is plausibly explained by their connection with the person's identity, though this project cannot investigate this suggestion extensively. For its present purposes it is enough that inescapability is a feature of the practical phenomenology of many people, that is, of those who have commitments generating personal needs. This account of inescapability is compatible with a person's needs and commitments being particular to themselves and with sophisticated subjectivist construals of what those are. Premise 4 is undermined and *Real* confirmed as indeed the only sense in which personal needs must be objective, since personal needs' normative demands may be inescapable whether or not they are objective or subjective in most ways other than *Real* and *Particular*.

### 1. Objectivity and subjectivity

The distinction between objectivity and subjectivity is indeed, in Peter Railton's apt description, both "grand and obscure".<sup>360</sup> Its grandness owes to the great weight many philosophical positions place on it; its obscurity to the diverse and often inexplicit senses it receives. Even when the meanings of certain prominent usages is made explicit, we see that they conflate multiple distinctions. Clearly identifying and teasing these apart is crucial both for the purposes of this project and for well-being theory generally. As I do so, in this part of the chapter I compare from time to time the entries for the two terms in certain major dictionaries (Chambers, Collins, Longman,

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<sup>360</sup> Railton, "Facts and Values," *Philosophical Topics* 14 (1986): 5.

Merriam-Webster, and Oxford),<sup>361</sup> of course not because they are authoritative, but because their diversity is instructive and some of their quite different suggestions are helpful. In separating out distinct meanings, one possible response is to conclude that only some are what ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’ really mean. Perhaps unsurprisingly the attitude I favour is that there are different senses in which values can be objective and subjective.

### 1.1 Ostensibly primary senses

Likely the most common ordinary-language usage of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’, corresponding to the primary definitions in most dictionaries (Chambers, Collins, Longman, Oxford), is to distinguish between bias and the absence of bias.

#### *Unbiased/Biased*

- An epistemic attitude or judgement is objective if and only if it is unbiased by peculiarities of the evaluator’s perspective.
- An epistemic attitude or judgement is subjective if and only if it is biased by peculiarities of the evaluator’s perspective.

Although this pair of meanings, and its primacy, is important to keep in mind, our more immediate concern is with senses in which objectivity and subjectivity are attributed to the values of things themselves, not judgements about and epistemic stances towards them. A second pair of definitions found in all dictionaries is applicable to value, respectively ‘mind dependence’ and ‘mind independence’. Among philosophers, L. W. Sumner for one explicitly endorses these labels (citing Oxford) as “the strict and proper sense[s]” in which value may be objective or subjective.<sup>362</sup> Yet what these mean is to say the least obscure, and in the following precise formulations can only be given of alternative disambiguations. Moreover, it is clear that the ‘mind independence’ definition is infected by philosophy and cannot provide independent support to any position. This is especially evident in dictionaries’ various adjuncts to the ‘mind independence’ definition, including “real” (Chambers, Collins, Longman) and “actual” (Oxford). I will argue presently that while the association of objectivity with the real is certainly correct, the implication of mind independence is a conflation. Further on I argue that mind independence/dependence is not even an exceptionally important pair of senses in which value may be objective or subjective.

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<sup>361</sup> Available as of end-2018 respectively at: <https://chambers.co.uk>; <https://www.collinsdictionary.com>; <https://www.ldoceonline.com>; <https://www.merriam-webster.com>; <http://www.oed.com>.

<sup>362</sup> Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 36. Sumner goes further in defining a subjectivist philosophical theory of a value as one that involves at least some mind-dependence, and an objectivist theory as one that involves none. This is purely for his own dialectical purposes, however (*ibid.*, 35). One might just as well adopt inverse definitions on which an account is objective so long as it contains at least some mind-independence.

## 1.2 Reality and appearance

We might reconstruct that conflation as deriving from the primary ‘unbiased’ sense of objectivity, from a way of interpreting what that bias involves. If subjectivity in the sense of bias owes to psychological interference, it might be thought that being unbiased requires freedom from psychological influences. Yet it is much too fast to infer from some psychological factors introducing bias that objectivity in this sense of absence of bias requires the absence of all dependence on the mind. All that a distinction between biased and unbiased judgement presupposes is the conceptually distinct distinction between reality and appearance.

### *Real/Merely Apparent*

- Something is objective if and only if it is real. That is, if and only if it obtains independently from how it appears or appeals to a subject in their particular epistemic and desiderative standpoint.
- Something is subjective if and only if it merely appears or appeals to a subject in their particular epistemic and desiderative standpoint. That is, if and only if its existence consists in attitudes a subject has in that standpoint, such as beliefs about which states of affairs obtain and desires that certain states of affairs obtain.

The possibility of biased judgement about some state of affairs presupposes a truth about whether it does or does not really obtain—that is, whether or not one presently believes or desires that it does so—and where one’s perception of this reality can be obscured if one’s biases are not minimised or even eliminated. On the other hand, a false perception is *merely* apparent or desired.

Nevertheless, one may still hold that, things being as they actually are, for the value of something to be ‘real’ it must be mind independent. Mind independence and reality, mind dependence and mere appearance, could be conceptually distinguishable but in the actual world coextensive in the case of some kind of value, so perhaps it matters little whether objectivity and subjectivity are characterised in these or those terms. There is a sort of subjectivist position which would concede these alignments of reality with mind independence and mere appearance or appeal with mind dependence, and approve of some value’s being subjective in the latter senses. It might accept classification as a form of ‘antirealism’. For any subject, on such view, there is no reality, no fact of the matter, about whether something has the relevant value that lies behind whether they believe or desire that it does. We can see here, in passing, that essential to the formulations of most subjectivist proposals is the indexing of the value to the subject in question,<sup>363</sup> a point I discuss more directly below. Things of some relevant kind have the value

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<sup>363</sup> Or group of subjects, as in cultural relativism. I set these aside to discuss only the individual case.

only ‘for some subject(s)’, and on this current particular variant whether it is ‘for them’ depends on their actually desiring or believing that it has the value. Now, the foregoing belief- or desire-based variant is coherent, and its description as ‘subjectivist’ surely legitimate. Nevertheless, even with respect to this position, though it may count some value as subjective in the senses of constituted by mere appearance and of mind dependence, in a different way it retains objectivity in the realist sense. While it may seem a trivial point, any coherent account of some value makes a claim to objectivity, in the sense of reality, just insofar as it purports to describe the truth about that value. The contrary assertion that the value is subjective, in the sense of mere appearance, on *this* point would be the denial that any account of its reality is possible—a radical position that I expect few self-described subjectivists about values wish to present. This granted, it is possible to make objective (unbiased) judgements about what is, as a matter of fact, of value for a person even on the foregoing position. True, for the subject themselves there may be no possibility of attaining a perspective-independent view on what is of value for them, no truth of the matter independent of whether it seems to be so, no view on the value of something that is uninfluenced by peculiarities of their perspective—since those are precisely what fully determine what is valuable for them. Yet for other people evaluating this subject, objectivity in the sense of lack of bias is possible and something they could fail to achieve; there is a fact they could misperceive and get wrong, namely whether something really is what the evaluated subject desires or believes to be valuable. There is a fact of the matter about whether something is valuable even if it is subjectively constituted, and only the sort of thing that exists ‘for’ particular subjects. The later Thomas Nagel champions an objectivity about value that I understand as being primarily in the unbiased sense, an “impersonal”, “centerless” perspective adopted by “stepping outside ourselves”, that we can and should seek. It is from this position, for him, that one can apprehend objective value. However, he is also very sensitive to the subjective constitution of some truths in this way. “As in metaphysics, so in the realm of practical reason the truth is sometimes best understood from a detached viewpoint”, he writes. However, he continues, “but sometimes it will be fully comprehensible only from a particular perspective within the world. If there are such subjective values, then an objective conception of what people have reasons to do must leave room for them”.<sup>364</sup>

This realism about mind-dependent value may still seem trivial. But mind dependence is also compatible with a more extensive realism that allows appearance and reality to come apart even in the case of the subject’s own judgements and other attitudes. Whereas the foregoing variant makes the value of something to a subject depend on their present, actual desires, on more soph-

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<sup>364</sup> Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 140. Compare also Railton, “Facts and Values”: 18-9. Sen similarly points out that ‘subjective’ characteristics such as “tastes and interests” “can be built *parametrically* into an evaluation function without losing objectivity”. See his “Well-Being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985): 196, original emphasis.

isticated positions it depends not on those, but on their attitudes in some more or less idealised standpoint. A minimal, and compelling, first step would be to allow actual desires and beliefs to be misdirected when their objects are relevantly misperceived in respect of non-evaluative features. For example, a person may actually desire to drink the liquid in some glass, falsely believing that it is gin when it is in fact petrol.<sup>365</sup> Actually desiring or believing that it would be a good idea to drink any liquid under the description ‘gin’ would only be appropriate if drinking it really would satisfy that desire or belief, and to do that it would really have to be gin. More sophisticated positions go further, in allowing the *appearance of value or appeal itself* of objects correctly perceived in respect of non-evaluative features to be false. On some views it is not even what one desires or judges to be valuable under improved conditions at all, but that which is the object of some other attitude such as “caring”,<sup>366</sup> “valuing”,<sup>367</sup> or “mattering”.<sup>368</sup> (I return to these below in §2.3.) Possible idealised conditions include ones in which one is fully informed and perhaps fully rational,<sup>369</sup> or (more conservatively) in which one “knows what it is like” to possess or experience the relevant would-be object of value.<sup>370</sup> On some views it is the subject themselves who is idealised and holds the relevant attitudes; sometimes the authoritative attitudes are those of an ideal counterpart advising the subject.<sup>371</sup> On all such views, dependence on a favoured standpoint, that though still one’s own may diverge from that one presently occupies, allows a gap to open between seeming and truth within the individual’s own standpoint; there arises the possibility of being wrong about what is valuable, not only for outside observers in their judgments of which attitudes another person has, but for the person themselves about their own attitudes—and not only on matters of non-evaluative fact, but about the appropriateness of their own responses to given non-evaluative facts. The subject can achieve greater objectivity and less subjectivity in the sense of reducing bias the more their evaluations overcome the limitations of their non-idealised standpoint.

### 1.3 Universal or subject relative

So it is compatible with a value being either mind dependent or mind independent that there is a fact of the matter about what is valuable to a subject distinct from what merely appeals to them

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<sup>365</sup> This example comes from Bernard Williams, “Internal and External Reasons,” in *Moral Luck*, 102.

<sup>366</sup> Connie Rosati, “Internalism and the Good for a Person,” *Ethics* 106 (1996): 297-326; Benjamin Yelle, “Alienation, Deprivation, and the Well-Being of Persons,” *Utilitas* 26 (2014): 367-84.

<sup>367</sup> Dale Dorsey, “Subjectivism without Desire,” *Philosophical Review* 121 (2012): 407-42.

<sup>368</sup> J. David Velleman, “Is Motivation Internal to Value?,” in *Preferences*, ed. Georg Meggle, Christoph Fehige, and Ulla Wessels (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), 88-102.

<sup>369</sup> *E.g.*, Williams, “Internal and External Reasons”, 101-13; Railton, “Facts and Values”; Rosati, “Internalism and the Good for a Person”; Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). Not all of these authors may best be described as ‘subjectivists’ as such. For strenuous criticism of full-information accounts see Sobel, “Full Information Accounts of Well-Being”, 43-68.

<sup>370</sup> Sobel, “Subjectivism and Idealisation,” in *From Valuing to Value*, 261-74.

<sup>371</sup> *Cf.* Railton, “Facts and Values”.

or appears to them to be so. However, by ensuring that that reality is indexed to particular subjects, sophisticated mind dependence positions depart from positions that claim it is not only mind independent, but also external and/or universal. The latter claims are what normally distinguish positions labelled ‘objectivist’. For sophisticated subjectivist positions, as with the actual-desire picture, things remain valuable *for* or *to* subjects, not valuable simpliciter as on ‘objectivist’ accounts. It is this difference that many advocates of the mind independence of well-being, for example, appear to consider most important and motivate their positions:

*Universal/ Subject Relative*

- Some value is objective if and only if its objects possess it simpliciter, *i.e.* it is not indexed to any subject(s), *or* its objects possess it for all subjects of some relevant kind, *e.g.*, all rational beings.
- Some value is subjective if and only if its objects possess it only for or to some subject(s).

This is a distinct pair of senses that are very commonly associated, if not in practice conflated, with objectivity and subjectivity in other senses. Sumner and other defenders of subject relativity<sup>372</sup> argue that the prime reason an adequate theory of well-being requires some element of ‘subjectivity’ is that it is needed in order to capture well-being’s ostensibly “subject-relative or perspectival character”.<sup>373</sup> Yet the association with perspective—of how things *appear* to subjects (including idealised, not only actual, appearances)—suggests an illegitimate conflation of mind dependence with subject relativity, and mind independence with universality. Although mind dependence might entail subject relativity (with the premise that the constitutions of our minds are relevantly contingently variable), the latter does not by itself entail the former. Sumner does in fact immediately acknowledge this, that identifying the two is a substantive thesis that is “neither trivial nor analytic”. It is rather “a putative interpretation or explanation of this fact [*sc.*, that well-being is to a large extent subject relative]”.<sup>374</sup> Interestingly, universality and subject relativity might themselves be regarded as forms of ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’ in their own right. Merriam-Webster offers “peculiarity to a particular individual” separately from its mind dependence offering as indeed another sense of ‘subjective’. But Sumner calls ‘subject relative’ a “merely grammatical” meaning of ‘subjective’, and presumably stands by his assertion that in the context of value, at least, ‘mind dependent’ is “the strict and proper sense”.<sup>375</sup> I will not take sides on the semantics here, but however we decide to use words we should be careful to keep

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<sup>372</sup> For example, Railton, “Facts and Values”; Rosati, “Internalism and the Good for a Person”; Dorsey, “Subjectivism without Desire”; Yelle, “Alienation, Deprivation, and the Well-Being of Persons”.

<sup>373</sup> Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 42.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 43.

the conceptual distinctness of these two distinctions clear. All that subject relativity in itself means is that things may be valuable to some people without being valuable to all people.

In fact, it is false that mind dependence entails subject relativity anyway. What the sophisticated subjectivists above really put forward is not mind dependence as such but *attitude* dependence,<sup>376</sup> which is not the only way value could depend on subjects' minds. Well-being hedonism, for instance, counts a value as mind dependent but it asserts that positively (negatively) valenced experience or similar is of value (disvalue), as a matter of fact and universally—whether or not subjects are positively or negatively disposed towards having such experiences. A well-informed subject might rationally desire, value, or have some other positive attitude towards some project that, though it matters deeply to them, brings them more pain than pleasure. They measure the value of their life against their success in pursuit of it, not how pleasant that is. But well-being hedonism would overrule this subject's perspective as mistaken, recommending instead as objectively superior a more experientially rewarding life.<sup>377</sup> So mind dependence and universality are compatible.

#### 1.4 Intrinsic, subject dependent, external, internal

Indeed, despite allowing mind-dependent value a place within it, Nagel argues that objective value is universal in precisely the way of well-being hedonism. This part of his position is ensured if objective value is *intrinsic* to its objects. For him, objective value is “what is of value in itself, rather than *for* anyone”.<sup>378</sup> Similarly, Sumner asserts that “[t]he core of subjectivity ... consists of states attributable only to subjects”.<sup>379</sup>

##### *Intrinsic/ Subject Dependent*

- Some value is objective if and only if its objects' possession of it depends exclusively on its objects' intrinsic properties.
- Some value is subjective if and only if its objects' possession of it depends on relations between its objects and one or more subjects *for* whom those objects have value.

Of values that are mind dependent, then, only those that are intrinsic to its objects would count as objective: in this case, pleasurable experiences and painful experiences. For Nagel the mind-dependent value of personal concerns is ruled out, as merely subjective, because it depends in part on the relation between them and the subjects whose concerns they are. He regards value

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<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, 36, where Sumner explicitly specifies this.

<sup>377</sup> For more or less this reason, some theorists have suggested that well-being hedonism should not be classified a subjectivist theory so much as a one-item objective list theory. See Scanlon, “Value, Desire, and Quality of Life,” in *The Quality of Life*, ed. Nussbaum and Sen, 189; Arneson, “Human Flourishing Versus Desire Satisfaction,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16 (1999): 115.

<sup>378</sup> Nagel, “Subjective and Objective”, 209.

<sup>379</sup> Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 32.

that is subject relative to be something that is projected onto its objects by subjects' attitudes: "they acquire value only because of the interest we develop in them and the place this gives them in our lives, rather than evoking interest because of their value".<sup>380</sup>

Another contrast that might easily be confused with the intrinsic/subject dependent distinction is whether value depends on facts 'internal' or 'external' to subjects. "External" is attached to the 'mind independence' definitions of 'objective' in some dictionaries (Chambers, Longman). Although different construals are possible, this is what I take the distinction to be:

*External/Internal*

- Some value is objective if and only if its objects' possession of it depends on no facts about subjects.
- Some value is subjective if and only if its objects' possession of it depends on facts about one or more subjects.

The universal/subject relative, intrinsic/subject dependent, and external/internal distinctions can come apart and their interrelations are complicated. I note the following summary points.

1. Although all subject-dependent value is internal, the example of well-being hedonism shows that some internal value could nevertheless be intrinsic. Although the value of pleasure depends on the mental states of persons, on that account it does not depend on its being valuable to or for anyone.<sup>381</sup>
2. Two ways some value could be ensured to be universal are if it were external and/or intrinsic, since it would be impervious to contingent differences between persons.
3. However, as my formulation of the definition of universal perhaps already suggests, it is possible for some value to be universal yet subject dependent. This will be the case if it depends on relations between objects and subjects, but the facts in virtue of which it does so are facts about *all* subjects. In the case of moral facts, a popular candidate has been human beings' common rationality. In the case of well-being, this option might be less plausible for the defender of universality than another candidate, a more richly specified human nature common to all persons. (I return to the notion of subjects' natures in the second part of this chapter.)
4. For some value to be subject relative it must be subject dependent *and* the nature of that dependence must owe to contingent and hence variable facts about persons.

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<sup>380</sup> Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 168-9.

<sup>381</sup> Nagel has associated externality with both 'objective' and 'real'. See his "Subjective and Objective," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 202. However, in light of his view that pleasure is objectively valuable he must mean external in a different sense from the one I present. This is likely in relation to the detachment required for impersonal, unbiased judgement.



5. None of these possible senses of objective and subjective, if they are such, entail or exclude the possibility that if some value fulfils them then it is real, or not. There is no good reason to exclude subject-relative and any other extrinsic properties of objects from those which exist independently of their actual appearance and could be acknowledged from an unbiased standpoint.

Although all of these points are worth acknowledging, I set them aside to concentrate in the following section on a differentiation that is particularly important for understanding the theoretical commitments personal needs do and do not require.

### 1.5 Subject relativity is compatible with attitude independence

Commonly, something rather more specific is identified with some relevant value's being internal to subjects, at least in the popular view called "internalism", which *prima facie* claims that the value is both subject relative and attitude dependent. On that view, for something to be valuable to a subject there must be appropriate conditions possible in which they would regard it positively, lest it be unacceptably "alien" to them.<sup>382</sup> The subject-dependent, subject-relative facts appear on this view to be mind dependent, in particular attitude dependent, after all. Connie Rosati attributes the popularity of subjectivist (in the sense of attitude dependence) positions to the attractiveness of this internalism, whether it is explicitly or implicitly endorsed.<sup>383</sup> The internalist condition is highly plausible, and I will not challenge it here. But it is important to recognise that it can be read in at least two different ways: one as an attitude dependence proposal about the constitution of some value familiar from above; another as representing only a *constraint* on what can be valuable to a subject. Some value's being constrained by the internalist condition might seem no different from its depending on subjects' attitudes. This is false, however, and to see the possibility of its being only a constraint we need only look to the account of Railton, himself a chief proponent of internalism. He combines subject relativity with attitude independence.

At first glance, subjects' idealised attitudes appear to play the lead for Railton, since he states that

an individual's good consists in what he would want himself to want, or to pursue, were he to contemplate his present situation from a standpoint fully and vividly informed about himself and his circumstances, and entirely free of cognitive error or lapses of instrumental rationality.<sup>384</sup>

This suggests an alignment with the attitude dependence subjectivist camp. This impression is misleading, however, because Railton also holds that "appeal to the hypothetical desires of an idealized individual has an essentially *heuristic* function".<sup>385</sup> For Railton, the value of 'an individu-

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<sup>382</sup> Railton, "Facts and Values": 9; Velleman, "Is Motivation Internal to Value?"; Rosati, "Internalism and the Good for a Person".

<sup>383</sup> Rosati, "Internalism and the Good for a Person": 299.

<sup>384</sup> Railton, "Facts and Values": 16.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*: 25, emphasis added.

al's good' does not depend on a subject's attitudes, but rather on certain attitude-independent facts about the subject. The former "track" the latter.<sup>386</sup> Railton's position is compatible with the internalist condition. It is compatible with Nagel's assertion "that the truth about how we should live could [not] extend radically beyond any capacity we might have to discover it (apart from its dependence on nonevaluative facts we might be unable to discover)".<sup>387</sup> It is compatible with an argument for internalism David Velleman and Rosati offer appealing to 'ought implies can': that for something to be good for a subject they must be able to care about it, and they cannot be expected to care about it if they are incapable of caring about it.<sup>388</sup> But none of that, if it were true of any value, implies that that the value would *depend* on some relevant subject(s) being able to appreciate it in favourable conditions.

To explain, first consider that value here is a special case of the more general issue of whether there could be aspects of reality that it is impossible, even in the most epistemically ideal circumstances, for us to detect. In the case of physical reality, it is whether reality includes things that are beyond all possible powers of detection and measurement, and could not be captured by a complete science.<sup>389</sup> If there are, one could reasonably respond that inaccessible 'reality' does not matter. We could introduce a distinction between two notions of reality. Reality\* would include necessarily inaccessible things. Reality proper we might reserve for what we could call *our* reality, that which we inhabit. That which we inhabit would be defined as the environment that includes all and only the things that can possibly impinge on our lives. Analytically, things beyond any possible powers of detection could never so impinge. In the specific case of what is of value to or for a person, there could be two senses of what matters to them independently of their attitudes, of their "objective interest" (Railton's term): on the one hand, what matters\* or their objective interest\*, which includes inaccessible value facts; on the other hand, we might reserve what matters to a person proper, or their objective interest proper, for only those value facts it is possible for a person to recognise. Facts about 'value' that are inaccessible would be no facts about value proper at all. All this notwithstanding, even if the range of facts that constitute reality is coextensive with the deliverances of our ideal powers of discernment, it is not necessarily the case that that reality is *constituted* by our actual or hypothetical appreciation of it. 'Dependence' here is a matter of explanatory priority, of whether value's reality is best explained by its being constituted so, or else contrariwise the adoption of those attitudes is explained by there being antecedent facts about value that they are responses *to*. The former, attitude dependence

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<sup>386</sup> As David Sobel neatly expresses the point. See his "Explanation, Internalism, and Reasons for Action," in *From Valuing to Value: A Defense of Subjectivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 153.

<sup>387</sup> Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 139.

<sup>388</sup> Velleman, "Is Motivation Internal to Value?"; Rosati, "Internalism and the Good for a Person": 320.

<sup>389</sup> A complete science might also include things such as spatiotemporal dimensions or fundamental particles that cannot themselves be corroborated empirically but which are entailed by the best fundamental physical theory.

option is possible here, the claim that value is constituted by our attitudes being adopted, and might be favoured by many people's theoretical inclinations. But it is also possible and plausible that, as Railton argues, as in the judgements of an idealised subject about physical facts, "the existence of an individual's objective interest can explain why his ideally informed self would pick out for his less-informed self a given objectified subjective interest, but not vice versa".<sup>390</sup>

### 1.6 All that personal needs require

This just about concludes this catalogue and differentiation of distinct senses of 'objective' and 'subjective'. Again, the only sense in which personal needs must be objective is that they are in a limited sense real, that is that there is a matter of fact about whether a person has them or not. The only sense in which personal needs need to be subjective is that they are subject relative (though also as a consequence that they are extrinsic—most likely, in particular, also internal, depending on contingent facts about particular subjects that *mutatis mutandis* may or may not also obtain in the cases of other subjects). In the corresponding terms of the previous chapter, personal needs need satisfy only *Real* and *Particular*. We now see that these conditions are at very least conceptually compatible. In order to be real, a need does not have to be universal, intrinsic to its objects, external, or mind-independent.

While "internalism" read at minimum as a constraint on what can count as a personal need for a person is also compelling, I have taken special care to show that a value's being subject relative is compatible with it being either attitude dependent or attitude independent. The account of personal needs does not need to commit either way. For this project's purposes, it does not matter especially whether the best account of personal needs' reality is a form of sophisticated subjectivism or else whether they depend on attitude-independent facts about individual persons. This is a point on which others can supplement the account as they wish.

### 1.7 A brief comparison, nevertheless

Even so, it does seem that the attitude independence route has an advantage here, in that it appropriates part of the allure of objectivism of the typically externalist, universalist sort—apparently a major motivation for proponents of such accounts. It accounts for the datum that, at least in many people's phenomenology, value judgement or caring about something seems to involve a recognition of, a response to, something separate from the judgement or the caring itself. There is a fact about the value to be discovered, an object the subject makes a judgement *about*, that they respond *to*. Our *reactions* are not what confer value; value is something the thing we are reacting to possesses antecedent to our appreciation of it.<sup>391</sup> Bernard Williams suggests that this

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<sup>390</sup> Railton, "Moral Realism," *The Philosophical Review* 95 (1986): 175-6n.

<sup>391</sup> Objectivists who stress this impression include David O. Brink and James Griffin. See Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 225; Griffin, *Value Judgement: Improving Our Ethical Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 28-9.

sense of discovery, of objective fact that is “independent of the will and inclination”, is especially vivid in examples of ethical conflict. Nevertheless, where the typical ‘objectivist’ interpretation goes wrong is in inferring that that value *must* be based on facts that are external and/or universal to subjects. It does not follow from attitude independence that the value does not have an extrinsic, subject-relative basis in contingent facts about particular subjects, that may vary from person to person. As Williams continues, “it does not follow that it [such value or other practical demands] is independent of what one is, nor that [the] impressions [one has of them] represent an order of things independent of oneself”.<sup>392</sup> When one discovers that something matters, on a subject-relativist, internalist, attitude independence account, one is discovering that that the thing attitude-independently matters to oneself. It cannot be inferred from that that it also attitude-independently matters to just anyone else. Taking this route, one might hope that accepting the possibility of subject-relative attitude independence could persuade objectivists to drop commitments to externality and/or universality. Again, besides offering the possibility of winning some objectivists over to personal needs, whether it is really an advantage for an account to incorporate this feature will depend on the reader’s theoretical inclinations—which order of explanation they find most plausible.<sup>393</sup>

On the other hand, a potential weakness of the attitude independence route is that it is not obvious what kind of subject-relative facts might suitably determine what matters to a subject, what their “objective interest” is.<sup>394</sup> The chief advantage of the attitude dependence route is that it has an account at the ready of just which subject-relative facts a person’s values depend upon, namely facts about their attitudes.

The second part of this chapter explores a possibility about what those subject-relative facts might be that is compatible with either possibility. As it happens, it touches on one last meaning of ‘subjective’ that we have not yet considered. More importantly, it addresses a crucial outstanding issue personal needs face. That is how they can be sufficiently inescapable, which presents a challenge however one would supplement the account.

## 2. Inescapability

### 2.1 The need for inescapability

The necessity distinctive of categorical needs, personal or otherwise, must involve something very different from being merely good or valuable, such that having one met makes a generic contribution to a subject’s well-being. One aspect of this difference is that their contribution

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<sup>392</sup> Williams, “Conflicts of Values”, 75.

<sup>393</sup> Brink (in *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, 225n) notes that Spinoza for one considered it equally obvious that the precise opposite to Brink’s own objectivism is true.

