Economic Justice and the Minimally Good Human Life Account of Needs

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1. Introduction

There are many reasons why one might want an account of what people need. One reason is that, on some accounts, a decent society must enable its members to secure what they need. Needs compete with welfare, opportunity, resource, and capability accounts of the currency of economic justice and there are many compelling arguments that a decent society must enable its members to secure what they need (Pogge 2002; Hassoun 2012; Vallentyne 2005; Alkire 2002; Reader 2006; Copp 1998; Brock 1998; Braybrooke 1998; Buchanan 2004). So, it is important to have an account of needs that might play the requisite role in answering the question “What must a good society enable its members to secure?” After all, if no account can play this role then we should presumably answer this question by referencing a different (i.e. welfare, opportunity, resource, or capability) alternative.

Some suggest that a needs account might have an advantage over at least the resourcist alternative, because a decent society might have to enable different people to secure different things (Reader 2006). Some people need only a little food and water. Others (e.g. pregnant women) need much more. Some do not need expensive medicines or health care. Others (e.g. AIDS victims) require a lot of medical aid. So, any good account of needs must accommodate differences in individuals’ needs (Brock 1998; Frankfurt 1988). Ideally, a good account should capture all of the things each person needs without including anything someone does not need.

This paper will provide an account of needs that (1) can accommodate individual differences in need that (2) decent societies might, plausibly, have to enable their members to fulfill. It will not argue that its account of needs is better than welfare, opportunity, resource, and capability accounts of the currency of economic justice. Rather, this paper just aims to provide a new competitor worth further consideration. In doing so, this paper will link discussions about the nature of needs to those about...
economic justice. It will also critically review several accounts of need in the literature arguing that none can fulfill the above desiderata. More precisely, Section II sketches what this paper will call the *minimally good human life* account of needs. It argues that autonomy, for instance, is characteristic of, and often necessary for, a minimally good human life. Section III considers the practical implications of the minimally good human life account of needs and shows how it fulfills the above desiderata for a good account. Section IV argues that some of the best alternative accounts have unintuitive consequences. They either cannot (1) accommodate individual differences in need or (2) are not plausible accounts of what decent societies must enable their members to secure.

## 2. The Minimally Good Human Life Account of needs

On the minimally good human life account, people need whatever enables them to live minimally good human lives. Although a few theorists have suggested something along these lines, none have said much about what exactly a minimally good life requires (Anscombe 1958; Hassoun 2009a). This paper will begin this project.

It is possible to provide a perfectionist account of the minimally good life. Most perfectionists are concerned with what it is for a human life to be *good* as opposed to *minimally good*. One can, however, imagine a perfectionist theory intended to explicate the notion of a minimally good human life as one that develops the features that constitute or are central to human nature (Arneson 1999: 120). Such a theory might be developed via a two-stage process. First, sketch a broad account of what a minimally good life would be for animals as well as humans, if not all living things. Then, arrive at an account of the minimally good human life by considering “the peculiarities of the human situation” (Kraut 1994: 48).

Perfectionist theories are usually objective list theories and are distinguished from desire-, or preference-, based accounts of what a good life requires. It is reasonable to think that an adequate account of the minimally good human life will be objective in this way: Any conception of a minimally good human life must be sensitive to what people think they need, though it cannot be completely determined by the whimsy and occasional delusion of human desire. Before cashing out such a perfectionist account of the minimally good human life, however, it is important to get clear on the kind of minimalism at issue.
Because the idea would be to explicate a conception of a *minimally* good human life, it is unfortunate that perfectionist theories have their name. The minimally good human life need not be perfect. I think my life would be better if I did something that merited a Nobel Peace Prize. But I do not need to do any such thing to live a minimally good human life.

On the other hand, a human life may not be *minimally* good and yet have some significant and valuable things in it. It is easy to imagine someone with a great career, for instance, living a miserable life, devoid of basic human attachment, completely isolated from the rest of world.

