

Il tema

Satisfying Future People's Basic Needs

La soddisfazione dei bisogni fondamentali delle generazioni future

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Abstract. This paper explores the role of basic needs in theories of intergenerational justice, focusing on forms of intergenerational sufficientarianism that regard the satisfaction of basic needs as the primary moral obligation owed to future generations. The paper advocates for a moderately demanding view of basic needs and argues that each need should be linked with a range of potential “need satisfiers,” enabling future generations to choose how their needs are met. Including multiple satisfiers broadens the responsibilities of current generations and transforms traditional sufficientarian perspectives into a more demanding, quasi-sufficientarian framework of intergenerational justice.

Keywords: intergenerational sufficientarianism, intergenerational justice, sufficientarian perspective, basic needs.

Riassunto. Questo articolo esplora il ruolo dei bisogni fondamentali nelle teorie della giustizia intergenerazionale, concentrandosi su forme di sufficientarismo intergenerazionale che considerano la soddisfazione dei bisogni fondamentali come il principale obbligo morale nei confronti delle generazioni future. L'articolo sostiene una concezione moderatamente esigente dei bisogni fondamentali e argomenta che ciascun bisogno dovrebbe essere associato a una gamma di possibili “soddisfattori”, consentendo alle generazioni future di scegliere come soddisfare i propri bisogni fondamentali. L'inclusione di una pluralità di soddisfattori amplia le responsabilità delle generazioni presenti e trasforma le prospettive sufficientariste tradizionali in un quadro più esigente, di tipo quasi-sufficientarista, della giustizia intergenerazionale.

Parole chiave: sufficientarismo intergenerazionale, giustizia intergenerazionale, prospettiva sufficientarista, bisogni fondamentali.

When it comes to defining what presently living people might owe to future people or future generations, many authors defend some form of intergenerational sufficientarianism. While there are different forms of intergenerational sufficientarianism that are discussed in the literature, one particularly popular version of intergenerational sufficientarianism argues for basic needs as the primary (or the most plausible) currency of intergenerational justice.¹ There are several reasons why many theories argue for basic needs as the primary currency of intergenerational justice: needs are said to enjoy particular moral urgency, basic needs are assumed to be easily definable, and they are said to hold across different temporal and cultural contexts.

In this paper, I want to defend a form of intergenerational (quasi-)sufficientarianism that draws on a particular understanding of basic needs and that responds to recently levelled criticisms against basic needs. In particular, I will look at arguments put forth by George Boss,² who claims that needs should be thoroughly re-conceptualised and that many current understandings of basic needs, as abstract normative concepts, fail to reflect the inescapably political nature of needs. While I reject Boss's ultimate conclusion, most of his criticisms basic needs theorists should take to heart: basic needs can be satisfied in different ways and if one wants to defend a normatively attractive basic needs sufficientarianism (as most in the literature do), providing for a fair range of need satisfiers and different ways of conceptualising what ought to count as basic need satisfaction should be a key concern. However, this significantly alters the size and scope of what presently living people might owe to future people. This means that intergenerational basic needs sufficientarianism is more demanding than often thought and that it is actually quasi-sufficientarian.³

The paper is structured as follows. In section one, I will briefly explain how the argument of the paper needs to be situated within the rather complex and challenging landscape of intergenerational ethics, and which basic assumptions my argument rests on. In section two, I will look at different accounts of basic needs in intergenerational justice

¹ Meyer and Pölzler, "Basic needs;" Petz, "Exploring Intergenerational Climate Resilience;" Gough, "Climate change;" Gough, "Sufficiency;" Casal, "Sufficiency." Of course other currencies of intergenerational justice are discussed as well (Page, "Intergenerational Justice") and a recent special issue of a journal even tried to provide distinctly relationally egalitarian theories of intergenerational justice (Cass and Campos, "Introduction").

² Boss, "Basic human needs;" Boss, "Needs, Politics;" Boss, "Political theory."

³ I will later explain what I mean by quasi-sufficientarian.

and the claims that are made from moral urgency, easy definability, and cross-temporal as well as cross-cultural plausibility. As the argument will show, a too minimalist understanding of basic needs comes with significant drawbacks, which is why I ultimately embrace a moderately demanding conception of basic needs. In section three, I will turn to Boss's recent criticisms of the standard way of conceptualising basic needs. While Boss makes several important points, I ultimately defend the moral importance of standard accounts of basic needs. However, as I will argue in section four, for every need there should be a range of appropriate basic needs satisfiers, since determining how needs have to be satisfied in the future would be both disrespectful and unjust. I will conclude by showing that making plural basic need satisfiers part of one's theory of intergenerational justice, one moves away from a narrowly sufficientarian view and one's theory becomes more demanding.