<sup>394</sup> But for some ideas see Kraut, *What Is Good and Why* and Daniel M. Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

must be qualitatively distinct, rather than one of mere degree. That is the topic of the following chapter. But that quality must also have a peculiar nature. And this nature is in fact the origin of the first aspect. I have so far characterised this second aspect of ‘categorical needs’ necessity as their ‘inescapability’, but it is now time to expand on what that label means and entails. It applies to practical requirements the specific performance of which is non-negotiable, and which stem from some source the normative authority of which is undeniable. This notion partly underlies the rhetoric of needs being ‘absolute’, ‘unforgoable’, and things that a person ‘cannot do without’ having met. For needs, the familiar, most basic undeniable source of such imperatives is ensuring survival, which is considered by many to have an authority surpassing any mere preference to stay alive. Over and above this, accounts seen in the previous chapter argue that having a minimally decent life also commands undeniable authority (though perhaps differently and less). According to these, one harm lacking such a standard of living entails (among other hardships) is feeling shame,<sup>395</sup> something which it is wrong for others (perhaps individually, perhaps together as a community) to allow to happen to someone if it is in their power to prevent it. As with moral duties generally, the requirement to comply and meet these needs would be non-negotiable.<sup>396</sup> Yet while the authority of preventing harms of this kind is widely acknowledged, I have pointed out a common resistance to allowing benefits surpassing such minimal conditions to count as categorical needs. As I interpret it, one reason is precisely that critics and sceptics cannot locate suitable sources of normative authority above minimal states. The kinds of things they see, or anticipate, non-minimal claims of need appealing to seem to them not to imply *inescapable* normative demands.

As I described it at the beginning of this chapter, the crucial issue for needs that are non-minimal and ‘personal’ is that of how much scope they allow for the subject’s own control. If a person has the ability to do without having a purported need, then it is negotiable, hence dispensable, hence not a categorical need after all. Another way Frankfurt expresses the condition is that “what [a] person needs must be something that he cannot help needing”.<sup>397</sup> Yet the goods personal needs would have to derive from, sceptics and critics presumably think, are voluntarily chosen, most relevantly things like projects and life plans. Personal needs would not in fact count as genuine categorical needs, because people can choose different projects and ways of living.

The condition that personal needs must not be subject to the person’s control is true, and some accounts of needs fail to meet it. Raz proposes needs he also calls “personal needs”, that

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<sup>395</sup> See again Adam Smith, cited in the previous chapter in Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, 210; Wiggins, “Claims of Need”, 13, 26.

<sup>396</sup> Non-negotiability does not entail that the all-things-considered best course of action necessarily involves fulfilling it. But even if that best course does not involve it, it does not simply go away; it remains an unfulfilled requirement, that cannot itself be cancelled out by the (in the circumstances) overriding correctness of doing other incompatible things. See Chapter 6.

<sup>397</sup> Frankfurt, “Necessity and Desire”, 109.

are “the conditions necessary to enable a person to have the life he or she has set upon”, to pursue and fulfil his or her goals. Not having these met “will make impossible the continuation of the life the agent has”.<sup>398</sup> In his earlier work, David Miller similarly defined “intrinsic needs” connected with a person’s “life plan” (the “definite and stable idea of the kind of life that he wants to lead”).<sup>399</sup> Although these approaches are definitely on the right track, in that they each recognise that needs can be personal, those they propose appear too contingent to count as genuine categorical needs. Certainly, once ‘set upon’, a life requires certain things for its continuation. Unsupplemented, however, this condition leaves it open to the person to subsequently set upon something else whenever it takes their fancy. It is indeed common for people to ‘set upon’ careers and other commitments they do not truly believe in and soon give up on. And even a sincere commitment to a course of action does not on its own entail sufficient inescapability.<sup>400</sup> That intentions and plans are too “contingent and alterable” to be suitably inescapable is indeed precisely what led Miller later to recant his earlier account in favour of a moralised conception.<sup>401</sup> The only solution, it seems to many, is for inescapability to be imposed from without.

## 2.2 The personal can be inescapable

The problem with both scepticism about personal needs and with Raz’s and the early Miller’s accounts of them is that they envisage the personal in voluntarist terms. This voluntarist view is that a person’s well-being largely depends on the goals, aims, or projects that they freely choose to adopt and pursue. The defender of personal needs does not need to concede this; in fact they must not. Yet it is common and influential. For example, Rawls writes,

We are assuming that people are able to control and to revise their wants and desires in the light of circumstances and that they are to have responsibility for doing so [...] Persons do not take their wants and desires as determined by happenings beyond their control. We are not, so to speak, assailed by them, as we are perhaps by disease and illness so that wants and desires fail to support claims to the means of satisfaction in the way that disease and illness support claims to medicine and treatment.<sup>402</sup>

Elsewhere Rawls asserts that successful deliberation about one’s “life plan” selects a permutation of aims that “can be satisfied in an effective and harmonious manner”,<sup>403</sup> and “reject[s] other plans that are either less likely to succeed or do not provide such an inclusive attainment of aims”.<sup>404</sup> However, two problems with this outlook are that it is less demonstrative of choice

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<sup>398</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 152-3, 377.

<sup>399</sup> Miller, *Social Justice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 128-35.

<sup>400</sup> Reader, *Needs and Moral Necessity*, 63. Compare also Doyal and Gough, *A Theory of Human Need*, 51.

<sup>401</sup> Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, 209. Braybrooke makes the same criticism of the early Miller, in his *Meeting Needs* at 200 and 308-9.

<sup>402</sup> Rawls, “A Kantian Conception of Equality,” *Cambridge Review* 96 (1975): 97, cited in Scanlon, “Preference and Urgency”: 663-4.

<sup>403</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 360.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

over one's personal objectives than it might seem, and that it is unrepresentative of what for most people living a good life actually involves.

Taking the first, certainly we can control whether and how we satisfy our desires and other objectives. Multiple desires or objectives under general descriptions can be differently specified in more and less coherent ways. If complete coherence is impossible, a person can decide which collection of specifications it is best overall to pursue. However, what is being controlled there is what specifically is to be done, overall and in a particular set of circumstances. True, the motive force of the desires deemed incompatible is suppressed, and the unpursued objectives are neglected. But that entails neither that the person's choice has the aim nor that it has the power to make those desires disappear, or to make those objectives now unworthy.<sup>405</sup> This is different from the case in which a person has a desire that they do consider in itself undesirable to have—perhaps it is inherently bad, something they do not identify themselves with; perhaps although not inherently bad it is unhealthy because it undermines other things. It is a familiar point, however, that even though a person can make judgements like these this does not mean they have the ability to get rid of the desire. Nor, if they do, does it mean that they can do so at will without an extended process of effort and adjustment.

That is the first problem with the voluntarist outlook, the fallacy of psychological control. Nagel expresses its second deficiency, which he endorses, as follows: “Most of the things we pursue, if not most of the things we avoid, are optional”. He envisages such subject-relative values, glossed as our “individual aims, projects, and concerns, including particular concerns for other people that reflect our relations with them”, to depend on the value we project onto them: as I quoted him earlier, “they acquire value only because of the interest we develop in them and the place this gives them in our lives, rather than evoking interest because of their value”.<sup>406</sup> But it is false that a person's subject-relative values are largely optional. Call this the fallacy of normative control. First, as we have seen already, even if they are attitude dependent, and in that sense “projected”, those values are not simply a matter of what the person develops an interest in. A gap can open between what a person actually judges is good for themselves, or values or desires, *etc.*, and what as a matter of fact is really good for them. So it goes with our aims, projects, and other concerns. We cannot change the normative truth, what is really good for us, simply by actually believing or choosing differently. Of course, it may be replied that as it happens the truth about what is good for a person in large part depends on how they choose, or would choose after ideal deliberation. In the case of some of the ‘big things’ in people's lives—life projects, careers, relationships, and so on—the truth about which is the right path might be shaped by

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<sup>405</sup> Scanlon is similarly sceptical of how much control we have over our desires. See his “Preference and Urgency”: 664-5.

<sup>406</sup> Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 168.

their ideal choices. One counter to this objection is that, even if this is true for some things, it could not work for all concerns; plausibly the truth of a person's good is not all of their own making.

A greater mistake is to miss that even many of those big things are in fact not shaped by a person's choices. I suspect that the voluntarist outlook is to a large extent an artefact of liberal society's prevailing ideals. The subjectivist notion that whatever a person shapes for themselves is the right thing for them to follow is encouraged by the political freedom it makes available in which they can do so. Another prominent strand in liberal ideology is the rationalist position that vaunts rational autonomy. This more objectivist ideal celebrates the capacity for free choice itself: for it, the effective exercise of that capacity in shaping one's life is an end in itself.<sup>407</sup> Modern liberal societies moreover display atomised family structures and individualistic consumer cultures. This is not a criticism of political freedoms. But though this is simple speculation, I believe these phenomena might explain much of the cultural scepticism about the existence of unchosen, indispensable goods over and above bare necessities. Nevertheless—even if it is attenuated somewhat in comparison with more traditional societies, and can be a source of tension, there is still a central place in the lives of many liberal citizens for something radically different from freely chosen engagements. In a certain special sense many people also have *commitments*.

It is important to briefly distinguish the sense of 'commitment' I intend from certain other common uses of the term. One common meaning I do not intend is that entailed by arranging a person's exterior environment in order to constrain or manipulate their present or future choices; creating a 'commitment mechanism'. I also mean something different from a sort of commitment to general normative principles some philosophers argue is implied by the exercise of rational agency.<sup>408</sup> Commitments of the kind I mean are neither externally imposed nor demands for rational consistency implicitly, actively assumed in making autonomous choices. Commitments are similar to those to the extent that all three enforce certain responses irrespective of whether the person believes that they ought or desires to respond in that way. But the kind I am concerned with is rather a certain type of element in the way the things that matter to persons are commonly structured.

Examples of things that can be commitments in this sense include special roles, communities, relationships with family, friends, partners, and so on, projects, ideals, identities, causes, and vocations.<sup>409</sup> While some commitments are willingly initiated, in other of these cases people find

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<sup>407</sup> Cf. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, 232.

<sup>408</sup> Cf. Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), *ca.* 228-33.

<sup>409</sup> Bernard Williams has made similar references to what has "importance" to specific persons, and of the "commitments" they have. Although he does not elaborate much on what these are and entail, possibly he has something very similar to my 'commitment' in mind. See Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 182ff and Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, by J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 116-7.



themselves with allegiances and under demands they have not chosen but cannot deny. Even when they appear to be chosen, that is often not a case of a person's dispassionately considering how their talents might suit a particular project, or how compatible they would be with a potential friend or partner, for example. Even interests such as these can be thrust upon a person; commitments often arise out of our pursuing passions that grip us, where it can seem, as I quoted Griffin in Chapter 2, that "they choose us".<sup>410</sup> Even if a commitment is something a person has themselves very deliberately adopted, it is false that it necessarily remains optional after a person becomes involved in it. Their initially acquiring the commitment may owe partly to their willing it to become one, but, having done so, if it represents a commitment in the sense I mean then its requirements are inescapable.

### 2.3 Commitment contrasted with other modes of value

Commitment must be carefully distinguished from other senses in which we might say things can 'matter' to a person, in particular "valuing" and "caring about" which are often treated as synonymous with mattering (but which I think should not be).<sup>411</sup> Valuing has most commonly been defined as a kind of desire or combination of desire with other attitudes.<sup>412</sup> A potential first difference is that commitment in my sense defines interests that like those listed above typically have a distinctively serious, central importance to the people with them, and by the special normative role they play as a result. As a result commitments are categorically different from mere tastes, desires, and attractions. This is unlike Rosati's use of 'caring', for example, as a catch-all that includes "desiring, liking, being glad of",<sup>413</sup> which presumably often take as objects things that are not that serious.

That valuing is typically defined in terms of desires and beliefs does not necessarily prevent it from amounting to the same as, or providing a fine basis for, commitment. Commitment is objective in the sense of real, so it can come apart from what a person actually believes and how they are actually motivated to act; but as I have argued this is compatible with attitude dependence, if given a sufficiently sophisticated account. However, for some authors valuing and caring seem to be or depend on attitudes a person *actually* has, as on Valerie Tiberius's account of a person's "value commitments". Whenever this is the case they are sharply distinct from commitment in the sense I intend.

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<sup>410</sup> Griffin, *Well-Being*, 54.

<sup>411</sup> As in, e.g., Alice Hall and Valerie Tiberius, "Well-Being and Subject Dependence," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, ed. Guy Fletcher (Routledge, 2015), 180; Velleman, "Is Motivation Internal to Value?": 92.

<sup>412</sup> E.g., David Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value," in *Papers in Ethics and Social Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 69; Gilbert Harman, "Desired Desires," in *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 135.

<sup>413</sup> Rosati, "Internalism and the Good for a Person": 301.

Tiberius defines her “commitments” in terms of valuing, which for her is “to care about [something] in a particular way, and to care about something is, at least in part, to have some positive affective orientation toward it”.<sup>414</sup> Value commitments for Tiberius are not just anything that a person values in this actual-attitudinal sense; indeed they correspond similarly to commitments in my sense to the important ends, projects, relationships, and so on central to our lives. Additionally, they must satisfy two further conditions. The first is that the person’s valuing of it must be stable over time.<sup>415</sup> The second condition is that the valued ends have “authority” for the person, in the sense that the person regards them as “justified”: they are “the ends [they] take to be normative for [themselves]; [they] endorse or avow them as things that it makes sense to care about, pursue, or promote”.<sup>416</sup> A justification also has the effect of reinforcing the stability of the person’s valuing of the end.<sup>417</sup>

Although Tiberius’s value commitments at least promise to pick out all and only the right qualitatively distinct interests that are central to persons’ lives, they are insufficiently inescapable to count as commitments in my sense. The fact that a person’s valuing has been relatively stable does not ensure that it will continue, not even if it is because a person presently “takes” the requirements their value commitments (Tiberius’ sense) imply to be authoritative. A person can persistently endorse actions, behaviours, beliefs, and dispositions, believing them to be justified when in fact they fail to live up to the requirements of commitments (my sense) they are under. Yet part of the inescapability that commitment on my account has is that there *is* a matter of fact about what one is committed to that is separable from what one appears, even to oneself, to be committed to. To be clear, it is as not as if people cannot be wrong about their commitments on Tiberius’s account.<sup>418</sup> It is only that, for her, if they are wrong, they are wrong about which commitments they ought to have, not about anything they might be committed to unbeknownst to themselves.

Suppose though that we allowed, as on sophisticated subjectivist construals such as Dale Dorsey’s and Rosati’s, that a person might not realise what they value or care about in unfavour-

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<sup>414</sup> Valerie Tiberius, *The Reflective Life: Living Wisely with Our Limits* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 25.

<sup>415</sup> David Copp’s account similarly proposes that a person’s “values”, are their “stable and endorsed standards about the course of her life”, or more precisely:

One’s values at time *t* are preferences one has at *t* about the course of one’s life (a) that are stable over a period in one’s life that includes *t*, and (b) that one is at *t* content to have, and (c) that one would not be content at *t* to anticipate losing, where (d) the attitudes indicated in (b) and (c) are themselves stable.

See Copp, “Reason and Needs,” in *Value, Welfare, and Morality*, ed. R. G. Frey and Christopher W. Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 124-5.

<sup>416</sup> Tiberius, *The Reflective Life*, 24. Scanlon endorses a similar condition on valuing; see *What We Owe to Each Other*, 95.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-4.

able epistemic conditions<sup>419</sup>—that is, that Tiberius’s “value commitments” were allowed to be potentially unknown to persons themselves. Commitment as I intend it has the additional feature of entailing constraints on their will, that it is somehow not within their power to upset the continuation of their commitment. Whether Tiberius’s value commitments share this feature would depend on how the notion of her commitments’ “authority” is to be understood. In any case, on my account what a person is committed to is determined independently of whether they want to value or care about this or that. As will become clearer in section 2.5, it is precisely commitment’s independence from the will that is most central to personal needs’ inescapability.

Commitments are also distinguished by the special shape of the requirements they generate. Stemming from the central importance of the interests they represent, this form is one of strict, specific requirement, which has an essential connection with non-substitutability. Commitments are sources of practical requirements with the character of necessity. A person’s personal needs are defined as those strict practical requirements that their commitments entail. They are what something’s being one of their commitments necessitates of them. Moreover, something a person merely desires, cares about, or values—that lacks any essential connection to one of their commitments—lacks any necessity.

#### 2.4 Commitments, personal needs, and well-being

In one important first-personal evaluative context, how well a person’s life is going consists in how successfully they are living up to the requirements of their commitments, which is to say fulfilling these needs. But it is essential also to note that the relation of meeting personal needs to fulfilling commitments is not that of means to further ends. It is constitutive of having a commitment that one is related to something in such a way that one is under certain requirements towards it. And it is constitutive of living up to a commitment that one responds appropriately to it.

Personal needs are not necessarily moral requirements, though soon I will suggest that if a person has moral duties, then those lie among their personal needs. Still, all personal needs can have a comparable seriousness to moral demands that is manifested by the common idea that a person can *betray* the things that they are committed to—where this need not involve anything distinctively morally wrong, and need not even involve failing other people.<sup>420</sup> A person can have partial obligations towards people to whom they are committed, and it need not be immoral or

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<sup>419</sup> See again Dorsey, “Subjectivism without Desire”; Rosati, “Internalism and the Good for a Person”: 307. See also Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 160.

<sup>420</sup> Though I criticised him earlier (§2.1) for overemphasising the role of adopted goals and the life a person has “set upon”, Raz also offers this example: “life may not be worthwhile, may not be morally possible, for parents who have betrayed their child” (*The Morality of Freedom*, 377). Such betrayal cannot be a matter of failing to hit one’s aims or goals, but that of failing certain commitments. Goals for Raz, then, seem implicitly to include more than adopted aims. We do well to distinguish mere aims and commitments explicitly and sharply.

moral whether or not a person betrays them or remains loyal—on some views at least, partial obligations are excluded from morality as such. A project, vocation, dream, or ideal the person is committed to similarly makes demands on them that they can live up to or fail.

Betrayal is admittedly a more obvious a possibility in the case of the former commitments, when it involves letting down other people, than in the case of commitments that are not essentially other-involving. So I anticipate an objection that concedes the former but argues that the second is a false parallel. In those cases, this objection runs, there could only be obligation to oneself, and it might well be doubted whether there is such a thing, or, if there is, whether it can have strength comparable to those towards others. The right reply to make can safely leave the latter question aside, however, because the parallel is closer than the objection makes it out to be. While the requirements entailed by a person's commitment of the kind in question are not towards other people, they are nevertheless not obligations towards themselves, and in fact still towards things beyond themselves. The situation can again be illuminated by way of the distinction between the intrinsic/extrinsic and instrumental/final distinctions. Even though the fact that the person has a commitment is explained by its relation to themselves, the end that person pursues is not its benefit to them; for them, living up to the commitment, appropriately responding to its various requirements, is itself the final end. Appropriately responding to their commitments does improve the person's well-being (in the sense specific to this context of evaluation), but that is not why it is valuable to them. What they owe they owe to the commitment, not to themselves. See again my interpretation of the case of Bava Mahalia in Chapter 1 section 2.6.

Still there is the question of what this seriousness is. It cannot just mean that a person's responding appropriately to their commitments makes a 'very large' or 'great' difference to their well-being, since that would not entail a categorical distinction between commitments/personal needs and other things that might be 'valued' or desired—and perhaps that would entail their exchangeability (see following chapter). The answer, I suggest, is that living up to the requirements of each one of their commitments is itself an *essential* constituent of a person's living well (in a first-personal evaluative context). I will need to come back to explain why this might be so in the following section.

Before that, I want to note that personal needs come in at least two different forms (I do not rule out the existence of others). The form I mostly discuss I call 'performance needs'. These refer to ways a person's commitments imply that they need to respond in circumstances that arise. Since (as I show in the following chapter) the defence and elaboration of needs crucially depends on how they can figure in the determination of what a person ought to do, performance needs are the personal needs I focus on. But there is another form of personal needs, one that is formally similar to the silo model of Griffin's, Qizilbash's, and some other multidimensional accounts of well-being in other evaluative contexts. These are various highly generally spe-

cified attainments a person must have in sufficient quantity or degree. I call these a person's 'standing needs'. A sportsperson might need to compete in a sufficient number of suitable competitions and tournaments. A person's commitment to literary and cultural criticism might require them to read a sufficient range and number of work, see enough musical and dramatic performances, visit enough galleries and museums. These requirements need not be regarded as instrumental to these roles; they may be constitutive of fully or properly being such a person. A person may need to be loved. The distinction between these two forms of personal needs describes a difference in urgency: whereas it does not matter especially when within some time-frame a standing need is satisfied, performance needs demand more or less immediate responses to more tightly defined circumstances. This is not to say that it cannot become urgent to satisfy a standing need; that is, that standing needs cannot imply performance needs in certain conditions. In particular, if there are certain alternatives that would put in jeopardy a person's ability to meet one of their standing needs, that need implies a performance need for them to avoid taking that course. A standing need may also require continual performance; if a person's ability to meet a standing need is insecure or uncertain, a performance need may exist to act such as to contribute to the meeting of the standing need whenever the opportunity arises to do so.

## 2.5 Commitment, constraint, and identity

While the preceding sections explain what I mean by commitment and personal need, they do not yet provide enough reason to accept that those exist and play a role in well-being. There remains the large question about the source of this necessity. Whereas accounts of the sources of moral requirements are familiar (however successful or not one thinks they are), it is not obvious what basis personal needs might have—besides that of adopted aims, goals, projects, and so on that I have argued are inadequate. Relatedly, the similarity of personal needs to moral requirements I have indicated may seem worrisome however it is accounted for: whereas it is commonly accepted that the bindingness of moral requirements does not depend on a person's endorsement, it might be appalling, and thus perhaps implausible, if the bindingness of a person's personal needs similarly turned out to be something alien to them. Recalling both the internalism condition of this chapter's first part and the liberal/conservative hostility to needs touched on in Chapter 3, talk of requirement in the context of well-being appears to be perfect for use in social control. Such a view might seem to justify demands for loyalty and obedience to oppressive communities, families, spouses, and so on, and for the imposition of life courses on people that they cannot identify with.

The bindingness of personal needs does not, however, exist as an ideological fiction, and this can be seen in the way commitment and necessity can be experienced in the first person, and recognised by a person's own lights. I said I would focus on performance needs more than standing needs, and it is these, I suggest, that also show up in many people's personal experience most

clearly. People's perception that they have some commitment can take the form of a *vivid sense* that they *must* take some course of action that honours the commitment, that it is demanded of them. Now, it is the existence of commitments that generates and explains their requirements (even if having the latter is constitutive of the former), and as I argued earlier a person need not be aware of their commitments. Even so, this experience of compulsion is the strongest available evidence for the existence of commitments. This experience has a psychological aspect, in that a person strongly feels that their will is constrained. But it also has a normative aspect; its compulsion or sense of impossibility is not *merely* psychological. It is not simply an unreasoned, brute urge or overwhelming aversion that the person feels; they acknowledge it as having a special sort of authority for them, as reflecting a truth about what they (in particular) should or should not do.<sup>421</sup> For Williams earlier, it was precisely this sense of the impossibility of denying, and the necessity of acknowledging, each of several conflicting demands that he suggests is remarkable about moral dilemmas, and that lends strong support to belief in 'objective' normative truths that exist independently of whether one happens to believe or want them to do so.<sup>422</sup> Such experiences of "practical necessity" are more often discussed in moral cases, concerning what is "morally impossible";<sup>423</sup> I submit, however, that this necessity is also a feature of many people's experience of their not essentially moralised personal commitments. Gary Watson has referred to appearances of such necessity as "Luther cases", after Martin Luther's declaration in defending his advocacy of his beliefs, "Here I stand, I can do no other".<sup>424</sup> However, although Luther's is a helpfully dramatic illustration, Watson's term threatens to aggrandise commitments and personal needs, suggesting that they are uncommon and exotic. While having commitments creates the constant possibility of serious conflict, unmitigable loss, and even dilemma,<sup>425</sup> their appearance and people's negotiation of them is typically quite mundane. They are the stuff of life. The feelings involved are not necessarily very dramatic, either. They could be the gentle tug that reminds one to keep a promise and or not let a person down. Or the moderate pull in both directions when two such obligations conflict, together with another feeling that one really needs to find a way of resolving or ameliorating the clash. Dramatic examples only make the character of necessity they indicate especially clear.

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<sup>421</sup> Frankfurt argues the same in his "Rationality and the Unthinkable," in *The Importance of What We Care About*, 182.

<sup>422</sup> See again his "Conflicts of Values", 75.

<sup>423</sup> Raimond Gaita writes powerfully on this topic. See his *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), e.g., circa 297.

<sup>424</sup> Watson, "Volitional Necessities," in *Agency and Answerability: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 100-1.

<sup>425</sup> Cf. George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi", cited in Karl-Otto Apel, "Universal Principles and Particular Decisions and Forms of Life," in *Value and Understanding: Essays for Peter Winch*, ed. Raimond Gaita (Oxford: Routledge, 1990), 73:

The essence of being human is that one should not seek perfection, that one is sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty, [...] and that one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one's love upon other human individuals.

I do not want to get diverted by questions about the nature of agency and motivation that these cases may provoke.<sup>426</sup> I want, rather, to take them as what I hope the reader can accept as a phenomenological datum. It is enough for the purposes of this project that many people live their lives as if they have commitments and needs as I characterise them, that they are internal to their conception of themselves and the value of other things and people in relation to themselves. That being said, a literal reading of the language of ‘identification’ that is used in contexts like this offers a plausible explanation of the normativity of personal needs, of why they are severally essential to a person’s first-personal well-being. On this proposal, which I tentatively endorse, the reason people affirm and ‘identify’ with experiences of practical necessity, why they recognise them as authoritative, is that their commitments and the requirements they impose are essential to who they, in a special sense, are.<sup>427</sup> (Incidentally, a person’s commitments and personal needs would then be ‘subjective’ in another sense not yet considered: “relating to the nature or essence of a subject” (Collins), or “of, relating to, or constituting a subject” (Merriam-Webster).) But this sort of identity is not the personal identity most often discussed in metaphysics, and nor is it the person’s identity qua human being as appealed to by basic needs and similar concepts. It is rather who they are in particular and in a sense defined by their own personal commitments, a usage of the word that I suggest is indeed current. A connection between a person’s identity, their ends, and/or their deliberation has also been asserted by a great many philosophers.<sup>428</sup> In the present account, however, it is important to reemphasise the objectivity this identity must have, something that other authors do not always claim: just as a person can have false beliefs about what their commitments are, a person can falsely identify with someone different from who they truly are. I pick this idea up again in Chapter 6, in its relation with coherentist practical reason. However, that later discussion aside, this project cannot adequately explore this possible connection with identity and the deep questions it poses. Its task is only to show how commitment and personal need might be accommodated in an adequate theory of well-being and practical reason.

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<sup>426</sup> For a penetrating discussion see Watson, “Volitional Necessities”, *passim*.

<sup>427</sup> Frankfurt explores a proposal of this kind in, *inter alia*, his “On the Necessity of Ideals,” in *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 108-16.

<sup>428</sup> Including John Dewey, “Human Nature and Conduct,” in *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 150; John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” *The Monist* 62 (1979): 347; Bernard Williams, “Persons, Character, and Morality,” in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 12; Susan Hurley, *Natural Reasons: Personality and Polity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 262; Wiggins, *e.g.*, “Nature, Respect for Nature, and the Human Scale of Values”: 20-1; John Finnis, “Commensuration and Public Reason,” in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 220; Henry S. Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, 166-7; Elijah Millgram, *Ethics Done Right: Practical Reasoning as a Foundation for Moral Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 297-8; Daniel M. Hausman, *Valuing Health: Well-Being, Freedom, and Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 141.