Nevertheless, even *minimally* good lives should have some things of value or pleasure or have some significance. A human life completely devoid of pleasure, significance, and value is not even minimally good.

What exactly is necessary for a *minimally* good human life will probably vary between contexts. In Finland, where the winter is quite cold, heat may be necessary, even for survival. In Hawaii, people can live minimally good lives without heat. Some people need a lot of nutrients just to survive, never mind flourish.

In every context, a minimally good human life for humans cannot just be a life that is worth living. Lives may be worth living even if they are thwarted in significant respects (and contain significant pain and suffering). On balance it may be better to have such a life than to have no life at all. But those whose lives are just barely worth living do not live minimally *good* lives. The threshold for a minimally *good* human life falls between the threshold for a life worth living and a just plain good life.

Consider how a perfectionist account of the minimally good human life might look. Following Richard Arneson, for instance, it is possible to fruitfully (mis)interpret Thomas Hurka’s perfectionism as providing an account of the minimally good human life (Arneson 1999). On this account, the minimally good human life includes the things “essential to humans and conditioned on their being living” (Hurka 1993: 16). Following Hurka, one might suggest that practical reason is often essential to a minimally good human life.

Or consider a different perfectionist theory. In “Desire and the Human Good,” Richard Kraut might be (mis-)interpreted as suggesting that, to live a minimally good human life, “one must love something, what one loves must be worth loving, and one
must be related in the right way to what one loves” (Kraut 1994: 44). Alternately, Martha Nussbaum’s list of basic capabilities might be fruitfully (mis-) interpreted as providing a characterization of the minimally good human life.

It may be impossible to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for a minimally good human life, but reflection can help us isolate some characteristic features of such a life. There are common threats to individuals’ ability to live minimally good lives – disease, hunger, and complete isolation pose such threats, for instance. Similarly, minimally good lives often share some basic characteristics – some degree of satisfaction with one’s lot in life and connection with others in one’s community, and so on. Many accounts of human rights help to specify common features of a minimally good life under the guise of establishing that certain interests are truly important (Nickel 2006).

To further illustrate the basic argumentative strategy and add some content to an account of the minimally good human life, this paper will argue that, because humans are distinctively autonomous creatures, autonomy is characteristic of a minimally good human life. That is, it will suggest that whether or not one lives a minimally good human life is not a completely subjective matter. Rather, a minimally good human life is characteristically choice-worthy and a life in which one can make some significant choices. By making such choices one must be free to shape one’s own life (Nussbaum 2000: 72).

Most perfectionist theories embrace the idea that a minimally good human life usually contains at least some autonomy. On Arneson’s suggested adaptation of Hurka’s theory, for instance, the minimally good human life includes the kind of practical and theoretical reason that this paper will suggest is essential to autonomy. As Arneson points out, humans are not only physical objects but, more remarkably, living rational animals. Similarly, on Kraut’s theory, the minimally good human life requires making appropriate autonomous choices. We need to be able to reflect and evaluate to be related in the right way to the valuable things we love; our good is grounded “in our capacity for rational choice” (Kraut 1994: 48). Some minimal conditions for autonomy are also central to Nussbaum’s account (Nussbaum 2007). Before arguing, however, that any plausible perfectionist theory should support the conclusion that autonomy is characteristic of a minimally good human life, let us say a bit about the kind of autonomy at issue.
3. Autonomy

To secure autonomy, to shape one’s life, one needs to have some freedom from both internal and external constraint. *Internal freedom* is roughly the capacity to decide “for oneself what is worth doing”, one must be able to make “the decisions of a normative agent” – to recognize and respond to value as one sees it (Griffin 2006). One must be able to reason about and make some plans on the basis of one’s beliefs, values, desires, and goals (henceforth commitments). *External freedom*, or liberty, is roughly freedom from interference to pursue a “worthwhile life” (Raz 1998; Griffin 2006). One must have some freedom from coercion and constraint; one must be able to carry out some plans.

