

## WELL-BEING AS NEED SATISFACTION

Marlowe Fardell

NEED-SATISFACTION theories of well-being are rare in philosophy.<sup>1</sup> When considered at all they are commonly dismissed as unviable.<sup>2</sup> However, I argue that such neglect and dismissal owe to mistaken preconceptions about needs' essential nature. Here I make a start on refuting these, defend a new theory of well-being as satisfying certain needs, and discuss its significant practical ramifications. Crucially, a need-satisfaction theory primarily aims to do something different from the theories that philosophers most commonly discuss. Those theories usually either detail what well-being consists of (e.g., pleasure, achievement, friendship), explain why the things that are good for people are good for people (e.g., because people desire them), or both. By contrast, a need-satisfaction theory's distinctive purpose is to specify how the constituents of well-being—whatever they are—are *structured*. As a result, a need-satisfaction theory does not necessarily conflict with theories of other types, and indeed may complement them.

The chief motivation of the need-satisfaction theory I defend is to vindicate a belief about well-being's structure integral to many people's self-understanding. This is that certain of their engagements are irreplaceable to the good of their lives. Some of the central constituents of their well-being appear to them to be non-substitutable: no other goods can make up for them if they are lost or forsaken. Examples of such engagements, for some people, include commitments to certain projects, tasks, or vocations; to maintaining communities, cultural practices, environments, or relationships; and to maintaining integrity of character or devotion to belief systems or causes. In academic and policy con-

- 1 In the evaluative context at hand (cf. section 4.1), a person's "well-being" is the state (realizable to different extents) in which they have, are doing, and are being things that are *finally good for them* to have, do, and be. Something is "finally good" if it is worth having, doing, or being *for its own sake*, not for any further purpose (cf. section 1 and Crisp, *Reasons and the Good*, 100). More exactly, a person's well-being also comprises their "ill-being": ways their life is bad that are not simply absences of good things. However, I will not discuss ill-being in this paper.
- 2 E.g., Griffin, *Well-Being*, 41–47.

texts, however, a very common assumption is that well-being is structured in a way that directly contradicts this appearance. It is often assumed that well-being comes (or can be represented as if it came) in generic *amounts*, contributed in varying degrees by the good things in a person's life. In other words, it is assumed that well-being can at least be represented in terms of a unidimensional, homogeneous currency.<sup>3</sup> Anything bearing or yielding the same amount of this well-being currency as another could substitute for it with no loss. I call this view "structural monism" about well-being.<sup>4</sup> Where structural monism fails to describe many people's well-being as they understand it, the need-satisfaction theory I defend accounts for the phenomena by building non-substitutability into the structure of well-being.

The first three sections of this paper defend an account of the needs relevant here. Section 1 presents an original analysis of the concept of "categorical" needs and defines the subtype of these I am especially concerned to defend, "personal needs." In section 2, against prevailing views assuming that categorical needs are exclusively minimal, universal, and moralized, I argue that personal needs are also categorically necessary despite being non-minimal, particular to individual persons, and nonmoralized. In section 3, I explain how personal needs possess this necessity, namely by being the inescapable practical demands of a person's commitments, specially defined. The next three sections develop a theory of well-being that adopts this account of needs, well-being as personal need satisfaction (WAPNS). In section 4, I seek to avert possible misunderstandings by further clarifying this theory's relations to other types of well-being theory. Sections 5 and 6 each defend one of its two central claims, both of which arise from personal needs' and commitments' twofold non-substitutability: by non-needs and by each other. Both aspects owe to personal needs' inescapability and commitments' centrality. WAPNS would vindicate the possibility of non-substitutable constituents of well-being and refute structural monism. In section 7, I discuss its considerable implications for aggregating and measuring well-being. Section 8 concludes.

A caveat. This paper aims to convey the potential appeal and fruitfulness of a theory that has many interrelated components. This necessitates covering a lot of ground, and means I cannot discuss and defend each component in as much

- 3 It is irrelevant which scale or units are chosen. For this paper's purposes it also does not matter whether a person's (a) *absolute total* well-being, or else only (b) *changes* in their well-being, are assumed to be representable by sums of a well-being currency. (The latter is less demanding, since it does not require any level of zero well-being to be defined.)
- 4 "Structural" since it need not involve a robust metaphysical commitment to there "really existing" only one constituent of well-being. As I will later explain, a strength of the view is indeed that the currency may be a formal construction (section 3.3).

detail as it ideally merits. Accordingly, the paper is better read as a detailed outline than a definitive statement.

# 1. WHAT ARE CATEGORICAL NEEDS?

On my proposal the concept of a personal need is a subtype of a more general need concept, so I begin by analyzing the latter. The latter needs are variously called “non-contingent,” “fundamental,” “absolute,” and “categorical” needs.<sup>5</sup> I use “categorical.” They are distinct from mere instrumental preconditions for further ends, for example, such as to have a knife in order to cut something. Rather, they are conditions somehow necessary in their own right for a person to satisfy. On my analysis, this general concept is underdetermined, possessing what can be called a “modular structure.”<sup>6</sup> It has several essential conditions, three with fixed content (“A modules”), and three others that, while also essential, are open to different specifications (“B modules”). In other words: (i) all categorical needs share certain essential features (A modules); (ii) different types of categorical needs exist, varying in other respects; and (iii) this variation is nevertheless further conditioned or restricted (by B modules). What this means will become clearer as I proceed.

The A modules of categorical need are as follows:

*Final* (A<sub>1</sub>): Categorical needs are conditions that it is finally necessary for the person who has them to fulfill.

*Real* (A<sub>2</sub>): There is a fact of the matter about what a person categorically needs independent of the person’s actually, presently apprehending it.

*Inescapable* (A<sub>3</sub>): A person’s categorical needs are not subject to their will, in that a person cannot simply decide what they do and do not need (at least not directly).

Let me unpack these. The first A module, *Final*, says that categorical needs are conditions it is necessary to fulfill for their own sake, irrespective of whatever

5 Reader, *Needs and Moral Necessity*; Thomson, *Needs*; Wiggins, “Claims of Need”; Frankfurt, “Necessity and Desire.”

6 I adapt this approach and terminology from Ingrid Robeyns’s mapping of the relations between various specific capabilities *theories* to the capabilities approach to development as a whole, which is underspecified (Robeyns, *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice*). My suggestion here is that this modular representation can also help with understanding *concepts* that are underspecified but that, analogously to Robeyns’s approach, nevertheless entail some restrictions on how they can be further specified while remaining species of the same general concept.

other purposes satisfying them might also serve. They are “finally necessary.”<sup>7</sup> As before, they differ from needs that are necessary only as prerequisites for fulfilling further conditions, such as means to further ends. As I will discuss at length, various accounts of categorical needs’ final necessity exist. The personal needs I defend are finally necessary due to their constitutive relation with what matters to a person. Other needs’ final necessity is held to relate to moral requirement.

Modules Real and Inescapable underlie the commonly drawn needs/wants distinction. That distinction is confused if it depicts needs and wants as exclusive opposites. Some goods can be both wanted and needed. Other things might be good for a person, but neither wanted nor needed (reading some potentially edifying but unexciting book, say). Still, this popular contrast points to a kind of “objectivity,” expressed by A2 and A3, that categorical needs possess but that desires for non-needed things lack: their existence is not contingent on whatever a person happens to *believe* or *want* to be the case.<sup>8</sup>

On my analysis, conditions A1–A3 are necessary and sufficient for a good or interest to be a categorical need. Nevertheless, however a specific subtype of categorical needs fulfills these, it cannot avoid also fulfilling the following modules B1–B3 under some specification or another:

*Normative alignment* (B1): The needs correspond to or derive from normative considerations of some kind.

*Scope* (B2): The needs are shared across persons to some greater or lesser extent.

*Extent* (B3): The needs correspond to some more or less expansive or minimal extent of attainment.

I do not propose that these B modules exhaust the respects in which different categorical need concepts might vary. These are just those that are relevant to distinguishing the two types of categorical needs that I discuss in this paper.

In most contemporary accounts, categorical needs correspond directly to standards of just minimal provision or assistance. A person’s needs are considered to be the necessary constituents of a relatively minimal, socially acceptable

7 This is like “finally good,” where, as before, something is finally good if and only if it is good to have or pursue or be for its own sake. It is common to identify final value with intrinsic value; however, since “intrinsic” tends to carry further connotations, it is best to separate the final/nonfinal and intrinsic/extrinsic distinctions (Korsgaard, “Two Distinctions in Goodness”; O’Neill, “The Varieties of Intrinsic Value”; Kagan, “Rethinking Intrinsic Value”; Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen, “A Distinction in Value”). I eschew “intrinsically” necessary for similar reasons.

8 Cf. Griffin, *Well-Being*, 41; Wiggins, “Claims of Need,” 6.

living standard, or indispensable requirements for elementary forms of human social functioning.<sup>9</sup> Common to these accounts is the idea that certain attainments—those possessing categorical necessity—are intimately connected with moral or political requirements on moral agents to ensure that other persons satisfy them. Theorists of such needs “want an analysis of needs such that they turn out to be morally compelling.”<sup>10</sup> Clearly, these needs must connect with some at least partial conception of a good life. However, only some of a person’s interests, specially interpreted, are picked out as relevant; typically, lacking what one needs is identified with suffering *harm* (a morally freighted concept). Thus these *essentially moralized* needs, as I call them, specify the B modules of the general concept of categorical need as follows:

*Moralized* (B1\*): If a person lacks an essentially moralized need, then others are *pro tanto* morally obligated to assist them in attaining it. Moreover, persons’ essentially moralized needs extend only so far as the conditions others are *pro tanto* morally obligated to ensure they can attain.

*Universal* (B2\*): Essentially moralized needs are necessary for human persons as such (at least in some society), and hence are shared universally by such persons (at least within that society).<sup>11</sup>

*Minimal* (B3\*): Essentially moralized needs correspond to a relatively minimal standard of attainment.

Yet accounts of essentially moralized needs typically do not propose these conditions as specifications of B modules. Explicitly or otherwise, they imply that Moralized (B1\*), Universal (B2\*), and Minimal (B3\*) are in fact A modules of categorical needs. That is, they appear to hold that something is a genuinely cat-

9 Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*; Wiggins, “Claims of Need”; cf. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*; Braybrooke, *Meeting Needs*; Doyal and Gough, *A Theory of Human Need*; Brock, “Morally Important Needs.” Another approach to moralizing needs, which I will not discuss, identifies needs specific to “private morality” (Brock and Reader, “Needs-Centered Ethical Theory”; Reader and Brock, “Needs, Moral Demands and Moral Theory”; Reader, *Needs and Moral Necessity*). That approach effectively weakens conditions B2\* and B3\* slightly, bringing such needs somewhat closer to the personal needs I defend (cf. esp. Reader, *Needs and Moral Necessity*, 65–66), but nevertheless keeps tight hold of B1\*.