## 2.6 Priority to the particular

The most natural construal of the framework I envisage is that a person's commitment to a thing is contingent upon radically particular characteristics of both themselves and the thing. That is to say, the status of something as a person's commitment is both (i) subject relative and (ii) not dependent on generic features it possesses in common with other possible objects of commitment. I will flesh this out in a moment, but first I will contrast it against the outlook it completely opposes: that on which the values of objects to subjects always depend on general features those objects possess in common with others of their kind—which, moreover, are reasons for everyone to recognise those values. Translated to the case of commitment, the opposed view is one on which something's being a person's commitment (their commitment to their commitment) always depends on general features that it has in common with other things—that, furthermore, entail that it is, or should become, a commitment for everyone else also.

An example of the approach opposed is Griffin's. On his account the prudential value of anything depends on its possession of some "desirability characterization" ("such as 'accomplishment' or 'enjoyment'").<sup>429</sup> He endorses the objectivist view seen above (§1.4) that "we recognize something to be valuable, and therefore form a desire for it"—rather than its value depending on anyone's attitudes towards it.<sup>430</sup> And this he thinks is "most naturally explained by appeal to impersonal values". This in turn, he argues, ensures that when viewing an object aright, judgements about its desirability, and the desirability characterisations in terms of which they are framed, will be shared by anyone: "To see anything as prudentially valuable, then, we must see it as an instance of something generally intelligible as valuable and, furthermore, as valuable for any (normal) human".<sup>431</sup> This is precisely what ensures, for him, that there is a "profile of prudential values" that applies to every human person. On the other hand, it is not as if this universalism is necessarily incompatible with there being some variation across subjects; indeed as seen in Chapter 2 it is something Griffin wants: "There being just one profile of prudential values for humans is compatible with there being very many forms that a good human life could take".<sup>432</sup>

The first inadequacy of this sort of approach for commitment is that it is not in itself especially plausible. Against Griffin, we have seen it is a mistake to infer objectivity of other kinds—impersonality, universality here—from objectivity in the sense that there are facts of the matter about things' values antecedent to our actually desiring them (where those facts may be either attitude independent or dependent). Whether values are universal turns on the separate question of what the basis of such facts is: in particular, of the extent to which such a basis really is

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<sup>429</sup> Griffin, *Value Judgement*, 29, 36.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-9.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.



shared across subjects. Griffin's proposal is that this basis is ultimately a shared human nature. The assumption that there is such a thing would work here if true; however, it is controversial, and for good reason. It is unclear what kind of thing capable of grounding prudential value could be necessarily shared by all human persons, even "normal" ones.<sup>433</sup> Moreover, it is not a necessary postulate: it would be enough for value to be real that each person had a suitable individual nature (an 'identity', on the foregoing proposal). Subject relativity is perfectly compatible with the reality of values, and with attitude independence if a theorist wants that also. An inductive inference from our contingent personal experience of people's values to their necessary convergence would be a fearfully ambitious.<sup>434</sup> But the premise that human constitutions are contingent alone makes necessary convergence seem unlikely. Setting aside views on which value is external, the value of anything depends in crucial part on facts about individual persons. If these facts are contingent, then any convergence in values will likewise be contingent and, hence, likely imperfect at the population level—let alone across populations in which people are differently inculcated (that is, whose identities are differently formed).

The idea that identifying shared profiles of values is possible is nevertheless sound—to the extent that despite the diversity in people's commitments they can typically be classified into various general kinds. At a relatively high level of abstraction there is some similarity and convergence in the values of human beings. However, most plausibly these are *generalisations* about the kinds of things that matter to people, empirical abstractions from patterns of valuing that are non-accidental yet contingent (compare Chapter 2 §4.2.2). And these are surely apt and innocuous on any account.

A second deficiency of the Griffin-type approach for commitment appears if it is read as doing more than that; in particular, if it suggests that the value of things is necessarily explained by their belonging to some kind. For example, if the reason a person's finishing writing a book is valuable is that it is an instantiation of the value 'accomplishment', that it realises such a value. This might be the case for some of the things people pursue. Some pleasurable activities are pursued purely because they are fun; in such a case a person is not attached to the activity in its particularity, and anything just as fun could do as well. Also, a person may have standing needs of a kind that take the shape of general categories, which might, for them in particular, include things like accomplishment, friendship, love. They may have an awareness that they need a sufficient degree of such things that is missing from their life, and on that basis seek *something* that falls under such a general kind. They may have a commitment that is defined in relatively general terms,

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<sup>433</sup> What does "normal" mean here—'sufficiently similar to 'us'? And who are 'we'—middle-class, Western philosophers?

<sup>434</sup> Cf. Sobel, "Do the Desires of Rational Agents Converge?," in *From Valuing to Value: A Defense of Subjectivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 105-15, discussing Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

which may be pursued in various more specific ways. The relation between the general and the specific is crucial to the discussion of Chapter 6. However, explanation of value by kind-membership will not do for commitments generally—including something falling under such an unfulfilled category if it *in particular* is to come to count as a commitment for that person. The value of many commitments is radically particular; a person's commitment to an object can be to the object in its particularity. It is important that this does not mean that such commitments are defined simply by very fine-grained individuation. If that were the case, anything exactly similar in all relevant respects would do as well. On the other hand, it also does not mean that qualitative uniqueness is a defining or necessary feature of commitments. Commitment is closely similar to love in Frankfurt's discussion, in which

The focus of a person's love is not those general and hence repeatable characteristics that make his beloved *describable*. Rather, it is the specific particularity that makes his beloved *nameable*.<sup>435</sup>

A different way of putting the point is that commitment is typically towards tokens, not any of the types of which it is a token; and neither does a commitment necessarily derive its worth from tokening any types. None of this is to say that a commitment's possessing certain characteristics cannot enter into the explanation of why a person pursued it in the first place; it is only that once it has become a commitment those characteristics do not explain its status as such. If a person has truly become committed to the thing then it is not the case that anything else possessing those characteristics will now do as well. Contrary again to Griffin, a further feature of commitment is that something's being one need not depend on its having any actual or possible value to everyone, or even anyone, else.

For a person who has commitments of this form—and again, some people may not—it is the particularity of these that makes them and the personal needs that they entail non-substitutable. Each of a person's commitments is an utterly independent source of normative requirements to which they are severally accountable.

## 2.7 Commitment and moral requirements

The status of moral obligation vis-à-vis the non-moral requirement I am discussing may be a concern. One potential worry about the framework I propose is that it does not draw a sharp line between moral commitments and any other commitments a person might have. It also relativises personal needs to the individuals that have them, and I have argued that the existence of necessarily shared values is relatively implausible. So it might be thought that the framework is

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<sup>435</sup> Frankfurt, "On Caring," in *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, 170, original emphasis. My account of commitment is indeed significantly influenced by Frankfurt's discussion of love—where for him love is not paradigmatically romantic, and similarly to commitment not necessarily towards persons. See "On Caring", 166-7, 169-70. Another similarity is that he characterises the requirements love imposes as needs, and alike to moral obligations. I do not take on all elements of Frankfurt's account, and I have preferred the term 'commitment' because it risks fewer potentially misleading connotations than 'love', and it emphasises the bindingness involved.

antithetical to a moral ‘realism’ that would make morality overriding and objective in the sense of universal. However, such a morality is not necessarily incompatible with the commitments and personal needs account. Although I am sceptical about universal values, it is less implausible that moral values are universal than that what matters non-morally to particular persons is universal. The subject relativity of non-moral values is compelling in part because of the radical particularity of many people’s personal commitments, and the partiality this implies. By contrast, it is of the essence of moral value that things have it because and only because of the general kinds to which they belong; morality is impartial, and impartiality is treating alike things exactly alike. If a theorist finds this plausible they could adopt this framework with the added assumption that all persons necessarily have certain identical commitments—to all other rational beings, say—and that these impose the same impartial requirements to act on every person. Additionally, rather than allowing all commitments and needs to have equal seriousness, a moralist could assign categorically greater, overriding seriousness to moral commitments and the personal needs those entail over others. The commitments and personal needs account can live perfectly well with being an account of non-moral aspects of well-being without claiming to assimilate or eliminate a universal, objective morality—however capable it also is of doing so. Again, my hope is for the framework to be compatible with a wide range of philosophical positions. It is equally compatible with a non-universalist account of morality on which, for example, appropriately impartial commitments are widespread across individual persons, shaped by closely similar innate dispositions and patterns of socialisation—and yet, where these dispositions and upbringings are contingent, some persons would lack moral commitments. I prefer to avoid unnecessary controversy by refraining to prejudice the framework either way.

## 2.8 Knowledge of commitments

Yet a worry might have formed that the account as it stands is nevertheless too permissive. It might be expected to fall afoul of criticisms of subjectivist accounts of well-being and other values that point to people with seemingly aberrant attitudes. These are commonly characterised by bizarre compulsions, and a kind of compulsion is a mark of commitment on this account. Warren Quinn gives the example of a person who is strongly disposed to turn on radios in their vicinity,<sup>436</sup> and, more generally, there is the actual phenomenon of obsessive-compulsive disorder. It is hard to accept, such a criticism would run, that such things could possibly be part of the good life for anyone.

Again, however, the account is not subjectivist, in the respect that it holds that there are facts about people’s commitments that are independent of their actual attitudes. I said the experience of a compulsion, and of feeling having their will constrained, can be evidence that a person has a

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<sup>436</sup> Quinn, *Morality and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 236ff.

commitment—it can strike them that they are genuinely perceiving something. However, this does not entail that they have it. How a case is elaborated bears on how good the evidence is: in particular, whether the person identifies with the necessity they feel under. In the case Quinn gives, the person is said neither to approve of, nor take pleasure in, the activity, and nor is it useful; it is just a basic fact of their motivations. If a person experiences a compulsion or constraint on their will as something alien to them, and especially if they think they would be better off without it, that strongly suggests that it does not signify any commitment.

Another case discussed in this area is a person who does endorse the activity in question, namely the man whose sole pleasure is to count blades of grass. Here my reaction is similar to Rawls'; I want to allow that doing so *might* be a part of the person's good, but that other hypotheses are available and are perhaps more likely.<sup>437</sup> Perhaps the person is wrong—to try to gauge this, we might try persuading them to try other activities and to reflect on how various other careers might suit them. Nevertheless, on the other hand, there is no reason in principle why the person could not be committed to their task.

The account can say something similar about allegiances and projects commonly considered wicked or evil—even if it is not assumed that all persons are necessarily bound by moral commitments. Thus unadorned, it would allow that ostensibly wicked projects *may* constitute commitments for some people, and, consequently, that it may well be a part of those people's good to live up to the personal needs those impose. Now to some readers this might seem to amount to endorsing or respecting such values on some level. And this may seem to be a conclusive reason to hold that, on the contrary, certain moral values are included, necessarily, among every person's commitments. Although, as above, that is one way one could go, I think it is worth pointing out that conceding that certain persons' good may in part be wicked with respect to one's own values has no such problematic conclusion. Note that it is precisely the point of saying that some value is subject relative that it has value *only* to certain persons, and that it does not necessarily have *any* value for other persons. Moreover, something's having subject-relative value for a person fails to entail *anything* about what is good, period, or good impersonally considered (whether there is such a thing), or that it has any authority for any other person whatsoever. It is true that, to the extent that other people matter to a person (large, for most persons), the achievement of those people's good is something the person should be in favour of. Such a commitment to other people (which may be impartial) also requires respect for the fact that different people's goods are constituted by things which may not matter to one personally, possibly one may not even be able to see quite why those things matter to them. Yet there is no need to consider this benevolence to be unconstrained. More than this, some projects and allegiances other people may have will so conflict with what matters to a person that they merit (for them)

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<sup>437</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 379-80.

no respect, consideration, or accommodation. It can be acknowledged both (a) that another person really does have some commitment, that really does have subject-relative value for them, and (b), at the same time, that one's own commitments necessitate that one rejects, opposes, and frustrates it. One need not countenance a commitment in order to recognise that someone else may truly have it.

In the last sentence I say 'may'. This is again because a person's affirmation and pursuit of ostensibly wicked goals will be only evidence that those things are truly commitments for them. Even as we recognise the genuine possibility of them being irredeemably wicked, we may reasonably be optimistic that they are not. A person's commitments may be quite far removed from what they actually avow. Although contingently so, we can expect that the vast majority of human beings are constituted such that, deep down, other people matter to them, and in certain ways, whether they have realised it or not.

Commitments and requirements a person does not realise they have and are under may be, and I expect often are, reachable via something Williams calls a "sound deliberative route" from their existing motivations. However, there may also be cases in which a person's commitment is contingently epistemically inaccessible however well informed of non-evaluative facts and capable of reasoning they are. Knowledge of some such commitment, which may be radically different from those a person thinks they have, may come—perhaps in some cases only *can* come—from having something like an epiphany. Again, however, such an experience does not entail that one comes to know something new about the external world. Heretofore unknown features of oneself are discovered and engaged, namely one's latent sympathies and dispositions. Indeed, although I cannot take up any adequate discussion of this point, I think Williams is right when he argues that for someone to have a reason to do anything it *has* to rely in part on the possibility of their being moved by it<sup>438</sup>—this just is the internalist condition mentioned above; any 'reasons' they ostensibly have that cannot possibly engage them will necessarily be alien to them. Note that the possibility of commitments that are inaccessible to reasoning from actual motivations appears in fact to be quite compatible with the rest of Williams' account. For him, a person's "subjective motivational set", from which their reasons must ultimately in part derive, is most definitely not limited to actual motivations as on some other internalist accounts of reasons: among other things, it includes "dispositions of evaluation" and "patterns of emotional reaction".<sup>439</sup> On the personal needs account, it may only be through the confrontation of certain circumstances, actual or *imagined* (a less commonly noticed pathway of deliberation Williams suggests<sup>440</sup>), that these can be engaged, the person moved—and the knowledge that they have some

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<sup>438</sup> Williams "Internal and External Reasons", 104ff.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*

commitment attained.<sup>441</sup> (This will be why art and the examples of others—especially of their love<sup>442</sup>—can be powerful, even necessary forces for moral improvement, much beyond, I suspect, the powers of reason-giving and ethical theory.)

### **3. Conclusion: from normativity to non-substitutability**

This chapter has argued that personal needs can indeed possess the objectivity and inescapability essential to all forms of categorical need. Its first part distinguished many different distinctions often identified or associated with the objectivity/subjectivity distinction. I argued that the only senses in which personal needs need to be ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ are, respectively, that (i) it is a matter of fact, not mere appearance which personal needs a person has, and that (ii) a person’s personal needs are particular to themselves, and may or may not be shared by everyone or even anyone else. The second part of the chapter exploited the possibility this established, that a need may be particular to a person, their very own, without that meaning it depends merely on what they happen to want. Together with the flawed assumption that what a person wants is a matter of their voluntary control, this represents a common source of scepticism about needs. This part endorsed the premise that inescapability is essential to categorical needs, and argued that personal needs possess it because they are entailed by people’s commitments. I suggested that commitments are sources of necessity for the person who has them because they essential to that person’s identity. An essential component of such a person’s well-being, as assessed in the first person, is living up to the requirements of their commitments, which is to say, responding appropriately to their personal needs. Where this chapter has argued for personal needs having a certain normative status—representing severally non-negotiable practical requirements—the following chapter examines how necessary demands of this sort are to be formally represented in the structure of a person’s well-being.

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<sup>441</sup> Interestingly, Williams considers whether a person’s subjective motivational set could include needs. While he deliberately sets aside any discussion of the nature of needs, he says the following:

I take it that insofar as there are determinately recognisable needs, there can be an agent who lacks any interest in getting what he indeed needs. I take it, further, that that lack of interest can remain after deliberation, and, also that it would be wrong to say that such a lack of interest must always rest on false belief. (*Ibid.*, 82)

This thought might be true of common conceptions of needs, and we have seen that it informs some opposition to needs playing any major role in the theory of well-being, as in Griffin’s account. However, it should be clear enough by now that it does not apply to personal needs.

<sup>442</sup> Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, 211-2.

## Chapter 5

### Personal needs in the structure of well-being

In Chapter 1 I canvassed a number of accounts of incommensurability, in terms of which protest responses have been or might be understood. These included the rejection of specifically monetary tradability, incomparability, and the ideas that precious goods are emphatically or lexically superior or protected by rights. I suggested that there is some truth in each of these, but that most basic to protest responses is simply the denial that the precious good under consideration is substitutable by, equivalent to, other goods. Although those other proposals are each *sufficient* to block the exchangeability of precious goods, I argued they are problematic in various ways. My own proposal observed that a more minimal ground for non-exchangeability is non-substitutability, which is itself formally identical to necessity. Roughly put, if nothing will do as well as A then A is necessary. As such, if the structure of respondents' well-being includes non-substitutability, it follows that the precious goods in some sense represent or present needs for them. The way forward was to explore what those needs could be like, and more generally to theorise the role of need in well-being. In the subsequent chapters I developed a notion of personal need that I claimed could have such a role. However, I have not yet fully explained the connection between the inescapability I have made much of and personal needs' non-substitutability—how, making good on the promise of Chapter 1, they do not work simply like goods that have merely *especially high* value, quantitatively conceived. I am now in a position to do that, to explicitly define the incommensurability that commitments and personal needs introduce into the formal structure of first-personal well-being. This incommensurability is unlike many definitions in having two components, united nevertheless by the idea of non-equivalence/-substitutability. While this chapter presents few ideas that taken singly are anything new, its contribution is to emphasise their connection with necessity and their significance within a needs-centred account of well-being.

Personal needs' incommensurability has a two-component definition because their non-substitutability has two aspects. I draw these out via a discussion in section 1 of a threat, or challenge, personal needs face—one that would make needs indeed mere bearers of merely great value. This 'teleological' argument is that the existence of a commensurating currency—as a

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<sup>443</sup> Henry James, *The Golden Bowl*, cited in Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* at 133.

formal construction, if not metaphysical substance—can be derived from any ordering of elements satisfying certain axioms. Showing how it is to be defeated supplies two negative conditions defining the incommensurability of personal needs. It is important to keep in mind that this is not a definition of incommensurability or non-exchangeability as such. As emphasised previously, there are many ways in which commensuration or exchangeability can fail; this definition is only intended to describe the way this happens in the case of personal needs.

Section 2 introduces the first condition, which depending importantly on perspective can be called either strict priority or “strong superiority”. Either way, this is a generalisation of the ideas of emphatic comparability, lexicographic preferences, and the motivation behind assigning of rights. Meeting personal needs takes strict priority over non-need attainments because (i) unlike non-needs they are non-negotiable, and (ii) gains in non-needs cannot make up for their loss. This section proceeds to consider the opposition this priority or superiority faces.

While the latter condition describes the relation between personal needs and non-needs, it is insufficient to describe how personal needs relate to one another. This recalls a limitation of the lexical priority interpretation that I pointed to in Chapter 1 section 3, that it does not plausibly describe the relation between precious goods; simply to carry on hierarchically ordering those goods<sup>444</sup> is implausible as a general model. The second component of personal needs’ incommensurability describes that relation, at least in the negative terms of a second failure of the teleological argument. It preserves the second aspect of personal needs’ non-equivalence, namely that they are non-exchangeable not only vis-à-vis non-needs but also by each other; they are *severally* necessary. Yet it is not immediately obvious which formal structure can do this. Analogously to the indexing problem of Chapter 2, needs must be neither incomparable nor apt to be traded off against each other. Section 3 examines the minimal formal requirements of this non-equivalence, which yield the following condition: it requires that the relative weight of a need is not determined independently of the weight of other needs; it is only then that no metric that problematically denominates needs’ separate values exists. Section 4 considers the bearing of this intrapersonal structure on the interpretation and construction of interpersonal constructs and measures of well-being, in the context of which, as seen in Chapter 2, there is strong demand for aggregation.

## 1. Teleology

This objection is a much better and more explicitly worked out companion to the sceptical rational choice interpretation of protest responses seen in Chapter 1 section 2.1. It is an argument from axiology exploiting the formal possibility that the values of items (and combinations of them) can be described as the outputs of a mathematical function whenever they are ordered in

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<sup>444</sup> Rekola, “Lexicographic Preferences in Contingent Valuation”.



such a way that satisfies certain axioms. It is teleological just in the sense that, if this can be done, the values of the items are representable as something common they possess or realise in various real-valued magnitudes.<sup>445</sup> The argument is relevant because it would entail that the ratio of one item's value to that of another describes the rate at which it can be substituted for the other.

A first matter to clarify before we can go any further is what is meant by 'items' in this context. It is a general feature of relevant debates that it is not always clear what kinds of things we are supposed to accept are commensurable or incommensurable. This may partly be an artefact of the questions being posed in different evaluative contexts. In the first chapter we were considering the ostensibly incommensurable value of such relatively concrete *things* as environments or friendships. In other places, it is quite *abstract 'values'* such as liberty and equality that are claimed to be incommensurable. Similarly, perhaps, in the second chapter we were supposing that different *dimensions* of well-being are incommensurable. What that entailed there, however, is that *attainments* of different extents along separate dimensions are incommensurable. The indexing problem is that of squaring that position with the assumed overall comparability of different bundles of attainments. For other authors, the items compared are the similarly overall notions of 'options' or 'alternatives', which is to say *states of affairs* or *courses of action*. Here, while the teleological framework similarly regards decision as a matter of choosing between alternate states of affairs, it goes further in resolving the latter as decomposable: a state of affairs is nothing but a collection of valuable parts that are realised, and the total value of the state of affairs is a function of the individual values of those parts. In the first instance, then, the items to be ordered are those components that combine to make up states of affairs; an ordering of states of affairs falls out of that ordering of items plus whatever function determines states of affairs' total values from the values of their parts.<sup>446</sup> An advantage of this decompositional approach is that it allows us to examine the internal structure of an alternative in assessing its (in)commensurability or (in)comparability with others. Indeed, for the purposes of argument it is very useful to engage with the teleological objection on its own terms, accepting the formal representation of items as taking numerically expressed values, which combine to form total values for the outcomes, 'states of affairs', in which they 'obtain'.

A teleological treatment can be given of any kind of valuable items—impersonal, prudential, aesthetic, or other. But in the present context of assessing the viability of personal needs, the items that make up a state of affairs, are, as in Wiggins' discussion of incommensurability, the various "demands that impinge" on a person when they face choices<sup>447</sup>—*considerations* that bear

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<sup>445</sup> John Broome demonstrates this particularly clearly in his *Weighing Goods: Equality, Uncertainty, and Time* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), esp. chs. 1, 4, and 5.

<sup>446</sup> Compare Broome's treatment in *Weighing Goods*, 69, 75, where he calls the value-contributions of decomposed parts of states of affairs "subutilities".

<sup>447</sup> Wiggins, "Four Proposals", 368.

for or against alternative courses of action. Applying the teleological framework, the ordering of such alternatives is a function of the considerations that might obtain for and against choosing them. Moreover, here the relevant considerations are not limited to the ‘prudential value’ of the objects of choice, how they narrowly benefit or fail to benefit the agent. The context is that of first-personal well-being evaluation, which as I have argued encompasses all of the ways it is good for them to act in that situation. This is the same context as that in utility theory, which standardly places no constraints on the content of the agent’s preferences: “in the description of a consequence is included all that the agent values”.<sup>448</sup> In the personal needs framework, the relevant considerations are the performance needs a person’s commitments present them with—and if the values of these can be represented numerically as the teleological objection has it, it might seem that these ‘needs’ will in fact fail to be truly any such things.<sup>449</sup> I will of course argue that that appearance is deceptive, and that putting things in this way does not in itself entail a commitment to teleology and substitutability.

A brief note on utility theory and its relation to the teleological argument I am considering. It is important to recognise that a utility function itself implies nothing about any substantive value. While often conflated with objective, measurable value, uninterpreted ‘utility’ is an operational notion. Reflecting the main interests of empirical economists and psychologists, utility theory most commonly operates with preferences, and if carefully interpreted there all it does is represent these.<sup>450</sup> The axiological framework adapted here by a teleological account is an outgrowth of utility theory, a generalisation of it. But the magnitudes its constructed functions assign to alternatives and components are only measures of the latter’s values if the ordering of alternatives and components is an ordering by some objective<sup>451</sup> value, rather than mere preference—again, the relevant value here being first-personal well-being.

For all that, a teleological treatment of an objective value remains purely structural, uncommitted to any substantive account of what it consists in or which things have it. Again, this is

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<sup>448</sup> Kenneth J. Arrow, “Exposition of the Theory of Choice under Uncertainty,” *Synthese* 16 (1966): 253-69.

<sup>449</sup> The teleological argument is similar to a procedure recently discussed under the heading “consequentialisation”, which is to redescribe a moral theory as a variant of consequentialism by including the way a state of affairs is brought about in the description of that state of affairs itself. See Jennie Louise, “Relativity of Value and the Consequentialist Umbrella,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 54 (2004): 518-3; Douglas W. Portmore, “Consequentializing Moral Theories,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 88 (2007): 39-73; Campbell Brown, “Consequentialize This,” *Ethics* 121 (2011): 749-71; Philip Pettit, “The Inescapability of Consequentialism,” in *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams*, ed. Ulrike Heuer and Gerald R. Lang (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 44. Although even more awkward, “teleologisation” would be a more accurate term, since the distinction between consequences and intrinsic properties of actions drops out in the process (Broome, *Weighing Goods*, ch. 1).

<sup>450</sup> On confusing different notions of utility see John Broome, “‘Utility,’” *Economics and Philosophy* 7 (1991): 1-12, and José Luis Bermúdez, *Decision Theory and Rationality*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 46-50. Compare John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, 60th anniversary ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>451</sup> In the minimal sense of real.

analogous to the purposes of this project, which is to establish the existence of need only as a structural feature of well-being in various evaluative contexts. I have appealed to examples of the kinds of things people take themselves to be committed to and to need, but remain agnostic as to the actual content of people's commitments and needs.

Furthermore, proponents of teleological accounts such as John Broome sometimes maintain that they do not even assume at the outset that the value in question has an existence independent of the (*e.g.*, ethical) considerations they take as their starting points—for example, that the value represents an objective external or separate from them (let alone that it has some independent metaphysical existence).<sup>452</sup> Broome maintains that the value so-structured emerges simply as a formal construction, out of the possibility of ordering items in conformity with assumptions about rationality.<sup>453</sup> The currency is ostensibly fiat, as it were, not backed by some ontologically substantive gold-standard. As an aside, I think there is room to doubt this. Broome concedes that there are important places where he has to rely on an external notion of 'good' (impersonally considered), which is the value he argues has a teleological structure.<sup>454</sup> Without antecedent commitment to such a value it is harder to accept that the axioms he defends really are required by rationality.

However that may be, let us examine the cases that can be made for those that are relevant here. I will not attempt any formal exposition of the teleological argument—as Broome's treatment, for example, demonstrates, its validity is firmly established.<sup>455</sup> But I will briefly run through the necessary axioms and their significance. An ordering of  $V$ -ness fulfils the axiom of Reflexivity if and only if every item in the order is at least as  $V$  as itself. Transitivity holds if and only if if  $x$  is at least as  $V$  as  $y$ , and  $y$  is at least as  $V$  as  $z$ , then  $x$  is at least as  $V$  as  $z$ . Completeness holds if and only if, for every  $x$  and  $y$ ,  $x$  is either more  $V$  than  $y$ , less  $V$  than  $y$ , or equally  $V$  as  $y$ . These first three axioms together simply say that all items in the domain do really stand in an order of  $V$ -ness. Some opponents of teleology argue that it goes wrong even in assuming these. I do not know of any critics of Reflexivity, but Transitivity has been contested,<sup>456</sup> and defending the possibility of incomparability in effect targets Completeness. If either of these fail, a teleological argument will indeed fail to go through.<sup>457</sup> However, as I have said before, I do not

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<sup>452</sup> Broome is responding to Philippa Foot's argument that no notion of good exists outside of a conception morality. See Foot, "Utilitarianism and the Virtues," *Mind* 94 (1985): 196-209.

<sup>453</sup> Broome, *Weighing Goods*, 17-19. See also p. 146: "We need not have a quantitative notion of good in advance of its measurement by utility; the utility scales themselves determine our quantitative notion."