The key difference between internal and external freedom is that the former is freedom from self-constraint, the later freedom from environmental or other-imposed constraints. So a woman who can think for herself may have internal freedom even if she lacks external freedom because she is imprisoned. To live an autonomous life, however, more is required. One must actually exercise one’s freedom – making both some simple and significant choices. And one must have at least some good options from which to choose. Let us consider each of these conditions for autonomy in turn.

First, what does it mean to say that one must be able to reason on the basis of one's commitments? The idea is just this: autonomous people must have some instrumental reasoning ability. Some hold demanding conceptions of rationality on which saying that autonomy requires the ability to reason would be controversial. Kant, for instance, thinks that (practical) reason requires each of us to acknowledge the categorical imperative as unconditionally required (see Hill Jr. 1989 and O’Neill 1986). The reasoning at issue does not require this much, however. People must have only some instrumental reasoning ability.

Next, consider what it means to say that one must be able to make some plans on the basis of one's commitments (see Bratman 2005). First, one must be able to make both some simple plans and some significant ones. To make significant plans one need not plan one’s whole life or every detail of one’s day. Rather, one must be able to navigate through one’s day without too much difficulty and make general plans for the future. One must not be constrained to making plans only about how to meet one’s needs like Joseph Raz’s proverbial man in a pit (Raz 1998). Though one might not choose to exercise this
ability, one must have the planning ability necessary to pursue the projects one values – to pursue a good life as one sees it. This ability requires a kind of internal freedom one can have even if subject to external constraint. One must be able to form some plans that would work if implemented. One must be able to make some plans that one could carry through if free from external constraint. There are many ways of making sense of this idea. One might, for instance, analyze the ability to make some plans on the basis of one’s commitments in terms of the ability to make one’s motivating commitments generally coherent. Alternately, one might give a decision-theoretic analysis of planning in terms of a consistent preference ordering. Yet another option is to explain the ability to make some plans on the basis of one’s commitments in terms of ordering one’s ends perhaps by drawing on John Rawls’ (1971) work on plans of life.

Consider what is required to carry out some plans. This ability requires both some internal and external freedom. One must be able to decide for oneself what is worth pursuing and be able to carry out those actions necessary to bring some valuable plans to fruition. The importance of the qualifier *some* is just this: One need not be able to carry out every valuable plan that one might want to carry out to have this component of autonomy. Still, the ability to carry out *some* valuable plans is a necessary component of this kind of autonomy. The idea that people must be able to reason about, make and carry out both some simple and some significant plans is tied to the idea that people must have good options. Good options are not only a matter of what one desires or avoiding harm. One must be able to secure food, for instance, to live a minimally good human life whether or not one wants to do so. One cannot be like Raz’s (1998) hounded woman fleeing forever from one tragedy or another.

The kind of options matters as well as numbers. People must be able to “exercise all the capacities human beings have an innate drive to exercise, as well as to decline to develop any of them” (Raz 1998: 375). People must be able to move their bodies, sense the world, use their imagination, express affection, and occupy their minds. A person does not need options that are not significant for that person. People lack good options if all of their choices are dictated by others or circumstances. They must not be paralyzed or chained. Their every decision must not be determined beforehand by the dictate to maintain their life. A singer threatened with the loss of her voice if she does anything another person dislikes, for instance, is not autonomous. All of a person’s options cannot have horrendous effects. On the other hand, if a person acts on his or her options that
must at least sometimes have significant effects. Though, to be autonomous, people need not fully realize their valuable capacities, they must be able to choose or reject self-realization (Raz 1998).

What options people need may be relative to the socio-economic-political conditions in which they live. Where participation in the life of the community is necessary for a minimally good life, what is required will be different in different circumstances. There are certain basic options – e.g. to be able to secure food, water, shelter – that everyone needs to secure autonomy. In different circumstances (or cultures), however, different kinds of food, water, and shelter may be necessary. One might worry that the conception of autonomy at issue is objectionably Western, but people in all cultures value the ability to reason and plan and need at least some of the same things to do so. Even to follow the rules of a monastic order or extremely hierarchical community, one must be able to (and actually) decide to do so and to do that everyone needs at least enough food, water, and shelter to survive.