10 Hooker, “Fairness, Needs, and Desert,” 185–86; cf. Doyal and Gough, *A Theory of Human Need*, 51.

11 Proponents of essentially moralized needs do hold that different people need different resources, depending on their physiologies (e.g., differences in metabolism, sex, mental or physical (dis)ability). But this variation in specific goods is required only to satisfy the same needs under general descriptions (Doyal and Gough, *A Theory of Human Need*).

egorical need if and only if it is essentially moralized, that is, also satisfies  $B_1^*-B_3^*$ . I consider rationales for this view in section 2. However, in this paper I argue that essentially moralized needs are not the only kind of categorical needs. The “personal needs” I defend are likewise categorical, but by contrast relate directly to central parts of well-being. Personal needs are categorical by virtue of likewise fulfilling the foregoing A modules, but in doing so they specify the B modules  $B_1-B_3$  differently from essentially moralized needs:

*Practical* ( $B_1^{**}$ ): Personal needs are practical requirements on a person entailed by commitments that matter to them personally. These commitments are not necessarily moral commitments. Neither are personal needs necessarily conditions that other people are morally required to help a person satisfy.<sup>12</sup>

*Particular* ( $B_2^{**}$ ): Personal needs are particular to individual persons, since other people will share these needs (be practically compelled in the same ways) if and only if they have the same commitments. Moreover, some persons’ commitments and personal needs may be ones that only some persons or even no other person shares.

*Expansive* ( $B_3^{**}$ ): Satisfying personal needs constitutes a major part of the well-being of persons who have them.<sup>13</sup>

To summarize, personal needs are defined as the objective, inescapable practical requirements entailed by a person’s particular commitments. A commitment here is specially defined as a personal engagement consisting of the personal needs it entails; it is a constellation of related personal needs.

I discuss commitment and inescapable practical requirement in detail in section 4 and yet further in section 7, but we can see already that personal needs and essentially moralized needs are very different. Essentially moralized needs define a standard of just provision that is supposed to guide moral and political distribution. By contrast, fulfilled personal needs constitute part of well-being. Specifically, they constitute part of well-being in a personal, agential context of

12 I allow for the possibility that moral requirements form a subset of a person’s personal needs—presumably among *every* moral agent’s personal needs. But this is by no means essential to the account.

13 Other expansive accounts of needs define them as the necessary constituents of a state of full human flourishing (Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*; Stewart, *Basic Needs in Developing Countries* and “Basic Needs Approach”; Grix and McKibbin, “Needs and Well-Being”). While interesting, these cannot be evaluated independently of the accounts of human flourishing in question (cf. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 7, 18), which I cannot do in this paper.

evaluation—how it is best for a person to *live*, at some specific time and place, in respect of what matters personally to that person. By “what matters personally to that person” I mean the ends particular to the person that determine what their living well consists of. Well-being in this context is partially analogous to the concept of utility or welfare in utility theory, which is a function of an agent’s preferences over outcomes (or “consequences”), and where, “in the description of a consequence is included all that the agent values.”<sup>14</sup> So, needs in this agential context concern not moral or political entitlement, but rather how an individual *needs to act*. Beyond needs to *have* or *receive* things, a person also and most importantly needs to *do* and *be* certain things and ways.<sup>15</sup> Yet despite stark differences between personal needs and essentially moralized needs, I argue that both kinds are genuinely categorical needs.

While section 3 makes the positive case for personal needs being categorically necessary, I first address the deep skepticism my proposal might already have provoked: it may seem obviously impossible for genuinely categorical needs to be personal. I consider two arguments expressing this reaction in different ways. These do not yet threaten personal needs having a role in a theory of well-being, but rather my proposal’s adequacy as an account of needs. This discussion also serves to illustrate the difference between the personal needs I defend and other accounts of categorical needs.

## 2. TWO OBJECTIONS TO PERSONAL NEEDS

### 2.1 *Skepticism about Inescapability*

The first of these objections is that personal needs cannot be sufficiently *inescapable* to count as categorical needs; in other words, they will not be able to fulfill A3 (Inescapable). Here critics may acknowledge that what matters personally to a person can be particular to themselves, but doubt that it can generate binding commitments. Lying behind this skepticism is the notion that persons *control* their personal ends. Critics allow that persons need certain things in order to

14 Arrow, “Exposition of the Theory of Choice under Uncertainty,” 254.

15 Cf. Max-Neef, Elizalde, and Hopenhayn, “Human Scale Development”; Wiggins, “An Idea We Cannot Do Without.” For the same reasons, and as will already have been apparent, commitments and personal needs are not restricted to narrow, self-involving interests. Separating a person’s other-regarding interests from their well-being is often justified for pragmatic reasons in interpersonal evaluative contexts (cf. section 4.1)—namely, to avoid double counting—but it makes little sense in the personal, agential context. A person’s narrow self is only one of their interests. This is again similar to utility theory, which (unless those are screened off for interpersonal purposes) counts a person’s other-regarding preferences among those that contribute to their welfare when satisfied.

attain these ends (i.e., instrumentally), but they think that persons choose for themselves which ends these are. For example, to be a painter a person needs enough money for canvasses, paints, brushes, and so on. That is true. But do they need to be a painter? As Harry Frankfurt puts the thought, although a person may “need the object, since it is indispensable to an end that he desires ... his need for it is his own concoction.”<sup>16</sup> Ends that matter personally to a person, on this view, can neither constitute nor entail categorical needs, because such ends are contingent on the person’s willing them to matter to themselves.

Some accounts of needs do appear vulnerable to this critique. Joseph Raz defends needs he also calls personal needs: “the conditions necessary to enable a person to have the life he or she has set upon”; that is, what a person needs in order to pursue and fulfill their goals. Not satisfying these “will make impossible the continuation of the life the agent has.”<sup>17</sup> The early David Miller similarly proposed “intrinsic needs” entailed by a person’s “life plan” (the “definite and stable idea of the kind of life that he wants to lead”).<sup>18</sup> In holding that some personally valuable aims may count as needs, Raz’s and Miller’s views are on the right track. However, they do not appear to survive the present objection: as Raz and Miller describe them, a person’s aims seem excessively subject to the person’s control. True, once a person has “set upon” a particular course of life, they need certain things in order to continue pursuing it. Yet this condition does not ensure that the person will not later simply change their mind and set upon something else. It is common for people to set upon careers and other projects without truly being committed to them, and later give them up. So, even if a person is entirely sincere, claiming to be committed to an aim does not entail enough inescapability to make it a need.<sup>19</sup> However, although I agree that this objection applies to Raz’s and early Miller’s accounts, that is because they concede too much to the voluntarist view. My account does not share the same weakness, since, as I argue in section 3, it rejects that view: despite being personal, engagements that qualify as “commitments” are not so subject to a person’s will. Before discussing that, however, I consider an objection a defender of essentially moralized needs might make. It partly depends on voluntarism, but also fails for other interesting reasons.

## 2.2. *Categorical Needs as Necessarily Essentially Moralized*

As mentioned, prevailing accounts of categorical needs seem to assume that,

16 Frankfurt, “Necessity and Desire,” 111; cf. Thomson, *Needs*, 88. See also Gillian Brock’s objections to Frankfurt’s own account, in “Morally Important Needs.”

17 Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 152–53, 377.

18 Miller, *Social Justice*, 128–35.

19 Reader, *Needs and Moral Necessity*, 63; cf. Doyal and Gough, *A Theory of Human Need*, 50–54.

necessarily, all categorical needs are essentially moralized needs. On my account, however, essentially moralized needs and personal needs are not necessarily in competition. Each of these subtypes of categorical need has a different function, suitable to different contexts of evaluation. Here I briefly explain why the contrary assumption is incorrect. Ultimately, my aim is not to critique essentially moralized needs, but rather to further distinguish them from personal needs and explain why for my purposes I can justifiably set them aside.<sup>20</sup>

Here is a drastically simplified rationale for essentially moralizing needs. It starts with the idea that certain losses or shortfalls constitute intrinsically morally salient harms to a person, harms that other people who are able to assist are morally required to prevent or ameliorate. Thus Moralized is the initial premise. It is precisely because of Moralized that Universal and Minimal allegedly hold. Universal would hold because morality and justice demand that obligation is impartial and hence uniform. Minimal would hold because people's obligations to promote others' well-being are limited. I say more about Minimal in a moment.

From here, the objection to personal needs must assume that the same concept of categorical needs will be appropriate to all contexts of evaluation. It follows that if the concept of personal needs is inadequate in moral and political contexts, then it is inadequate as a concept of categorical needs, period. That is to say, personal needs would fail to be categorical needs at all. Several related reasons might be given for why personal needs are inadequate in moral and political contexts. These center on the fact that people's aims are idiosyncratic and require differing amounts of resources to pursue, and it is assumed that people's aims are what generate personal needs. One concern is that if people were morally or politically entitled to the satisfaction of their personal needs, they would require an unjustly unequal distribution of resources. Different people would get different shares just because they have different personal aims. Moreover, since some aims are especially resource intensive, satisfying needs related to these aims might require an especially unjust extent of redistribution away from those people whose aims are modest. Furthermore, people might have a personal prerogative to privilege their own interests, which limits how much they are morally obligated to promote others' aims in the first place. Now add the earlier voluntarist skepticism about personal needs' supposed inescapability. If personal needs in fact fail to be inescapable, then far from financing people's aims whatever they are, it seems that justice demands instead that people *change* their aims to ones they can afford within their fair share of entitlements.<sup>21</sup> Similar considerations

20 My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that I expand this discussion.

21 On this last idea, that justice expects people to limit their ambitions, see Rawls, "A Kantian Conception of Equality," 97, cited by Scanlon, "Preference and Urgency," 663–64.

led the later David Miller to explicitly recant his earlier account in favor of an essentially moralized conception of needs. He argues that intentions and plans are too “contingent and alterable” to be suitably inescapable, and that only interests that society “validates” qualify as genuine needs.<sup>22</sup> Further strengthening the case that Minimal will be a feature of categorical needs: since the relevant standards are likely to be socially contested, the validated set of needs might extend only so far as “a kind of least common denominator” required for social consensus.<sup>23</sup> The thrust of these objections is that personal needs cannot be genuine needs, because, supposing they were, they would imply implausible moral and political obligations. Worse, some critics allege, claiming to have expansive needs is really just a device for special pleading, a disingenuous means of dressing up mere desires as politically important goals.<sup>24</sup> If there are categorical needs at all, it seems to some, their inescapability is inseparable from a moral/political imperative to ensure some universal minimum.

My account sidesteps these objections. Even setting aside the incorrect voluntarist assumption that personal needs are simply aims, it denies the crucial premise that the concept of categorical needs appropriate to moral and political contexts will have to be appropriate to every other evaluative context. A concept of needs operating in the agential context is not answerable to the same requirements of moral or political adequacy. (I return to the relevance of context in section 4.1.) I reemphasize that I am not aiming to refute essentially moralized needs—this paper neither affirms nor denies they exist. My argument here is only that they need not be the only needs that can fulfill the necessary and sufficient conditions of categorical needs A1–A3. This does not entail that personal needs have no significant political implications—they do. But these are less direct than those that essentially moralized needs allegedly have. As I discuss in section 7, personal needs will not normally be an appropriate standard of well-being evaluation for public purposes, but they have strong implications for which public standards of well-being evaluation *are* appropriate. In any case, I can now safely leave essentially moralized needs behind.

### 3. THE INESCAPABILITY OF PERSONAL NEEDS

This section explains how personal needs’ inescapability can stem from a normative authority that neither derives from nor entails moral obligation. As I soon

22 Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, 209. David Braybrooke makes precisely this criticism of the early Miller (*Meeting Needs*, 200, 308–9).