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-20.

<sup>455</sup> See especially chapters 1, 4, and 5 of *Weighing Goods*.

<sup>456</sup> At greatest length by Larry S. Temkin in his *Rethinking the Good: Moral Ideals and the Nature of Practical Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>457</sup> Broome himself points out that the flavour of incommensurability he defends—vagueness in ordering—would also complicate his account. He seeks to abstract from this in his book (*Weighing Goods*, 137), and I can similarly ignore this possibility. This project identifies what I think is a deeper problem.

question comparability, and this is just to say I can accept these axioms. Neutralising teleology can be achieved by less radical means. A more interesting fourth axiom is Continuity, which is difficult to define precisely in non-mathematical terms but is in any case essential for the representation of an ordering by a *single* function.<sup>458</sup> It is often denied with a view to establishing the existence of plural, qualitatively distinct, and hierarchically ordered kinds of values, which I also want; although actually there is a way of doing that while leaving Continuity formally in place (§2.2 below). A teleological structure is established so long as the foregoing axioms plus a last one, Independence, are fulfilled (Broome calls it Separability). The latter is especially important, and the one this account denies, because it is precisely this that ensures that the values of items (in this case of personal needs) can be expressed as a ratio of one to another. I put off explaining how that works and what is wrong with it until section 3, concentrating first on the acceptability of Continuity.

## 2. Strong superiority

### 2.1 Triviality and personal needs

I accept that the following claims are dogmatic, but I believe they bear scrutiny. While it is much more common to theorise goods and bads as forming a continuum, I take seriously the idea that there is quite a sharp division in the structure of many people's well-being between at least two categories, the trivial and the non-trivial.<sup>459</sup> Underwriting the distinction, I propose, is that non-trivial constituents of such a person's first-personal well-being are coextensive with their personal needs, and that trivial constituents of well-being are coextensive with things that person does not need—things that are unconnected to their essential commitments. Moreover, non-trivial goods/the person's personal needs stand in the relation of strict priority or strong superiority to trivial/non-needed goods. I use these terms interchangeably, although the latter term is gaining currency in the literature.<sup>460</sup> I said this relation represents the first component of personal needs' incommensurability; it is in this sense that personal needs are incommensurable with non-needs.

### 2.2 Definition and technical note

As a general condition strong superiority can be formulated roughly as follows:

*Strong superiority.*  $x$  is strongly superior to  $y$  if and only if no number of  $y$ s can be at least as good as  $x$ .

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<sup>458</sup> See Hirose, *Moral Aggregation*, 39-40.

<sup>459</sup> Cf. Frankfurt, "On Caring", 159.

<sup>460</sup> E.g., Gustaf Arrhenius, "Superiority in Value," *Philosophical Studies* 123 (2005): 97-114; Dale Dorsey, "Headaches, Lives and Value," *Utilitas* 21 (2009): 36-58.

This idea that there exist certain ‘higher goods’, strongly superior to others, has long been popular, advocated by philosophers as early as Francis Hutcheson,<sup>461</sup> John Stuart Mill,<sup>462</sup> Franz Brentano,<sup>463</sup> and W. D. Ross.<sup>464</sup> It is sometimes argued to imply the failure of Continuity in the domain of the relevant value,<sup>465</sup> produced by certain goods being infinitely better than, or lexically prior to, others. However, the failure of Continuity is not necessary for strong superiority, as several authors have recently pointed out. It can also be produced if the value contribution of the inferior good is not additively separable, in such a way that additional units of the good make diminishing value contributions that diminish the more of them there are towards a mathematical limit. If certain other goods are better enough—that is, above this limit—then no amount of that good can reach the same level of the value they possess, and without that entailing any violation of Continuity.<sup>466</sup>

The personal needs account is indifferent as to the formal structure of strong superiority. However precisely we should characterise the strong superiority of personal needs, all it has to say is that there is no number of non-needs that when attained are as good or better than meeting the requirements of a personal need. Equivalently here we can say that non-needs are strongly inferior to needs. Admittedly, though, as will be seen in section 3 below this account subverts the sense in which goods including personal needs are formally described in this context as being ‘better’ than others that are ‘worse’.

### 2.3 Personal needs over purely experiential value

Some of the scepticism about strong superiority is general, concerning its plausibility and workability as a formal structure. Other doubts concern the substance of higher-goods proposals, about the claims of particular goods to stand in that relation: for example, it may seem an elitist conceit to deem certain pleasurable activities categorically better than certain others, as Mill held; or implausibly moralistic to hold that virtue takes strict priority over all other considerations, like Ross. No strategy for addressing the former scepticism in the abstract stands out, so it seems

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<sup>461</sup> Hutcheson, “A System of Moral Philosophy,” in *British Moralists*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897 [1755]), 421-3.

<sup>462</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1863), ch. 2, paras. 6-8. Mill called the relation “superiority in quality”.

<sup>463</sup> Brentano, “Loving and Hating,” in *The Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*, trans. Roderick Chisholm and Elizabeth Schneewind (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 158.

<sup>464</sup> Ross, *The Right and the Good*, 149-154.

<sup>465</sup> E.g., Dorsey, “Headaches, Lives and Value”: 36; Jesper Ryberg, “Higher and Lower Pleasures – Doubts on Justification,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 5 (2002): 416. The “discontinuities” Griffin discusses (*Well-Being*, 83-5) do not entail the failure of continuity as such, only a form of “weak superiority”. *A* is weakly superior to *B* if and only if there is some number or amount of *As* that equals or exceeds in value any number of *Bs*. Weak superiority is not of interest here.

<sup>466</sup> Gustaf Arrhenius and Wlodek Rabinowicz, “Value Superiority,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Value Theory*, ed. Iwao Hirose and Jonas Olson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 230, 234-6; John Broome, “No Argument against the Continuity of Value: Reply to Dorsey,” *Utilitas* 22 (2010): 494-6.

likely that defending the possibility of the strong superiority relation requires defending the claims of particular goods' to stand in it: here, what kinds of things might contribute to a person's well-being and yet are trivial, and not needs. I have so far mostly sought to remain as neutral about the contents of people's well-beings—insofar as I have not specified which things people are in fact committed to, and allowed that these are many and diverse, potentially idiosyncratic. Similar to positions defended by Ross and Dorsey, however, I break with this policy by singling out *mere* or *pure* pleasure<sup>467</sup> and other merely or purely experiential goods<sup>468</sup> as—for many people—being strongly inferior to personal needs. (For Ross they are strongly inferior to virtue; for Dorsey they are strongly inferior to “deliberative projects”, “those projects, plans, goals and achievements one genuinely values fulfilling”.<sup>469</sup>) By purely experiential goods I mean those which are valuable or disvaluable *only* because of their experiential qualities. Two further points of clarification before I proceed. Making this claim about purely experiential goods does not rule out the existence of other trivial goods over which personal needs take strict priority. I should also repeat that I do not claim that all people's values are structured in this way: I allow that for some people pure positive experience may not be strongly inferior to any other values. I only find it implausible that that is the case for everyone, and that alternative value structures do not exist. The rest of this section addresses some initial concerns about the claim that purely experiential goods are strongly inferior to personal needs for some, before moving on in the following section to address the formal objection with this proposal about substance in hand.

The most immediate objection to interpreting some people's value structures as strictly prioritising personal needs over merely experiential goods may be that it represents an unattractively ascetic ideal.<sup>470</sup> However, it is not the case that a focus on living up to their personal needs will leave little room for enjoyment in a person's life. First, even while the demands of a person's commitments are strict, they are not necessarily disagreeable or even onerous. Careful work on projects to which they are committed can be highly enjoyable, as can involvement in family, community, and professional roles. Second, and more than that, even when responding to one's personal needs is not especially pleasant, or even unpleasant, doing so is often deeply satisfying. Some of the best experiences, deep satisfaction in particular, are those *taken in* things that have non-trivial value.<sup>471</sup> That they are necessarily attached to non-trivial objects is indeed what distinguishes them from pure positively valenced experience. Rather than having merely experiential value, they can seem more like experiences of the value their non-trivial objects have to us. Such

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<sup>467</sup> With Ross, *The Right and the Good*, 150.

<sup>468</sup> Cf. Dorsey, “Headaches, Lives and Value”: 43-4. Dorsey uses the term “hedonic goods”, but I use ‘purely experiential goods’ to encompass other positively valenced experiences that are similarly valued purely for their quality of sensation.

<sup>469</sup> I discuss Dorsey's position in some detail in Ch. 6 §5.2.1.

<sup>470</sup> The worry is analogous to that about whether morality may be overly demanding.

<sup>471</sup> Cf. Ross, *op. cit.*, 152.

feelings typically each have particular, rich characters,<sup>472</sup> and this is a direct consequence, I suggest, of the separateness, the non-equivalence, of their objects' values to us.<sup>473</sup> Third, the account does not deny that pure experience, unconnected from non-trivial objects, has value. In addition, unless we are very unfortunate our commitments are not usually so demanding that there are no opportunities to enjoy it. Yet further, other things being equal something's being gratifying in some way will, for most people, make it worthier of choice than the same thing that is not. We do not have to claim that pure experiences are on the same level as anything else to see them as valuable. Trivial value is still value, desirable for a person whenever it does not stand in the way of living as they must. It is also highly plausible that positively valenced experience and relief from negatively valenced experience are to a great extent things people need; that unremittingly dull work can be impossible to endure; that sanity requires relaxation, release, and even moments of ecstasy (we speak in these terms). This is all compatible with the fact that, many people's values being structured the way they are, it is a mistake for them to choose to enjoy mere experiences if doing so entails failing to respond appropriately to their personal needs.<sup>474</sup>

I suggest that a similarly more complicated treatment of pain is more realistic than the picture in which it is simply placed in the balance with non-trivial goods. A difference here is that it can be even harder to do without relief of pain than absence of positive experience.<sup>475</sup> Even relatively mild pain can impede a person from getting and doing what they need. Even so, people do often try to push through pain if they will otherwise not be able to do, or if they will lose, things they need—they speak of it as something that they have to bear for the sake of what matters more to them. Oftentimes in other cases they should not try to do so, since pain typically signifies bodily damage potentially compromising other necessary aspects of their lives. Preventing that will very often take precedence over the demands of commitments that in the circumstances ask too much of the person's body and/or mind. When a person cannot and should not ignore pain even in the face of necessity, then, these are often psychological and physical constraints, not instances of simple outweighing.

I said that experiences may have rich and distinctive characters produced by the independent values of their objects to a person. However, it might be pointed out that many pure experiences also have highly distinctive qualities; and claimed, moreover, that being able to appreciate these is central to some people's well-being. A first response would be to reiterate the point that the ac-

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<sup>472</sup> "Each pleasure increases the activity; what increases it is proper to it; and since the activities are different in species, what is proper to them is also different in species." Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. X ch. 5 1175a1-3.

<sup>473</sup> Cf. Martha C. Nussbaum, "Who Is the Happy Warrior? Philosophy, Happiness Research, and Public Policy," *International Review of Economics* 59 (2012): 337-338.

<sup>474</sup> Aristotle makes many of these points in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. X ch. 6. For a related discussion see Richardson, *Practical Deliberation about Final Ends*, 55-6.

<sup>475</sup> Dorsey emphasises a similar point in "Headaches, Lives and Value": 49-52.

count allows that some people's well-being may genuinely largely or entirely be constituted by appreciating pure experiences, and/or may be structured in such a way that those—or at least those with the right qualities—can make up for anything else they value. A second response is that even many cases of people for whom positive experience is overwhelmingly important in its own right might yet be understood in the terms of the personal needs account. For such people, engaging with certain kinds of experiences might constitute one of their commitments and imply imperatives for them to meet—this seems to be something we mean sometimes when we describe a person as having a passion for such things. So seriously might, for example, a whisky or wine sampler, or a connoisseur of fine food, take it that it becomes their vocation and profession: *e.g.*, sommelier, judge, critic, chef.

#### 2.4 Risking needs for non-needs

Strong superiority looks most plausible in cases of certainty. But it can begin to look less so once risk is involved. Indeed, pointing to the acceptability of risks to ostensibly strongly superior goods constitutes the chief general objection it faces in the intrapersonal context.<sup>476</sup> It is clearly false, it runs, that one good is strongly superior to another if it is acceptable to risk the former in an attempt to gain the latter. We do indeed risk supposed needs all the time, often for mundane purposes that the foregoing account might hold are not needs. Examples of acceptable risks to serious goods for the sake of relatively minor gains often involve the everyday dangers we accept around motor transport. I might risk my life crossing busy Euston Road to collect a chocolate bar over living the rest of my life without crossing this time. This seems quite rational, so long as I am careful to cross at the traffic lights, so minimising—but not eliminating—the risk of being hit by a vehicle.<sup>477</sup> Similar cases can be given for pain. Alistair Norcross presents the following scenario, with commentary:

You are settling down to spend the next twenty-four hours at home, reading, watching movies, eating and sleeping, when you feel the onset of a moderate headache. You know from experience that this headache will last for twenty-four hours, unless you take your favourite brand of pain-killer. Alas, the medicine cupboard is bare. However, the nearest pharmacy that sells your brand is only three miles away, less than a ten minute trip in your car. So, you jump in the car, purchase the pain-killer, and spend a pain-free twenty-four hours. Were you irrational to do that? Would it have been more rational to stay at home and suffer, albeit moderately, for the next twenty-four hours? Of course not. Suppose we add the following detail. You have just read an article in a reliable publication that claims that the type of car journey you are considering increases your chances of death, over staying at home, by one in a million. Does that change our original judgment about the rationality of your action? No. Most, if not all, of us were already aware of the risks of travelling by car, when we made our original judgment. Many of the things we do to improve our quality of life involve similar small risks of death (often larger than one in

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<sup>476</sup> *N.B.*, Although there are also powerful objections in interpersonal contexts, they introduce special complications, and I leave them aside for now in this chapter.

<sup>477</sup> Bailey offers a similar case in his “Is It Rational to Maximize?”: 200-1.



a million). Perhaps some of these really are irrational. Bungee jumping, bear wrestling, moving to New York City, for example. But many of them, such as driving (or walking) to the cinema to see a good movie, or driving to the pharmacy to buy pain-killers, are clearly rational.<sup>478</sup>

What does behaviour observed in these examples demonstrate? Given certain appropriate qualifications, and depending on what other options there were, it does indeed seem that it could be rational to accept, for example, a certain amount of pleasure with a one in ten million chance of death. As already noted in Chapter 1, however, it matters a great deal how we interpret cases such as these, because such decisions do not in themselves tell us anything about why they are justified, and in what other circumstances it would be rational to choose similarly. Certainly, one possible explanation is that there is, in effect, some common value possessed both by experiences negatively and positively disvaluable or valuable to a person for their own sake on the one side, and, on the other, all other things I might gain from living without being killed by automobiles, that renders them substitutable for each other. I take this option seriously, because it is simple, effective, and coheres well with attractive wider theoretical considerations, namely a universally aggregating teleological outlook. Moreover, I accept that any acceptable theory of needs must be sophisticated enough to offer plausible alternative accounts of these cases. Once again, though, I am confident that these present a puzzle, not a decisive objection. The *prima facie* appearance of trading off risks is balanced by the powerful intuitive appeal, at least to many, of strong superiority in cases of certainty: that, for some, no amount of such a commensurating value ostensibly yielded by the prizes could make up for living up to their commitments. If I was offered the certainty of, say, one million times the pleasure a chocolate bar brings (or any mixture of other values unconnected to my commitments) and to die immediately afterwards I would not prefer taking that option to living the rest of my life without it to continue with my living up to my commitments.<sup>479</sup> If I would otherwise begin to have an unrelieved, but less than crippling, headache forever I would not prefer to be killed in a car crash now instead. Other explanations for risk-taking besides implicit trading off are available. Risk seems to add something, and this must be explained, but other things being equal an account that can square both appearances will be better.

Possible explanations will have to differ across cases, not *ad hoc*, but depending on how they are appropriately interpreted. In some cases of this kind the desired gains are not exhausted by the final value of having or preventing or relieving particular experiences—ostensibly trivial with respect to personal needs on this account. They are demanded rather by specifiable, further, personal needs they serve. For instance, it often might not be the experience itself that is the most

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<sup>478</sup> Norcross, "Great Harms from Small Benefits Grow: How Death Can Be Outweighed by Headaches," *Analysis* 58 (1998): 154.

<sup>479</sup> If intuitions get somewhat distorted by imagining the effects of how long enjoying that pleasure would take, allow that a genie pauses the rest of spacetime (*i.e.*, including all my commitments) while I enjoy it.

important, final end achievable by taking some option. I might not be crossing the road simply for the pleasure, but because I think some chocolate or something similar will provide an instrumentally necessary energy boost to help me get through my working day adequately; that is, to live up to my commitment to my work. In other cases, a headache may be preventing me from writing my thesis. It is true, in the cases he presents Norcross wants to stipulate away any further consequences having a headache might have for the person or anyone else—only ostensibly trivial activities would be affected.<sup>480</sup> Still, I think this cannot be done especially *quickly*. If it is not garbage, what a person reads or watches will often connect with their personal needs. Unless a person lives a life of ease, getting enough sleep can also be necessary for doing whatever they ultimately need to do. A person may not feel up to cooking healthy meals if they are in pain. The kinds of reasons people have for such big changes as moving to New York are often more serious than just that it will be more fun or otherwise merely improve the quality of their experiences. Often they do so for the sake of purposes they take to be compelling, which structure their living as they believe they need to. Bungee jumping, too, may not be irrational for some people within the personal needs framework. People often offer reasons for doing things like bungee jumping that are not about the enjoyment—although for many the rush is indeed enjoyable. Anecdotally, people cite such things as needing to challenge themselves, overcome their fear of heights, feel properly alive. Apparently it can change one's sense of perspective on life. This is not to say there are no better ways of doing any of that,<sup>481</sup> only that regarding such an activity as answering to one's needs is an intelligible possibility. I am not saying these points are always the case, nor that Norcross cannot stipulate away even all these effects—but that we should always look behind appearances of merely experiential value and disvalue, and that if we do we might find needs structuring activities much more often than we might otherwise expect. This is to say, fewer cases really have the simplifying features Norcross supposes than he and other critics might have us believe.

Suppose though that it really is only pleasure for pleasure's sake, or exhilaration for exhilaration's sake, that is staked against one's life in the chocolate and bungee cases. Even then they might be understood as meeting needs for some people. As I noted in the previous section, it is plausible that people have certain (standing) needs for sufficient attainments of purely experiential goods.<sup>482</sup> Pain can make it difficult to enjoy otherwise pleasurable activities, and so achieve a sufficiency of pleasure. But stipulate even these possibilities away in the cases. Assume that in the chocolate case one already has a very pleasurable life, more than one psychologically needs; assume in the other case one's headache is so brief and/or mild that it really is only the feeling

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<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*: 152.

<sup>481</sup> Though perhaps for some people it really is that only extreme means will do.

<sup>482</sup> Recall how this turned out to be the case on my interpretation of Griffin's account of well-being as potentially in effect a needs account (Chapter 2 §4.2.1).

of the pain at stake. In full awareness, then, that being without the chocolate or headache is not something one needed, why would one drive?

In actual cases, often unnecessary risky behaviour is due either to not thinking about, or else discounting, the probabilities involved.<sup>483</sup> Of course there are bad reasons for doing this. One is the assumption that it is within one's power to negate the risks involved. This is the thought that one will be fine for certain so long as one takes good care; in doing so one has control over the actual outcomes. Symptomatically, some drivers are unsettled by self-driving cars that would take that control away, even if, according to the probabilities, those vehicles would be safer. I speculate that this connects with another bad reason: accepting such data, but believing nevertheless that bad outcomes happen to other people, those who do not take necessary precautions. Besides being bad reasons, clearly these do not apply to the risks run by riding on passenger transport, where the chance of disaster is likewise often not seriously contemplated; on the other hand, travelling by train and aeroplane is also significantly safer than by car.

But I think there are other reasons for disregarding small risks as negligible or 'practically' nil, or even not thinking about them, that are both defensible, not based on holding fallacies, and neither reliant on implicit calculation. The cost to an individual person of avoiding negligible risks all the time is very high. As I suggested earlier, many people's more general condition may be less one of balancing isolable trivial gains and much more one of negotiating the competing demands of their personal needs. Consequently, often a person may not know whether only trivial gains are involved or whether their objects and consequences turn out to bear on their needs. Reasonable confidence is a good policy, practically necessary for successful living. Such courage may not even only be a means to meeting personal needs, but for many people an end integral to their living well.

There is also another avenue that I think is worth exploring, but which I cannot pursue here. This is the idea that, in some cases, motivation by the pure pain or enjoyment (remember, as distinct from non-trivial satisfaction) at the potential cost of what one needs is more a matter of psychological pressure, of an urge to avoid what we cannot bear, than the pursuit of something inherently valuable. 'I cannot stand this headache anymore,' I might say, as I rise from the sofa and pick up the car keys. In some cases in which I do put needs at risk purely for the sake of seeking gratification or avoiding pain, perhaps that is more something I succumb to, and that I would be better off if I were not so vulnerable or did not have those motivations in such cases at all.<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>483</sup> Cf. Bailey, "Is It Rational to Maximize?": 202, 205-6.

<sup>484</sup> Considering the prevalence of automobile cases, too—although our commitments require us to get from A to B, perhaps in tolerating the ubiquity of these deadly machines as much as we do, really we suffer from a collective madness. But given the cultures we live in it can be difficult as individuals to opt out entirely—again, that is, without compromising other things we need.

Although these replies are far from decisive, I think they should weaken an opponent's confidence in calculative interpretations of cases. While they are less simple, and lack unity, the absence of any general formula is only to be expected if people's understandings of what they are doing when they take risks are often more complex and varied than they might otherwise be characterised.<sup>485</sup> Especially important is to consider the places that ostensibly mundane and ostensibly trivial gains have in people's lives more widely.

If cases of needs set against each other are pervasive, this reinforces the need to satisfactorily depict the second aspect of personal needs' incommensurability, that in which they stand with one another.

### 3. Interdependence

#### 3.1 Independence and its failure

It may be that certain personal needs take strict priority over others; that is, that there exist some divisions of strict superiority also within the domain of needs. In general, however, when personal needs conflict we should accept that they bear different degrees of weight vis-à-vis each other. This might seem to immediately concede that they are substitutable by each other. However, as it is the purpose of this section to show, this is in fact an innocuous, even trivial, assumption—at least, so long as Independence does not hold over them.

*Independence.* The values of the members or subsets of a set of things  $(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n)$  are independent if and only if, for any members or subsets  $x_i, x_j,$  and  $x_k,$  if  $v(x_i) \geq v(x_j)$  then  $v(x_i, x_k) \geq v(x_j, x_k).$

Sometimes also called Separability, this condition says that the values of the things it applies to are independent of whatever other things may figure alongside them in the outcomes in which they obtain.<sup>486</sup> As mentioned above, formally an 'outcome' or 'state affairs' can be a course of action defined in terms of all of the practical considerations (the  $x$ s in the definition) that bear for and against selecting it. In this context the relevant considerations are of course the personal needs at stake.

While the reason might not immediately be clear, the failure of Independence defines, negatively, the form of incommensurability personal needs stand in with respect to each other. This is because Independence, if it held of personal needs, would entail (and be entailed by) the existence of certain functions of equivalence for each pair of needs. Such a function would determine the rates at which the two needs could be substituted for each other in any state of affairs while realising the same value there. To defeat the threat of personal needs being substitutable in

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<sup>485</sup> Cf. Véronique Munoz-Dardé, "Global Justice: Imposed and Shared Risks," in *Spheres of Global Justice*, ed. Jean-Christophe Merle, vol. 2 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 551.

<sup>486</sup> Broome, *Weighing Goods*, 69.

this way, then, what is needed is a form of interdependence, of holism, as a result of which the relative values of pairs of things *do* depend on other, co-occurring things.

Holism about values is not an uncommon view. Scanlon, for example, maintains that “[g]oods are many, different goods are good for different people, and how good they are overall depends on how they are integrated”.<sup>487</sup> But to trace its positive consequences it is helpful to go right back to Moore, with his influential proposal that things can combine to form “organic wholes” the overall values of which are different from, and moreover “bear no regular proportion to”, the values of the sums of their parts.<sup>488</sup> Moore is concerned with intrinsic value, and the intrinsic values of parts and wholes, but the essential idea is not wedded to that metaphysics; accept his framework here for the sake of this illustration. One example of an organic whole, Moore claims, is that of a beautiful object, which, together with consciousness of it, realises more intrinsic value than the sum of the object’s value alone, unappreciated, and of that which the mere consciousness of just any thing has.<sup>489</sup> The connection between such an interactive effect and the failure of Independence is demonstrated by imagining a second intrinsically valuable but non-beautiful object, S, existing alongside the beautiful one, B. Absent consciousness of B, suppose the two objects realise different amounts of intrinsic value in some states of affairs in which they are located—presumably due in part to their non-beauty properties. If that were so, they could be substituted for each other in that ratio (or one that varies systematically as the amounts of the two change) to continue realising the same amount of intrinsic value. So when consciousness of B is added, the value B realises increases relative to that realised by S.<sup>490</sup> Since this occurs simply by the addition of something besides the two objects, Independence appears to be violated. The consequence that is important here is the following: whereas in other circumstances Ss may substitute for Bs at given rates, in these circumstances the same number of Ss could not make up for the value the B now brings. The sort of non-substitutability that is generated by (and generates) the failure of Independence corresponds precisely to this definition from Wiggins, which, insofar as it applies to personal needs, I endorse:

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<sup>487</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 118.

<sup>488</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 79.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>490</sup> Moore did not himself believe that intrinsic value ever changed; since it is indeed *intrinsic*, it could not be affected, even as additional value is produced in some combinations. So he would argue that the value of each thing should *not* be measured by how much value to a state of affairs it contributes. The ratios of things’ values with each other in terms of intrinsic value (or, at least, the function that determined that ratio) would remain constant whatever else occurred together with them, and whatever additional or lesser value was sometimes realised. Even so, in my view that would not alter the fact that there is something else better about a thing, relative to other cooccurring things, in circumstances in which it realises organic value, than in those in which it does not realise it.

A and B are incommensurable [...] just if there is for a [...] person no fixed and *general* ratio of substitution (nor even a general but systematically variable ratio of substitution) between them.<sup>491</sup>

The relative value of one such thing to another is not entirely general, but depends what else is at stake in the circumstances.

For all this, it might even now be unclear how this could establish the non-substitutability I have claimed personal needs require. I have just now said that personal do stand in ratios of substitution, notwithstanding that those are non-general on this account. Section 3.3 below clears this up, but before then consider the following.

### 3.2 Interactive effects

Interactive effects *must* be possible for there to be personal needs. Yet a critic may reasonably ask where the required interaction is supposed to come from. Claiming that two things' values relative to each other depend on whether certain additional things are present is fine enough, but it is not yet clear how that could work. It would be unlike the familiar complementarities merely instrumental goods often have. For example, where having a shower is useless without running water, and—diminishing and up to a point—having more water rather than a dribble increases its effectiveness in helping me wash. By contrast, here we are supposing that the non-value features of a context, such as the existence of these complementarities, are already factored into the determination of which finally necessary personal needs are at stake. What we need to know is how the final, not instrumental, value of a thing could be affected by the presence of the final, not instrumental, value of other things.