1. Some caveats and situating the argument

Before I can get to the actual argument of the paper, it is important to briefly situate the paper within the rather complex landscape of intergenerational ethics, by making it clear on which basic assumptions my argument rests.

The first question any theorist wanting to discuss intergenerational justice must answer is whether it at all makes sense to hold that principles of justice apply across generations or extend into the future. As any person familiar with the literature will know, the non-identity problem (NIP) challenges the basic moral intuition that one might wrong someone (in the sense of making them worse off than they would otherwise have been) by creating a future, in which this person suffers avoidable harms, since the very existence of that particular person depends on one having made the policy-choices that also are responsible for creating the harmful future. While the NIP is indeed a complex philosophical problem, on which a lot of ink has been spilled, my arguments in this paper rest on the assumption that recently put forth arguments⁴ are successful in showing that one can wrong future people (independent of which particular future person will come into existence) by not giving their needs and interests due consideration within the process of decision-making, since doing so is either disrespectful (i.e. a violation of the basic moral duty to respect other moral beings) or a failure in moral reason-giving. This will not convince

⁴ See: Kumar, "Wronging future people"; Finneron-Burns, "Contractualism and the non-identity problem," and *What we owe to future people*.

all champions of the NIP, but it forms the background for the arguments presented here.⁵

Second, the focus of the discussion in this paper are need-based sufficientarian theories of intergenerational justice. The reason why I focus on these theories is their prominence in the literature, as well as their wide intuitive appeal. However, I do not mean to suggest that this is the only possible account of intergenerational justice, or that there are no other justice-based concerns beyond mere need satisfaction.⁶

Third, since the focus of this paper is intergenerational need satisfaction, all claims of what justice requires should be phrased in terms of the probability of satisfying future people's needs. When it comes to the non-immediate future there simply is no route available to us which allows us to put future people into a position to meet their basic needs with certainty. Future people will be – just as we are – part of a complex set of social, political and economic institutions, in which all sorts of power imbalances, selfish interests, policies, norms and practices will significantly affect distributive outcomes and what an individual future person can actually do. All that we can thus aim for is to provide future people and groups of future people, with the necessary goods, means and surroundings to make it extremely likely that they will be able to satisfy their basic needs. However, for reasons of better readability and to make the arguments easier to assess and engage with, I will refer in this paper to actual future outcomes rather than probable future outcomes.⁷

With these clarifying remarks out of the way, let me turn to the actual argument.

2. Basic needs

Need-claims are ubiquitous within moral and political theory.⁸ Especially in the context of theories of intergenerational justice, basic needs have enjoyed a renaissance. Basic needs are commonly invoked as the primary currency of intergenerational justice. This is due to three perceived

⁵ For a critique of Kumar's attempt to circumvent the NIP using Scanlon's contractualism, see Martin, "Navigating Nonidentity."

⁶ In this paper, I cannot go into the recently levelled charge that all forms of intergenerational sufficientarianism suffer from certain design flaws (see: Heikkinen, "Why intergenerational sufficientarianism is not enough."). Needless to say, I do not agree with all of Heikkinen's arguments, but I don't have the space here to engage with them in-depth.

⁷ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for help in phrasing this point.

⁸ See: Reader and Brock, "Needs;" Gough, "Universal basic services;" Frankfurt, "Necessity and Desire;" Goodin, "The Priority of Needs;" Caney, "Two kinds of climate justice;" Brock, *Global Justice*; Rosen, "Basic needs and justice."

features of basic need claims: a) their moral urgency; b) the easy definability of human basic needs; and c) the cross-temporal as well as cross-cultural importance of basic need satisfaction. In the following, I will look at all three assumed features. As it turns out, though, most accounts of basic needs do not exhibit all three features, which might raise the question of whether basic needs are indeed a particularly appealing currency of inter-generational justice.