23 Goodin, “The Priority of Needs,” 624.

24 Flew, “Wants or Needs, Choices or Commands,” 216; cf. Wiggins, “Claims of Need,” 5.

explain, this inescapability takes the form of “practical necessity,” a special stringency attaching to some of the nonmoral as well as moral practical considerations a person faces, which often manifests phenomenologically. By “practical consideration” I mean a consideration that counts in favor of a particular person’s acting a certain way at some time and place. A practically necessary practical consideration becomes a “practical requirement.” Such considerations and requirements might otherwise be termed “reasons for action,” but I want to avoid any possible connotation that they must derive from a faculty of reason and/or that every rational agent faces the same considerations, even when persons are identically situated. They are *inputs* to practical reason, which may have sources that are arational and contingent upon people’s variable psycho-physical constitutions. As I argue below, however, they need be no less normatively authoritative for that.

The proposal that nonmoral personal interests might entail practical requirements contradicts the voluntarist view of nonmoral personal interests introduced in section 2.1. According to that view, people’s personal interests are nothing more than freely adopted and pursued goals, aims, or projects. However, while that is typically true of people’s less important ongoing engagements (e.g., hobbies or leisure activities, or careers pursued solely for instrumental reasons), the voluntarist view ignores the fact that people often also find themselves with allegiances and under demands they have not chosen but cannot deny. In the special sense I used in section 2, many people also have “commitments,” in the form of personal engagements that are or become beyond their control, and that they cannot rid themselves of at will. Such commitments are in this way inescapable. Common examples constituting commitments so defined, for some people, include special roles, certain projects, ideals, religious and cultural traditions, identities, relationships with family, friends, partners, communities, and so on, causes, and vocations. However, I cannot specify which concrete engagements are commitments and which others count only as hobbies, pastimes, or dispensable projects. For one thing, people’s hobbies and commitments vary from person to person; second, the same type of engagement may be only a hobby for one person and a commitment for another. Some people may paint, or garden, just because they enjoy doing so. Such pursuits might dominate a person’s leisure time, but by assumption they could give them up and do something equally or more pleasurable. For some dedicated artists or horticulturists, by contrast, it may be that they cannot but paint or garden; they pursue painting or gardening in particular for its own sake, and nothing can do as well. If that is the case, painting or gardening is among the second persons’ commitments. The courses of action these commitments dictate are practical requirements. The practical requirements a person’s commitments generate are the person’s personal needs;

they are the things the person needs to do with their life.<sup>25</sup> However, I do not need to make the stronger claim that every person has any commitments at all. To some people, things may only ever be generically good, with nothing in particular they need to do in life. That people may vary not only in their commitments but also in this respect owes to the “subject dependence” of commitments and personal needs that condition B2\*\* (Particular) expresses, and which I focus on in section 4.3.

As we will see is very important (section 6.4), commitments, and personal needs themselves, may be more or less specific. A person's commitments might be more general than painting: to a form of personal creative expression, perhaps, that might be pursued through different branches of art. A commitment to gardening might lead a person to a career with a botanical garden or arboretum, or otherwise perhaps to dedication to the upkeep and improvement of a community garden. In the other direction, in some cases it might be the creation of highly particular works or projects that are compelling. Close personal relationships tend to be similarly radically specific.

In supposing that at least some people have commitments, this proposal differs substantially from the voluntarist view. However, this is not to say that adopted engagements and commitments are mutually exclusive. An engagement might initially be entirely freely chosen, only subsequently becoming a commitment once the person is entangled with it. Moreover, the difference between voluntary choice and necessity might itself be vague. Even ostensibly willingly

25 The voluntarist view appears to be a common feature of a liberal outlook (e.g., Rawls, “A Kantian Conception of Equality,” 97; Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 168). By contrast, this account might seem to have a communitarian flavor in its insistence on limits to free choice and inclusion of social engagements among common examples of commitments. However, while persons' most important commitments are indeed often interpersonal relationships, this account describes a value relation that is not necessarily communal—commitments may be personal engagements that do not essentially require others' involvement. Moreover, while it is true that commitments phenomenologically manifest a sense of externality, the limits they entail are not “other” to the person; they exist by virtue of certain objects mattering specifically to them personally in a special way (more on this soon). Thus commitments do not include socially enforced demands that fail to correspond to what truly matters to individuals. (Not to say that some of a person's truly own commitments cannot conflict with and oppress other commitments the person has—a tyrannical love, perhaps.) So my account should not be read as a critique of liberalism as such. Indeed, in fairness to Rawls, he similarly rejects as unrealistic an image of the person without “devotion to specific final ends and adopted (or affirmed) values” (“Social Unity and Primary Goods,” 181). The compatibility of Rawls's view on aims and projects with my account would depend on how binding such devotion is upon the person. Moreover, my account's defense of incommensurability (section 6) is highly congenial to pluralist liberals, e.g., Berlin and Williams, “Pluralism and Liberalism.”

initiated engagements are often not the result of dispassionately considering alternative possible applications of one's talents, or comparing one's prospective compatibility with various possible friends or partners, for example. Our central engagements are often thrust upon us, where it can seem, as James Griffin observes, "they choose us."<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, the evidence that some people have commitments, not just hobbies and freely dispensable projects, is phenomenological—it comes from how some people experience some of the things that matter to them. In this experience, practical considerations can sometimes have the vivid character of absolute demands; they can *feel* binding. These are experiences of the "practical necessity" I mentioned, the term with this sense coming (I believe) from Bernard Williams.<sup>27</sup> Williams argues that some of the best support for *moral* obligations "independent of the will and inclination" comes from such a sense that some actions (including inaction) are impossible.<sup>28</sup> But as Williams also claims, I am arguing that *nonmoral* considerations can also be experienced by a person as practically necessary.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, however, this experience does not seem merely psychological, like an unreasonable brute urge or overwhelming aversion. Although it may sometimes present as irresistible, it is unlike the difficulty one would have with putting one's hand into a meat grinder, no matter the stakes.<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, if a person's will is weakened, then it may be only too easy for them to ignore demands that feel compelling—or else fail to find the necessary motivation. Rather, the compulsion has a normative aspect, the person acknowledging it as having authority over themselves, as reflecting a truth about what they (in particular, and there and then) should or should not do.

Moreover, although cases of moral impossibility are helpfully dramatic illustrations of practical necessity, it is not always so dramatic, tragic, or dilemmical. People's experiences and their negotiation of them is typically quite mundane. Helping a friend in some way or doing something for a community may feel, perhaps quite gently, like something that the person really must do even if not

26 Griffin, *Well-Being*, 54.

27 Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 196.

28 Williams, "Conflicts in Values," 75. Harry Frankfurt suggests that the "volitional necessity" he discusses can have a similar character ("Rationality and the Unthinkable," 182). He discusses what he calls "Luther cases," after Martin Luther's declaration: "Here I stand, I can do no other" (Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About," 86; cf. Watson, "Volitional Necessities," 100–101).

29 Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 196.

30 Véronique Munoz-Dardé considers what persons need for a flourishing life, and likens the impossibility of foregoing such needs to a psychological impossibility of this kind ("In the Face of Austerity," 232–33).

morally demanded. A person's sense that they should get on with carrying out a personal project, though subtle, may also have the character of a demand. Even so, in unfortunate circumstances the sense of these demands' necessity may come through more powerfully. There remains the constant possibility that neglecting even otherwise mundane requirements can lead to deeply regrettable mistakes and irrecoverable losses.<sup>31</sup>

Yet an experience of practical necessity is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for having a commitment. Another point of commitments' divergence from voluntary aims and hobbies is that the former are "objective" in the minimal sense of A2 (Real) as stated earlier. That is to say, whereas a person is conscious of their aims and hobbies, which commitments a person has is independent of whatever they actually, presently desire, care about, or believe matters to them. It is something a person may learn about themselves, and may forget. Indeed, this is another of the ways commitments and personal needs are resistant to free choice: like many normative truths, which a person has cannot be changed simply by their actually believing differently. So, although a person's experiences of practical necessity are perceptions of their personal needs when veridical, and so can be revelatory, they are also fallible. I am claiming only that experiences of practical necessity are good evidence for the existence of commitments, not that the former necessarily entail the latter.

The existence and nature of practical necessity (moral and nonmoral) calls for further investigation, but this paper has a different task.<sup>32</sup> Accepting that some of some people's interests appear to take the form of commitment, it considers how such people's well-being could be structured in a way that respects these appearances.

#### 4. WHAT KIND OF THEORY IS THIS?

This section aims to prevent misunderstandings of the objectives of well-being as personal need satisfaction, especially how WAPNS differs from other types of well-being theory. It makes a second pass over three key features I introduced earlier, situating them now within the philosophy of well-being: that personal needs are specific to an evaluative context (section 4.1); that WAPNS is primarily a structural thesis (section 4.2); and that personal needs are both personal and objective (section 4.3).

31 Cf. section 6.2.

32 For a penetrating discussion of Frankfurt's similar "volitional necessity," see Watson, "Volitional Necessities."

#### 4.1. Contextually Situated

WAPNS does not purport to apply to all contexts of evaluation. While many scholars are unused to specifying any particular evaluative context for their theories of well-being, I take seriously recent work arguing that doing so is indispensable. Some philosophers have noted this idea relatively briefly.<sup>33</sup> It is accepted as natural by investigators of well-being in other disciplines.<sup>34</sup> However, to date it is most fully developed in the work of Anna Alexandrova.<sup>35</sup> On Alexandrova's account, different concepts of well-being are appropriate to different contexts of evaluation, and these contexts and hence concepts are many and diverse. Crucially, context is not defined as some place and time of evaluation. Rather, it is determined by properties of the evaluating agent.<sup>36</sup> These properties include the evaluator's purpose in making the evaluation and the normative relationship between the evaluator and the subject (e.g., clinician to patient, scientist to subject, maternal/paternal, impartial/moral, and government to citizen). The meanings of evaluators' utterances of "well-being" and its cognates vary as these properties and circumstances vary. Alexandrova finds support for the context sensitivity of "well-being" in the actual practices of evaluators across different medical, social-scientific, and psychological fields, which do not aim to theorize well-being as something perspectiveless and all embracing—unlike the ostensibly all-purpose theories that philosophers tend to formulate. Rather, in these practices well-being is narrowly defined, relating to specific theoretical and practical purposes. In addition, often appropriate concepts of well-being are impacted by such practical factors as which forms of measurement are desirable and possible.<sup>37</sup> Other philosophers also express doubts about whether "well-being" is univocal.<sup>38</sup> They observe similar variation across contexts of ethical reasoning, with different well-being concepts relating to different moral, political, partial, and first-personal contexts.<sup>39</sup>

This paper is not the place to defend an account of well-being contextualism. My point is that need concepts appear to vary analogously by context, and that

33 Griffin, *Well-Being*, 1; Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 110–43.

34 See, e.g., Gasper, "Human Well-Being" and "Understanding the Diversity of Conceptions of Well-Being and Quality of Life"; Veenhoven, "Subjective Measures of Well-Being."

35 Alexandrova, *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*.

36 The view shares this feature with contextualist accounts of knowledge; in both cases the context-appropriate concept is "speaker relative."

37 Alkire, "The Capability Approach and Well-Being Measurement for Public Policy."

38 Kagan, "Me and My Life"; Campbell, "The Concept of Well-Being"; Feldman, "Two Visions of Welfare."

39 Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, ch. 3.

adapting such an account to the case of needs is promising. It would be no surprise if the semantics of “well-being” and “needs” were similar in this respect. Even when satisfied needs are not held to constitute aspects of well-being, I take it that needs are always at least essentially related to well-being. The need-satisfaction theory I propose here is specifically about the concept of well-being as a person’s living well according to what matters to them personally—that is, in the agential context. It does not claim to describe public concepts of well-being, or other concepts of advantage, appropriate for various moral or political purposes. As before, among other theories about those concepts, personal needs are not necessarily in competition with existing accounts of categorical needs.