4. Autonomy and the Minimally Good Human Life

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

Autonomy is often partly constitutive of a minimally good life as well. *Often*, part of what it means for us humans to live minimally good lives is that we “have a conception of ourselves and of our past and future. We reflect and assess. We form pictures of what a good life would be, often, it is true, only on a small scale, but occasionally also on a large scale. And we try to realize these pictures” (Griffin 2006: Ch. 2). Those who lack a conception of being a self - persisting through time with a past and a
future - may be unable to hope or dream. Those who never pursue their conception of a good life often cannot achieve their goals, carry out projects, or live their lives on their own terms. These things are often part of a minimally good life and they require the reasoning and planning conditions for autonomy (and good options). After all, reasoning is part of reflecting and assessing, and planning is part of trying to realize one’s picture of a good life. And, in the real world, people usually need good options to achieve their goals, carry out their plans, and live life on their own terms.

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

On this account, people can have minimally good human lives without autonomy. The severely disabled and very young, for instance, may have such lives. Even if these people cannot reason, form, or carry out plans they may experience joy and sadness, pleasure and pain, music and light. Disability theorists have convincingly argued that there may be a lot of value in a life without autonomy (Kittay 2005). Although autonomy is characteristic, and often partly constitutive, of a minimally good life, it is not always necessary for such a life.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that many other things may be necessary for a minimally good life. Some connection with other people or the natural world may, for instance, be important components of a minimally good life. It is not plausible to say that only autonomy is characteristic, and often constitutive, of such a life.

Nor is it plausible that people only need what enables them to secure autonomy. People may be autonomous – choosing between valuable options like spending time with loved ones or contributing to society – but make poor choices and, so, fail to secure what they need. The fact that people need more than what will enable them to secure autonomy is what distinguishes the minimally good life account of need from autonomy and person- hood-based accounts like those suggested by Gillian Brock and James Griffin.

5. The Minimally Good Human Life Account of needs and the Desiderata
This paper has started to explicate the minimally good human life account of needs by arguing that autonomy is characteristic, and often partly constitutive, of a minimally good human life. But does this capture differences in individuals’ needs and provide a plausible basis for what decent societies must enable their members to secure? Considering the account’s practical implications will help make this case.

This section will explain why, despite individual differences, everyone needs many of the things that appear on traditional lists of needs that decent societies must, plausibly, enable their members to secure – like food and water. It will conclude by considering and responding to a few objections.

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

Similarly, many of those who lack adequate shelter suffer from autonomy undermining disabilities. Those without adequate shelter may be exposed to environmental hazards including disasters, pollutants, parasites, and bacteria (e.g. in flood water or unsanitary living conditions). These “hazards are responsible for about a quarter of the total burden of disease worldwide, and nearly 35% in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa” (World Health Organization 2011). Bed nets alone could prevent a lot of autonomy undermining illness.

Less obviously, some of those without basic education, emotional and social goods suffer from autonomy undermining disabilities (Woolcock 2001, Doyle 2002). Basic education, emotional, and social goods are often necessary for securing decent living conditions, health care, livelihood opportunities, and earning power (Marmot 2004). Those who lack (formal or informal) elementary education may not develop or
maintain the reasoning and planning skills they need to secure autonomy (Beaton, 2003; Doyle 2002; Marmot 2004). Those who lack basic emotional and social goods are at high risk for mental and physical illness, suicide, and early death from other causes (Michelle Cullen and Harvey Whiteford 2001, Michael Woolcock 2001 and Christopher G. Hudson. 2005). “Fear, insecurity, dependency, depression, anxiety, intranquility, shame, hopelessness, isolation and powerlessness… such experiential elements of a bad life… [often impact] …agency” (Brock 1999: 33). Most people must be able to secure basic education, emotional, and social goods to secure autonomy.