Note that the failure of Independence would already be necessary if Strong Superiority were produced by additional increments of an inferior good making diminishing marginal value contributions towards an upper limit. That marginal contribution would be varying only because increments of the good were already present in the collection of goods to which it was added.<sup>492</sup> Again this would be unlike the case in which additional chocolates make a diminishing contribution because the person gets bored or sick because of them; that is, when additional chocolates become steadily less pleasurable. Rather, the assumption would be that what is added does not get boring or sickening, but rather adds the same unit of pleasure; somehow the final value of unit increases of pleasure is affected by which other final values coincide with it. Here too, it is

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<sup>491</sup> Wiggins, "Nature, Respect for Nature, and the Human Scale of Values": 19, original emphasis. For an earlier, less succinct statement, see his "Incommensurability: Four Proposals", 368. Similar to other philosophers debating the topic, Wiggins overreaches. Complaining about "the continuing absence of explicit stipulation" of incommensurability, and its consequent "obscurity", Wiggins thinks his definition is what we "ought to mean" by the term, and hopes for more "widespread and substantial agreement" on this ("Four Proposals", 358). But as I said in Chapter 1, and again above, I think it is unnecessary to secure agreement on what incommensurability 'really' or ought to mean. It can refer to a family of concepts, several different ways in which commensuration could fail.

<sup>492</sup> For a formal illustration of Independence using this example, see Arrhenius and Rabinowicz, "Value Superiority", 235.

difficult to see how things' values could alter *simply* because other things of final value were added or subtracted alongside them.<sup>493</sup>

This is essentially the same question as that of how conflicts between personal needs are to be resolved, something I have said it is vital to supplement an account of their structure with. If none can be given then the plausibility of the personal needs account is undermined. On the other hand, offering a plausible account of such resolution also increases the plausibility of the proposed structure. On the account I develop in the next chapter, the interdependence of personal needs' demands is produced by their coherence or otherwise with each other—that is, their ability to fit together in the life of a person in which they figure.<sup>494</sup> Reconciling or at least mitigating conflicts between personal needs involves improving their coherence with one another. While characterising this mechanism more positively comes later, a negative lesson from this chapter is that it is crucial that this coherence is not determined algorithmically. If it were, the values of needs would be systematically substitutable after all.

### 3.3 Scepticism about interdependence

There are grounds to doubt that it is possible to avoid resolving coherence, or any other form of interdependence, into an algorithm. Moreover, as I left off in section 3.1, it is not clear how it would help anyway, if personal needs still stood in ratios of substitution with each other—only non-general ones. This section addresses the latter via a demonstration that the former doubts are misplaced.

The danger for non-substitutability is that of a teleological structure that assimilates all interactive effects. Broome indeed allows that interactive effects might sometimes go into the determination of outcomes' values.<sup>495</sup> But he shows that Independence can be preserved so long as we can factor those effects into how we *individuate* the items that combine to constitute outcomes.<sup>496</sup> For example, grant that an outcome in which some benefits,  $x$ s, are equally distributed among some group of people is better than one in which there is an unequal distribution. One might think this entails that the additional value an  $x$  adds to the overall value of a distributional outcome is greater or lesser according to how much the person who receives it already has—an interactive effect, apparently violating Independence. Broome argues, however, that in fact we should see additional  $x$ s not as having their values affected in this way, but rather as representing different items altogether. The value of equality should be represented as “dispersed”, with the

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<sup>493</sup> This might be a reason to support a lexical difference, rather than diminishing marginal value, ground for Strong Superiority.

<sup>494</sup> This sense of ‘coherence’ has nothing to do with how authors such as Broome use this word, which has to do with an ordering conforming to the axioms I described.

<sup>495</sup> Broome, “Incommensurable Values,” in *Ethics Out of Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 147.

<sup>496</sup> Broome, *Weighing Goods*, 110.

xs that obtain individuated as an  $x_{\text{equality}}$  or  $x_{\text{inequality}}$ , to varying degrees, depending on who receives them.<sup>497</sup> We can perform a similar manoeuvre for any outcome. So we have

*Fine-grained Independence.* The contents of any outcome in the relevant domain can be individuated  $(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n)$  in such a way that, for any members or subsets  $x_i, x_j$ , and  $x_k$ ,  $v(x_i) \geq v(x_j)$  if and only if  $v(x_i, x_k) \geq v(x_j, x_k)$ .

This means that with the right individuation of outcomes' contents it is always possible to represent an ordering of values as fulfilling Independence. Yet Broome wants Independence to serve as a substantive constraint on rationality, which if fine individuation were permitted indiscriminately it would not.<sup>498</sup> So he takes care to combine it with the following principle:

*Principle of individuation by justifiers.* Outcomes should be distinguished as different if and only if they differ in a way that makes it rational to have a preference between them.<sup>499</sup>

According to this principle, some ways of individuating outcomes are the products of either irrationality or simple misdescription. Intransitive preferences, for example, are based on making fine distinctions between outcomes for no good reason; alleged counterexamples to Independence similar to the Allais 'paradox' do not reveal complementarities between outcomes that do and do not occur, but turn rather on under-describing certain outcomes.<sup>500</sup> There is no space or need to discuss these cases, but for present purposes let us allow Broome's conclusions and hence Fine-grained Independence. So-constrained, imposing Independence is a "way of individuating possibilities ... [that] takes into account everything there is to take account of"<sup>501</sup>—and this seems unarguable.

### 3.4 Reindividuation is innocuous here

We can accept that indefinitely fine individuation is possible, and therefore that a value function from personal needs to total outcomes taking into account all effects of contextual effects produced by coherence or similar interconnection is too. However, this move would make values teleologically structured in only a trivial sense. First consider the additional complexity of a value-function that would assimilate such effects. More importantly, since that might not itself be an objection, notice that among this complexity the independently individuated  $x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n$  the

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<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-87.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-8, 192.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, 103. 'Rationality' for Broome here is a thick notion determining not only the form but also the substance of the reasons there are for favouring alternatives over others. Whereas what is at stake for Broome is whether the structure of impersonal good is teleological, here it is whether subject-relative good has such a structure—or more specifically, that part of it composed of personal needs. So rationality for the personal needs account is relative; it is deliberating correctly with one's own needs.

<sup>500</sup> John Broome, "Rationality and the Sure-Thing Principle," in *Thoughtful Economic Man: Essays on Rationality, Moral Rules and Benevolence*, ed. Gay Meeks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 74-102.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.



function describes obtaining in alternatives will no longer be the needs as first described; that is, those that we are concerned to claim are non-substitutable. It will no longer be the need to  $\varphi$  for the sake of some commitment I have that is weighted in some way against some other need, but the need to  $\varphi$ -in-such-and-such-and-such-...-circumstances. When we reindividuate, it is not that interactive effects disappear but that we have changed the subject. Broome considers and deflects this style of objection in several contexts. But he is careful not to claim that fine individuation is justifiable in every case: “the strategy needs a particular defence on each occasion”, and in some it is “genuinely pointless”.<sup>502</sup> Applying the reindividuation strategy to personal needs is one such occasion. The values personal needs have *in themselves* are not independent—though the weights they bear on alternatives can be represented as varying depending on the other things the person needs to do there—even if they have indefinitely finely individuated counterparts that are. This latter weighting now only reflects a contribution to the degree of an alternative’s overall circumstantial *choice-worthiness*, and not a degree of value in a sense detached from the circumstances of the choice.<sup>503</sup> When things are substitutable, the degree of an alternative’s choice-worthiness aligns with some amount of value that it realises: and things can be represented as possessing differential amounts of the latter. But now these come apart. Weighting in a situation looks fine—in particular situations personal needs may have cumulative effects and can be represented as ‘tipping the balance’ over other collections of personal needs favouring another. But since the needs at hand are not themselves independent, it is a mistake to interpret these weights as measures of their or the relevant commitments’ own worth. Independently of the need to fit personal needs alongside each other, their values cannot be entirely summarised by any single magnitude at all. In themselves they remain fundamentally qualitatively distinct requirements to do or be this or that. It is not that they are incomparable in such terms, but rather that that common value neither exists nor can be constructed; that is, recalling Chapter 1 (§2.4.3), they are non-comparable by such a value.

Since it is always possible to impose Independence via reindividuation, however trivially, it remains the case that personal needs’ circumstantial relative values can always be represented in the formal terms of the teleological framework. Yet it will no longer be informative or useful to do so. Rather than comparison in terms of some common value being what determines alternatives’ choice-worthiness in a situation, what the weights there represent is the *output* of practical arbitration in the circumstances, rather than antecedent measures of value that could be fed into an algorithm. In Wiggins’ words, such output “sum[s] up a deliberation effected by other

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<sup>502</sup> *Weighing Goods*, 192.

<sup>503</sup> Cf. Wiggins, “Four Proposals”, 360-1.

means”.<sup>504</sup> Or in Susan Hurley’s pithy description, such an algorithm would merely “dangle”, with some other principle driving the ordering and weighting<sup>505</sup>—perhaps coherence.

### 3.5 Note on Griffin

The foregoing points bear on how Griffin’s account of well-being should be interpreted. I quoted him earlier arguing that well-being is a quantitative attribute, can be ordered on a single scale, and interpreted him as possibly endorsing substitution monism. Yet in fact he denies that there is any such thing as a “super-value”; similar to Broome, he holds that “[w]ell-being’ is not to be seen as the single overarching value, in fact not as a substantive value at all, but instead as a formal analysis of what it is for something to be prudentially valuable”. This is supposed to be compatible with pluralism, and the possibility of “compensated loss of value”,<sup>506</sup> but this seems to some commentators a source of significant tension in his account.<sup>507</sup> The key to resolving it is to pay attention to how Griffin combines his holism, on which how much well-being a good contributes depends on its combination with others, with his optimistic interpretation of the ability people have, most of the time, to “work out trade-offs”. Even though, as implied by his holism, “there are no permanent orderings or rankings among them”, people are perfectly capable of deciding which combinations of goods are “worth more”.

Yet we can see now that Griffin’s language obscures the relatively uncontroversial nature of his proposal that goods can most often be placed on a single scale of prudential value. All that “worth more” in his terms ultimately entails, and “[w]hat it is for something to be prudentially valuable”, is that some thing or collection of things is circumstantially worthy or worthier of choice, all things considered there. A separate point is that pointing as Griffin does to a basic ability to prefer one thing over another does not tell us anything about why the former is preferable to another.<sup>508</sup> We need an account of why an alternative should be preferred to another in those circumstances, and the answer cannot be that it improves a person’s well-being, or adds more prudential value, if those notions are ultimately not defined independently of choiceworthiness. A coherence account, if viable, might help with that.<sup>509</sup>

## 4. **Reconsidering the indexing problem**

In Chapter 2 (§3.2) I expressed doubts about claims by some multidimensional approaches that dimensions of well-being can be incommensurable and yet nevertheless assigned weights—that

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<sup>504</sup> *Ibid.* See also Daniel M. Hausman, *Preference, Value, Choice, and Welfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 18-9.

<sup>505</sup> Hurley, *Natural Reasons*, 264. Scanlon makes similar remarks in *What We Owe to Each Other* at 54.

<sup>506</sup> Ch. 1 §2.4.3, Ch. 2 §§3.2 & 4.2.1; cf. Griffin, *Well-Being*, 34-38, 89-90, 98, 235-6.

<sup>507</sup> Elinor Mason, “Value Pluralism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2018 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/value-pluralism/>.

<sup>508</sup> Cf. Hausman, *Valuing Health*, 130.

<sup>509</sup> This is indeed Hausman’s speculative conclusion to his *Preference, Value, Choice, and Welfare*, 129.

is, scepticism about how the indexing problem can possibly be overcome. But this chapter's discussion, drawing also on resources from Chapter 3, allows us to see the issue in a new light. To show this I take an important recent exchange between Alexandrova and Daniel Hausman as a foil, as Hausman has recently argued that the "heterogeneity of goods", as he puts it, defeats well-being measurement. Contra Hausman, and indeed Alexandrova, I show that incommensurability of the form defended in this chapter does not preclude interpersonal well-being measurement. The existence of personal needs is entirely compatible with it, and would in fact help underwrite the substitution pluralism sometimes assumed in multidimensional well-being measurement.

#### 4.1 The possibility of interpersonal well-being measurement

Hausman's account of well-being is similar in certain ways to Griffin's, holding that a person's well-being, their "flourishing", consists in their realising in their lives the sorts of things found on proposed objective lists, in combinations suitable to them in particular. Well-being is thus pluralistic, subject relative, and holistic<sup>510</sup>—in these respects also similar to the personal needs account of first-personal well-being. Indeed similar again, Hausman's concept of well-being seems apt for first-personal use in particular, and not for making measurable comparisons of different people's well-being. Yet Hausman argues that all this severely constrains possibilities for measuring well-being—in all contexts. He is not radically sceptical about the possibility of well-being comparisons. For one thing he thinks that individuals are very often well able to make comparisons in their own lives, despite the plurality of the goods that enhance their flourishing.<sup>511</sup> He also thinks that, given a likely natural connection between the extent of a person's flourishing and how they feel about it, "[s]ubjective experiences seem to be partial and fallible indicators" of their flourishing.<sup>512</sup> Nevertheless, he argues that the pluralism and holism of well-being mean that even intrapersonal comparability is very often rough and incomplete, and that these factors, together with wide interpersonal variation in which goods enhance flourishing, preclude anything that might serve as a reliable measure for comparing the well-being of different people.<sup>513</sup> Furthermore, while measures of subjective experience could be useful in certain circumstances, they fail to constitute measures of well-being as such, since judgements about a person's flourishing "ha[ve] no grounding in subjective experience and may be diametrically opposite to what the person's feelings suggest".<sup>514</sup>

A first problem with Hausman's argument is easy to diagnose by now, namely that he subscribes to Well-Being Invariantism. The concept of well-being, for him, refers in all evaluative

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<sup>510</sup> Hausman, *Valuing Health*, 121-5, 140-1.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-142.

<sup>512</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>513</sup> *Ibid.*, 141-2.

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

contexts to doing well according to standards that are specific to the individual and which encompass all aspects of their personal life (an instance of Circumscription). Although for him what substantively constitutes well-being varies across persons (is subject relative), there is a single theory—of flourishing—that describes in form what that entails for all persons (an instance of Uniqueness). Thus, for Hausman, a measure tracks well-being if and only if it tracks subject-relative flourishing. If the things a measure measures affect different persons' flourishing differently, then it cannot track well-being. Alexandrova rightly takes Hausman to task, making the familiar point that, in evaluative contexts other than the first-personal, well-being can consist in more narrowly defined and generalised attainments that depend neither on all, nor on the idiosyncrasies, of particular persons' goals and other values.

In these cases well-being is predicated of a particular kind of people in a specific type of circumstances. This sort of evaluation is at once narrower than Hausman's—not all goods are taken into account but only those shared by this group of people in these situations. It is also broader in that it considers a kind of person rather than an individual.<sup>515</sup>

However, while Alexandrova thus corrects Hausman's view that overall, all-things-considered well-being is the only sense of well-being, she concedes to him the practical impossibility of measuring it in that sense. She accepts that holism renders the “comparability of the value of different bundles of goods” “fiendishly complex” if not “unmeasurable”, and advocates “abandoning the project of capturing the all-things-considered well-being of individuals and focusing instead on its commonly valued components or on well-being of kinds that share features and circumstances”.<sup>516</sup>

But Alexandrova is wrong to side with Hausman on this point. Hausman goes wrong not only in thinking that the heterogeneity of goods (in its subject relativity) frustrates generalisations across persons, as above; he also goes wrong in thinking that the heterogeneity of goods (in its holism) frustrates overall comparisons from state to state. It is true that the incommensurable pluralism of well-being components *in the first-personal evaluative context* defeats any interestingly measurable notion of all-things-considered well-being there. As I argued earlier (§3.4), in needing to anticipate and build in the interactive effects of all possible combinations of circumstantial factors, such a measure would not only be fiendishly complex to construct but also rather uninformative, representing nothing over and above the choiceworthiness of combinations of well-being components for the person in question in very particular places in their life. However, we need to distinguish two different senses of an “all-things-considered” measure. In Alexandrova's usage here, it seems to mean a measure that both (a) concerns the overall state of the person, and (b) uses a person's own private standards. She contrasts this with the sort of meas-

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<sup>515</sup> Alexandrova, *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, 118.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, 117, 108.

ures she advocates that (c) measure only aspects of the person's life relevant to some particular evaluative context, and (d) use standards that generalise across persons. Yet this leaves out the possibility of another all-things-considered measure that (a) concerns the overall state of a person, but (d) uses standards that generalise across persons, not their own. Alexandrova briefly entertains such a measure—indeed, she thinks that if a measure comparing overall well-being across persons were ever actually to be practicable it would *need* to generalise across persons. But it is precisely this need for generalisation that she agrees with Hausman dooms any such interpersonal measure of overall well-being—because how an individual fares with some bundle of attainments according to such a measure would have to correspond, she seems to think, with an assessment of how that bundle affects them according to their personal standards. Individuals will inevitably value some things not captured by a generalised set of dimensions, and place weights on attainments vis-à-vis other attainments that are different from any generalised set of weights.<sup>517</sup>

Yet in fact in Chapter 2 we saw many efforts underway attempting to do precisely what Alexandrova and Hausman think we cannot or should not do. These aim to measure overall well-being across persons—but where the dimensions used are not required to correspond to standards particular measured individuals evaluate their own lives against, and neither is it required that any weighting of dimensions aligns with the priorities of all or any given measured individual(s). A circumscriptionist response is possible here, ruling all such attempts illegitimate and insisting that ‘overall well-being’ refers exclusively to something answering to personal standards. More in keeping with Alexandrova's own position more broadly, however, would be to permit overall or all-things-considered well-being to mean something different in the investigative and political contexts in which these measures are being developed.

#### 4.2 Contextualism and the indexing problem

What is interesting here about adopting this contextualist perspective on multidimensional measurement of overall well-being is that it dissolves the indexing problem. Or at least, it no longer represents a deep and general conundrum, but rather a practical challenge to be addressed—and differently so in different contexts. The crucial thing to note is that multidimensional measures simply have different purposes from first-personal thought about well-being. Alexandrova worries about “policy robustness”, posing the question, “how important should a well-being component be for policymakers to be justified to invest in this good at the expense of others and with a danger of disadvantaging those individuals for whom this good plays a minor role?”<sup>518</sup> However, the purposes of interpersonal overall measures do not need dimensions and weights to be so sensitive to particular individuals' attainments. Generalising across persons in

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<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-7.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

population-level measures of overall well-being is acceptable because these measures do not set out to represent, commensurate, and sum up everything that matters to individual persons. A typical goal is to provide a comprehensive, if rough, overview of the extent of social progress in a population, a measure of how well those people's lives are typically going overall, at present and/or over time. Such a measure is not proposed as suitable for policy purposes in general; 'overall' does not entail 'all-purpose'. It would be crude and misguided to, for example, use persons' scores on a population-level measure in assessing the costs and benefits of some relatively targeted policy or particular project. (It could perform as poorly or worse than willingness-to-pay can there.) Still it is true that there can be no normatively—here especially, politically—innocent measures.<sup>519</sup> Even averaging across a population is only sometimes appropriate: while useful for achieving wide coverage, it can conceal vitally important (*i.e.*, *ethically* or *politically* important) differences between subgroups of the population. Looking to more targeted measures of overall well-being will often be necessary for other purposes of interest.

This is all just to point out that the possibility of aggregate measures in interpersonal contexts is entirely compatible with the unavailability of any interesting quantitative notion of first-personal well-being. Moreover, as well as in the selection of dimensions, the weighting of a set of dimensions for interpersonal measurement of overall well-being reflects practical priorities in present circumstances. Thus these kinds of aggregate measure also carry over the second aspect of personal needs' incommensurability (corresponding to Wiggins' definition): as Alkire, for one, explains particularly clearly of dimensions (capability- and functioning-sets) she promotes:

[They] are incommensurable in the sense that no permanent priority or relative weight can be associated with them. The weights well-being measures apply to different functionings are [...] value judgments that reflect the relative importance of each functioning within some set for the purposes of the evaluation.<sup>520</sup>

In the earlier discussion in Chapter 2, I wrote, "if what we are doing is ranking by current priorities—that is, what to do here and now—, then the ideas of 'betterness, period' and of 'increases' and 'decreases' in well-being have no place". We see now that such an objection is in fact misplaced, because it assumes that there are senses of betterness and varying magnitudes that are abstracted from purposes, in particular ones that must be the same as those applying in

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<sup>519</sup> It is also a familiar point for many (though not all) practitioners of well-being measurement that besides technical considerations a host of normative choices must always be made even in the fine details of designing a measure. *Cf.*, *e.g.*, Alkire, "The Capability Approach and Well-Being Measurement for Public Policy".

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*, 618. On the other hand, if we are interested in changes over time there is an argument for keeping them constant for certain periods: Alkire *et al.* raise the option, for that purpose, of "fix[ing] the weights and other parameters for a given time period, such as a decade, and update them thereafter". There may be some trade-off between synchronic fidelity and usefulness in that case. See their *Multidimensional Poverty Measurement and Analysis*, 212.

private contexts of assessment. The conclusion I have since defended is that precisely the opposite is the case.

#### 4.3 Private vis-à-vis public standards

It is not as if interpersonal measures should or can be constructed and carried out entirely independently of individuals' own assessments, however. While the dimensions and priorities selected will not be the same as those any given evaluated individual would set, their selection must be answerable to measured individuals' personal standards in some appropriate way. Again, this influence cannot but be ethical or political. In particular, if the measures are intended to inform the actions of some governing body, they need to reflect or be appropriately informed by priorities that are or can be shared by the community it governs. I have more to say about this in the following chapter. Ironically perhaps, subsequent to his sceptical argument about well-being measurement, Hausman himself discusses at some length various ways in which "[t]he public evaluation differs from private evaluations instead because it holds states of affairs up to a different standard".<sup>521</sup> Naturally, he does not describe such a public standard as a standard of well-being, but if we eschew Invariantism there is no reason in principle at least some such standards could not count as such.

#### 4.4 Explaining the form of individual interests and dimensional incommensurability

One place in which personal needs can contribute is indeed here in the relation between interpersonal and intrapersonal evaluation. I do not at all propose that they are more suited to use in concrete practice in any way—that is, that practitioners should necessarily try to operationalise and/or elicit them directly.<sup>522</sup> The idea is rather that they provide an account of the *form* of individuals' interests, to which interpersonal measurement must be answerable, that differs fundamentally from preference satisfaction. They support the notion that dimensions represent things that have objective value, while at the same time accounting for different people having different personal interests. (Analogous to cross-personal differences in conversion factors of resources into capabilities, in some policy contexts it may be interesting and relevant to consider individuals' conversion of public-context dimensional attainments into personal-need-satisfaction.) Perhaps more importantly, the existence of personal needs in intrapersonal structure explains at a fundamental level why measures of any kind cannot automatically be assumed to extend across different evaluative contexts and in fact will very often not. In particular, it explains why there can be no absolute, context-independent, unidimensional

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<sup>521</sup> Hausman, *Valuing Health*, 160.

<sup>522</sup> In Chapter 3 (§4.2.1) I did suggest that an appropriate standard for interpersonal assessment might in some cases be a set of some of the *kinds* of personal needs the people implicated have. (Though this may not scale up beyond policies and projects focused only on relatively small communities.) However, in general I by no means want to anticipate practitioners' approaches to measurement design, so I offer no further speculations.

measure of well-being from which circumstantial priorities could be read off. That is, *the existence of personal needs explains why even in the most ideal circumstances there can exist no formally unidimensional notion of well-being that could function in broadly the same way utility does in utilitarianism*. This is something Sen has long emphasised. However, as I argued in Chapter 3, although theories often claim that their dimensions, capabilities, and so on are incommensurable, they lack a theory in the intrapersonal context that can bear that out. Hausman's account of flourishing is a good example of a theory that does operate at this level, but it is underdeveloped, with pluralism and holism asserted but not explained in depth or detail. As I earlier suggested would also be the case with Griffin's assertions of pluralism (and, it appears, sufficiency), formally implicating necessity, as the personal needs account does, would help him motivate these features in a more principled way.

### **5. Conclusion: incommensurability can coexist with comparability**

The main purpose of this chapter has been to show how the incommensurability of personal needs with each other and with non-needs differs from incomparability. Incommensurability can allow for the comparability of goods and collections of goods without supposing that their values are representable on a single dimension of context-independent value. One way of putting this conclusion is that there exist two notions of 'trading off'. One is worrisome in some cases because it asserts verdicts on relative inherent values of the things as such, that one can make up for another in every respect without loss. The other means simply deciding priorities in concrete circumstances. The chapter has shown how this result helps us to better understand—and to avoid—the indexing problem. The next task of this project is to show how the personal needs account can contribute to a better understanding of the possibility of comparing sets of incommensurable considerations. The following chapter takes up the suggestion that the comparability of alternatives responding to personal needs may depend on those needs' coherence with each other.



The standard of valuation is formed in the process of practical judgement or valuation.<sup>523</sup>

As I deliberate, I strive not only to adjudicate claims among my desires but also to understand those claims in terms that will make decision possible.<sup>524</sup>

## Chapter 6

### Needs in practical reason

It is all right to show that a formal structure exists in which incommensurability is consistent with circumstantial comparability. At least as important is to provide an account of how it is possible for comparisons to be determined. The issue is crucial to the ultimate success of the framework this project proposes, for if no mode of comparison can be given which does not commensurate and aggregate, the claim that the structure in fact exists is undermined.

This chapter's first section argues that while by assumption no formula can be given, it is unacceptable for the necessary reasoning to consist in intuition or depend on some special perception that cannot be explained. This requirement demands that the mode of reason be discursive, in the sense that explicit reasons can be given why specifically some sets of considerations take precedence over others in particular circumstances.<sup>525</sup> Section 2 discusses various preliminaries to the coherentist account of practical reason with personal needs that I propose. It distinguishes the relevant notion of coherence from other usages, and shows how it can be defined discursively yet non-algorithmically. Practical coherence is defined not by a particular procedure but rather by an objective. How the objective should be reached is left open, but it is nevertheless possible to explain why courses of action are at least as good as others by reference to the objective's achievement. Although no formula is or can be given, section 3 elaborates a particularly useful non-aggregating method with which coherence can be built: specification. Section 4 discusses how specification, combined with holistic evaluation, can be a highly effective way of building coherence among a person's personal needs—that is, for resolving conflicts between them. Whereas building coherence among personal needs using specification is in the first instance an intrapersonal process, section 5 advertises several ways it might make a difference in

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<sup>523</sup> Dewey, "The Logic of Judgments of Practice," in *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 8 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 39.

<sup>524</sup> Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, 140.

<sup>525</sup> I take the term 'discursive' from Richardson, *ibid.*, 31-3, 133-4.

the interpersonal comparison of alternatives. The areas considered there are (i) democratic public deliberation about policies and projects, and (ii) distributive justice in philosophy. This section makes no claim to solve issues discussed at one stroke. The general proposal is that it could be fruitful to approach these and similar topics within this paradigm: by keeping in view both (a) the salience of commitments and personal needs as inputs to practical reason, and (b) the possibility of practical coherence in resolving conflicts between them. Further development and investigation of the areas discussed and other potential applications remains necessary.

### 1. Discursiveness in practical reason

Authors defending incommensurability have not always offered especially helpful advice about how to choose between alternatives in which incommensurable considerations figure. Rejecting algorithmic determination, they have often swung towards giving up on explicit criteria. The issue is especially acute if the incommensurability of considerations is identified with, or thought to entail, the incomparability of alternatives in which they figure. For Raz, for example, if we have two incomparable options then all we can do is look to see if there is sufficient reason to choose either of them—if so, they are both “eligible”, and it is rational to choose whichever one wills.<sup>526</sup> John Finnis is an author who, in the face of incommensurability does offer a number of “principles of practical reasonableness”. However, these are presented as vaguely specified, largely negative constraints, which (in the words of Alkire, who defends and applies his account), “can only rule out options”. He holds that integrating the various basic and incommensurable aspects of well-being is the real problem of morality and the point of life.<sup>527</sup> Yet of those alternatives that survive the principles’ application, which to choose is again then only a matter of free and creative choice.<sup>528</sup> An alternative to proposals which leave choices between incommensurables to the free will, a different, traditional idea holds that alternatives featuring incommensurable considerations *are* rationally comparable—but still that comparability is achievable only by way of an uncodifiable practical wisdom, together with a refined situational awareness. The context-dependence of the judgements, and consequent absence of rigid criteria, entail that the decision-maker is not choosing on the basis of commensurating the various considerations. This faculty makes possible judgements that ostensibly are rational, and yet which they are is left to a sort of well-honed intuition.<sup>529</sup>

Naturally, I am sympathetic to the rejection of the idea that comparison necessarily requires and must be reducible to applying algorithms and exceptionless principles of priority. However,

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<sup>526</sup> Raz, “Incommensurability and Agency,” in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, ed. Chang, 110-28.