My view of concepts and theories of needs differs a little from Alexandrova’s regarding well-being. Alexandrova thinks that any common core shared by well-being concepts would at most be very minimal.<sup>40</sup> By contrast, on my analysis categorical needs have a determinate common core: it is  $A_1$ – $A_3$ , with different evaluative contexts calling for specific concepts that differently specify  $B_1$ – $B_3$ .<sup>41</sup> Alexandrova is also skeptical about the prospects of a “master theory” of well-being, which would determine and map narrow concepts and intermediate-level theories to specific evaluative contexts. She is not opposed to one, but doubts that one really is possible, and in any case thinks we need not await one in order to address the theoretical needs of specific evaluative contexts. I similarly doubt that a master theory of categorical needs is possible, though my more determinate analysis of the concept may provide some guidance.<sup>42</sup>

There are not only explanatory reasons favoring a different concept of categorical need operating in personal, agential well-being evaluation. Not only is it possible to adequately theorize this concept without at once theorizing every other well-being and categorical need concept. Theorizing well-being specifically in the context of individual agency *matters*. Only a theory that is motivated in that context is capable of resisting the strongest challenges to the existence of non-substitutable interests. As I later discuss (section 6.3), one of these is initially motivated in precisely this same agential context. Furthermore, I argue that the nature of well-being in that context *prevents* the same concept of well-being from being simply exported to other evaluative contexts (section 7).

40 She floats this idea: “well-being is a summary value of goods important to the agent for reasons other than moral, aesthetic and political” (Alexandrova, *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, 153).

41 Further specifications and combinations thereof are possible besides the ones I have discussed. For example, in some contexts of public well-being measurement an appropriate concept of needs might specify  $B_1$  nonmorally,  $B_2$  universally, and  $B_3$  expansively.

42 See also section 7.2.

#### 4.2. *Primarily a Structural Thesis*

Some philosophers propose that theories of well-being fall into two categories, depending on their theoretical aims: enumerative theories and explanatory theories.<sup>43</sup> Enumerative theories specify which things are good for people, such as pleasure, achievement, knowledge, and friendship. Explanatory theories explain why the things that are good for people are good for people: for example, they are good because people desire them. These two theoretical aims can be pursued separately. A theory may enumerate the good things without providing any explanation for why they are good for people. A theory may explain why things are good for people without saying which those are. A theory of well-being may also do both, conjoining enumeration and explanation. As I said at the outset, WAPNS's primary aim is neither of these: primarily it is a theory of how well-being is *structured*. I propose that structural theories compose a third aim-sorted category of well-being theories—and that these may be developed separately from enumeration and explanation. Two major subcategories are fundamentally monistic theories and irreducibly pluralistic theories. WAPNS is in the latter.

That this third category of theory exists may be obscured by the fact that philosophers usually embed structural claims within otherwise enumerative and/or explanatory theories. For example, John Stuart Mill's theory that some pleasures are "higher" and others "lower" both enumerates two types of good *and* attributes a certain structure to well-being: namely, that some goods are somehow so much better than others that no number of the lower goods can be as good as a single higher good.<sup>44</sup> James Griffin's theory of well-being is enumerative, explanatory, and structural.<sup>45</sup> He both argues that well-being is the fulfillment of informed desires and enumerates a number of goods that a person will desire if they are sufficiently informed. Nothing yet follows about structure; absent further theory, desire and list views are silent on whether well-being is monistically or pluralistically structured. Indeed, even though Griffin enumerates several qualitatively different goods, he argues that the possibility of rational trade-offs between them entails the existence of a unidimensional scale of well-being after all.<sup>46</sup> I discuss this inference in more detail in section 6.3. The structural position Griffin defends is ultimately monistic, then, with a relatively shallow pluralistic

43 Crisp, *Reasons and the Good*, 102; Fletcher, "A Fresh Start for the Objective-List Theory of Well-Being"; Woodard, "Classifying Theories of Welfare."

44 Mill, *Utilitarianism*. Mill's ostensible monism (only utility matters) thus coexists with a form of structural pluralism.

45 Griffin, *Well-Being*.

46 Albeit one that is frequently incomplete. Griffin, *Well-Being*, 90 and ch. 6.

veneer.<sup>47</sup> This is unlike, for example, John Finnis's and Martha Nussbaum's accounts.<sup>48</sup> These likewise enumerate and explain, but also embed the claim that well-being's multiple elements are deeply plural: goods of different kinds cannot be substituted in value, and hence a unidimensional scale is unavailable.

Nevertheless, structural theses have been formulated independently of explanatory and enumerative positions, as in the notable example of John Broome's account.<sup>49</sup> Broome formally derives a constructed monism (similar to Griffin's informally inferred position)—while abstaining as far as possible from any particular account of which things are good or why they are good for people.<sup>50</sup> Such abstention is advantageous and deliberate. Broome extracts and defends only a structure that is commonly assumed by preference-satisfaction theories (notably orthodox welfare economics) and consequentialist moral theories, which allows him to avoid complications and objections specific to those theories. WAPNS is likewise primarily a structural thesis because it defines commitments and personal needs in terms of a certain *form* that practical considerations can take. It likewise leaves open both which commitments people have and why, ultimately, people have commitments at all. In my case, only a structural theory is necessary to achieve my motivating goal: accounting for the apparent non-substitutability of some of at least some people's interests. By focusing on structure my account is less open to criticism for unrelated reasons.<sup>51</sup> In the following section I do discuss some highly contentious possible supplements to WAPNS; however, these are optional, and not part of WAPNS itself. Indeed, I offer WAPNS in an ecumenical spirit: something philosophers of different enumerative and explanatory persuasions might accept and build into their own more committed theories. WAPNS's primary adversaries are not those philosophers' accounts, then, but other structural theses—above all the formal structural monism of the type Broome defends (section 6.3). The two theories have precisely the same structural aspirations but draw precisely opposite conclusions.

47 Cf. Mason, "Value Pluralism."

48 Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*; and Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*. Finnis and Nussbaum frame their accounts in terms of a person's "basic values" and "central capabilities," respectively. They are nevertheless describing essential elements of persons' good or well-being specific to the evaluative contexts they address.

49 Broome, *Weighing Goods*.

50 Broome, *Weighing Goods*, 18–20, 32.

51 Rawls has called this strategy the "method of avoidance" ("Justice as Fairness," 231), which we might also call the "don't pick fights you don't have to" principle.

### 4.3. Enumerative and Explanatory Connections

Although the substance and explanatory basis of well-being are not WAPNS's main targets, it is not entirely neutral about them. Moreover, some theories may more naturally complement WAPNS than others.

One possible explanatory complement is an idealized-attitude-satisfaction theory. Such a theory holds that well-being is the satisfaction of certain attitudes the person (or a close counterpart) would have when placed in suitably idealized circumstances. Different versions select different attitudes, such as what the person would desire, or value, or care about; different idealizations include being fully informed, fully rational, and having undergone "cognitive psychotherapy."<sup>52</sup> Such theories allow that a person's well-being can diverge from what the person actually desires or believes it to be. So they secure the minimal objectivity that condition Real expresses. At the same time, the person's well-being remains dependent on what *they* (or at least a close counterpart) would desire, believe, care about, or value. So they also secure the "subject dependence" that Particular expresses, that is, that a person's personal needs and commitments depend on features of the particular person who has them. An example taking this suggestion could hold that a person's commitments are what the person would care about in the right circumstances. Conjoining WAPNS adds the supposition that such caring has the character of practical necessity, entailing practical requirements that are inescapable.

An idealized-attitude-satisfaction explanatory theory could fit well with WAPNS in these respects. Many philosophers are happy with such theories, so perhaps they would be happy with this combination. However, I think other reasons favor a different sort of explanatory theory.<sup>53</sup> Claims that well-being depends on people's attitudes—even idealized attitudes—face the objection that evaluative attitudes have a sort of "objective feel." When a person considers an object *worthy* of desiring or caring about, that seems like something about the object to be discovered—something the person forms a judgment *about*, that they respond *to*. Correct evaluation seems to depend not on the *person's dispositions to value* a thing, but rather on what the thing is *really like*, prior to the person's being disposed to appreciate that.<sup>54</sup> Practical necessity as I interpret it shares this character. On the other hand, some think that a good's objective feel strongly suggests that its value is "impersonal," that is, independent of facts about particular subjects. But as concerns the good specifically of persons, this con-

52 E.g., Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right*.

53 I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that I expand on the view to follow.

54 Cf. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, 225; Griffin, *Value Judgement*, 28–29.

clusion is antithetical to personal needs. WAPNS agrees with other philosophers who argue that impersonal accounts of persons' good implausibly attenuate the sense that their good is *theirs*.<sup>55</sup> If commitments were subject independent then the needs they entail would fail to be personal. So, WAPNS might appear forced to choose between objectivity and subject dependence.

However, that is not so. As Peter Railton notably recognizes, attitude dependence is not the only form of subject dependence. Furthermore, I add, the objective-feel objection only tells against attitude dependence. Railton partially agrees with attitude-dependence accounts. He argues that what matters to a person, the person's good, aligns with what a certain idealized counterpart to the person would endorse for them.<sup>56</sup> However, these endorsements do not *determine* the person's good. Rather, the determinants of a person's good are those natural facts about the person and the world that would *give rise* to those endorsements (i.e., cause and explain them).<sup>57</sup> These are facts about the particular person's psychological and physical constitution, as well as the circumstances they occupy.<sup>58</sup> Railton's view would underwrite Real and Minimal just as well as ideal-attitude-satisfaction views, and I think has the added advantage of accounting for evaluative judgments' objective feel. Similar to Railton's view of idealized endorsements generally, experiences of practical necessity are most plausibly not what determine a person's commitments and personal needs. These experiences are more likely similarly "indicators" of what matters to the person, serving a "heuristic function."<sup>59</sup> The real determinants, which underlie practical necessity, are more likely the person's actual psycho-physiological state and circumstances. I believe practical necessity has an objective feel because through it a person confronts who they really are, which, though not immutable, cannot be changed at will.

What might such determinants be? I suspect psychological drives play a large role. I have in mind drives to altruism, understanding, self-expression, ar-

55 Although I cannot defend it here, I also accept the "internalist requirement" that, lest a person's good be "alien" to them, it necessarily must engage or resonate with them in suitable circumstances (Railton, "Facts and Values," 9; Rosati, "Internalism and the Good for a Person"). I think it must be possible for a person to experience their personal needs' practical necessity.

56 Railton's usages appear to accord with my understanding of "what matters to a person" (section 1): the ends that determine what the person's good or living well consists of. A person's good is living in accordance with what these ends recommend or require of the person.

57 The endorsements' "reduction basis."

58 Railton, "Facts and Values," 25, and "Moral Realism," 175–76. This does not entail that a person's attitudes are never among these.

59 Railton, "Facts and Values," 25.

tistic creation, technical mastery, athletic excellence, maintaining traditions or practices, and possibly finer-grained drives than these. More specific commitments may partly be determined by the way other facts about the person and their circumstances channel these drives toward their most complete fulfillment. Among the facts channeling a person's vocational-type commitments will be their endowments, abilities, and opportunities.<sup>60</sup> A person may discover what "they were made to do"—no nonnaturalistic teleology required. Commitments to personal and social relationships would have different causes. The necessities involved are those of love, true friendship, loyalty, and allegiance, which are radically particular and often accidental. In these cases, facts about a person's *history* would be central: paths along which attachments, dependencies, vulnerabilities, and acknowledged obligations develop.