a) Moral urgency

The idea of a simple inescapable human need, which is of such urgency that it triggers a moral obligation to be met, is intuitively extremely strong and appealing. A basic need is often understood to be something inescapable and pressing, leaving the needing being in a state of vulnerability. Take the following example: you traverse a barren desert and come upon an exhausted looking child, who is barely able to stand and looks at you with desperation in their eyes and says: ‚I need water‘. Most of us would agree that we have in this situation a simple duty to give the child water, if we happen to have plenty thereof and if doing so does not impose morally significant costs on us.⁹

However, a need-claim like ‚I need water‘ feels quite differently when you are in your friend’s garden and your friend’s child holds a water pistol in their hand, clearly being in the middle of a fun water battle with their friends. It would certainly be odd to claim that the need-claim in these two scenarios is normatively speaking the same. What seems to make a difference here is what the water is needed for, and in which circumstances the claim is made. Hence it matters for which end E a person P needs the good G in question. Soran Reader and Gillian Brock agree and argue that the normative force of a need claim depends on the very end E that the need serves.¹⁰ According to Reader and Brock basic needs always serve non-contingent ends, that is, ends which the being cannot but have.

In the literature different candidates exist for these non-contingent ends which basic needs are required for. Depending on which account of non-contingent end(s) one chooses, different conceptions of basic needs follow: thin minimalist basic needs understandings; moderately demanding basic needs understandings; thick demanding basic needs understandings. Depending on what kind of understanding one chooses, basic needs

⁹ The simple fact that many people share the intuition that an existential need, like the one of the child in the desert, imposes a duty to assist is obviously, in and of itself, no proof that such duties do indeed exist. The only reason I chose this example is to highlight the fact that, in simple cases like this, most people intuitively feel that (basic) need claims do have a fair amount of moral, or normative, force.

¹⁰ Reader and Brock, „Needs, moral demands and moral theory,” 252.

satisfaction requires very different things, and also the assumed moral urgency of basic needs varies.

On a *minimalist understanding of basic needs*,¹¹ the non-contingent end that basic needs satisfaction serves is survival. This is closest to Reader's and Brock's¹² claim that non-contingent needs entail that, the very existence of the needing being is at stake. If the basic needs are not met, the being dies. It is easy to see why basic need claims then enjoy extreme moral urgency and should be given priority. This is the reason why most basic need theories invoke examples like the need for water, food, or a safe environment when they try to highlight the moral urgency of basic needs, even if many theories actually defend more demanding understandings of basic needs.

For showing the moral urgency of needs, clean water and food are the best examples. However, the minimalist understanding of basic needs is extremely thin and narrow: it really is only about the survival of the being in question. This means that the goods G can be a quite limited set of goods. If a person's survival is at stake, all that matters is that they receive food and safe drinking water, not that they have access to a wide variety of foods or beverages. The claim that every future human being needs access to a wide variety of different food stuff, including a wide selection of diets for cultural reasons and specific food preferences, clearly does not follow from a minimalist understanding of basic needs. If currently living people could make sure that there is for eternity enough super nutritious porridge to feed all future people, a minimalist could not complain, since the non-contingent end of survival would be realised. In other words, while the minimalist understanding of basic needs is successful in proving the moral urgency of basic need satisfaction, it is really an account of the bare minimum. This is precisely the reason why the vast majority of basic-need theories reject the thin minimalist account of basic needs¹³ and opt for a more demanding understanding of basic needs.¹⁴

The *moderately demanding understanding of basic needs* also stresses the unavoidability and urgency of non-contingent needs. However, the non-contingent needs in question are not about mere survival but rather as necessary for avoiding sustained and serious harm.¹⁵

¹¹ Schuppert, *Distinguishing basic needs*.

¹² Reader and Brock, "Needs, moral demands and moral theory," 252.

¹³ See: Nullmeier, "Towards a theory of needs-based justice," 200-2001

¹⁴ See: Braybrooke, *Meeting Needs*; Siebel and Schramme, "Need-based justice from the perspective of philosophy."; Doyal and Gough, *A Theory of Human Need*; Meyer and Pölzler, "Basic needs and sufficiency."

¹⁵ See: Doyal and Gough, *A Theory of Human Need*, 50; Thomson, *Needs*; Wiggins, *Needs, Value, Truth*, 14.