<sup>527</sup> Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 100, cited by Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 112.

<sup>528</sup> Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 109-13.

<sup>529</sup> E.g., Ross, *The Right and the Good*, 21-7; Thomas Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value,” in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 135; McDowell, “Virtue and Reason”.

any conclusion drawn from this that the comparability of alternatives in which incommensurable considerations figure is *in general* either radically underdetermined, or based on ineffable grounds for deciding, would seem rather implausible. In the account of personal needs I have been developing, incommensurable requirements, entailed by a person's different commitments, confront each other very often; such incompatibilities are not confined to pivotal, existential questions, moral dilemmas, and other hard choices. Our negotiation of these circumstances seems generally reasoned; it is not our general condition that there is nothing that can decide, or be explicitly said to decide, such ordinary instances. It is therefore unsatisfactory to leave the determination of these solutions in a black box. I do not claim that these cursory remarks about the foregoing positions are enough to demonstrate that they are failures in this respect. Indeed, there are truths and subtleties in each of these ideas that are worth preserving and elaborating further. The point is only that *if* such views arrive at such a radical conclusion as to black-box rational decision between alternatives featuring incommensurable considerations, then they are unacceptable. I should also point out that this is not to claim that people always need to act on explicitly entertained reasons, and certainly not that the final value or necessity of practical considerations itself has to be rationally explicable (as far as my account is concerned, that an end is choice-worthy at all may largely be arational). The issue is only of whether an account can in principle always be given of what the considerations are and determinately how they bear on the alternatives in question.

Similar points apply to the comparability of well-being states with incommensurable components in interpersonal contexts. A difference is that, as we saw in Chapter 2, there is no question there of proponents of multidimensional measurement having confidence that methods exist to arrive at principled comparisons (even as they acknowledge significant incompleteness). Yet while in the previous chapter I defended the intelligibility of weighting incommensurable dimensions, responding to opponents and assuaging earlier doubts, still there is the question of how that can be done. Theorists such as Alkire and Sen point to democratic deliberation as a vital means to selecting and weighting incommensurable dimensions, but it is unclear precisely how it can ultimately help with my question. In effect, I want to press even further the following critique that Alkire addresses to Sen:

The problem is that, although Sen regularly refers to the need for explicit scrutiny of individual and social goals, for reflectiveness, value judgement, practical reason, and democratic social choice, he chooses not to specify the possible range of procedures by which valuational issues are to be resolved or by which information on valuations is to be obtained.<sup>530</sup>

In her work, Alkire has explicated and actually convened participatory procedures, in which the valuations of those involved in, and affected by, projects are elicited. In designing these she has

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<sup>530</sup> Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 13.

drawn on Finnis’s account of plural “basic values”, which provides a more definite framework than Sen’s but which is also more flexible than Nussbaum’s account of universal central capabilities.<sup>531</sup> Her account is thus an advance on Sen’s proposals in terms of explicitness. However, in relying ultimately also on Finnis’s account of practical reason, groups’ valuations emerge out of evaluators’ free agency we know not how. Even if there are sensible principles constraining comparisons as Finnis’s account proposes, it would be good to have some more determinate account of what free choice within their bounds entails. Do individuals just decide on a whim? Most plausibly they do not select some options over others arbitrarily, but because they believe that those are worthier responses in respect of the things that matter to them. There is the response familiar from Chapter 2 (§3.1) that agreement on maximally precise criteria is unnecessary; it can be enough to identify a *range* of weightings, and a set of *generally specified* dimensions, that are acceptable to every person without their sharing identical values.<sup>532</sup> Yet as I also argued there, deferring the possibility of circumstantial comparability to participants in deliberative exercises in this way is theoretically unsatisfactory, because it does little to address sceptics who think the best explanation of people’s ability to compare is in fact dimensions’ ultimate commensurability after all.

To comment briefly in explanation of Sen’s motivations, he thinks it is important to recognise not only that different dimensions and weights will be appropriate to different evaluative contexts, but that it is also a contextual matter which decision procedures are appropriate for determining these. They cannot be anticipated ahead of such contexts, and, furthermore, in order to respect the agency of those who are affected by and participate in them, the form a process should take should itself be open to democratic debate.<sup>533</sup> Such abstention seems defensible as a practical policy, and I by no means want to argue that more definiteness should in practice necessarily be demanded. Even so, it may be fruitful to have a more determinate—even if fairly abstract—account of what deliberators are doing, and of what deliberative outcomes should ideally deliver, a possible advance on dominance partial ordering. (Later in section 5.1 I suggest an ideal of this kind.) In the individual case, we could be better assured of there being such a thing as a person’s or group’s deliberating correctly, or at least better or worse. In order for a person or group to even know what they are doing they must have some way of tracking steps and describing the reasons for their conclusions, and it seems a reasonable theoretical goal to attempt to draw out what is happening there and to see what generalisations, if any, it is possible to formulate about such procedures. There is also, again, a demand for political accountability—recall the argument from explicitness for using a procedure like CBA.<sup>534</sup> Certainly, democratic delibera-

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<sup>531</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 52-3.

<sup>532</sup> Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, 46; *ibid.*, 30, 127.

<sup>533</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 286-7.

<sup>534</sup> Ch. 1 §1.

tion's purpose, in empowering its participants to decide autonomously, eases the requirement for accountability considerably. Still, it is surely necessary for members of a community or population to be able to explain to each other the rationale of a decision, in explicit terms, in order for it to carry conviction over time, and for it to be explicable to affected parties not previously party to deliberation, such as young adults who were children at the time. These last points are only the speculations of an outsider to practical debates that are properly beyond the scope of this project. Even so, I think it is legitimate to discourage proposals that leave it ultimately inexplicit how comparability is to be achieved.

My complaint can only be effectively pressed, however, if adequately discursive accounts are actually available. As Rawls writes in a similar context:

A refutation of intuitionism consists in presenting the sort of constructive criteria that are said not to exist. ... [I]t is pointless to discuss this matter in the abstract. The intuitionist and his critic will have to settle this question once the latter has put forward his more systematic account.<sup>535</sup>

While I agree wholeheartedly with those who assert that no algorithm or set of rigid principles is available, I am nevertheless optimistic about the possibility of giving such constructive criteria. In the following sections I argue that such discursiveness about procedure in the first-personal context is achievable.

## **2. A preliminary characterisation of intrapersonal practical coherence**

### **2.1 The relevant notion of coherence**

At several points in the previous chapter I suggested that the choiceworthiness of an alternative involving personal needs might be determined by its coherence. This seemed promising because it is surely of the essence of the notion of coherence that, whatever else it entails, it describes a form of interdependence between the elements of a whole. Coherence does not follow from interdependence, but it stands out as a candidate, familiar from a range of philosophical positions making appeal to it. Even so, the notion typically remains obscure.<sup>536</sup> Fortunately, this pro-

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<sup>535</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 35.

<sup>536</sup> Elijah Millgram, "Coherence: The Price of the Ticket," *The Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2000): 82; Juan Manuel Pérez Bermejo, "Coherence: An Outline in Six Metaphors and Four Rules," in *Coherence: Insights from Philosophy, Jurisprudence and Artificial Intelligence*, ed. Michał Araszkiewicz and Jaromír Šavelka (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2013), 93-111.

An exception Millgram identifies and discusses is Paul Thagard's work on the idea, in which coherence is modelled computationally. See, *inter alia*, Thagard, *Coherence in Thought and Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000). I am not in a position to conclusively evaluate the success of Thagard's theory, but I strongly suspect that, if applied to personal needs, it would either (a) problematically commensurate them, (b) be unclear what the output of the model represented—or both. Thagard is also primarily concerned with the truth of theories, scientific and ethical, which may limit the application of his approach here. Moreover, his models assume that the justification of *all* propositions depends on the weight of the whole, but this may or may not be the case with a person's commitments (see next paragraph). However this all may be, the the kind of coherentist practical reason I discuss proceeds by reshaping qualitatively distinct concepts, not computing given inputs, and it is not clear that quantitative representation of that is possible.

ject does not require a survey of works deploying the notion or any general definition of coherence. There is room to doubt whether any such definition, abstracted from the purpose coherence is meant to serve in some instance, is even possible.<sup>537</sup> So we can set aside the most commonly discussed sort of coherence, in epistemology and the philosophy of science, namely coherentist justification of beliefs, theories and so on—where what is at stake is the truth of, or our confidence in, such propositions, and in which explanatory relations are especially important. The sort of coherence required here is also different from a prominent coherentist procedure in ethics and political philosophy, reflective equilibrium. In its canonical form, that procedure aims to arrive at a coherent ethical theory, working from initial, particular judgements to general principles that would systematise them, and then back and forth, until one arrives at “principles which match [one’s] considered judgments duly pruned and adjusted”. Coherence there consists in an equilibrium in which “principles and judgments coincide”.<sup>538</sup> While this process may be suited to developing general principles, it does not immediately offer what this project needs.

Only a very specialised sort of coherentist practical reason is necessary here, that has just one purpose: determining the overall choiceworthiness of courses of action in circumstances in which different practical considerations make incompatible demands. Besides circumstantial requirements that do not derive from principles, these considerations—in my framework, personal needs—may also include any general principles entailed by persons’ personal commitments (including moral commitments). But here the interesting cases—indeed, the cases that call for the sort of coherentist practical reason discussed here—are those in which personal needs, including requirements flowing from such general principles, come into conflict. The assumption here is precisely that in the relevant cases there is no further general principle or algorithm for resolving these conflicts.

Since practical coherence does not concern the justification of principles and other practical requirements, it does not assume that they are undermined if they cannot be perfectly reconciled with each other. Unlike traditional coherentist proposals, then, it is perfectly all right if some or many practical considerations are explanatorily foundational; that is, if they have grounds independent of their coherence with each other. It is only whether they take precedence or otherwise with respect to each other in concrete circumstances that depends on coherence in the sense of interest here—the coherence of their requirements, not their explanatory grounds.

I have been referring to coherence as a mode of practical reason. However, more specifically, by practical reason here I mean a mode of the *determination of correct choice* rather than of deliberation about what to choose. If deliberation is successful then it will land upon correct solutions, but what is at stake here is objectively (that is, as a matter of fact, potentially distinct from how

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<sup>537</sup> Luc Bovens and Stephan Hartmann, “Solving the Riddle of Coherence,” *Mind* 112 (2003): 603.

<sup>538</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 18.

things appear) what those solutions are, which conclusions should be arrived at. Analogous to a point made about some utilitarian accounts, building coherence here is a criterion for correctness, not necessarily a decision procedure. That there is such a reality, is, again, not to say that truths about coherence have an external source or existence; correct courses of action are simply those that a person's own commitments truly require of them. As will soon be clear, nevertheless, there may often not be unique solutions; correctness is disjunctive whenever more than one equally coherent solution is possible (§4.2.3). This approach sidesteps concerns about practicability, but a downside is that relevance to practice is indirect. This is worthwhile, nevertheless. The initial step taken here is establishing the possibility of correctness, ahead of further questions about which means reliably get at it, and the complications those introduce.

## 2.2 The discursiveness of practical coherence

The desired sort of coherence must remain somewhat obscure in one sense, to the extent that it must remain uncodifiable. This is not a bug, but a feature, however. If the price of codifying coherence were the possibility of its being fully, non-trivially represented by the application of extendible principles or formulae, then applying it to personal needs would render them commensurable, and it would lose all interest. On the other hand, given the discursiveness requirement, coherence must also not fully embrace indeterminacy. On the present proposal, practical coherence is discursive, yet non-algorithmic, for the following reasons:

1. It can be explicitly defined without specifying a particular formula (*e.g.*, quantify, aggregate, maximise), but with a determinate objective.
2. Although methods to get there are left open, an explanation can always be given for a course of action with respect to its adequacy in achieving or approaching the objective.

Still, it might be wondered how it is possible to define the objective of practical coherence without a definition of what coherence consists in in the abstract. It is also unclear what methods might be suitable. In fact, which methods are available affects which objectives are possible, so I begin with the latter issue, introducing the method of specification. Coherence as an objective becomes more determinate when later considered specifically in the context of intrapersonal well-being—where the latter, moreover, is conceived as structured by commitments and personal needs.

### 3. Specification

The notion of specification appears most prominently in the work of Aurel Kolnai,<sup>539</sup> Wiggins (interpreting Aristotle),<sup>540</sup> and Henry Richardson.<sup>541</sup> It also seems to be present in the work of John Dewey.<sup>542</sup> As Richardson's account emphasises most clearly (and on which I most rely), specification is the prime method of working towards practical coherence. There are other ways coherence can be sought—finding means that serve multiple ends at once, for example—but these are of relatively minor importance here, and specification is the deepest way through which ends can be made to accommodate one another. To explain what it involves, and how it applies to the present account, I run through the following component ideas: the non-specificity of many ends; the revisability of ends, and; the transmission of practical commitment specification makes possible. Each of them taken separately is very simple, obvious even. However, together—and subsequently paired with holistic evaluation—they provide powerful resources for building coherence among a person's ends.

A note on the authors I draw on. My interests are different from those of Kolnai, Wiggins, and Richardson. They apply specification to generic ends or norms, but I am particularly interested in applying it to commitments and the requirements on a person's action they generate, that is, their personal needs. Moreover, they discuss practical coherence and specification as modes of deliberation. Again as mentioned above in section 2.2, coherence and specification as I apply them are modes of the determination of correctness of action. It may or may not be fruitful for a person always to pursue specification directly and explicitly. Specification as I apply it delineates possibilities for correct action, whether or not people alight upon them or are even looking for them. Even so, in the rest of this section I explain specification in the neutral terms of ends, that a deliberator may be actively considering. As for Dewey, although he is an ally insofar as he advocates holism and specification, he is unfriendly to any binary distinction between ends and means, and would likely reject much of the mechanics of this account of specification.<sup>543</sup>

#### 3.1 Non-specificity of ends

A first idea is that a person's ends, the things their action does or should aim at, are not always fully specific.<sup>544</sup> In the framework of this project, what a commitment requires of a person may not be entirely specific. In Wiggins' illustration, I may

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<sup>539</sup> Aurel Kolnai, "Deliberation Is of Ends," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 62 (1961): 195-218.

<sup>540</sup> Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason," in *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 215-37.

<sup>541</sup> Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*.

<sup>542</sup> Dewey, "Human Nature and Conduct", 135.

<sup>543</sup> See Richardson's discussion of how Dewey's ideas contrast with his own account, in *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, ch. 8 §2.3.

<sup>544</sup> Kolnai, "Deliberation Is of Ends": 205.



have an extremely vague description of something I want—a good life, a satisfying profession, an interesting holiday, an amusing evening— [...]

... but it is important to remember always the difference between *constitutive* and *instrumental* relations, seen at several points earlier,<sup>545</sup> because

the problem is not to see what will be causally efficacious in bringing this about but to see what really *qualifies* as an adequate and practically realizable specification of what would satisfy this want.<sup>546</sup>

More prosaically, a person might want to have something for dinner, where that aim does not specify whether to go out or stay in, and then whether to have curry or pasta. It is just as important to be able to find such constitutive solutions to one's ends as, having got those, to find means to them,<sup>547,548</sup> and to confuse these is a serious error.<sup>549</sup> Even when one is in the process of pursuing some end, one can often see that one is not necessarily pursuing it, it specifically, for its own sake (*though that might also be the case*), but because it is a *way* of achieving something more general. (We see that 'for the sake of' also does not necessarily mean 'as a means to'.)

### 3.2 Revisability of ends

This brings us to the second idea, which is that ends are revisable. In itself this is uncontroversial; pressure to choose different courses of action arises all the time, typically in light of the costs of a current or proposed course. A standard way of depicting these costs, and what happens next, is in amount terms, apt to be aggregated, weighted, balanced, maximised or similar. However, this way of thinking can be premature, threatening to overlook another important perspective.

Rather than immediately attempting to quantify prospective costs and benefits, we can examine the concrete places those occupy (actually or possibly) in relations between ends, means, and ways in which these are contingently specified. We look in the first place to which concrete losses and gains make attaining which ends possible or impossible, which may include chains and networks of intermediate ends. We look in particular to what things are valued *for*—instrumentally, but most importantly finally and constitutively—rather than presuming that their value is adequately represented as something added or subtracted, improving or worsening the overall value of an alternative by some function or formula.

This puts us in a position to do something different from employing a sort of umpire whose arbitration concludes that one of the two conflicting courses of action wins out and the other

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<sup>545</sup> Ch. 2 §4.1, Ch. 3 §3.1 & appendix.

<sup>546</sup> Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason", 225.

<sup>547</sup> Another of the non-instrumental forms of reasoning Williams identifies in "Internal and External Reasons", 104.

<sup>548</sup> Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, 75.

<sup>549</sup> Kolnai, "Deliberation Is of Ends": 207.

loses. Revision there involves simply abandoning ends it is no longer possible to achieve because they figure in alternatives that are found ‘worse overall’ than the one selected. This other possibility is to look for alternative ways in which the conflicting ends might be pursued, if they are not entirely specific, that could enable them to no longer conflict.<sup>550</sup> The metaphor is not one of arbitration but of reconciliation. The examples of the previous subsection were ways reason moved from the general to the specific. In this sort of case it moves first from the specific to the general, from there back down again to the specific.

But here we confront the question of what there is to choose, if anything, between competing possible specifications. Authors considering this question, or something like it, commonly emphasise the imagination and creativity specification as practised typically requires, which is correct and important. It requires new alternatives to be generated, additional to those that take ends’ initial specifications for granted. However, it is easy to mistakenly conclude from this that specification is a matter of free play, or to overemphasise the instability of people’s ends. Dewey exaggerates when he characterises deliberation in terms of clashing impulses and habits, leaving a person’s ends<sup>551</sup> in uncertain flux.<sup>552</sup> Kolnai is overly pessimistic about the rationality of specification. He suggests that we crave rational standards, and deliberate as if criteria for its correctness can be found, but he is ambivalent about whether these can stand independent of the exercise of our free will.<sup>553</sup> Interestingly, Finnis is on the right track with two of the principles of practical reasonableness he offers that are not really as negative as Alkire describes them—and offer slightly more guidance than simply encouraging free choice. One is that, although one should hold to one’s commitments and not “abandon them lightly”,

One should [also] be looking creatively for new and better ways of carrying out one’s commitments, rather than restricting one’s horizon or one’s effort to the projects, methods, and routines with which one is familiar.<sup>554</sup>

This sounds close to what I have been saying, but a limitation is not that it merely rules options out, but rather that it rules out too little. When should we stay constant, and when should we revise? The other of Finnis’s principles relevant to coherence and specification, is, citing Rawls, that a person should pursue a “rational plan of life”, where essential to such a plan is that its components are coherent. Finnis uses the rhetoric of components that “harmonize” with each other.<sup>555</sup> This is also good, but still very vague, and so it too offers little real guidance. How it is

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<sup>550</sup> Cf. Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, 57-8, 171.

<sup>551</sup> Or rather, “ends in view”, which for him are not essentially distinct from means, but located on a continuum of “ends-means” and are extremely specific to the moment of deliberation. Cf. Dewey, “Theory of Valuation,” in *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 227-8, cited in Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, 163.

<sup>552</sup> Dewey, “Human Nature and Conduct”, 138, 150. Cited in Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, 161-2.

<sup>553</sup> Kolnai, “Deliberation Is of Ends”: 213ff.

<sup>554</sup> Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 110.

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

that coherence or “harmony” can be improved is precisely what we need to know here. Consistent with the discursiveness requirement we need more determinate criteria, and further examining exactly what specification involves and entails contributes to this.

### 3.3 Transmission of practical commitment

This third idea both constrains and inspires what specification can be. Again, it may seem obvious, but making it explicit and bearing it in mind is absolutely vital. It is simply that in a genuine specification what is being revised is *not* the end under its non-specific description, but only its more concrete realisation. Not just anything can count as a new specification of an end; if it is to be genuine it must be a way in which the more general end *continues* to be pursued. The condition is positively helpful, because it means that it can be possible to preserve the point of what one is doing or was considering doing, while doing something different in its specifics.<sup>556</sup> And this is something that can be determined and explicated rationally.

## 4. Intrapersonal coherence and personal needs

### 4.1 Applying holistic specification

Specification is helpful for the account this project develops, because it can make resolving conflicts between personal needs possible—that is, make them coherent—without treating them as commensurable and thereby not really needs at all. If the needs at stake in some context are not entirely specific, then although they may conflict as they are currently or possibly specified, it may still be possible to satisfy them all if different, non-conflicting specifications can be found.

In pursuing specification to improve coherence, comparisons of alternative specifications must be holistic. All other personal needs at stake in their totality are relevant—all others that would be affected now and in the future by any changes. To make this holism more precise, the notion of ends ‘regulating’ other ends can be helpful. An end regulates another end if and only if the pursuit of the latter is shaped by what, where, when, and how things count as being done for the sake of the former.<sup>557</sup> For example, a person’s desire for something pleasant to do may regulate which way they choose to walk home from work; they may choose the route through the park over the path running beside the motorway. A person’s aim to continue being a writer may regulate their aim to choose a flat or house to live in: that aim might recommend, other things being equal, flats and houses with a good workspace, such as a study. It is because the requirements of a person’s commitments are all equally necessary that their appropriate pursuit is *jointly* regulated by the requirements of all of the person’s other commitments. The determination of what, where, when, and how a person should do for each commitment—that is, their personal

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<sup>556</sup> Dewey, “Human Nature and Conduct”, 135, cited in Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, 170; Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, 169-71.

<sup>557</sup> Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, 55.

needs—is sensitive to how what they do could affect their ability to live up to every other of their commitments.<sup>558</sup> A person achieves practical coherence among their commitments if they can find acceptable specifications of their requirements such that it is possible for them to do that; such that every one of their personal needs can be satisfied.

The following subsection addresses several possible concerns, in the process further elaborating and clarifying the view.

## 4.2 Further details

### 4.2.1 *Rationality*

It could still be wondered how rational this mode of reason is. The response to this concern may already be apparent in view of my earlier discussion of what specification involves and entails, but again it is worth making it completely explicit. The acceptability of any given specification is constrained by two conditions. First, each specification of a requirement has truly to be a genuine specification of it; that is, one that if met continues to meet the requirement under its non-specific definition. Second, every affected specification within the whole is relevant to the acceptability of any particular specification, because only localised respecification could easily ramify to create further incompatibilities between other sets of requirements. Any specification is unacceptable, even if locally appropriate and genuine, if it makes impossible the genuine specification (as per the first condition) of any one or more of the requirements of the person's other commitments. (Or—since sometimes only imperfect coherence may be possible—it is unacceptable whenever another specification is available that can do better, in that it fits with a *more* coherent total solution than the one considered can. See below §4.2.4.)

There may be alternative coherent specifications, and total sets of specifications, possible, and these are all acceptable so long as they fulfil these conditions. However, the stringency of these conditions will often ensure that there are not radically many that are substantially different.

In cases of conflict it will usually be unnecessary for a person to rearrange their life completely. Rather than having to find new specifications for large swathes of their commitments' requirements, it will often be sufficient to focus on local respecification. This will be so whenever local specification does not appear to threaten the adequacy of current specifications of the requirements of other commitments. Indeed, in practice, necessity itself will typically preclude such total assessment. Such evaluation and consequent rearrangement has costs, which if great enough will diminish the means a person has to live up to their commitments.

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<sup>558</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 169.

#### 4.2.2 *The equality of commitments, mutual accommodation, and coherence as an end*

On the account of commitments and personal needs developed in previous chapters, each of a person's commitments is an utterly independent source of normative requirements upon them, independent of anything else they might also be committed to or are otherwise interested in.<sup>559</sup> It may then be wondered why, on the account of building coherence through specification, the content of those requirements should now be at all sensitive to considerations beyond themselves. Commitments themselves do not seem to be committed to cohering with others.<sup>560</sup> Neither, if coherence were otherwise a sort of alien value, is it clear why commitments would have to acknowledge its having any authority over them.

But this account does not suppose either of those things. Coherence is not held to be an additional value worth pursuing for its own sake,<sup>561</sup> and neither does a pressure towards it arise from within the person's commitments themselves. Rather, it arises purely out of the need for them *all to fit within a single life*.<sup>562</sup> Note that each commitment even taken singly does in fact in a certain way need to adapt to external conditions: simple scarcity in time and resources alone can necessitate finding new specifications of its requirements. The addition of other commitments alongside it simply introduces more competition for those. The fact that each commitment is necessary for the person's living well ensures that the person is pulled towards an equilibrium in which each commitment receives sufficient attention for its requirements to be met—it is their combined pressure that creates the demand for acceptable specifications that will make it possible to reach such a state. In this way coherence is to be sought without its constituting a separate end sought for its own sake. An incoherent set of commitments is just one in which one or more are being neglected.

It is worth mentioning that holism is a common feature of the views of proponents of specification—via a connection with the person's identity. This is in the same sense seen in Chapter 4 (§2.5) in which a person's identity comprises their personal values. Once more, Wiggins puts the idea neatly when he writes, “When someone makes a choice, they will bring to bear upon it, explicitly or implicitly, their conception of the life they want to lead, their whole *skopos*”. He furthermore thinks it is necessary to do this: “Only in the presence of some such thing can contextually reasonable choices be made between the claims of things whose values are independent of

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<sup>559</sup> An exception would be if two or more of a person's commitments were somehow essentially interconnected.

<sup>560</sup> See previous note.

<sup>561</sup> Without ruling out it having such value for some people, aesthetically perhaps.

<sup>562</sup> Cf. Richardson's discussion in *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, 182, 189.

one another”.<sup>563</sup> Dewey, Hurley, and Richardson hold similar views.<sup>564</sup> The imperative to maintain coherence is framed as requiring that a person remain true to who they are, and this requires attention to *all* of the elements of themselves in this sense, that none be forsaken.

Nevertheless, one might doubt the claim that a person’s commitments are really all necessarily equal, if that is supposed to mean equally important. One might suppose that some of a person’s commitments, such as to family or moral commitments, might consistently come before others, such as to their work. Yet it is in fact consistent with the equality of commitments in the intended sense that certain kinds of hierarchical ordering could exist between certain of a person’s commitments. I do not assume that such orderings do exist, and nor will I provide an account of how they might. But I can envisage that such a relation could include one or both of the following. First, commitment A could enjoy *priority in fixity* over commitment B. Suppose new specifications are required in some circumstances that arise, and equally coherent solutions are available in which: (a) the requirements of A are respecified and B’s remain as initially specified, and; (b) A’s requirements remain as initially specified and B’s are respecified. A enjoys priority in fixity over B if and only if whenever this is the case solution (b) is preferable. Second, commitment A may enjoy *priority in preservation* over commitment B. Suppose that circumstances arise that force a choice between equally coherent solutions in which: (c) A’s requirements are left unfulfilled while B’s continue to be fulfilled, and; (d) A’s requirements continue to be fulfilled and B’s are left unfulfilled. A enjoys priority in preservation over B if and only if whenever this is the case solution (d) is preferable. (Again, I discuss the issue of imperfect coherence below in §4.2.4.) Even if relations of this sort exist between a person’s commitments this does not alter their equal status in the sense intended here—as each being essential to the person’s life and well-being (and identity, if one takes up that view). The following continues to be the case. First, in the second scenario something essential to the person’s good is lost or neglected in alternative (d), its preferability to (c) notwithstanding. Second, their status as equally being needs also has the consequence that commitment B regulates a person’s responses to commitment A whenever (i) the requirements of B cannot be met under any acceptable specification so long as A’s requirements are met as initially specified *and* (ii) acceptable alternative specifications of A’s requirements are possible that do allow for B’s requirements to be fulfilled under an acceptable specification. This is to say that between the following courses of action, (f) is preferable: (e) A’s requirements continue to be fulfilled as initially specified and B’s requirements are left unfulfilled, and; (f) A’s requirements are respecified and B’s requirements are fulfilled under some acceptable specification. If this sort of liability to regulation remains, as it does among commitments on the

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<sup>563</sup> Wiggins, “Nature, Respect for Nature, and the Human Scale of Values”: 20-1. *Cf.* also Wiggins, “Deliberation and Practical Reason”, 237. McDowell employs similar rhetoric in his “Virtue and Reason”: 346.