I sketch this contentious and underdeveloped account only to indicate how I would seek to complement WAPNS. I reemphasize that it is no part of WAPNS itself, which is open to other possibilities. Theories proposing universally shared elements of well-being, for example, might also usefully incorporate WAPNS (though admittedly deleting the second condition in B2\*\*), by formally representing those elements as commitments that all persons necessarily have. These might be explained by facts about some uniformly shared human or rational nature. For others who wish to account for cross-personal variation, "commitments" can serve as a label for values that vary across persons but that are nevertheless objective, in the sense that they do not vary due to differences in mere preferences or other subjective attitudes. That WAPNS does not commit either way in this regard may be advantageous. With it, people with different metaethical inclinations may be able to agree that well-being is objective to an extent, and that it has a certain structure—without needing to agree on well-being's deeper nature.

Briefly now regarding enumeration, it is true that WAPNS claims that certain kinds of things constitute commitments for some people (special roles, tasks, vocations, special relationships, connections with traditions, cultures, etc.). This is unlike the typical philosophical enumerative theory, however, which purportedly describes the well-being of the human being as such. WAPNS does not claim that persons have any particular commitments. WAPNS does not claim that the above kinds of things necessarily formally constitute commitments for every person. WAPNS does not even claim that every person has commitments at all. Those assumptions are not mandatory for anyone, and my theoretical goals do not require them. I hope it is now clear enough what those goals broadly are.

60 Compare Railton, "Facts and Values," 26–28.

## 5. FIRST STRUCTURAL CLAIM: NON-SUBSTITUTABILITY OF NEEDS BY NON-NEEDS

### 5.1. *Satisfying Needs Is Strongly Superior to Satisfying Non-needs*

WAPNS distinguishes between commitments on the one hand and non-need goods (“non-needs”) on the other. To be clear, non-needs are not just any unnecessary items. A necessary means to a worthless end is likewise worthless, so not a good and not a non-need in my terms. A non-need here is finally good, but is not finally necessary. WAPNS’s first major structural claim is that the division between commitments and non-needs is irreducibly one of kind, not quantity. This proposal resembles the familiar idea that some of a person’s interests possess a qualitatively distinct significance, lacked by other interests. Specific proposals have called such interests “simply, important,” “heavyweight,” “central,” and “global.”<sup>61</sup> More than this, WAPNS mirrors the common further claim that there is no number of noncentral goods that it is better for a person to have than satisfying their central interests. In contemporary terms the latter are “strongly superior” to the former.<sup>62</sup> WAPNS holds that, in any context of decision, no number of satisfied non-needs can take priority over a person’s satisfying their needs. The language of decision and priority suits WAPNS better, because it more clearly avoids any suggestion that commitments and personal needs can be evaluated by how good or better they are in the abstract (see section 6). Whichever terms we use, the claim that well-being is structured by such a difference between types of good is not novel.

WAPNS’s contribution is how it supports such a division. A tenable strong-superiority claim cannot allow the value difference between central and noncentral interests to be ultimately reducible to a magnitude, however large. It requires an account of why the value difference between the goods is irreducibly nonquantitative—why else is one type superior to the other, if not that it is simply greater in value?<sup>63</sup> WAPNS’s distinction between commitments and non-needs fulfills this requirement. Commitments’ place in a person’s well-being lies not in their incrementally increasing it, but in their imposition of inescapable requirements (personal needs). So, not only does this make commitments and non-needs irreducibly qualitatively distinct parts of well-being, the inescapability of personal

61 Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism” and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 182–83; Griffin, *Well-Being*, 45–46; Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*; Dorsey, “Headaches, Lives, and Value.”

62 Arrhenius, “Superiority in Value”; Dorsey, “Headaches, Lives, and Value.”

63 Compare Julius Schönher’s (“Still Lives for Headaches”) effective critique of Dale Dorsey’s (“Headaches, Lives, and Value”) strong-superiority proposal.

needs also overrides the mere attractions of non-needs. Section 6 expands on both points in detail.<sup>64</sup>

Although WAPNS concentrates on defending the existence of commitments/personal needs, it does not rule out other interests besides commitments in some way also being finally necessary in at least some people's lives—such things as being truly understood by others and sexual fulfillment, perhaps. In the following subsection I consider whether another need might be some degree of pleasure.<sup>65</sup>

### 5.2. Needs and Pleasure

Just as on the issue of what, specifically, people's commitments are, WAPNS itself does not take a stand on which goods are non-needs. That is the role of an enumerative theory. Still, the distinction may seem undermotivated without a concrete example, even if it is no part of WAPNS proper.

I think many people's non-needs include pure pleasure and sensory gratification in general, although my discussion will focus on the former. This is not to deny that such experiences are *good*, nor that other things equal it is better to have more of them. The point is that their attractions lack the sense of normative authority bestowed by practical necessity. Baldly stated, this position may nevertheless seem implausibly ascetic or puritanical; however, considering the nature of pleasure and of the needs in question suggests it is not.

First, the qualification *pure* is important. Pure pleasure is pleasure unattached to otherwise valuable ends; in its case pleasure itself is the end, and the aim pursued is worthwhile just insofar as it yields pleasure. This pleasure is unlike the satisfactions gained from fulfilling independently worthwhile ends. In these cases the end is not sought for the sake of the pleasure it brings; the plea-

64 There is an important objection to strong superiority that I take very seriously but cannot discuss in this paper. This is that alleged strong superiorities are far less plausible when the benefits and costs at stake are risky, and in real life risk is omnipresent. People seek relatively trivial goods despite risking extreme losses (e.g., death)—and it seems perfectly rational to do so if the risk is sufficiently small. This, critics conclude, is inconsistent with the serious good risk being strongly superior to the trivial goods. They allege that risk-based arguments such as this decisively support aggregating individually trivial benefits/costs together with serious ones, at least in risky cases (Norcross, "Comparing Harms"; Bailey, "Is It Rational to Maximize?"; Fried, *Facing Up to Scarcity*; Horton, "Aggregation, Risk, and Reductio"). A response I intend to make in future work points to the typical *necessity* of such risks, when justified, in view of the person's life as a whole—needs are risked for other needs. I will show that strong superiority is much more defensible when normative necessities embrace not only minimal goods and moralized harms, but also final ends playing a central and organizing role in people's lives.

65 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for recommending that I discuss this.

sure is *taken in* the fulfillment, a reflection of the end's final value. So prioritizing independently worthwhile ends such as personal needs ahead of pure pleasure does not entail sacrificing pleasure *per se*. A life satisfying personal needs will be full of pleasures, often deep, taken in those satisfactions. Similarly, interpersonal relationships valued for their own sake may be categorically more important than pure pleasure, but nevertheless partially constituted by shared pleasures. Consider the purpose of celebrations, and the difference between going to a fair-ground with friends or family and going alone.

Second, *complex* pleasures, even if valued partly purely for their own sake, are also the intelligible objects of commitments. Aiming to be a connoisseur of certain goods or experiences might constitute a genuine commitment for some person. Actively seeking out complex experiences, critiquing them, and gathering a store of knowledge about them is not just passively gratifying, but rather an actively pursued project that might plausibly entail personal needs on the person. Complex pleasures are also often bound up with traditions. Distinguishing "higher" from "lower" pleasures (as on Mill's view), which I endorse here, is sometimes regarded as elitist.<sup>66</sup> However, that danger is avoided if we allow that different things objectively matter to different people (section 4.3). Being an aficionado of science-fiction B-movies might be as much a more than merely gratifying project for one person as cultivating a taste for and knowledge of fine whiskies is for another.

Third, even if no single episode of pure pleasure could be categorically necessary, Richard Arneson might be right that some sufficient amount of "cheap thrills" is somehow essential to a person's well-being.<sup>67</sup> So, the relative priority in some situation of a commitment *vis-à-vis* pure pleasure might partly depend on whether the person already has enough pure pleasure in their life. An extreme case: a person faces a fork in their life between an unremittingly dull grind necessary to live up to some commitment and a more pleasant life that abandons that commitment. Here we would have a need confronting another need, and we have not yet considered how conflicts among needs might play out. It is also worth noting that it could make a difference in varying but related cases whether having enough pleasure is *finally* necessary or else only instrumentally required—say for one's sanity and capacity to pursue other ends that *are* final. If the more pleasant life won out, but *only* because the dull grind was psychologically crushingly difficult, then we would know the following: if the dullness were at least bearable, and a genuine commitment were at stake, then in that case abandoning the commitment would not be the better choice.

66 Mill, *Utilitarianism*.

67 Arneson, "Human Flourishing versus Desire Satisfaction," 120.

6. SECOND STRUCTURAL CLAIM:  
NON-SUBSTITUTABILITY OF NEEDS BY OTHER NEEDS

6.1. *Commitments Are Irreducibly Plural*

The following two possible structural features are compatible: (i) well-being being divided into two or more qualitatively irreducible types of good (e.g., needs and non-needs), and (ii) the goods within each type ultimately being only quantitatively distinct in final value from each other. In other words, irreducibly separate types of good could still be quantitatively measurable along scales of final value, their separateness meaning only that they lie on different scales. Applied to the present case: despite their separateness from non-needs, personal needs might all still lie on a scalar dimension of their own. Personal needs' place on the scale could depend on how much of a common value they possessed or realized—degree or strength of “neededness.” If that were the case, then the satisfactions of different personal needs could substitute for each other in final value, and WAPNS would be false.<sup>68</sup>

That is not the case, however. Commitments are not only irreducibly separate from non-needs; they are also irreducibly separate from one another. This claim is not an independent addition to WAPNS. It follows from the same reason that commitments and personal needs are separate from, and superior to, non-needs: namely, the finality and inescapability of personal needs' necessity. That *each* commitment's demands are inescapable means that the latter are not answerable to *anything* else that might be achieved by acting differently. So, the attractions of non-needs are irrelevant to the bindingness of a given commitment's demands—yet equally so are the demands of the person's *other* commitments. Commitments' satisfactions are *severally* finally necessary, each for its own sake and no other. They are not jointly necessary for any further purpose that they might together serve. This, then, is what precludes placing personal needs on a single dimension of neededness. Such a dimension would falsely presuppose that personal needs' values derive from something they all possess or yield when satisfied, or a purpose that commitments serve in common.

Personal needs and commitments could sensibly be called “incommensurable” with each other. Yet this status differs from the forms of incommensurability philosophers today more frequently discuss, such as items' or outcomes' relative values or orderings being *vague*, or else *incomparable* with respect to some scale

68 More generally, anything called a “need” fails in fact to be necessary whenever its value consists in how *much* it is “worth” or how *much* good/harm meeting it does/averts. In such cases, talk of need is redundant (cf. Fletcher, “Needing and Necessity,” sec. 5).

or value. In WAPNS, it is not that there is some difficulty or indeterminacy in placing personal needs' and commitments' satisfactions on a scale of neededness (or contribution to well-being generally), but rather that they are what Ruth Chang terms "noncomparable" with respect to it: the basis of the desired comparison itself is unavailable.<sup>69</sup> Commitments and personal needs are incommensurable because it makes no sense even to imagine placing their satisfactions on such a dimension; the dimension itself is at fault.<sup>70</sup> Commitments' irreducible separateness, and consequent non-comparability, ensures the non-substitutability of their satisfactions by each other. Their substitutability would require a common denominator, but no such thing can be defined even in principle (or even formally, see below).