According to Doyal and Gough,¹⁶ for instance, survival and autonomy are the basic preconditions for the avoidance of serious harm, which leads them to the claim that a needs-based theory of morality must, first and foremost, be concerned with securing every person's health and the basis for every person's autonomous agency. The idea that a plausible account of basic needs cannot just be limited to the means for sheer survival but must also include the conditions for some form of autonomy, has proven very popular. Following Doyal and Gough's ground-breaking work, others have embraced similar accounts, including those theorists who argue for basic capabilities following Nussbaum.¹⁷

The most popular account of a moderately demanding understanding of basic needs claims that basic needs are the things and goods required for leading a decent life. While this might sound intuitively appealing, the question is what defining basic needs as necessary for leading a decent life implies for both their moral urgency and the issues of definability and cross-cultural importance.

Let's assume a person needs for their survival water, food, and a safe environment, while for leading a decent life they on top of that also need (some degree of) freedom, housing, social ties, education, and health care to name just a few. Apart from the fact that the second part of the list does not seem exhausting of everything one needs for a decent life, in terms of moral urgency, we face an obvious question: is it morally just as urgent to give the person in question education, as it is to give them freedom? And what about the goods from the minimalist understanding? Are food and water on the same level as housing and social ties? It seems that there exist obvious differences between the urgency of these goods, since water and food do seem more basic. In addition, whether education or freedom score highly, probably also depends on the concrete circumstances the person is in. So as soon as we leave the minimalist understanding of basic needs, the moral urgency of basic need claims gets muddled.

This issue only gets worse for even thicker demanding basic needs understandings, which claim that basic needs are all those needs that need to be met in order for a person to have a flourishing life, including all particular goods this might require (e.g. a smart phone or access to a particular piece of land). However, if everything that a person requires for a flourishing life is couched in terms of basic needs, it is doubtful that all basic needs really do have the same moral urgency. Maybe a fulfilling love life is part of a person's flourishing life but does that really fall into the category of "a simple inescapable human need, which is of such urgency that

¹⁶ Doyal and Gough, *A Theory of Human Need*, 55.

¹⁷ Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*.

it triggers a moral obligation to be met” as I put it at the beginning of this section?¹⁸ It seems not. Phrased differently, the lack of a fulfilling love life or the lack of a fulfilling social life – while certainly being harmful and detrimental to the agent’s ability to live a flourishing life – cannot be considered to be existentially necessary for the being of the need-claimant, or to enjoy in general such moral urgency that there is an immediate moral obligation to meet these needs. In fact, it is doubtful whether “basic needs” is at all the right word for these instances.

In other words, if one wants to appeal to the unique moral force of basic need claims (based on their existential importance for the needing being itself, or for reaching at least a decent life worth living), one cannot include demanding ideas like flourishing in the group of ends underlying basic need claims. There are simply too many goods and things required for every person to lead a flourishing life for them all to have that special moral urgency that need-theorists claim basic needs have. However, as argued above, the minimalist understanding of basic needs is simply too narrow to ground a plausible account of intergenerational justice. Therefore, for the remainder of the paper I will focus on the moderately demanding understanding of basic needs. It is this moderately demanding understanding of basic needs that has also been the target of a range of criticisms by people like George Boss, which I will turn to in the next sections.

b) Easy definability of basic needs

Similarly, as with moral urgency, defining what should count as the kind of basic needs that every human needs in order to survive is – at least relatively speaking – easy. Every human being needs water and food, as well as an environment that is reasonably safe, which must include sufficient oxygen and a certain temperature range (though depending on clothing and shelter, humans can survive different kinds of temperature ranges). While critics of basic need theories like Soper¹⁹ and Boss²⁰ highlight that terms like “reasonably” and “sufficient” are somewhat indeterminate, defining the need is still relatively easy. It is more about the exact nature and quantity of the goods needed to satisfy the need, i.e. what one calls “satisfiers,” that requires further precision. However, not being able to put a precise number on every calory or every half degree should not

¹⁸ There is of course the further issue of how a basic need like the fulfilling love life could be met, but that is a secondary issue, since what I try to determine in this section is whether all basic needs enjoy the same moral urgency and why.

¹⁹ Soper, “A theory of human needs.”

²⁰ Boss, “Basic human needs.”

count against the ease of definability for the thin minimalist understanding of basic needs.