<sup>564</sup> Dewey, “Human Nature and Conduct”, 150; Hurley, *Natural Reasons*, 36; Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, 189.

present account, it distinguishes these sorts of permitted hierarchical ordering sharply from hierarchical orderings in which differently specifying the goods involved is not contemplated. A person remains answerable to the joint requirement to meet *all* the requirements of *all* of their commitments whenever possible. Naturally, even if two commitments were hierarchically ordered in one or both of the ways discussed, each equally being needs also continues to distinguish them both as enjoying strict priority over non-needs.

#### 4.2.3 *Specification and necessity*

It might be wondered how a particular thing a person needs, as a personal need, can continue to be a need, if it is open to a person to respecify and so just as well do, be, or have something concretely different. How is this compatible with such personal needs' ostensible non-substitutability? Again this may well already be clear from the previous discussion. The answer is that often a person's personal needs are quite non-specific requirements entailed by their commitments—this indeed must be the case if respecification of such a personal need is possible. If this is so it can be possible, circumstances permitting, to arrive at new specifications that are really able to do just as well at serving the same requirement. If a person can do this, then, although alternative acceptable sets of concrete ends may differ in specifics, the person does not, if choosing correctly, “merely shift from one holistic equilibrium to another” (in Richardson's words). That coherence is built through specification means that the objective is to find a set of ends that “remains the same in essentials”.<sup>565</sup>

When a requirement of one of a person's commitments is not entirely specific in this way, what it is necessary for the person to do is thus *disjunctive*.<sup>566</sup> The person needs to do at least one of the things it is possible to do, here and now, to meet that requirement. Disjunctive necessity is familiar from instrumental cases. A person may need, instrumentally, to get from point A to point B. Multiple routes are possible. Thus it is unnecessary to take any given route considered singly. But it is not possible to get to point B unless one takes one of them. Even so, when it comes to a person's commitments and personal needs, as I pointed out the alternative possibilities are typically severely constrained by the combined effect of (a) what can truly count as a specification of any given need and (b) what specifications are compatible with other acceptable specifications of other needs. Not all possible specifications that are adequate to a given need taken in isolation may be adequate when the whole is considered. Thus the circumstances taken as a whole can often narrow the options sharply down to the point that, things being as they are, it really is necessary for a person to pursue some unique set of specifications of their needs.

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<sup>565</sup> Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, 171.

<sup>566</sup> On disjunctive necessity see Frankfurt, “On Caring”, 164.

#### 4.2.4 *Imperfect coherence*

Far from specification being excessively permissive, then, it will often be difficult to find *any* solution that meets both of those criteria. But it will be clear from the foregoing discussion that the account does not assume that full coherence is always possible. It does not at all rule out cases in which a person's personal needs are irremediably incompatible, and it is important to recognise these cases for what they are, which is unresolvable.<sup>567</sup>

Even so, however: the importance of that recognition can itself be seen as, at a higher level, deriving from consideration of coherence. The conclusion that no compatible concrete specifications of the needs in question are possible is generated by a recognition of the integrity of each of such commitments. Concretely unresolved outcomes can be the only ones consistent with that integrity.<sup>568</sup>

Further, even if a requirement cannot be met it may still regulate aspects of the course of action that goes ahead without it. This is something we might call 'salvage', retrieving what we can of what is lost or forgone, and coherence is diminished less to the extent to which this can be achieved. Compatibly with an otherwise coherent course of action proceeding, an unmet requirement may require doing *something*, which, while falling (potentially very far) short of being a specification of it, is intelligibly still for its sake. It might further some even more general or abstract point the requirement or commitment as a whole has or relates to; it could be a way of recognising its loss. This could involve trying to mitigate, make amends for, or honour it in some way—even though these responses cannot correct the requirement that has been violated, forsaken, neglected, and so on. This phenomenon is similar to, but more general than, the "moral residue" several philosophers argue is left behind by moral requirements that are overridden in pursuing the all-things-considered right thing to do—which on some accounts requires compunction, guilt, shame, or some other emotion.<sup>569</sup>

A last point on imperfect coherence. This account is somewhat less hostile to maximisation than coherentists such as Wiggins and Richardson. Since a person faces circumstances with a finite set of commitments that are on a par as discussed above (though possibly complicated by hierarchical relations as above in section 4.2.2), more coherence is achieved the greater the number of commitments is met. As a result, numbers matter, other things being equal. This makes possible in some cases reasoning that may outwardly *look* like the aggregation of well-being, and often deliver similar verdicts, but which is not, since it understands the situation differently, and

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<sup>567</sup> Cf. Hurley, *Natural Reasons*, 261; Richardson, *ibid.*, 179; Wiggins, "Four Proposals", 377-8; Millgram, *Ethics Done Right*, 297-8.

<sup>568</sup> Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, 179-82.

<sup>569</sup> *Inter alia*, Ross, *The Right and the Good*, 28; Bernard Williams, "Ethical Consistency," in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956 - 1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 168-86; Patricia S. Greenspan, "Moral Dilemmas and Guilt," *Philosophical Studies* 43 (1983): 117-25.



delivers different verdicts in different circumstances. One is not counting loci of teleologically given value. That is to say, which things are counted are not simply taken at some contextless face value, independent of contextual, coherentist specification. Also, because what is to be maximised is finite, there is an upper bound to demands to ‘increase value’. Or at least, on demands to increase non-trivial value; there may not be any such upper limit on the value of pure pleasure and other trivial goods. These points bear on the discussion of relevance in subsection 5.2.2 below.

## **5. Interpersonal practical coherence**

This section considers the difference an account of intrapersonal practical coherence with personal needs might make in interpersonal contexts. In truth, getting into a position to make contributions in such areas is the ultimate motivation for this project. It is premised on the conviction that deep and extensive revision of common conceptions of the structure of well-being and rational comparison is necessary to make good progress with these. Since this has required a focus primarily on the individual case, however, it has left space at the end, here, only for some sketches and speculative proposals. Still, it indicates a direction of travel for the account that has been developed, and I hope does enough to show that further development and application to the following issues and beyond might be fruitful. The topics I consider are public deliberation about policies and projects and the limits of aggregation in philosophical debates about the distribution of gains and losses across persons.

### **5.1 Personal needs and coherence in democratic deliberation**

The account of well-being and practical reason this project has developed promises to inform the evaluation of policies and projects in both theory and practice. It will already be clear that it illuminates resistance to cost-benefit analysis discussed in Chapter 1. It does this by bearing out the intelligibility of the proposal submitted there, to interpret protest responses to contingent valuation surveys as drawing on and even citing things protestors believed were needs of a sort for them. Its connections with attractive wider theoretical considerations I have since defended improve its plausibility as an interpretation—improving its ability to compete with the sceptical rational choice alternative. It thus contributes, at a theoretically fundamental level, to the case for constraining CBA in respect of precious goods. It is important for this case not to be overstated, however. The account does not rule out CBA’s providing useful information,<sup>570</sup> and leaves practitioners to decide its appropriate uses—informed, I hope, by accounts of the contextual nature of well-being evaluation, and by accounts such as mine of persons’ affected interests often being incommensurable and necessary. Alkire has found CBA useful for providing information about projects’ “efficiency” in respect of those outcomes it is possible and appropriate to

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<sup>570</sup> Ch. 1 end-§1.

assign prices; this information can be taken into account *alongside* other criteria that are not necessarily commensurable with the relevant numéraire.<sup>571</sup> That CBA has limits is thus not especially controversial, but the existence of personal needs helps to motivate and reinforce certain of them.

A more specific and distinctive consequence is that policies and projects that affect needs must be justified, if they can be, by reference to their own necessity—that is, the demands of other needs they aim to meet—not simply a promised increase in aggregate good defined in terms of preference satisfaction, or any other metric which makes no distinction between trivial and non-trivial benefits and costs.<sup>572</sup> It is still possible to proceed with policies and projects that conflict with the needs of some of those affected: on the account developed here, conflicts between needs do not necessarily lead to deadlock; that would be the case only if the instantiation of incommensurable goods within alternatives implied the latter's incomparability. Besides intrapersonal coherence, the account this project proposes recommends working towards *coherence across persons*—towards achieving or at least approaching a reconciliation of the different needs of different people at stake, rather than simply aggregating them as initially specified. Clearly, in practice this would require much public discussion, and so the existence of needs and the ideal of coherence together provide strong encouragement towards the theory and practice of democratic deliberation. But this project does not merely endorse that movement, which has already developed much momentum of its own. It also contributes in at least two ways that I discuss in what follows: a suggestion that personal needs can intelligibly and productively be cited in deliberative processes, and; an articulation of an ideal objective for democratic deliberation.

Although, as we have seen, personal needs do not in general provide suitable standards for interpersonal comparisons of well-being, they may nevertheless be relevant inputs into the interpersonal contexts of public deliberation. This indirect relevance is in a sense similar to my earlier suggestion that needs and capability constructs suitable for interpersonal comparisons might draw on generalisations about the personal needs members of the target group have. In both cases personal needs may provide resources for the *construction* of the criteria used to compare alternatives in interpersonal contexts. Here I suggest that the account of personal needs can build on positions in the theory of democratic deliberation about which inputs it is appropriate to bring to the table. Against Jürgen Habermas, who imposes no limits on which considerations participants can appeal to,<sup>573</sup> Rawls at one point argued that only those which other participants

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<sup>571</sup> Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, ch. 6.

<sup>572</sup> Cf. Wiggins, “Nature, Respect for Nature, and the Human Scale of Values”: 18.

<sup>573</sup> Habermas, “Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls’s *Political Liberalism*,” *Journal of Philosophy* 92 (1995): 109-31.

can accept are appropriate.<sup>574</sup> But Rawls later argued, and as Richardson elaborates in more detail, that besides advancing publicly acceptable considerations it can sometimes be appropriate and useful for participants in democratic deliberation to also cite their “comprehensive doctrines” or “ultimate ends” (respectively), concerns that are of central private importance but which others cannot be expected to share. (Religious values are a prime example.) The latter supplement, but do not replace, the publicly acceptable considerations, and their relevance to deliberation comes from their potential to explain and clarify the reasons participants adopt the positions they do.<sup>575</sup> In a related vein, Jane Mansbridge argues that the narrow self-interest of participants is relevant to deliberation, and therefore it can be appropriate for them to express personal desires and preferences.<sup>576</sup>

My proposal is that personal needs are more appropriate to cite than desires and preferences—unless those desires and preferences are not *mere* desires and preferences and assert rather orderings of circumstantial preferability with respect to their personal needs. Similar to Richardson’s reference to ultimate ends in particular, it is the objectivity of personal needs that makes them more appropriate to take seriously. Yet personal needs retain an advantage of the preference-citation idea in that they can be indefinitely fine-grained and subject-relative. Such considerations can be serious without needing to be especially grand, or elements of an especially comprehensive conception of the good life. Another advantage is that personal needs emphasise the place the interests have in people’s lives and the incommensurable *form* of their value. The latter aspect is indeed one part of their seriousness; citing personal needs can make explicit that proposals cannot be accepted by people if they recommend merely compensating them for their needs going unmet.

A related suggestion derives from personal need’s status as a well-being concept, and its relevance to constructing well-being concepts for other, interpersonal purposes. If I am right about its relevance, and also if personal needs are citable considerations in democratic deliberation, then an account of personal needs may help join up the theory of democratic deliberation and participatory approaches to developing well-being constructs for use in policy and project evaluation. This is only an idea, but one I think might be worth pursuing.

I said that personal needs may also contribute to an articulation of an ideal objective for democratic deliberation. The possibility of specification, and the accommodation between even

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<sup>574</sup> Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 140-8.

<sup>575</sup> Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 89; Richardson, *Democratic Autonomy: Public Reasoning about the Ends of Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 12, 82, 173.

<sup>576</sup> Jane Mansbridge, “Practice-Thought-Practice,” in *Deepening Democracy*, ed. Archon Fung and Wright Erik Olin (London: Verso, 2003), 176. The positions of Habermas, Rawls, Richardson, and Mansbridge described here are cited by David A. Crocker, *Ethics of Global Development: Agency, Capability, and Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 322-4, 336.

incommensurable ends it can enable, is central to this ideal. Specification is unsurprisingly already central to Richardson's account of democratic deliberation, since additional to "bare compromise"—that is, agreements to change means to agreed ends—specification enables "deep compromise", "a change in one's support of policies or implementing means that is accompanied and explained or supported by a change in one's ends that itself counts as a compromise".<sup>577</sup> The ideal I propose is also close to that expressed by Finnis, together with other authors in various places, of harmonious "integral human fulfilment", of all persons being compatibly, completely fulfilled. Alkire identifies this ideal with the objective of human development.<sup>578</sup> But a problem, I think, is that such rhetoric will sound highfalutin to the unconverted without explicit, rigorously motivated theoretical foundations. More determinacy can be given to the process of achieving harmony or integration if it can be explicitly described in terms of deep compromise, the building of coherence as per the previous section but only now across persons. Furthermore, a more determinate structure can be placed within such an ideal, and more determinate inputs to deep compromise also given, if fulfilment is cashed out as living up to commitments and the meeting of personal needs. The following paragraph explains.

This proposal is that the ideal social outcome from a given party's standpoint is one in which intrapersonal coherence expands outwards across persons. At least, it does so *so long as* the party's commitments in some at least minimal degree include requirements to aid, or at least not harm, the success of other people's lives. If that is the case, then the party's commitments and personal needs can be seen to lie within a broader network that connects those of all of those other persons. Depending on who else matters to the party, and in what way, this network may be more or less partial, and more or less integrated. If a party is committed only to some people, not humanity at large, their ideal outcome will embrace only that community. If a party's commitments to others require only non-interference or minimal provision, then even in their ideal outcome those other people may or may not live successful lives. The network will be broadest and most integrated if the party has commitments to all other people, and those commitments moreover entail requirements to fully enable those others to live successful lives.<sup>579</sup> In that case, their ideal social outcome is one in which coherence is scaled up to the point at which every person is able to meet all of their personal needs—where this has been made compatible with everyone else's being able to do the same. Needless to say, it will likely *never* be possible to bring about such an ideal state of universal harmony in any actual circumstances. Still, it provides a reference point

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<sup>577</sup> Richardson, *Democratic Autonomy*, 147.

<sup>578</sup> Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, 106-7, citing Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle, and John Finnis, "Practical Principles, Moral Truth and Ultimate Ends," *The American journal of jurisprudence*. 32 (1987): 131.

<sup>579</sup> Importantly, interpersonal coherence of this sort does not entail that people *themselves endorse* the contents of others' flourishing. It takes only that they accommodate it, whatever—within bounds set by the possibility of coherence with others' flourishing—it is.

for democratic deliberation, and, moreover, not only an ideal that is separate from practice, failing to provide guidance in the here and now: I speculate that such interpersonal coherence will often be achievable locally, where sufficient good will and resources are available, and it always makes sense to aspire to reach it.

The mutual accommodation this democratic-deliberative approach involves, and its use of needs and commitments as inputs, has relevance for distributional issues as discussed below in subsection 5.2.2.

## 5.2 Resistance to interpersonal aggregation in philosophy

For at least the last fifty years, a major topic in moral and political philosophy has been the limits of aggregation. Earlier on this concerned objections to utilitarianism,<sup>580</sup> later consequentialism,<sup>581</sup> and more recently aggregation as such, since—as seen in the previous chapter—considerations that are not naturally described as consequences can also be teleologically represented and aggregated. Unlike in the previous chapter, however, the focus in these debates has largely been on *interpersonal* aggregation, the distribution of losses and benefits across different people. Rather than the sort of focal question being whether an individual should risk their own life to alleviate a headache, it has been more whether the importance of alleviating a sufficient number of headaches can together outweigh preventing one other person's premature death. While some philosophers favour unconstrained aggregation, and so are willing to answer the latter question positively, many others believe that a correct moral theory will rule out such conclusions. A common aspiration is to assign a significant role for aggregation, but not so great that it leads to verdicts that seem intuitively wrong.<sup>582</sup> A classic diagnosis by those opposing unconstrained aggregation is that it is insensitive to the fact that the gains and losses are had by different people; in the slogan, it “ignores the separateness of persons”.<sup>583</sup> Moreover, this diagnosis seems to be that this is *the* essential problem with aggregating theories, that such accounts illegitimately “extend to society the principle of choice for one [person]”.<sup>584</sup> The dominant style of non-aggregationist response since, as a result, has been to formulate new interpersonal principles of choice that do better on that score, in particular ones taking account of fairness, persons' separateness ostensibly entailing their meriting equal treatment. However, while procedural fairness is certainly extremely important, there is room to doubt whether the strategy of finding new interpersonal

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<sup>580</sup> E.g., Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 24.

<sup>581</sup> E.g., Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Foot, “Utilitarianism and the Virtues”.

<sup>582</sup> E.g., Michael Otsuka, “Saving Lives, Moral Theory, and the Claims of Individuals,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 34 (2006): 109-35; Alex Voorhoeve, “How Should We Aggregate Competing Claims?,” *Ethics* 125 (2014): 64-87.

<sup>583</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 24. Also early on: David Gauthier, *Practical Reasoning: The Structure and Foundations of Prudential and Moral Arguments and Their Exemplification in Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 126; Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, 138; Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 32-3.

<sup>584</sup> Rawls, *loc. cit.*

procedures can really get to the heart of the issue. For one thing, the fairness of a procedure *per se*, treating people equally, does not rule out aggregation, even possibly problematic aggregation—so long as, for example, people have equal chances of sustaining the harm—as in an equal lottery in which ‘winners’ have their organs harvested—or if they are to take turns in sustaining it. Moreover, as virtually all participants to these debates agree, even if aggregation looks problematic in some cases, at the same time it seems reasonable and necessary in others. For example, when there is a choice to be made whether to prevent one person from harm or five others from each suffering the exact same harm, to many it seems right to prevent harm to the five. When, rather than a headache, the many will suffer something as serious as paraplegia, it may seem right here also to save them rather than prevent the single premature death.<sup>585</sup>

Whether interpersonal aggregation is acceptable seems not always to turn on whether different people are treated equally, nor simply on the sizes (in some generic terms) of the aggregate gains and losses at stake but, crucially, on the *kinds* of benefits and harms they are. That one aggregates across persons does not *in itself* seem essentially problematic; more important in determining whether aggregation is appropriate or not in the circumstances, it seems, are the characters of the interests at stake—which ones are *apt* to be aggregated and which ones are not. It seems promising, therefore, to focus efforts on working out which differences make which differences here. This is where my account may make a contribution, with its distinctive proposal to locate fundamentally qualitative differences in the intrapersonal structure of well-being. It lends some general support to, but also reorients, certain approaches to aggregation that move in the direction of relying heavily on qualitative differences between goods and bads. I discuss two kinds of account taking this attitude. One is where the interpersonal application of strong superiority is defended; that is, the view that certain interests people have are such that preserving them is more important than any number of gains or prevented losses of a lesser kind to other people.

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<sup>585</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 239; Otsuka, “Saving Lives, Moral Theory, and the Claims of Individuals”: 128. For an author denying that it is better to prevent even the *same harm* befalling the many than the few is John M. Taurek. See his “Should the Numbers Count?,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6 (1977): 293-316.

The other is the idea that only gains and losses that are “relevant” to each other can be aggregated, which is enjoying increasing prominence.<sup>586</sup>

### 5.2.1 *Motivating and defending interpersonal strong superiority*

Positing the strong superiority of goods of a certain kind over others of different kinds, locating there at least one fundamental qualitative difference between benefits and harms, is not a popular type of position. Aside from concerns about the intrapersonal context discussed in the previous chapter, it is thought to face special difficulties in the interpersonal context. Its usefulness may be very limited: it may be able to explain the inappropriateness of aggregating headaches against lives, but it is silent on the extent to which aggregation within the ostensibly higher category is appropriate (a limitation encountered in earlier chapters), and it may be excessively rigid. An attraction of instead relying on a notion such as relevance, discussed in the following subsection, is that it promises to enable a more general, unified, and flexible explanation of the limits of aggregation. Nevertheless, my view is that, while existing proposals are inadequate, the strong superiority approach is on the right track; identifying qualitatively different goods in the intrapersonal structure of well-being is the way forward. I show how personal needs, combined with coherentist practical reason, promise to enable interpersonal strong superiority to better resist criticism than existing proposals. I illustrate this, by way of contrast, with a discussion of Dorsey’s account of strong superiority and a recent objection to it posed by Julius Schönherr.

As I alluded in the previous chapter (§2.3), Dorsey has defended a position that “deliberative projects” are intrapersonally strongly superior to “hedonic goods”. Deliberative projects are “those projects, plans, goals and achievements” that are large-scale, organising features of people’s lives—where, moreover, fulfilling them is “genuinely endorsed”, meaning endorsed in “sound mind” and with all relevant information.<sup>587</sup> Dorsey argues that if a person genuinely endorses playing trombone, for example, that thus qualifying as a deliberative project for them,

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<sup>586</sup> There is another important response that shares the merit of introducing qualitative differences, but which I will not discuss. This is the argument of Robert Nozick, an early exponent of the separateness of persons critique, that aggregation is constrained by certain rights people have, where aggregate benefits can never outweigh a single rights-violation. (Except, perhaps, in cases of “moral horror”, see his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 29-30n.) To some extent the earlier proposals of this project, together with those discussed below, cover the ideas rights proposals in general combine. They involve interpersonal strict priority, which is not unique to the concept of rights. Moreover, I argued in Ch. 1 §2.5 that more interesting and fundamental than rights is the status of the interests they protect—why those interests and not others? Nozick has his own, controversial reasons (based in natural law). But interestingly there is another movement that considers needs to be a ground for human rights. See *inter alia* Massimo Renzo, “Human Needs, Human Rights,” in *Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights*, ed. Rowan Cruft, S. Matthew Liao, and Massimo Renzo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 570-587; Nicole Hassoun, “Human Rights and the Minimally Good Life,” *Res Philosophica* 90 (2013): 413-38; David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Gasper, “Conceptualising Human Needs and Wellbeing”, 52; Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). The general idea seems moderately plausible, and there may be potential for this project’s account to support it—primarily via a vindication of the bare idea of needs in the face of considerable scepticism—but I will not explore it here either.

<sup>587</sup> Dorsey, “Headaches, Lives and Value”: 41-4.

then it is better for them to play trombone while having any amount of headaches than to forgo it but have their headaches relieved. This is supposed simply to be ensured by their genuine endorsement of the project: Dorsey argues that people evaluate their lives primarily by their success in their deliberative projects, and so to have the headaches relieved at such a cost “would lead to a life [they] value living *less*”.<sup>588</sup> I actually think this is inadequate already as an intrapersonal account, but I will focus here on its adequacy when carried over, as Dorsey advocates, to the interpersonal case: there is no number of other people’s headaches it is better to relieve than preserving a person’s fulfilment of one of their deliberative projects.<sup>589,590</sup> Note that positions like Dorsey’s entail the ‘lives over headaches’ verdict—dead people cannot pursue deliberative projects—, but clearly they make a considerably stronger claim.

As Schönherr acknowledges, one reason these projects—he calls them life projects—seem apt for backing up a strong superiority relation is that they are *discrete*. This is unlike, say, quantities of life, which are indefinitely gradable.<sup>591</sup> Dorsey also does well to emphasise the *effects* of harms that are not themselves losses of a strongly superior good, but which can prevent such a good being attained or maintained: it can be as important to relieve one person’s headache as to protect some other person’s success in their deliberative project, if in fact relieving the first person’s headache is necessary for them to achieve one of *their* deliberative projects.<sup>592</sup> The question is thus whether sufficiently *mild* headaches can in sufficient number be as bad as one person’s being prevented from pursuing a deliberative project. However, despite the discreteness of deliberative projects and hedonic goods/bads as categories, Schönherr points to how particular instances of them can differ in value. Discreteness appears in a coarse grained contrast between life projects and purely hedonic goods: but surely their value is sensitive to fine differences in concrete examples of those types. Schönherr’s objection is this: if it is something’s interfering with a life project that makes all the difference whether any number of other things can be better than it, then “strong inferiority should also hold between the *worst* non-life project interfering state and the *most benign* life project interfering state”. But at this level, Schönherr argues, strong

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<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*: 44, 46, original emphasis.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*: 46-7. Dorsey has since explicitly disowned this view in favour of a more complicated position. See his “First Steps in an Axiology of Goals,” *International Journal of Wellbeing* 1 (2011): 167-85. However, I think that position has very serious problems, and that his earlier view is closer to being right.

<sup>590</sup> Importantly, in such a moral context it could often be better to instead consider people’s *capabilities* to have their headaches relieved vis-à-vis other people’s *capabilities* to pursue their deliberative projects. But I leave that issue aside.

<sup>591</sup> Schönherr, “Still Lives for Headaches: A Reply to Dorsey and Voorhoeve,” *Utilitas* 30 (2018): 212. One might object to Schönherr’s terminology: ‘discrete’ is a quantitative notion, which might beg the question against the opponent who wants to claim rather that the differences between the items are essentially qualitative. In my view, conceding that the differences are (non-trivially) assessable in terms of differences of quantity makes defeat inevitable.

<sup>592</sup> Dorsey, “Headaches, Lives and Value”: 46-7.



superiority “just looks much less plausible”.<sup>593</sup> He seeks to depict such a comparison in an imagined case, which in essence invites us to consider which of the following options is worse:

- (a) Someone’s being harmed in the smallest way that is *just* enough to disrupt one of their life projects, such that they instead have to do something else *very nearly as good* but not quite.
- (b) Harming every other person in *as bad a possible way* that *stops just short* of interfering with any of their life projects.

In Schönherr’s presentation, the person’s—Bob’s—life project is playing the trombone. If option (a) is chosen, Bob is prevented from pursuing it, because whenever he goes to play a trombone he suffers sufficiently intense headaches. Bob therefore has to settle for his “second favourite choice”, which is playing the flute. The harm inflicted on the people in (b) is each having bad headaches that are almost but not quite sufficient for them to not be able to pursue their projects. Schönherr argues that Dorsey’s attempt to ground strong superiority in a difference between deliberative projects and non-project goods fails because “[n]ot much seems to be lost if Bob doesn’t get his favourite choice”.<sup>594</sup>

We see here that the key vulnerability of Dorsey’s proposal is precisely that, for all he says, such a person does not appear to need to be pursuing that project in particular. The issue is concealed in the intrapersonal case, because Dorsey effectively tells us that a person simply does not contemplate forgoing their deliberative projects. But when it is necessary to do so in Schönherr’s interpersonal case, option (a) does not look too bad, because there does not seem to be any reason in principle why another project could not do nearly as well. Option (b) also looks worse, as I see it, in the absence of a more compelling account than Dorsey’s of why people’s lives should be evaluated primarily by their success in their deliberative projects.

Deliberative projects are inadequate in these ways, I suggest, because they fall short in seriousness and in structure, and these are two things commitments and personal needs are able to supply. We do better if we shift from deliberative projects to allowing that a person’s playing the trombone may be a personal need for them—and, if it is, that *that* is why it is strongly superior to the things in their lives that are not required by their commitments. How does such a shift help? As I will show, it means that a situation like (a) *may* or *may not* be as benign or, as bad, as it may seem—depending crucially on how the case is elaborated. For this new proposal’s purposes it is currently under-described. In particular we need to know in any given case how and why the project matters to the person. That is one thing. If the personal needs and commitments account is applied, and given Schönherr’s description, (b) will also be seen to be less bad than it might otherwise seem.