Unlike the relation between commitments and non-needs, however, commitments are not generally related to each other by further hierarchies of strong superiority (not to rule out such relations ever *also* existing). Since all entail inescapable demands, commitments are in that respect all on a par.<sup>71</sup> I discuss how else they relate in sections 6.3 and 6.4.

## 6.2. Necessity and Incomplete Lives

Commitments' irreducible plurality and noncomparability implies a sense in which a person's satisfying their commitments is "essential to" their well-being. One way of interpreting this "essential to" relation has absurd consequences. On that interpretation, satisfying every commitment is necessary in order for a person to count as having a good life. It follows that a person would simply fail to live a good life whenever even one of their personal needs went unsatisfied. This picture makes well-being out to be implausibly binary: a person either has a good life or they do not. Surely people can live quite good lives even when some of their central interests are unfulfilled (by far people's usual condition).<sup>72</sup>

WAPNS agrees. A person's life can indeed be quite good despite some of their commitments being unsatisfied. However, it matters how we understand this. As before, commitments are distinguished from non-needs by all sharing a crucial

69 Chang, "Introduction," 29. Chang designates noncomparability a "formal failure of comparability," and argues that "practical reason never confronts agents with comparisons that could formally fail" ("Introduction," 29). (For this reason, her discussion is relatively brief, and I have not seen other authors take it up.) That might be so, but it does not prevent anyone from falsely *believing* that certain things are comparable, when they are in fact non-comparable, in terms of some value.

70 Cf. Berlin, *Liberty*, 216; Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason," 362–63; Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values*, 177; Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism*, 56.

71 I do not mean in Chang's technical sense of parity ("Introduction").

72 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to address this concern.

characteristic: they all entail inescapable requirements, that is, personal needs. This is what gives all commitments their paramount importance, in the form of their strict priority over the dispensable attractions of non-needs. However, this is not a characteristic that commitments fulfill in lesser or greater amounts. Again, this importance they share does not designate a further end that all commitments serve, or a separate "value" that satisfied needs all produce, bear, or contribute to in varying degrees. In particular, "well-being" is not such an end, something further and separate from satisfied commitments. Rather, satisfied needs and commitments each *constitute* a central part of well-being, and separately so. There is nothing to this part of a person's well-being *over and above* the several satisfactions of their disparate commitments. In the personal context WAPNS describes, then, well-being is a composite inseparable from its constituents, and does not come in degrees as such.<sup>73</sup>

While a person's life can be going better or worse in respect of their commitments, then, that means nothing more than that certain of their commitments are being satisfied or not. True, we can count the number of commitments the person is satisfying. This part of a given person's present well-being could be placed on an ordinal scale according to that number. Other things equal, it is better for a person to be higher on that scale, fulfilling more practical requirements than fewer. However, the normative pressure to be higher on the scale is not anything separate from the commitments' several demands. The person does not gain anything their commitments have in common when placed higher on that scale; the scale and their place on it have no significance independent of the importance of meeting their commitments' demands taken separately. Relatedly, it is not better or worse in itself to have more or fewer commitments. If a person gains a new commitment, that person does not *thereby* come to enhance their well-being in respect of their commitments when they satisfy it, compared to when they had fewer commitments.

Well-being's fragmented structure should not be considered an unfortunate obstacle. It is necessary for registering and explaining the possibility of losses that are irrecoverable in final value. Again, I take this possibility to be a feature of many people's self-understandings. This is not the obvious fact that it can become physically impossible to turn back time and replicate or replace certain concrete items or events. As the qualification "in final value" indicates, the phe-

73 The relation between commitments and well-being closely resembles the relation between the virtues and eudaimonia in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* under the "inclusive end" interpretation. On that interpretation, eudaimonia is composed of fulfilling the several virtues, rather than forming a further, unitary, ultimate aim that fulfilling the virtues serves (the "dominant end" interpretation) (Ackrill, "Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*").

nomenon is that certain things essential to a person's life cannot be recouped and canceled out in value by later gains. If the damage to a person's well-being constituted a reduction of some further end that the lost thing served, then the loss could be compensated perfectly by anything that served that further end to the same or better extent. But on the contrary, the damage is a loss of a kind of final value inherent to, and inseparable from, the particular damaged thing.

The consequences of commitments' irreducible plurality are also not all so dour. It also entails that no losses or failures can diminish those commitments that *are* satisfied. Failures do not produce a loss that can be set beside and offset the positive values of satisfactions. Even a single fragment of a person's well-being could be perfect, complete in its own way, and a source of joy, even if the person's life were in other respects damaged beyond repair.

### 6.3. Non-substitutability, Monism, and Independence

The assertion that commitments are irreducibly plural is not only or even primarily an ontological claim, a denial that ultimately there "really exists" only one component of well-being. That is just as well, because there is a greater challenge to it than that. A sophisticated objection to the possibility of non-substitutable interests need not rely on metaphysics. The truth of a *formally derived* structural monism I have mentioned previously would suffice to defeat WAPNS. As in Griffin's theory, this variety of structural monism is even consistent with a relatively superficial, merely enumerative pluralism: the objector can allow that the constituents of well-being are qualitatively distinct, while also showing that a unidimensional well-being scale can be formally derived nevertheless. All it needs is that outcomes can be ordered by how good they are for a person—a "betterness" ordering—where this ordering satisfies the axioms of utility theory.<sup>74</sup> It is positively helpful to address this objection, because structural monism also *requires* this to be the case.

Appealing to utility theory's axioms is attractive to those who accept that a person's *rationality* requires their ordering of *preferences* to satisfy them.<sup>75</sup> It takes substantial argument to conclude that a person's well-being aligns with their rational (and presumably adequately informed) preference, but suppose for the sake of argument that can be done.<sup>76</sup> If it can be done, and if a person has a betterness ordering satisfying the axioms, it can be shown that such a quantitative attribute as "good" exists as a formal construction. Despite being only a formal

74 At least generally. A structural monist might allow that the ordering is in some cases incomplete.

75 Following, e.g., Savage, *The Foundations of Statistics*.

76 Broome, *Weighing Goods*, ch. 6.

construction, this attribute functions as a sort of fiat currency. It denominates the values of all the practical considerations favoring an outcome (e.g., satisfying a personal need). How good an outcome is for a person can be represented as if it were the sum of amounts of good borne or produced by the individual considerations favoring the outcome.<sup>77</sup> Differential amounts of this currency that practical considerations bear or produce would represent ratios of substitution between them.

For present purposes I need not rehearse this derivation, because WAPNS does not dispute its validity. WAPNS objects to the applicability of one of the necessary assumptions—variously termed an axiom of “independence” or “separability”—in comparisons involving commitments and personal needs. Structural monism actually requires different but related independence assumptions to apply in several different dimensions of comparison, but I concentrate on the independence or otherwise of practical considerations within outcomes.<sup>78</sup> I will refer to it simply as Independence, and for efficiency, introduce and discuss it in its direct connection with (non-)substitutability and needs.

Take any two (sets of) practical considerations  $x$  and  $y$  bearing on the choiceworthiness of an outcome. An outcome's choiceworthiness here is the extent to which it is better or worse than others for the person in question to choose. For argument's sake suppose that the extent to which fulfilling  $x$  increases the outcome's choiceworthiness relative to fulfilling  $y$  can be represented by the ratio  $c_x/c_y$ , where  $c_x$  and  $c_y$  are real numbers. Independence here is the assumption that  $c_x/c_y$  will be unaffected if any further (sets of) practical considerations (i.e., besides  $x$ s and  $y$ s) also come to bear on the outcome in question.<sup>79</sup> It means,

77 Broome, *Weighing Goods*, chs. 4 and 6. Again, the scale and units of these quantities are irrelevant.

78 Much discussion of independence focuses on whether rational preferences between *alternative outcomes*  $x$  and  $y$  are independent of whether any other *outcome*  $z$  is also available to choose, i.e., the “independence of irrelevant alternatives.” Like Broome (*Weighing Goods*, ch. 5) and many others, I find counterexamples to the rationality of independence in this dimension implausible (cf., famously, Allais, “The Foundations of a Positive Theory of Choice Involving Risk and a Criticism of the Postulates and Axioms of the American School”). Less commonly discussed is my focus here: whether the practical influence of considerations *within the same outcome* are independent of each other. Broome considers one way that independence might fail in this dimension—if the good of an outcome is affected by how a given sum of benefits is distributed across different persons involved—but not the more extensive, intrapersonal failure I discuss presently.

79 Since  $c_x/c_y$  may not be fixed, but rather vary systematically depending on how many  $x$ s and  $y$ s are already present: more precisely and generally, the effect of Independence is that  $c_x/c_y = f(x, y)$  is unaffected by adding any further (sets of) practical considerations. That is,  $c_x/c_y = f(x, y, z) = f(x, y)$  for all possible (sets of) additional practical considerations  $z$ .

then, that  $c_x/c_y$  comes to represent not only  $x$ 's and  $y$ 's relative bearing on the choiceworthiness of the outcome at hand. That ratio is converted into a ratio of how much each  $x$  and  $y$  are *worth*, representable by differential amounts of a currency of substitution that is valid in any circumstances of choice.<sup>80</sup> As mentioned, well-being itself functions like such a currency—i.e., structural monism is true—if and only if Independence (plus other necessary axioms) holds over a choiceworthiness ordering (now converted into a betterness ordering) that includes all of the good-making things in a person's life. But consider even just the case in which Independence (and the other axioms) always applied to the satisfactions of personal needs and their relative bearing on outcomes' choiceworthiness. Independence here would ensure the formal existence of such a thing as the unidimensionally measurable value of neededness, or commitment-living-up-to. All personal needs/commitments could be represented as possessing it in different amounts, implying rates at which each could be perfectly compensated by others. As I said in section 6.1, if this were the case, then in fact no personal "need" or "commitment" would be any such thing, since satisfying any other (or combination of others) would do equally well in sufficient number. So, Independence must fail to apply to personal needs' and commitments' practical bearing, in order for them to exist at all.

#### 6.4. Comparing Outcomes without Commensurating Practical Considerations

Independence might be considered indispensable to rational comparison for one or both of the following reasons. First, it might be considered indispensable for its own sake, as a requirement of simple consistency (utility theorists often style their axioms this way). This reason is unconvincing. It is true that the ratio  $c_x/c_y$  should consistently be insulated from wider considerations  $z$  just so long as  $z$  are irrelevant; however, whether wider considerations are sometimes relevant to  $c_x/c_y$  is precisely what is in question. And if they are, then consistently ignoring them would be irrational. Second, Independence might be considered indispensable to rational comparison for what it yields—namely, the formal existence of a commensurating currency. Yet rational choice does not obviously require any such thing. From the possibility of rationally comparing and ordering outcomes, it does not follow that practical considerations are already commensurated ahead of that comparison.<sup>81</sup> An ordering of choiceworthiness could emerge from deliberation without having been predetermined so, and in-

80 N.b., "worth" here does not designate subject-independent value specifically; if the considerations are subject dependent, it means "worth to the person."