This account fulfills the desiderata from which this paper started. It is plausible that a decent society must enable most of its members to secure food, water, shelter, education, health care, social and emotional goods. Most people need these things on the minimally good human life account. Some people will be able to secure autonomy without being able to obtain very much food, water, shelter, education, health care, social or emotional goods (O’Neill 2000). More may be necessary for others to secure autonomy. So, the minimally good human life account of needs also captures individual differences in need.

One might object that an adequate account of the minimally good life should include much more than the sort of autonomy at issue in this paper. If autonomy only requires the ability to reason about, make, and carry out plans and good options, some young children are autonomous. At least one could argue that the account of the minimally good life at issue in the account is too minimal; a decent society must enable its members to secure much more than food, water, and so forth. Similarly, saying that everyone needs what will allow them to secure the kind of minimally good life cashed out here will not account for each and every person’s needs.

It is true that a full account of the minimally good life must include much more than this minimal autonomy but this paper has only argued that this autonomy is characteristic, and often partly constitutive, of a minimally good life. So, while the sketch has not been filled out enough to provide a complete account of what a decent society must enable its members to secure, it is plausible that decent societies must enable their members to secure at least this much. Similarly, this paper has not shown that a complete account of the minimally good life will capture each and every person’s needs, but the account does capture some important differences in individual needs and it does not say
that people need things they do not. Finally, as will become clear below, the account avoids the problematic counter-examples to which the alternatives fall prey.

A more troublesome objection is that it would be too much to require a decent society to enable all of its subjects to secure what they need to attain even the minimal autonomy this paper has argued is characteristic, and often partly constitutive, of a minimally good life. Some have very expensive health needs and others may lack the social and emotional support they need for minimally good lives even in a decent society.

Perhaps it is implausible to believe that decent societies have to enable all of their subjects to live minimally good lives. If so, however, it is also implausible that these societies have to enable everyone to secure a minimal level of welfare, basic capabilities, or what not. That said, I believe that it is plausible that any decent society should enable its members to live minimally good lives when it is possible to do so. Even if this is not realistic or desirable in our world because, for instance, it is too expensive to help some live minimally good, that is not necessarily a problem for a theory of needs: There may be a cost threshold limiting what a society is required to provide for its members that is external to an account of what people need. Moreover, there are good reasons to keep the threshold external to an account of what people need. A person who must have expensive medical care to live needs that care, even if that is not the kind of need it is reasonable to require a decent society to meet. Everyone needs some social and emotional support whether or not a society does a good job in creating social spaces that foster supportive communities.

4. Competing Accounts of Needs

This section argues that the minimally good human life account of needs has some advantages over the most plausible alternatives: harm and social role accounts. The main alternative accounts of need were not designed to fulfill the desiderata with which this paper started. Harry Frankfurt only tried to account for the presumptive force of needs (Frankfurt 1988). Garrett Thompson wanted to give an account of needs that can explain why one cannot say truly that someone should have different needs (Thompson 2005). David Braybrooke tried to explain what people need in a way that could play a role in guiding public policy (Braybrooke 1987). Still, harm and social role theories are amongst the best developed accounts of needs, so it is worth seeing if they can fulfill the other criteria for a good account of needs set out at the start as well as those they are
supposed to fulfill. If they cannot and the minimally good human life account fares better, there is at least some reason to take the minimally good human life account seriously.

5. Harm-Based Accounts

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

There are at least three problems with Frankfurt’s account. First, Frankfurt’s notion of harm is too inclusive. Intuitively, one may not be harmed if one’s bad state merely persists. Some are not made worse off than before by remaining in a bad state that does not become worse. Suppose, for instance, that Grace is in the early stages of Parkinson’s syndrome, a degenerative disease. She shakes and has Bradykinesia but can still walk and feed herself. Suppose, further, that she is given a new medication that stabilizes her condition. Her condition may remain the same (in at least one sense); she may still shake and have Bradykinesia but retain her mobility and ability to feed herself. Even so, it seems that Grace has been helped, not harmed.