However, defining basic needs becomes much more complex when one turns to the other aspects of the moderately demanding account. The basic problem is this: Moderately demanding accounts of basic needs claim that there are a range of things/states of affairs/goods, which humans need to live a decent life. However, for these needs to be truly basic needs they must be needs which are shared by all humans in order to live a decent life, which brings with it the problem that the needs a person has in a capitalist economy like France in the 21st century must be the same as the needs a person had in 13th century Greenland. This is what Boss²¹ identifies as a key feature of what he calls the BHN (basic human needs) approach, which holds that basic needs by definition need to be universal. In other words, not only how particular needs are satisfied across cultures and time periods is important (see sub-section c below) but also which needs humans had, have, or will have for leading a decent life. Since the non-contingent end is living a decent life, the list of needs one ends up with will necessarily be abstract and broad at the same time.

If one looks at the existing literature, there are several accounts of what should be on the list of basic needs for living a decent life. These include health, education, social relationships and autonomous agency. However, as Kate Soper²² has pointed out, the more abstract and general lists of basic needs become, the more “vacuously uninformative” do the lists get in terms of what exactly one must provide people with. Take the following example: most moderately demanding theories of basic needs list basic education as something every person needs in order to live a decent life. But what exactly does education mean here? Is it about an institutional (i.e. school) education? In that case, it clearly is not a basic need, since there were plenty of historical examples where people seemed to live a decent life without ever having attended a school. Is it about religious or spiritual education? But is this really a need everyone shares?

Miller discusses the issue of religious education and ultimately claims that one needs to define an abstract enough need to cover all relevant cases: “We may not agree that there is a need for religious education as such, but we can agree that there is a need for education, and this can be spelt out as a need for an education that prepares children to take part in the range of activities that together constitute a decent life in the society to which they belong.”²³ So would it be better to list a caring and nurturing

²¹ Ibid., 1143.

²² Soper, “A theory of human needs,” 113.

²³ Miller, “Grounding human rights,” 415.

social environment, since many children learn what they need to know initially within family or kinship structures? But this, too, does not seem absolutely necessary for all children who go on to live decent lives. However, even if we were to solve this issue we might end up with a highly abstract and vague list of things necessary for leading a decent life.

As Boss²⁴ observes, many basic need theories try to sidestep the issue by saying that the general abstract need still applies, since every human needs to learn something sometime and every human needs some social relationships, and what the critics really are talking about is specifying *particular needs* that particular people have in concrete circumstances.²⁵ This answer suggests, however, that underneath each general abstract list of basic needs there should be another list of derivative particular needs, which does make the entire issue of defining what falls under basic needs rather complex. This is an issue, that also holds for knowing what cross-temporally as well as cross-culturally is important for basic need satisfaction.

c) The cross-temporal as well as cross-cultural importance of basic need satisfaction

One of the key difficulties for any account of basic needs is to defend the universal importance of a set of universal basic needs on the one hand, and on the other hand to allow for different accounts of interpreting and satisfying these basic needs. As Boss²⁶ puts it, basic needs accounts struggle to offer a justification of any list of basic needs which is not partisan, paternalistic and culturally oppressive. Furthermore, even if one has identified a list of basic needs, this list needs to be interpreted to determine what *exactly* is covered by the list (in terms of provision), which raises the spectre of relativism. The issue of how to interpret different basic needs, was touched upon in the last section: it is here that basic needs theorists often argue for the importance of abstract basic needs which are supplemented by a range of particular needs, which has the side-effect of making needs more difficult to define. When it comes to the particular satisfaction of the basic needs, then, the debate shifts to which satisfiers individuals might have a claim to. This question is of huge importance if one wants to avoid both, a) that basic need theories only require the production of nutritious porridge for all and b) that basic need theories ride roughshod over cultural differences in what counts as an adequate way of satisfying a basic need.

²⁴ Boss, "Basic human needs," 1148.

²⁵ Copp, "The right to an adequate standard of living."

²⁶ Boss, "Political theory and the politics of need."

As George Boss observes, most basic needs theorists try to solve this issue by claiming that

the activity of needs-meeting differs between cultures, these differences equate merely to different modes of satisfaction for common, universal human needs. Thus, for instance, one can meet the need for food in countless ways, and the precise manner of doing so is sensitive to cultural differences. This does not, however, change the fact that humans need food.²⁷

This is precisely what can be observed when David Miller,²⁸ for instance, argues that cultural norms and preferences might shape what counts as an adequate satisfier, or when Gillian Brock²⁹ claims that indigenous people must be able to meet their basic needs in “their own traditional ways,” since everything else would be disrespectful and violate their basic rights.