81 Wiggins, "Incommensurability"; Hurley, *Natural Reasons*; Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*. Equivalently, from the incommensurability of  $A$  and  $B$  in value (specific-

stead “sum up deliberation effected by quite other means.”<sup>82</sup> Still, I accept that this reply will only carry conviction if we can say what such other means might be—some alternative mode of rationally ranking outcomes that does not rely on predetermined measures of how much the things involved are worth. Indeed, I suspect that the ultimate reason for structural monism’s predominance is this: a presumption that *there is no alternative* to rational choice consisting in maximizing such a commensurating value (or being representable as such). Some explicitly claim as much.<sup>83</sup>

In fact, negating Independence over personal needs and commitments is informative. It entails that they instead stand in some holistic relation of *interdependence*—meaning that personal needs’ effects on an outcome’s overall choiceworthiness do depend on which other personal needs are at stake in those circumstances. That is to say, somehow what determines whether one outcome involving personal needs should be chosen over another must be how different fulfillments of those needs fit together, not how they sum. The truth of such a holism would block the conversion of comparisons of choiceworthiness in particular situations into verdicts about some circumstance-independent quantitative value that satisfied personal needs possess or yield.<sup>84</sup> If a satisfactory account of holistic practical reason can be given, then, the non-substitutability of certain interests is vindicated.

Not enough work to this end has been done, perhaps partly because the no-alternative belief is widespread. But Henry Richardson’s account of specificationist deliberation provides a strong start.<sup>85</sup> Specification exploits the fact that norms, principles, ends, and so on are often relatively general, not tied to concrete particulars. Suppose a person goes to a restaurant just because they want something for dinner. That particular restaurant is their specific aim, but only because it *counts as* a specification of the general aim. In a real-life case,

---

ly their *noncomparability*), it does not follow that *outcomes* featuring *A* and *outcomes* featuring *B* are *incomparable* (i.e., by choiceworthiness).

82 Wiggins, “Incommensurability,” 361.

83 Bailey, “Is It Rational to Maximize?”

84 It is always possible to preserve Independence by redescribing outcomes in ways that take holistic effects into account. However, doing so risks triviality and would ensure it here (Broome, *Weighing Goods*, 107–10, 186–92; Hurley, *Natural Reasons*, 264; and Wiggins, “Incommensurability,” 360–61, 370–71).

85 Richardson, “Specifying Norms as a Way to Resolve Concrete Ethical Problems” and *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*. Richardson builds on ideas from Dewey, “Human Nature and Conduct”; Kolnai, “Deliberation Is of Ends”; and Wiggins, “Deliberation and Practical Reason” (interpreting Aristotle). Specification is not the only mode of holistic deliberation (cf. Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, ch. 7), but it is especially powerful.

other considerations will probably also favor that particular restaurant. However, as far as this general aim is concerned, any other restaurant will do—as will eating at home, even. If the restaurant is closed, they can go somewhere else and still satisfy that aim. Apparent conflicts between a person's commitments and personal needs may also often be resolvable through specification; commitments' requirements are often quite specific, but need not be maximally so. If the commitments at stake (and/or the particular needs a given commitment entails) are sufficiently nonspecific, then the apparent conflict might be resolved by specifying them in new ways that are mutually compatible. A toy example: a young person drawn to a career as a doctor might also be drawn to a career as a scientist. Both might be independently compelling for this person, non-substitutable. However, ultimately what are non-substitutable may not be those specific careers, but more general commitments to humanitarian aid and scientific inquiry. Rather than evaluating the person's choice between doctor and scientist in terms of how *much* well-being they would give the person (or the *strengths* of the reasons favoring each), choice may be guided by the possibility of satisfying both nonnegotiable commitments—how to *reconcile* rather than simply *arbitrate between* them.<sup>86</sup> This often involves rejecting a given menu of alternatives and thinking creatively—really deliberating.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps becoming an immunologist would constitute a specification of both commitments; the person could investigate the nature of human beings and their pathogens while potentially also improving many people's health. Much more needs to be said about how specification works (especially when applied in complicated scenarios and its implications for interpersonal decision making), but the example illustrates some of the proposal's essential features. First, specification's holism: the acceptability of any particular new specification of a personal need partly depends on the availability of appropriate compossible specifications of the other commitments/personal needs at stake. In structural monism, a practical consideration contributes the same increase to an outcome's total choiceworthiness irrespective of how it is specified (side effects excepted); in specificationist deliberation, any given consideration's practical influence cannot be evaluated independently of its compatibility with other considerations. Second, although specification admits a lot of flexibility, the commitments and personal needs in their general forms are not what are exchanged; *they* remain non-substitutable. Relatedly, there is no claim that appropriate specifications necessarily are available. Whether they are de-

86 Cf. Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, secs. 18 and 20.

87 N.b., this is not to say that a creative outcome arrives *ex nihilo*. It remains a discovery about something—namely, about the logical and physical possibilities that the actual state of the person and the world enable.

depends on how forgiving the world is, and on how general or specific the person's commitments and needs are. So there remains the frequently realized possibility of irrecoverable losses being unavoidable—and this is realistic.

## 7. PRACTICAL RAMIFICATIONS

### 7.1. *Undercutting Aggregation at Its Foundations*

Despite being immediately situated in a personal evaluative context, WAPNS has strong indirect implications for theorizing interpersonal contexts. It bears on theories that primarily operate in interpersonal contexts, but that nevertheless critically rely on assumptions about well-being at a personal level. A clear example is classical utilitarianism, which simply extrapolates intrapersonal evaluation to interpersonal evaluation, “extend[ing] to society the principle of choice for one [person].”<sup>88</sup> In that theory, an individual's well-being is a quantity of personal utility, and social well-being is just the sum of personal utilities. Yet it is only if Independence is assumed in the personal case that well-being can be represented by anything that, like utility, is apt to be summed at all—let alone summed together with other individuals' well-beings. Personal needs halt this and any analogous transition at a basic level, because they are in the same evaluative context as—and so compete with—personal utility.<sup>89</sup> The distinctive significance of personal needs is that they too bear on outcomes in individual-level decision making. If WAPNS describes some people's well-being, and since personal needs do not aggregate and trade off, then the transition from one-person aggregation to multiperson aggregation cannot get started.

This barrier is unlike possible external constraints on interpersonal aggregation that do not themselves rebut *intrapersonal* aggregation (e.g., demands of equality or rights, and technical difficulties with merging different persons' preference orderings). This barrier also differs from that posed by positing a diversity of incommensurable “values” or “elements” or “constituents” of well-being at a high level of generality and ostensible universality. WAPNS's objection to aggregating theories is more challenging, because it confronts the derivation of interpersonal from intrapersonal aggregation on that derivation's own, intrapersonal territory.

A reasonable reply is that much of the “aggregation” discussed in recent mor-

88 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 24.

89 Personal needs compete only with concepts of utility that are (or turn out to be) equated with welfare *qua* well-being, which purely formal decision-theoretic notions of utility may avoid doing. On confusing different interpretations of utility and utility theory, see Broome, “Utility”; and Bermúdez, *Decision Theory and Rationality*, 46–50.

al theory is not the aggregation of well-being as such. WAPNS's bearing on such approaches is accordingly less direct. Some things called aggregation are innocuous. Take outcomes differing only in total number of lives saved. WAPNS does not deny that saving the greater number there is better. Other things equal, in a given situation, satisfying a greater number of practical requirements than fewer is a better choice. Again, this owes to the several pressures of those requirements, not of any such thing as betterness over and above those, even as a formal construction. So, "numbers count" or aggregate in this sense (and much more needs to be said about this), but it matters crucially what we are counting. Of course, usually other things are not equal, and for this reason contemporary discussions shift to aggregating persons' *claims* (to be benefited or spared from harm by the decision maker's choice) weighted by different *strengths*.<sup>90</sup> There is no space here to discuss WAPNS's bearing on strength-weighted claims properly; however, I can say that its implications would depend on whether pairwise strength comparisons are interpreted as independent of each other or not. If they are, then an argument like that in section 6.3 can be run, and strength-weighted claims reduce to quantities of a welfare-like currency. If they are not, then strengths—now representing only circumstance-dependent contributions to choiceworthiness—are the *outputs* of some form of non-aggregating, holistic deliberation. WAPNS's critique of intrapersonal well-being aggregation lends support to such non-aggregating approaches, and may influence what form they should take.

## 7.2. *On the Supposed Indispensability of Unidimensional Measurement*

Another possible reply is that scales of overall well-being—and corresponding overall "levels"—are practically indispensable. If that were so, and WAPNS ruled these out, WAPNS might be less plausible. WAPNS does indeed rule out aggregating central parts of personal well-being entirely. Yet the truth here is more complicated than this thought suggests. In the first place, on closer inspection, rationales for unidimensional measurability are often doubtful. A unidimensional measure is neither the only nor obviously the best manner of representing a person's overall well-being in any evaluative context. Once more, clearly there are intermediate states between full attainment and total shortfall of well-being, yet those need not be defined as gradations on a single scale. As with the incomplete personal life (section 6.2), they are often better identifiable by noting the various qualitatively distinct respects in which a person is doing well and falling short. Measurement is not necessarily unidimensional or even scalar at all.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, when different considerations point in different directions, unidi-

90 E.g., Voorhoeve, "How Should We Aggregate Competing Claims?"

91 Cartwright and Runhardt, "Measurement," 271–76.

mensional measures obscure relevant information. Knowing the *different* ways that evaluated subjects improve or deteriorate can be crucially important—ways that fully aggregating measures brush over. Most of the pressure toward unidimensional metrics comes from needing to know what to *do* with this information—that is, determine which policies are best to choose. Yet as before, from the possibility of ranking outcomes it follows neither that the values involved can be condensed into a single value, nor that condensing them is necessary for arriving at that ranking. Other modes of decision are possible, though beyond the scope of this paper.

Concepts and theories of well-being appropriate to different contexts of evaluation are often related, and WAPNS has implications for which public-context concepts, theories, and measures will be appropriate. It provides foundational support for the growing movement toward disaggregated, multidimensional well-being measures.<sup>92</sup> These often treat discrete dimensions as incommensurable, and indeed, in some cases, severally *necessary* for well-being.<sup>93</sup> Disaggregated approaches are potentially vulnerable to critics favoring economic-welfare analysis, which is structurally monistic and rigorously motivated at a foundational level—but also undermined there by WAPNS. Potentially, too, in specific contexts appropriate dimensions to measure might often be identified as the *kinds* of things, under general descriptions, many subjects under investigation require in satisfying their personal needs.<sup>94</sup> That is, macro-level dimensions could sometimes be generalizations about which personal needs those subjects have and the necessary means to satisfying those. Nevertheless, WAPNS is not necessarily opposed to constructing fully aggregating, unidimensional measures, which may remain desirable for certain public purposes, notably, tracking well-being in a population.<sup>95</sup> What matters is *how* these are constructed and interpreted. Such indices require assigning weights to measured dimensions, which might be expected to erase personal needs' non-substitutability. It would indeed, if the weights supposedly reflected ratios of some common final value, that attainments along each dimension all possessed or realized in different quantities (section 6.1). However, that need not be so if the weights instead represent circumstantial social priorities. This is precisely how thoughtful social and policy scientists think of them: in addition to other normative and pragmatic factors,

92 Not least the capability approach to human development.

93 Cf. Fardell, "Conceptualising Capabilities and Dimensions of Advantage as Needs."

94 Cf. Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, 109.

95 Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi, *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*.

setting weights is a political decision.<sup>96</sup> The weights' circumstantial nature also limits how accurately indices can be extrapolated over time and across relevantly differing circumstances.<sup>97</sup> It can be useful and worthwhile to retain a given index over a limited period to track changes through time, updating the weights only periodically. But it must be borne in mind that this is a pragmatic choice that may reduce the index's synchronic fidelity.<sup>98</sup> Above all, it can never simply be assumed that such a measure can be carried over for use in different practical applications. Moral and political theory might benefit from better recognizing that the scope for abstraction from specific aggregation and measurement exercises is limited. If nothing else, WAPNS's defense of non-substitutable interests helps to explain at a foundational level why such difficulty exists.