Perhaps Frankfurt could say that one’s going from a degenerative to a stable condition constitutes a change in one’s state. If so, one’s bad state does not persist, rather one is in a new stable state. So, he could argue that one has not been harmed by the change. He must say more to show that one cannot benefit from something that keeps a bad state from getting worse in light of the fact that one may be lucky one’s state does not deteriorate (note: this is all consistent with the fact that sometimes withholding a benefit can constitute harm.)

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

Neither contention is plausible. Adopting this conception of harm for the moment, however, it should be clear that one’s bad state persisting does not necessarily make one worse off than one would otherwise be. Grace, for instance, would have been in a worse state if her condition had not stabilized (on any reasonable way of thinking about her state; she would have both lost the use of her legs and continued to degenerate). The fact that her bad state persists does not mean she is worse off than she would otherwise be (though it is plausible that Grace’s life goes worse if she is ill for longer).

Saying that the relevant comparison is to the time right before Grace got her degenerative disease will not help. Before getting her degenerative disease Grace may have had a much worse disease. She might, for instance, have had cancer (though her cancer was removed just as she was developing Parkinson’s). If so, Frankfurt must agree that (on this conception of harm) Grace has not been harmed by becoming ill. But this is unintuitive.

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

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

I do not believe either of these responses goes through. First, it is more plausible that the cuts are minor harms than that they are not harms at all. Second, it is hard to see how protective clothing is harmful. Perhaps the idea is that people may be harmed if they are forced to wear such clothing. But that need not be the case. Suppose, for instance, that a woman raised in a liberal family in the US freely decides to wear a hijab that would protect her from paper cuts. Does she then need to wear a hijab? I think not, or at least not to avoid paper cuts. Perhaps the idea is that the clothing is harmful because it is a
nuisance but some may not be bothered by the clothing. Finally, suppose this is wrong and the clothing is harmful. On Frankfurt’s account that only seems to imply that people need to avoid the clothing as well as the cuts, not that they do not need to wear the clothing (for without it they will also be harmed by the cuts). If the clothing is not as harmful as the cuts, he will presumably suggest wearing the clothing. But the important point here is just that it is really implausible or at least it is not in line with our ordinary discourse to say that one needs protective clothing to avoid paper cuts.

Frankfurt cannot avoid this problem by suggesting that we need what, all things considered, will prevent the greatest harm. For, sometimes we do need what will prevent lesser harms as well, we just cannot have it. Pregnant women may need anti-inflammatory drugs even if all things considered refraining from consuming them will prevent the greatest harm to the women as well as their fetuses.

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

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

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

Although this paper did not challenge this way of specifying Frankfurt’s conception of harm above, it is implausible. Suppose that George is riding upon his dark steed when he comes across Effe standing on a corner. Being a Very Evil Man, George stabs Effe, grabs her purse, and gallops away. Unbeknownst to George, Effe had just decided to walk down a dark street that she could not see was covered with ice. If George had not interrupted her she would have walked down the street, fallen, hit her head, and died from the injury days later. Because she has been stabbed, however, Effe goes to the hospital instead. It seems that George has still harmed Effe. Frankfurt could not argue that the fact that someone has not been made worse off than they would otherwise be means that that person has not been harmed (see Feinberg 1984).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, Thompson’s account may have to contend with another general objection to harm accounts. Intuitively, some of the things people need they need not merely to avoid harm but in order to flourish. It is possible to argue for this conclusion in several
ways. Often people need purely instrumentally valuable goods to flourish. Alternately, (though Thompson will not accept this account), consider a conception of harm on which someone can only be harmed if she is made worse off than before. In some developing countries there are ten year old children who are working and will not receive a secondary school education. On this conception of harm, these children will not be harmed by failing to receive this education: they are not made worse off than they were before if they are not educated. But, intuitively, most of these children do need education. Intuitively, this is something that a decent society should, at a minimum, enable these children to secure because they need it.