The issue that Boss³⁰ identifies with these approaches is that they therefore cannot define which goods are needed for satisfying a whole range of particular needs that are context-sensitive interpretations of the assumed universal basic needs. In addition, if there are *precise, determinate* satisfiers that are required for meeting needs in culturally sensitive ways, then *all these satisfiers* would be of the same moral importance as the general satisfaction of the basic needs themselves, which in turn would lead to an impossible calculation dilemma of trying to figure out which goods G need to be preserved for satisfying which currently unknown particular needs through particular satisfiers.

The only way one can seemingly avoid this problem is to reject the moderately demanding understanding of basic needs in favour of the minimalist understanding of basic needs, since already determining what people need to lead a (minimally) decent life leads to the above-described problems of indeterminate particular needs and an endless list of possible particular satisfiers. However, the minimalist understanding, while satisfying the conditions of easy definability and clear moral urgency, does not deliver an attractive account of intergenerational justice, since all that is required is to allow future people to survive, no matter whether they only ever eat nutritious porridge, or live pretty miserable lives.³¹ Therefore, I

²⁷ Boss, “Basic human needs,” 1144.

²⁸ Miller, “Grounding human rights,” 416.

²⁹ Brock, “Are there any defensible indigenous rights?,” 297.

³⁰ Boss, “Basic human needs;” Boss, “Political theory and the politics of need.”

³¹ What exactly counts as an attractive account of justice is of course a matter of debate. What I mean here is that the minimalist account does not fit with the views most authors in the literature defend, precisely because pure survival seems too low a bar for “justice.” However, this might just be a sign that much of the debate is heading in the wrong direction. See Casal,

will try to tackle Boss's well-founded criticisms head-on and defend the idea of a moderately demanding account of basic needs.

3. Needs: Political, not moral?

Now we have reached a point, at which George Boss raises the question of whether we should abandon standard basic needs theory? In his critique of standard basic needs theories, Boss³² claims that standard basic needs accounts which operate with a universal moral conception of needs ought to be rejected in favour of a political account of needs. According to Boss,³³ there are at least three good reasons why abstract moral accounts of needs ought to make room for a political conception of needs:

First, needs are inherently political, since it is only in concrete societal contexts that abstract lists of needs can be interpreted.

Second, if a given society could not decide for itself what counts as necessary for a decent life, this would be impermissibly and unjustifiably paternalistic and unfair.

Third, only concrete individuals in concrete historical and social circumstances can rank their needs and thus provide a moral hierarchy of needs.

Giving each society a say over defining basic needs and making subjective need-orderings a major object of concern, does not lead to relativism Boss claims, since a political account of need simply roots need theory in the here and now:

Such an approach is premised on abandoning the search for transcendental solutions, it does not attempt to assign needs normative importance in abstract, extra-political conditions, instead taking as its starting point the actual political settlements that one finds in contemporary life. This is, in other words, to theorise the politics of need as it stands today, rather than seeing theory as a way to pre-empt, get outside or solve the political. The subject matter of such a theory is, therefore, the concrete content of political conflicts and settlements in particular times and places, which might include various prevailing stances on need, some of which may be dominant, and some of which may be marginalised; the different distributions of harms, burdens, and benefits posited by those stances; the mechanisms by which any settlements have been brought about; the relations of power involved in those mechanisms; and the winners, losers and resistances thus produced. The goal

"Sufficiency" and Spengler, "Two Types of 'Enough,'" for interesting arguments regarding minimalist views.

³² Boss, "Basic human needs;" Boss, "Political theory and the politics of need."

³³ Boss, "Political theory and the politics of need."

of the theorist is to analyse these formations, revealing their dynamics, and thus identifying next steps; to explore, in other words, what ought to be done in specific contexts, rather than offering abstract solutions.³⁴

As the lengthy quote above details, Boss³⁵ argues for a political account of needs, which puts the political process of identifying what ought to count as an important need in a particular context centre stage. So why is this not the correct conclusion?