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<sup>593</sup> Schönherr, “Still Lives for Headaches”: 213, original emphasis.

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*

Schönherr finds it implausible that not being able to pursue a deliberative project is so bad, apparently because he does not envisage people being committed as such to any particular projects, but only as seeking what they most prefer—I assume this is what “favourite” means. Dorsey does not do enough to counter such an interpretation, because “genuinely endorse” will sound to many just like ‘really, really want’. We can also allow Schönherr that people often do compare many of their activities, for some even large-scale ones such as careers, in terms of, say, pleasurableness—again, “favourite” does not connote serious commitment, more like what a person finds most enjoyable. When this is the case, it is not with a heavy heart that people settle, when they have to, for the ‘next best’ thing. Applying now the commitments and personal needs account, however, enables us to dispel any notion that Schönherr’s interpretation is mandatory, and to see that the case as described does not distinguish between three other possible scenarios.

First, it may well be that playing the flute instead is not too bad—but not for the reason Schönherr thinks. This is because, as we have seen, depending on the nature and structure of their commitments there is often some flexibility in which specific ends a person needs to pursue in order to be living up to them. Not playing trombone will not necessarily fail to live up to the commitment in question, because playing trombone may be how Bob presently fulfils a more general commitment to music. Playing flute instead may be a perfectly fine alternative specification, in a way that having a life’s supply of any and all of his favourite foods could not. Therefore, that changing instrument *may* not be too bad is insufficient to disprove the commitment at issue being strongly superior to other kinds of consideration. As we have also seen, nevertheless, the local acceptability of playing flute does not guarantee its acceptability all things considered: it depends on whether the costs of changing instrument ramify to undermine Bob’s other commitments.

While the first scenario is one possibility, the commitments and personal needs account makes a second possibility also plausible: it may be that Bob is truly committed to the trombone in particular. Perhaps he descends from a long line of trombone players, and he is committed to maintaining that legacy. Whether he instead played flute, tuba, trumpet, or cornet, in this case all would simply fail to do that. Another person might be committed to saxophone, and saxophone in particular, because its distinctive moan, timbre, and dynamic possibilities uniquely enables her to express herself, and the experience of doing so affects her profoundly like nothing else. *If* these commitments to specific instruments are commitments, there is nothing that is ‘almost as good’ as them; the value of a commitment is truly discrete. The strong superiority of commitments (and the things necessary for them) over non-commitments (and things that do not prevent people from living up to their commitments) owes to the fact that these things are necessary for the good of their lives; their lives will be incomplete in essentials without them. This possibility is obscured by the fact that for many people playing music is more of a hobby than a com-

mitment. I do not know how common a commitment to a particular instrument is—the first and third scenarios I consider may be more likely—, but it is intelligible enough.

The possibility of strongly superior aspects of lives is also obscured by the focus here on individualistic project-adoption. Dorsey and Schönherr's discussion leaves out family, relationships, duties, roles, and so on, all aspects of life that as I argued commonly make inescapable demands on persons. The sense critics have that things like deliberative projects lack necessity is unsurprising when the focal cases selected are more commonly hobbies, or valued because they are enjoyable. On the other hand, that such commitments are left out is itself unsurprising given the relatively shallow condition of genuine endorsement that Dorsey conceives as bestowing value on major aspects of life.<sup>595</sup> If Dorsey wants to defend strong superiority<sup>596</sup> he needs greater fixity, something like personal needs; but to have that he would need to make his subjectivism more sophisticated (see Ch. 4). Actual, genuine endorsement is neither necessary nor sufficient for an aspect of a person's life to be something they cannot do without.

Indeed, it is a virtue of the commitments and personal needs account that it does not treat all things that might count as deliberative projects in Dorsey's sense as equally serious. The third possible scenario compatible with the description of (a) is just that playing the trombone is a genuinely endorsed long-standing pursuit, but it is really only a hobby, not a commitment. If this is the case then Schönherr is right that Bob could take up the next most enjoyable pastime and that that could be almost as good. It would not even be so bad if he were somehow prevented from having any hobby. Again, this does not undermine the strong superiority of things that *are* commitments.

Option (b) is not so bad on the commitments and personal needs view, because the people there each have everything essential for a good life. As described in the case the headaches are not so bad as to prevent their having that. But more than this, consider just how mild the headaches would have to be if they were not to seriously undermine their doing as they need. As I argued in the previous chapter (§2.3), relief from pain, whether severe and mild, is crucial if it is not to sabotage people's ability to live up to all of their commitments. This proposal is not intended to be revisionary of how extensive pain relief ought to be, but asserts that pain relief as actually provided *is* justified, and largely so by need.

It is by now a familiar point in this project that an account proposing strong superiority will be insufficient on its own. While here it may promise to account for the inappropriateness of aggregating headaches as against lives, it says nothing about the proper limits of aggregation within the category of the higher goods it identifies. What can we say about a case of one per-

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<sup>595</sup> Dorsey does at one point include relationships in a list of potential global features of a person's life, but I suspect he does not think of these as features that are especially binding on a person's endorsement.

<sup>596</sup> In fact he no longer does, see his "First Steps in an Axiology of Goals".

son's commitment to the trombone versus five people's commitments to careers as engineers? Neither does positing strong superiority distinguish between losses that intuitively seem differently important and yet comparably serious—like death and paraplegia as above. For these reasons, we need to take a more general view, which I attempt in the following section's discussion of relevance.

### 5.2.2 *Reassessing relevance*

Here I discuss another recent approach, which proposes an integrated explanation of why some harms aggregate and others do not, and which might appear more flexible than drawing a bright line between two categories of value. This is to employ the notion of “relevance”, which unlike proposals such as Dorsey's, and mine, does not identify thresholds of importance within the inherent structure of individual well-being. Thresholds of relevance are characterised rather as marking contextual qualitative differences of “moral seriousness”.<sup>597</sup> I focus on Alex Voorhoeve's Aggregate Relevant Claims (ARC), which I think it is fair to say is the most developed account to employ relevance. Although I support the thrust of Voorhoeve's account, I argue that it could nevertheless still be elements in the structure of people's well-being—the existence of personal needs and commitments—that provide the ultimate basis for thresholds of relevance. This would be deeper and more concrete than the motivation Voorhoeve supplies, and may also affect the advice an ARC-type account would give in many contexts.

Voorhoeve summarises ARC as follows:

1. Each individual whose well-being is at stake has a claim on you to be helped. (An individual for whom nothing is at stake does not have a claim.)
2. Individual's claims *compete* just in case they cannot be jointly satisfied.
3. An individual's claim is *stronger*:
  - a) the more her well-being would be increased by being aided;
  - and
  - b) the lower the level of well-being from which this increase would take place.
4. A claim is *relevant* if and only if it is sufficiently strong relative to the strongest competing claim.
5. You should choose an alternative that satisfies the greatest sum of strength-weighted, relevant claims.<sup>598</sup>

Let us break it down. The salience of elements 1 and 2 above is obvious. Element 3 is similar to prioritarianism, the view that is like consequentialism but diverges by placing more weight on gains to people the worse off they are in absolute terms. The respect in which prioritarianism remains like consequentialism is that it prescribes choosing the alternative with the highest total weighted gain. ARC similarly adjusts all gains, but with element 4 above diverges from prioritari-

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<sup>597</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 238.

<sup>598</sup> Voorhoeve, “How Should We Aggregate Competing Claims?”: 66. Voorhoeve's emphases.

anism by not counting all adjusted gains in alternatives. Only weighted gains *individually considered* that are *close enough* in magnitude to other *individually considered* weighted gains are counted. ARC remains similar to consequentialism in respect of element 5, nevertheless, in that it aggregates this relevant subset of weighted gains in each alternative to determine which alternative it is best to choose.

Some examples will illustrate the difference this makes. Prioritarianism allows relieving headaches to outweigh curing paraplegia so long as enough headaches are cured. This is despite the very great additional weight it places on the enormous benefit of curing each case of paraplegia, and the minimal weight it places on the small benefit of curing a given individual's headache. This is a simple consequence of unconstrained aggregation, any weighting notwithstanding. On ARC, by contrast, an individual's gain has to be very large and/or from a very small base in order even to be counted alongside benefits of the individual seriousness of curing paraplegia. Gains are counted together only when, compared one-on-one, they are comparably serious, "relevant". For example, even if death is worse than paraplegia, paraplegia is bad enough that it can be better to cure enough cases of it than prevent a smaller number of deaths. This comparable seriousness is a qualitative difference between goods; there is a threshold between them and other individuals' potential but irrelevant gains. This threshold is not absolute and context-independent, however. Rather, it is contextually determined by the closeness in magnitude of the gains and losses circumstantially at stake.

Before I can show how personal needs may inform the way thresholds of relevance are determined, we need to look at the way Voorhoeve motivates them. A first part of this motivation is his understanding of the ultimate motivation of the non-aggregative approach to distributive justice, which is sympathetic identification with people as individuals, rather than as members of groups. Rather than comparing the aggregated gains and losses of alternatives, on this approach one enters the perspectives of the individuals concerned one by one. One compares their individual claims, and in the purest form of this approach favours the alternative that satisfies those with the very strongest claim.<sup>599</sup> "Its justification", Voorhoeve writes, "is that this form of concern for each person taken alone is a natural expression of our appreciation of the separateness of persons".<sup>600</sup>

A second part of the way Voorhoeve motivates relevance is to highlight individuals' morally permissible partial concern. He cites the common-sense judgement that it is morally permissible for a person to save themselves instead of another person from the same serious harm. This can be permitted even given the choice between a less serious harm to oneself, such as disablement,

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<sup>599</sup> Voorhoeve, "Why One Should Count Only Claims with Which One Can Sympathize," *Public Health Ethics* 10 (2017): 150. He cites there Thomas Nagel, "Equality," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 116f.

<sup>600</sup> Voorhoeve, "How Should We Aggregate Competing Claims?": 69.

and a more serious harm to the other, such as death. At the same time, another common-sense judgement is that if one has the following two options one should choose the latter: (a) avoiding harm to oneself and allowing a serious harm, such as death, to befall another person; (b) preventing the harm to the other person but in the process suffering a minor harm oneself.<sup>601</sup>

Putting these two parts together, when comparing individuals' claims one on one, we can sympathetically identify with their claims to prioritise, within legitimate bounds, their own interests. We thus depart a little from the pure non-aggregative procedure. When we go to compare claims as the non-aggregative approach prescribes, then, we now no longer sympathise only with the very worst off person; we also sympathise with any person who could permissibly put their own benefit or protection from harm ahead of the worst-off person: "If one were to place oneself in his position, taking on his maximally permissible degree of self-concern, one would also want to press one's claim".<sup>602</sup> It is important to note, however, that this sympathy is moralised; it is not contingent on the extent of any actual person's sympathy, but refers rather to the morally appropriate way one should feel towards the person's claims. One does not appropriately sympathise with any individual's claims to prioritise their interests that overstep the bounds of morally permissible partiality.<sup>603</sup> The range of claims one can appropriately sympathise with in this way is the range of claims that are relevant. With this feature ARC is able to motivate taking account of, and aggregating, a wider range of claims than the pure non-aggregating approach, yet without thereby moving "too far" from it or abandoning its essential point.<sup>604</sup>

Relevance thus tracks the limits of appropriate sympathy, which in turn track the limits of permissible partial concern. But what does permissible partial concern track? In presenting ARC Voorhoeve explicitly abstains from offering an account of permissible partiality; he "simply assum[es] that, up to a limit, one is indeed morally permitted to be more concerned for oneself than for a stranger and to act on this pattern of concern when no other moral considerations (such as rights or special ties) stand in the way".<sup>605</sup> His appeal to the bounds of appropriate sympathy and permissible partiality

is not intended to justify the non-aggregative approach. Rather, assuming the merits of the non-aggregative approach, it is used to explain why some failures to satisfy the strongest claim would be especially morally problematic on this approach, and are therefore to be avoided by a view that accords the non-aggregative approach some respect.<sup>606</sup>

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<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*: 71.

<sup>602</sup> Voorhoeve, "Why One Should Count Only Claims with Which One Can Sympathize": 151.

<sup>603</sup> Voorhoeve, "How Should We Aggregate Competing Claims?": 73. Voorhoeve says that in this respect he draws on Adam Smith's account of sympathetic identification, citing Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), II.II.II, I.I.III-IV.

<sup>604</sup> Voorhoeve, "How Should We Aggregate Competing Claims?": 70.

<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*: 71.

<sup>606</sup> Voorhoeve, "Why One Should Count Only Claims with Which One Can Sympathize": 152n (155).

Thus Voorhoeve's aim is only to rationalise the sorts of common-sense judgements above, as in deaths vs. headaches and deaths vs. quadriplegia, "explaining [them] as the consequence of a reasonable sensitivity to the competing demands of" the non-aggregation and aggregation approaches.<sup>607</sup> The strong intuitive appeal of each means that we require a way of reconciling them, and Voorhoeve's account proposes a way this is possible. Now, this is fine as far as it goes, and there may be no practical need for anything more: a reflective equilibrium is achieved, wherein one's principles match one's considered case judgements.<sup>608</sup> However, I do think we can dig a little deeper than this, and that doing so may be fruitful. In doing so we may be able to confirm, and reinforce, although sometimes also revise, some people's intuitive case judgements. The following proposal is sketchy and speculative, and could benefit greatly from a more extensive and critical treatment than I can give here, but I hope it is interesting enough to merit further exploration.

Part of the intuitive appeal of non-aggregating approaches, hazily perceived or otherwise, I think, is that there are *certain things* that are specially significant to particular people. Some things Voorhoeve himself says hint at this. In cases of permissible partiality, he writes that "from [a person] P's permissible personal point of view, P's own claim takes on *special significance*"; he refers to attaining, in sympathetic identification, "a vivid sense of *what is at stake* for each person taken separately".<sup>609</sup> But how could what is at stake for a person be so important to them? It cannot *just* be because it is their own claim, because that would not distinguish the claim from one that is impermissibly partial, such as refusing to take on a small cost to avert a major harm to another person. So it can only be *some* of the things that are the person's that are specially significant and which may justifiably receive partial treatment. One way of defining these would be to say that they are benefits or losses that are especially *large*, and defining relevance, as Voorhoeve does, in terms of "closeness". Yet I believe this cannot do. The placing of a threshold on a scale, if it is not to be arbitrary, will not explain the limit it is supposed to describe—it simply pushes the question back a step. Admittedly, Voorhoeve can reiterate that he is not in the business of providing this kind of explanation. Yet, again, it could be helpful if we did have an account of what makes the relevant thresholds non-arbitrary. A different approach to defining the range of things that are especially significant to a person does not turn immediately to quantifying them but gives an account of qualitative conditions for them counting as such. Accounts exist that do explain the limits of partial concern and these are indeed spelt out in terms of the special characters of certain objects, specifically in terms of people's commitments, to personal projects and

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<sup>607</sup> *Ibid.*: 152.

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.*; cf. Otsuka, "Saving Lives, Moral Theory, and the Claims of Individuals": 134-5.

<sup>609</sup> Voorhoeve, "Why One Should Count Only Claims with Which One Can Sympathize": 151, 154. My emphases.

specific other persons.<sup>610</sup> Losses violating people's commitments would count as relevant on this dominant way of construing permissible partiality, and it would be because certain losses did not do so that they would not count as relevant. Following this idea, perhaps we can tighten the notion of closeness by letting go of its merely quantitative specification.

That goods and bads integral to people's commitments do not aggregate with those that are not would mean that relevant benefits and losses can be described as incommensurable with non-relevant benefits and losses. So I am with Richardson, who cites ARC approvingly, but seems somewhat surprised that Voorhoeve "lays no stress on the incommensurability of different goods". I also agree in suspecting that

An argument from the pervasive deliberative incommensurability of goods such as [Richardson offers], however, could serve as a basis for insulating Voorhoeve's position from attacks by those who assume that the default position that needs to be defeated is that what we should be doing is maximizing aggregate goodness.<sup>611</sup>

Thus a sufficiently fine-grained and flexible account of incommensurable goods may complement views such as ARC, and promise to supply deeper rationales for thresholds of relevance. And the account of personal needs and commitments may be able to do that.<sup>612</sup>

In fact Voorhoeve makes further oblique references that point in the direction of need. He writes often of people as having "good lives" without qualification and of "full, good lives".<sup>613</sup> But if the structure of well-being were simply scalar, with a single dimension, there would be no room for an unqualifiedly good life. A life could only be good to different degrees, and not full unless there were an upper bound to the scale. But presumably in such a conception applied here there would not be such an upper bound; presumably the person who has a good life despite sustaining a minor injury (in the course of saving another person's life) would have had a better life if they had not been injured. It is possible to make room for both the notion of a full life *and* for further improvements if qualitative distinctions in goods are drawn and there are at least two dimensions: one or more dimensions can have (an) upper bound(s) and be the prime standard(s) of the goodness of a life; (an)other dimensions may allow for indefinite improvements even if the person's life is full in respect of (the) other dimension(s). Prime dimensions would be all those that are *essential* to having a full life, here living up to one's commitments. Given this articulation of the notion of "full life", if one saves a person from death but as a result is bed-ridden for a day, the reason this will not typically prevent one from having a full, unqualifiedly good life

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<sup>610</sup> Troy Jollimore, "Impartiality," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2018 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, forthcoming, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/impartiality/>, §6.1.

<sup>611</sup> Richardson, *Articulating the Moral Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 53, 53n.

<sup>612</sup> Whereas applying *basic* needs might entail the implausibilities of what Voorhoeve calls the "threshold view" ("How Should We Aggregate Competing Claims?": 67-8n), using the flexible notion of non-basic needs does not.

<sup>613</sup> *Inter alia* *ibid.*: 68, 81-2, 86.



is that it does not prevent one from doing what one needs to do in life, which is live up to the requirements of one's commitments.

Yet so far this proposal to align relevance with necessity does not go much beyond strong superiority; we do not yet have a way of differentiating between things that are necessary for or deleterious to persons' commitments. For we would expect some of these to be better and worse than others; preserving the attraction of relevance would surely require narrowing these down to focus on, and aggregate, only a worst subset of these (analogous to them being within some quantitatively defined band of sufficient closeness). Even if they all may bear on people's commitments, death, quadriplegia, paraplegia, and losing an arm seem differently serious. Importantly, however, we must not take them at face value. In comparing these harms we cannot simply assign them values on a scale of badness and trade them off at those ratios when sufficiently close to each other on the scale. It is a platitude that their badness is not inherent, but stems from the particular things they prevent people from doing—in particular, on my account, living up to their commitments. So disabilities can affect people differently in this respect. We also have to give up any assumption that having a disability necessarily prevents a person from living a full life. Consider a committed flautist whose life almost entirely revolves around the flute, who does not have any physically demanding (*e.g.*, sport-related) commitments, and whose external environment is well set up to cater for people with limited mobility. Besides a difficult period of practical adjustment, if this person becomes paraplegic they can nevertheless have as good a life in essentials as before. Things will be different for an equally committed dancer, an essential part of whose life would be wrecked by paraplegia. On the other hand, however, and depending on which kind(s) of dance they are committed to, crippled hands will be far less bad for the dancer than for the flautist. *If* an essential part of the flautist's life is as wrecked by their crippled hands as the dancer's is by paraplegia, then it may be better to prevent even just two committed flautists' crippled hands than to prevent one such dancer's paraplegia. At the same time, allowing the death of a single young adult would be worse than allowing any number of such flautists to become paraplegic. If the circumstances are right, then, crippled hands may be relevant to paraplegia, and paraplegia irrelevant to death, determined not by the proximity of the values assigned to the harms on a numerical scale of badness, but by the particular activities and achievements they inhibit.

There are some major caveats to this idea, so simplified the above examples are. The examples are deliberately isolated from (i) the ramification of the disabilities affecting other commitments, (ii) which possibilities for respecifying commitments exist, and (iii) the practicalities of measurement. What could the proposal recommend if these are introduced? Even in an idealised context ignoring practicalities in (iii), (i) and (ii) are extremely salient. Yet the problem of working out which losses are relevant after introducing them is still not determined by quantitative close-

ness, but rather by whether they irrevocably prevent persons from having full lives. Given the possibility of ramifications across people's whole lives, and opportunities for people's commitments to be differently specified, it would have to be worked out by way of a complex process of seeking interpersonal coherence as in section 5.1 above. After this process, resources would be allocated to allow the greatest number of people to have full lives.

One might wonder how it could be acceptable for the process to aggregate here, given my account's unfriendliness to reducing benefits and harms to numerical quantities. The reason is that for the person or party whose interests are structured by commitments and personal needs, their concern for others is non-teleological. As per section 4.2.4 above, numbers matter, but not because they are responding to the potential for context-independent value to be realised in states of affairs (the teleological picture), rather because the best thing for them to do is to preserve the greatest coherence of their living up to their own commitments—including their commitments to other persons. Moreover, if a decision-making person or party's concern for others takes an egalitarian shape, their concern for each person is equal, similar to ARC, albeit differently motivated. So the aggregation is not problematic. We will not be trying to count some value that is distributed across persons, such as the number of needs or commitments persons *as a whole* are able to fulfil or that are interrupted. We will be counting full lives, people's abilities to live up to their commitments as separate wholes. This is so even as we need to look at the internal structure of people's lives in order to work that out.

Introducing (iii), in the context of measurement and policy, in some ways complicates, in others simplifies, matters. Case workers in social, especially therapeutic, care may be able to look behind the impairments to the commitments they impact, but large-scale decisions, as in budget allocation, will not be able to do so. In such contexts, quantitative measures would indeed need to be constructed, not to measure the different disvalues of different conditions per se, but representing generalisations about patients' abilities to adjust to them—of the *typical* potential for them to regain coherence in their lives. In comparing numbers in this context, the necessary data would be how commonly people in a certain population with a certain disability are able to live full lives in the sense defined above in terms of commitments.

Much, much more could be said about the proposal I have just presented. The discussion fails to pursue many avenues necessary to establish it as a proper contender. For one thing, fuller engagement with positions such as Voorhoeve's is necessary. A particular question may be what role permissible partial concern has in it, if any. As I have painted ARC the latter seems ultimately heuristic, tracking especially salient interests. My proposal makes direct appeal to salient interests. But should it?<sup>614</sup> The notion in the proposal that it is completely full lives that should

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<sup>614</sup> There could be room for applying to interpersonal cases the notions of priority in fixity and in preservation I set out above in §4.2.2.

be counted might need to be finessed. Perhaps there should be a role for what I earlier called salvage, when coherence is imperfect: a life that is not full but in which significant salvage is possible may be better than a life that is not full and in which no salvage is possible. But I leave off here.

## **6. Conclusion: towards coherentist, needs-oriented accounts of individual and interpersonal choice**

The main purpose of this chapter has been to present an account of intrapersonal practical reason capable of accommodating the incommensurability of commitments and personal needs. Objections to proposed incommensurabilities commonly focus on its problematic consequences for rational choice, so it was necessary for the explanatory ambitions of the broader account of personal needs that it is able to answer them. For the answer to be convincing the proposed mode of practical reason had to be discursive, lest it fail to explain much at all. It also needed to be non-algorithmic, lest it fail to accommodate personal needs after all. On the account I have defended, the choiceworthiness of alternatives depends on their coherence, in the specialised sense of the demands of all of the person's commitments being met to the greatest compatible extent. I demonstrated the most powerful way in which this is achieved, which is through finding alternative concrete specifications of those requirements of commitments that are relatively generally defined. Evaluating alternatives holistically, coherence can be improved by finding a total set of compatible specifications.

The chapter also outlined ways in which the account of intrapersonal practical coherence might be extended to contexts of interpersonal choice. These suggestions are inadequately developed, mere sketches, but they are intended more as proof of concept than rigorously established proposals. Their purpose has been to exhibit the broader framework's potential fruitfulness, additional to its various interpersonal implications noted in earlier chapters. Special attention is required to the relation between these proposals, which suggest idealised solutions in terms of personal needs, and more realistic scenarios in which ideal deliberation cannot be convened, and constructs and standards are required that cannot be sensitive to differences between individuals. There is also the question of how to relate the claims of those who have commitments and those whose well-being is not structured in that way.

The intrapersonal account itself requires considerable more support and extension in order to be practicable. Where I have given an account of the determination of correct choice—which solutions are available to a person—an account is also needed of how a person should actually choose with an eye to coherence, especially in awareness that their information is imperfect and that their options are risky.

## Afterword

This project has covered a lot of ground. It has moved from concrete issues of measurement and policy evaluation, to the context of individuals' personal values, from there to the metaphysics of value, to axiology, practical reason, and finally touched on how it all might relate to moral and political philosophy. It has tried to present a coherent alternative framework, a whole world-view almost, to the teleological outlook that prevails in many areas in the social sciences, policy, and philosophy. That it is systematic and coherent is necessary, as I said at the outset, for it to have any prospect of rivalling that dominant outlook in explanatory power. I cannot claim to have achieved that in just one study, a doctoral thesis at that, and especially since covering more ground requires moving more quickly than may do full justice to individual topics. However, I hope to have at least provided a moderately persuasive outline of how it can be started.

I have tried to pick my battles. I have argued for need as a *structural* feature of well-being, trying in the main to maintain focus on what was strictly necessary for making that thesis credible. I have wanted to make it something that might be compatible with a range of more substantial positions. In particular, I hope personal needs might have just enough subject-relativity to appeal to some economistically minded theorists, otherwise convinced that that required something like preference satisfaction. And that they might have just enough objectivity to appeal to those who otherwise think an ontologically robust universalism is required to undergird things of serious value. But of course, I may end up pleasing neither.

My primary focus has been on the first-personal context, which I think is crucial. It is there in which the self-understanding is gained that is the root of many ethical concepts. I have appealed to commonalities in people's self-understandings as evidence for the personal needs I have identified. But that context is also the proper site of conflict between those who deny, and those who accept, the incommensurability of goods. Not enough traction can be gained if the case for incommensurability is made only in the abstract terms of broad categories of value, considered in isolation from how they fit into individual lives, moment to moment.

A theme has been that it is a problem if the use of concepts formulated directly for public purposes obscures things' significance to particular individuals. At the same time, however, I have wanted the personal nature of personal needs not to fundamentally problematise practical matters of measurement and policy. The challenge has lain in relating the two contexts to each other, such that the personal can feasibly inform public standards. However, personal needs are unlike utility, which, though initially likewise formulated in the personal context of choice, can in principle virtually be transplanted to any other context of evaluation, at least given further assumptions and the availability of suitable proxies. Personal needs relate to other evaluative contexts in more complicated ways, and so it is not possible to provide any general account of how

they should inform the construction of appropriate well-being concepts there. One thing I do hope to have achieved in this regard, however, is to make more intelligible to those operating in public domains individuals' claims that certain things in their lives are non-substitutable and so necessary. This is a primarily defensive move, a vindication in the face of considerable scepticism, but it also provides space for new non-aggregationist approaches to distribution that are rooted in well-being's having structure. Indeed, personal needs provide a deep rationale for well-being pluralism, which positively supports the broad thrust of the capabilities approach and multidimensional approaches to measuring well-being.

One topic I have not addressed directly, but which has appeared obliquely and is implicit in the logic of need, is the possibility of sufficiency. Proposals that it is intelligible and desirable for people to somehow have 'enough' are plagued by objections concerning the significance of the thresholds they seem to need to draw, and that (recalling Ch. 3 §1.1) it represents an unattractively minimal ideal. However, personal needs create the possibility for a different approach. The notion of sufficiency it suggests—having everything one needs—is not directly answerable to distribution, formulating and applying thresholds or similar, and it is most definitely not a minimal state. Its influence, both public and personal, would lie in recasting well-being claims as satiable—at least as concerns non-trivial aspects of life. If well-being is in an important sense not defined as indefinitely improvable then in that sense it can actually be possible to locally overcome scarcity.

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