6. Social Role Accounts

The minimally good human life account of needs is not the only account that can explain why people need things that they do not need to avoid harm. David Braybrooke’s social role account in Meeting Needs has this flavor. Policy makers can determine the needs of a population via a two-step process. First, they must create a list of necessary goods that enable individuals to fully carry out four social roles – citizen, worker, parent and housekeeper (Braybrooke 1987). Discussion is essential to determining the exact content of the list. Then, policy makers must determine the minimal standards of provision for necessary goods. These standards should be set at the level sufficient for each member of the population to carry out each social role. Braybrooke thinks that even those who choose not to occupy a particular social role need many of the same things that those who occupy all of the roles need.

Unfortunately, some people do not need the things that would let them occupy Braybrooke’s social roles and others need things that they do not need to occupy these roles (especially if they hope to occupy other roles). A monk who never wants to have children may not need to have them or be a worker, but may need religious freedom.

Even if Braybrooke agrees that the monk needs religious freedom, he might suggest that this freedom is just a part of the freedom of conscience necessary for the social roles at issue in his account. He might maintain that people need freedom of conscience to be good citizens, for instance. Perhaps some freedom of religion is necessary for the kind of freedom of conscience people need to be good citizens, workers, parents, and housekeepers.
It is not clear, however that people need the kind of religious freedom the monk needs to fulfill Braybrooke’s social roles. Many of those in the world’s most oppressive regimes who lack freedom of conscience as well as freedom of religion are parents, housekeepers, workers, and citizens, for instance.

Perhaps Braybrooke could maintain that the monk only needs the opportunity to have jobs and children. Perhaps his idea is just that people need to have the opportunity to fulfill their social roles. Maybe old monks do not need to be able to have children but when they are young, everyone should have this option.

Unfortunately, Braybrooke cannot claim that people just need to have the opportunity to fulfill his (their) social roles. If the monk, for instance, never wants to have children nor wants the opportunity to do so, it would be strange to say he needs this opportunity. At least the monk does not need the opportunity to have children if he stays a monk who does not want children. Though, if the monk did decide that he wanted to have children, he may need the option.

Braybrooke would probably respond to this last worry by saying that he is only concerned to give an account of what people typically need in a way that could be presented to the public. For, he explicitly says that not everyone will need to play every social role on his list and emphasizes that he is not concerned about idiosyncratic, or episodic needs. Most people need what will allow them to have children and homes. Few people need the kind of religious freedom monks need. Similarly, most people need what will allow them to work and to have citizenship in some country, though some extraordinary individuals do fine without these things. For Braybrooke, needs are (rebuttably) universal propositions for people in their prime who are not disabled (Braybrooke 1987: S2.33). Braybrooke is only trying to give an account that can form the basis for social policy.

This, however, is just to say that Braybrooke is engaged in a quite different project than the one in which this paper is engaged. Although Braybrooke’s project is also quite valuable, his account cannot be used for this paper’s purposes. Braybrooke’s account does not fulfill the desiderata with which this paper started. It does not capture all the differences in individual needs because, intuitively, some needs are not even rebuttably universal (i.e. few would think everyone needs the kind of religious freedom the monk needs). So it does not capture these individuals’ needs. Braybrooke’s account, like harm accounts of needs also suggests that some people need things that they do not
Perhaps for this reason, decent societies need not enable their members to secure all and only those things Braybrooke’s account suggests. Decent societies need not enable their members to fulfill all the social roles if they do not want to do so. They need not, for instance, enable monks who do not want to have children to do so. Decent societies may, however, have to enable monks to secure significant religious freedom. The claim is not that what people need is determined by what they want but that the life plans people pursue are relevant to what they need.

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

The minimally good life account of needs might provide a basis, however, for public policy. People do understand what it means to reason and plan etc., so policy makers could just talk about the abilities constituting what this paper has called autonomy, rather than using the term “autonomy” when talking about these components of a minimally good life. Furthermore, the minimally good life account can provide the basis for a simple, concrete list of needs. To create such a list, policy makers just have to focus on what most people need to live a minimally good life.