Moving the debate over what counts as the kind of basic needs connected to leading a decent life from abstract moral theory to the realm of the political does not solve any of the issues at hand. While Boss³⁶ once again is correct in highlighting that defining what counts as a necessary aspect of a decent life is without a doubt controversial, the element of controversy will not go away in the realm of politics. Just the opposite is the case: political decisions, even if based on compromise or even consensus, are based on the particular power relations that shape the society in question. While Boss³⁷ claims that theorists need to analyse these power dynamics and identify next steps, this does not offer any protection for those people whose needs are at stake, if a society for instance decides that social welfare payments will be halved, or that free health care is abolished. Boss³⁸ explicitly criticizes Lawrence Hamilton's³⁹ account of basic needs, which also acknowledges the political nature of needs, but which comes with strict universal rules for avoiding domination in political decision-making processes, for bringing in universal moral standards through the back door. This seems to suggest that Boss is willing to trust political definitions of what counts as needs, simply because politics is in Boss' view "a domain characterized by the fundamental yet contrary impulses of ongoing conflict and necessary cooperation" and not a domain of subjection, oppression, and elimination.⁴⁰ This is not to say that politics always has to be about subjection and oppression, but for a theory arguing that needs can only be defined politically, it is not good enough to trust in its necessarily cooperative spirit. Cooperation by some can still imply the subjection and even the elimination of others, as ample historical evidence shows.

³⁴ Boss, "Basic human needs," 1158-1159

³⁵ Boss, "Basic human needs;" Boss, "Political theory and the politics of need."

³⁶ Boss, "Basic human needs," 8

³⁷ Boss, "Basic human needs," 1159.

³⁸ Boss, Boss, "Political theory and the politics of need," 369-373.

³⁹ Hamilton, *The Political Philosophy of Needs*.

⁴⁰ Boss, "Needs, Politics, and the Climate Crisis," 1; Boss, "Political theory and the politics of need," 360.

In fact, if there is one thing one should take away from contemporary debates on epistemic injustice,⁴¹ it is that unjust background conditions and widespread epistemic oppression and exclusion will prevent any political definition of needs from being epistemically just and thus lead to further injustices. Therefore, any theory that wants to hold on to the goal of being culturally-sensitive, pluralist, and respectful of alternative epistemes, should at all costs avoid a solution that wants to put the definition of what justice morally requires into the hands of those that often are already (partially) responsible for upholding a system that produces certain types of morally problematic inequality and unjust outcomes and structures. It therefore is overly short-sighted to claim that each society should be able to decide for itself what counts as necessary for a decent life, without distinguishing between two problems: first, the abstract ideal of the needs that all people do and will have for at all being able to lead a decent life, namely a sufficient degree of health and of autonomy or practical agency. This is what Doyal and Gough⁴² defended, and it is something that can and must be decided in the abstract, since if it is left to political decisions, there are strong incentives in the game of power and advantage to prioritise one partial view over another. Second, there is the concrete interpretation of what “sufficient degree” in each society means and which *satisfiers* are needed for reaching said degree. The second aspect is indeed political, but it is not a process that can be left to each society as it sees fit, precisely because in many cases those who are marginalised will not be properly heard or they will be often enough simply overruled. This is precisely why Hamilton⁴³ combines his political account with a theory of non-domination.

In addition, *defining basic needs in the abstract is really the only option on the table*, if one talks about intergenerational justice, since future people simply cannot speak for themselves. If currently living people are put in a position where they have to decide what future people need, this most likely will lead to bad outcomes for future people, which is why any political account seems particularly worrying in this context if not all relevant parties are at the table. Interestingly enough, in his paper on needs and climate change, Boss⁴⁴ is less dismissive of abstract basic needs, precisely because he sees that future people are vulnerable to the decisions people make in the here and now. If one wants to make sure that future people can lead a decent life, one a) needs an abstract universal understanding

⁴¹ Fricker, *Epistemic injustice*; Catala, “Democracy, trust, and epistemic justice;” De Brasi, Warman, “Deliberative democracy;” Liveriero, “Epistemic injustice in the political domain.”

⁴² Gough, *A Theory of Human Need*.

⁴³ Hamilton, *The Political Philosophy of Needs*.

⁴⁴ Boss, “Needs, Politics, and the Climate Crisis.”

of what needs must definitely be met in order for a decent life to be possible (even if there might be other needs we do not know of, yet) and b) one cannot rely on the uncertain outcomes of political processes, in which concrete individuals in concrete historical and social circumstances can rank their needs and thus provide a moral hierarchy of needs, which will deeply affect the lives of future people.

This does not mean that a universal moral account is without problems when it comes to epistemic injustice and making assumptions about what future people need, but it certainly allows for easier inclusion of a wide variety of viewpoints. While Boss and Soper are right in identifying indeterminacy as a weakness of standard basic need accounts, it is not a knock-down reason to reject a moral account. In fact, the moral force of every person's right to be able to lead a decent life speaks strongly in favour of a moral account. Put somewhat simplistic, let's embrace the indeterminacy and see what follows from it, rather than throw out the child with the bathwater.

As I stated in the previous section, many of Boss's criticisms are quite convincing. My point therefore is not that these criticisms are wrong-headed or ill-founded, but that the conclusion drawn from these observations, namely that one needs a political account of needs, is false and from the viewpoint of intergenerational justice deeply problematic. Therefore, I rejected above the move to a political account of basic needs. This still leaves the question of how a moderately demanding account of basic needs can deal with some of the issues that Boss has identified and provide a plausible account of intergenerational justice?

4. A revised account of a moderately demanding basic needs (quasi-) sufficientarianism

From what I have argued so far, it becomes clear that any plausible needs-based account of intergenerational justice must be a moderately demanding one and one which addresses the two main criticisms provided by Boss and others: a) that the account has to allow for a wide range of possible satisfactions of the fairly abstract basic needs for leading a decent life; b) that future people will have the freedom to lead decent lives in different ways, which means that there might be further particular needs future people might have, based on their interpretation of what a decent life is. Within the context of intergenerational justice fleshing out how a moderately demanding account of basic needs-based justice can address both these issues might be easier than one initially thinks.

While it is true that it is impossible to know which particular needs future people in different places might have when it comes to education, social ties, and basic autonomy, what matters from the viewpoint of intergenerational justice is what kind of world is left behind for future people and which options are available for satisfying future people's basic needs, no matter what exactly they are. In other words, what seems to matter is that future people have the right kind of environment, as well as a wide range of options and goods at their disposal so as to live decent lives. This could be summarised in the form of too broad principles:

The decent environment principle: As a matter of basic needs-based intergenerational justice current people owe it to future people to leave a planet behind in which basic ecological balance (or stability) is available, and in which overall environmental conditions allow for the safe and secure survival of large parts of the population.

The range of options and goods principle: As a matter of basic needs-based intergenerational justice current people owe it to future people to leave a world behind in which future people can have the freedom to lead in various ways decent lives and to have the necessary goods for realising said freedom.

Needless to say, this is quite abstract, but the basic idea is what matters most for determining what current people owe future people as a matter of justice: the aim is to provide a theory that gives every future person a decent life, while also not riding roughshod over cultural differences and allowing for people to live decent lives according to their circumstances. Phrased differently, a pluralist, culturally-sensitive, non-authoritarian, freedom-preserving moderately demanding account of basic needs-based justice requires the preservation of a really wide range of goods, since the indeterminacy of future particular needs and satisfiers means that current people ought to provide too much rather than too little. That is one of the reasons why nutritious porridge is not enough and the bare minimum is not enough. As a very crude analogy, it's like trying to prepare for a group of guests, whose dietary and drink preferences one does not know: it probably would be nice to have a wide selection of drinks and foods available, so as to make sure everybody is happy. The big difference with the case discussed here is that we do not talk about the act of being a good host, but about what intergenerational justice requires.

If my argument is correct, then something quite peculiar follows: basic needs-based intergenerational justice is not really that sufficientarian anymore, if sufficientarian is taken to mean that one only has to leave as much as is absolutely necessary. Since one cannot know what future people actually will use to satisfy their needs, it is quite likely that current people leave an over-provision for the future. So that means while the

argument in this paper started with a sufficientarian vision, the upshot is actually quasi-sufficientarian, in the sense that current people should leave enough goods for a whole range of scenarios and pathways, which means future people will definitely have more than the bare minimum for leading a decent life. Doing so will avoid path-dependency and lock-ins, which would both undermine future people's basic freedom, as in a scenario in which all future people can only lead a decent life if they work in agriculture and grow a certain variety of grains, vegetable and fruits. Limiting future people's options in such a way does not respect their claim to leading a decent life which requires future people to enjoy a sufficient degree of autonomy/agency, including the freedom to live a decent life in line with different cultural views and conceptions of the good.

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