Note that, in providing concrete policy advice, the minimally good life account may fare no better than Thompson’s account. Unlike Thompson’s account, however, it is plausible that the minimally good life account, when it is not being used for policy purposes, captures all and only the things each person needs. So, even if it is not good to use a highly philosophical account of needs as the basis for public policy, such an account may be useful for other (i.e. philosophical) purposes. Once again, this is just to say that harm, social role, and minimally good life accounts of need may be part of different, but valuable, projects.

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

8. Conclusion

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

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ii For discussion of the idea that justice should respond to individual differences in this way see Martha Nussbaum (2000) and Thomas Pogge (2002).

iii I have argued elsewhere that there are significant obligations to help those in need and suggested something like this account. See, for instance Hassoun (2012 and forthcoming). I have also advanced some constraints on an adequate theory for how institutions should meet need in Hassoun (2009a).

iv If these things include welfare, capabilities, resources, or opportunities, this account may overlap in part, or whole, with versions of welfare, capability, resource, or opportunity accounts of what decent societies must enable most of their members to secure.
Ultimately, Arneson rejects this kind of perfectionism because he does not think it can accommodate cheap thrills. I do not find this particularly compelling but if cheap thrills are essential to human wellbeing, maybe humans and other animals need cheap thrills to live minimally good lives.

He uses Kripkean thought experiments to argue for this contention.

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

On this account, people would need: Life, health, nourishment, bodily integrity, shelter, reproductive choice, sensation, imagination, reason, adequate education and freedom of expression, the ability to experience emotions, pleasure and avoid non-beneficial pain, to form attachments, to form a conception of the good life, affiliate with others, and have the social bases of self respect. They might also need to be able to care for and live in relation to other parts of the natural world, play, participate effectively in politics, and have equal rights to employment and property (Nussbaum 2007: 23-24).

As David Brink (2008: ???) puts it, “This perfectionist conception of the significance of choice or post-deliberative desire may sound remarkably like an informed desire conception of practical reason or the good. But notice some important differences. First, an informed desire conception defines normatively significant desire by appeal to a counterfactual condition. Is the desire one which would emerge from some suitable idealization of the agent’s current desires? By contrast, the perfectionist conception appeals to an historical condition. Is the desire one which was produced or is sustained by a suitable kind of deliberation?” Still, “it is choice, rather than desire, as such, that has normative significance.”

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

Although it will not do here to go into Hurka’s argument for this conclusion, he basically uses a scientifically informed Kripkean conceptual analysis to reject other perfectionist conceptions because they fail two tests. They either fail to retain the appeal of the idea that human nature is morally significant or have implausible consequences by suggesting that human nature includes things that lack moral significance. See Thomas Hurka 1993: p.9. As Richard Kraut puts it, perfectionist theories are developed via a “two-stage processes in which a broad account that applies universally is then made more specific by being tied to the peculiarities of the human situation.” See Richard Kraut 1994: p. 48.

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

Again, the kind of reasoning and planning one must be able to do need not be particularly complex. For an interesting discussion of non-intellectual pleasures that may contribute to a minimally good life see Braybrooke (1989).

At least this seems right on the conditions for autonomy this paper has defended.

Scurvy results from a lack of vitamin C, beri-beri from a lack of thiamine, pellagra from niacin deficiency, and macrocytic and microcytic anemia from folic acid and iron deficiencies, for instance. There
is also a lot of evidence that decent nourishment is important for good cognitive functioning. Children’s mental functioning can even be impaired if their mothers do not receive proper nourishment during pregnancy (see Leathers and Foster 2004).

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

Johns Hopkins and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. 2011.

Bed nets can prevent many cases of dengue fever and malaria, for instance. See Center for Disease Control and Prevention. 2011.

Stress may contribute to a host of autonomy-undermining mental disorders. Stress can, for instance, cause panic attacks and depression. Psychological disorders can reduce the ability of one’s immune system to fight infection. See: David B.

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