## 8. CONCLUSION

If we are truly to promote it, we must recognize that many people's well-being is structured by personal needs. Personal need is a variant of a general concept of categorical need. On the dominant conception of categorical needs, the latter are necessarily minimal, universal, and moralized. By contrast, though likewise genuinely categorical, personal needs represent practical requirements entailed by central elements of a persons' well-being—their commitments. The theory of well-being based on this account of needs has a number of distinctive features. First, it is primarily specific to a personal evaluative context: that of an agent's decision-making in regard to all of the things that matter to them. Second, it is a theory of well-being's structure, not of which specific things form part of people's well-being or why they do so. Third, its avoidance of commitment on these scores enables it to identify important parts of well-being that are both objectively important and subject dependent in a relatively neutral way. Yet the theory's most practically significant features are the foundations it provides for the apparent non-substitutability of some people's commitments. This non-substitutability is twofold: such commitments are non-substitutable both (i) by non-needs and (ii) by each other. Both relations owe to the inescapability of commitments' requirements, that is, personal needs. Personal needs' significance lies precisely in their appearance in the personal, agential context, since it is there that the most formidable theories opposing non-substitutability are likewise initially motivated. Personal needs present a foundational challenge to any ethical, political, or economic theory that relies on intrapersonal aggregation to

96 Cf. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 78–79; Wolff and de-Shalit, *Disadvantage*.

97 Alkire, "The Capability Approach and Well-Being Measurement for Public Policy," 618.

98 Alkire et al., *Multidimensional Poverty Measurement and Analysis*, 212.

be in principle unproblematic. This paper's practical conclusions have not been entirely negative, however. It also prepares the way for developing non-aggregating approaches to both intra- and interpersonal decision making involving needs. These are steps toward understanding the possibility of an ethical and social order that takes people's central interests seriously.<sup>99</sup>

marlowe.fardell@gmail.com

#### REFERENCES

- Ackrill, J.L. "Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*." In *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, edited by Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 15–33. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.
- Alexandrova, Anna. *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Alkire, Sabina. "The Capability Approach and Well-Being Measurement for Public Policy." In *The Oxford Handbook of Well-Being and Public Policy*, edited by Matthew Adler and Marc Fleurbaey, 615–44. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Alkire, Sabina, James Foster, Suman Seth, Maria Emma Santos, José Manuel Roche, and Paola Ballon. *Multidimensional Poverty Measurement and Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Allais, Maurice. "The Foundations of a Positive Theory of Choice involving Risk and a Criticism of the Postulates and Axioms of the American School." In *Expected Utility Hypotheses and the Allais Paradox: Contemporary Discussions of Decisions under Uncertainty with Allais' Rejoinder*, edited by Maurice Allais and Ole Hagen, 27–145. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979.
- Anscombe, G. E. M. "Modern Moral Philosophy." *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (January 1958): 1–19.
- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. 2nd ed. Translated by Terrence Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999.

99 The account developed in this paper has been significantly impacted by discussions over the years with Senthuran Bhuvanendra, Thomas Carr, Amanda Hughes, Douglas Lavin, Polly Mitchell, Véronique Munoz-Dardé, and James Wilson. It has also greatly benefited from the comments of two anonymous referees. I would also like to thank my doctoral examiners Michael Otsuka and Ingrid Robeyns for their comments on earlier incarnations of some of these ideas. Special thanks to Daniel Ranweiler for his generous comments on draft versions of this paper.

- Arneson, Richard J. "Human Flourishing versus Desire Satisfaction." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 113–42.
- Arrhenius, Gustaf. "Superiority in Value." *Philosophical Studies* 123, nos. 1–2 (March 2005): 97–114.
- Arrow, Kenneth. "Exposition of the Theory of Choice under Uncertainty." *Synthese* 16, nos. 3–4 (December 1966): 253–69.
- Bailey, James W. "Is It Rational to Maximize?" *Utilitas* 10, no. 2 (July 1998): 195–221.
- Berlin, Isaiah. *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Berlin, Isaiah, and Bernard Williams. "Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply." *Political Studies* 42, no. 2 (June 1994): 306–9.
- Bermúdez, José. *Decision Theory and Rationality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Brandt, Richard. *A Theory of the Good and the Right*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.
- Braybrooke, David. *Meeting Needs*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- Brink, David O. *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Brock, Gillian. "Morally Important Needs." *Philosophia* 26, nos. 1–2 (March 1998): 165–78.
- Brock, Gillian, and Soran Reader. "Needs-Centered Ethical Theory." *Journal of Value Inquiry* 36, no. 4 (December 2002): 425–34.
- Broome, John. "Utility." *Economics and Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (1991): 1–12.
- . *Weighing Goods: Equality, Uncertainty, and Time*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991.
- Campbell, Stephen M. "The Concept of Well-Being." In Fletcher, *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, 402–13.
- Cartwright, Nancy, and Rosa Runhardt. "Measurement." In *Philosophy of Social Science: A New Introduction*, edited by Nancy Cartwright and Eleonora Montuschi, 265–87. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Chang, Ruth. "Introduction." In *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, edited by Ruth Chang, 1–34. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Crisp, Roger. *Reasons and the Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Dewey, John. "Human Nature and Conduct." 1922. In *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 14, edited by Jo Ann Boydston, 1–12. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967.

- Dorsey, Dale. "Headaches, Lives, and Value." *Utilitas* 21, no. 1 (March 2009): 36–58.
- Doyal, Len, and Ian Gough. *A Theory of Human Need*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991.
- Fardell, Benjamin. "Conceptualising Capabilities and Dimensions of Advantage as Needs." *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 21, no. 3 (2020): 263–76.
- Feldman, Fred. "Two Visions of Welfare." *Journal of Ethics* 23, no. 2 (June 2019): 99–118.
- Finnis, John. *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- Fletcher, Guy. "A Fresh Start for the Objective-List Theory of Well-Being." *Utilitas* 25, no. 2 (June 2013): 206–20.
- . "Needing and Necessity." In *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, vol. 8, edited by Mark Timmons, 170–92. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- , ed. *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015.
- Flew, Antony. "Wants or Needs, Choices or Commands." In *Human Needs and Politics*, edited by Ross Fitzgerald, 213–38. Rushcutters Bay, Australia: Pergamon Press, 1977.
- Frankfurt, Harry. "The Importance of What We Care About." In *The Importance of What We Care About*, 80–94.
- . *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- . "Necessity and Desire." In *The Importance of What We Care About*, 104–16.
- . "Rationality and the Unthinkable." In *The Importance of What We Care About*, 177–90.
- Fried, Barbara H. *Facing Up to Scarcity: The Logic and Limits of Nonconsequentialist Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Gasper, Des. "Human Well-Being: Concepts and Conceptualizations." In McGillivray, *Human Well-Being*, 23–64.
- . "Understanding the Diversity of Conceptions of Well-Being and Quality of Life." *Journal of Socio-Economics* 39, no. 3 (June 2010): 351–60.
- Goodin, Robert E. "The Priority of Needs." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 45, no. 4 (June 1985): 615–25.
- Griffin, James. *Value Judgement: Improving our Ethical Beliefs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

- . *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.
- Grix, Marco, and Philip McKibbin. "Needs and Well-Being." In Fletcher, *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, 292–306.
- Hooker, Brad. "Fairness, Needs, and Desert." In *The Legacy of H. L. A. Hart: Legal, Political, and Moral Philosophy*, edited by Matthew Kramer, Claire Grant, Ben Colburn, and Antony Hatzistavrou, 181–99. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Horton, Joe. "Aggregation, Risk, and Reductio." *Ethics* 130, no. 4 (July 2020): 514–29.
- Hurley, Susan. *Natural Reasons: Personality and Polity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Kagan, Shelly. "Me and My Life." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 94, no. 1 (June 1994): 309–24.
- . "Rethinking Intrinsic Value." *Journal of Ethics* 2, no. 4 (1998): 277–97.
- Kekes, John. *The Morality of Pluralism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Kolnai, Aurel. "Deliberation Is of Ends." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 62, no. 1 (June 1961): 195–218.
- Korsgaard, Christine M. "Two Distinctions in Goodness." *Philosophical Review* 92, no. 2 (1983): 169–95.
- Kropotkin, Peter. *The Conquest of Bread*. 1892. Rookhope, UK: Aziloth Books, 2017.
- Mason, Elinor. "Value Pluralism." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/value-pluralism>.
- Max-Neef, Manfred, Antonio Elizalde, and Martín Hopenhayn. "Human Scale Development: An Option for the Future." *Development Dialogue* 1 (1989): 7–80.
- McGillivray, Mark, ed. *Human Well-Being: Concept and Measurement*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan and UNU-WIDER, 2007.
- Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1863.
- Miller, David. *Principles of Social Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- . *Social Justice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.
- Munoz-Dardé, Véronique. "In the Face of Austerity: The Puzzle of Museums and Universities." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (June 2013): 221–42.
- Nagel, Thomas. *The View from Nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Norcross, Alastair. "Comparing Harms: Headaches and Human Lives." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 26, no. 2 (April 1997): 135–67.

- Nussbaum, Martha C. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- O'Neill, John. "The Varieties of Intrinsic Value." *Monist* 75, no. 2 (April 1992): 119–37.
- Rabinowicz, Wlodek, and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen. "A Distinction in Value: Intrinsic and for Its Own Sake." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100, no. 1 (June 2000): 33–51.
- Railton, Peter. "Facts and Values." *Philosophical Topics* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 5–31.
- . "Moral Realism." *Philosophical Review* 95, no. 2 (April 1986): 163–207.
- Rawls, John. "Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 223–51.
- . "A Kantian Conception of Equality." *Cambridge Review* 96 (1975): 94–99.
- . "Social Unity and Primary Goods." In *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, edited by Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, 159–85. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- . *A Theory of Justice*. Rev. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Raz, Joseph. *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Reader, Soran. *Needs and Moral Necessity*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2007.
- Reader, Soran, and Gillian Brock. "Needs, Moral Demands and Moral Theory." *Utilitas* 16, no. 3 (November 2004): 251–66.
- Richardson, Henry S. *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- . "Specifying Norms as a Way to Resolve Concrete Ethical Problems." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 19, no. 4 (Autumn 1990): 279–310.
- Robeyns, Ingrid. *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2017.
- Rosati, Connie. "Internalism and the Good for a Person." *Ethics* 106, no. 2 (January 1996): 297–326.
- Savage, Leonard J. *The Foundations of Statistics*. New York: Wiley and Sons, 1954.
- Scanlon, T. M. "Preference and Urgency." *Journal of Philosophy* 72, no. 19 (November 1975): 655–69.
- . *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Schönherr, Julius. "Still Lives for Headaches: A Reply to Dorsey and Voorhoeve." *Utilitas* 30, no. 2 (June 2018): 209–18.
- Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- . *Inequality Reexamined*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

- Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.
- Stewart, Frances. "Basic Needs Approach." In *The Elgar Companion to Development Studies*, edited by David Clark, 14–18. Cheltenham UK: Edward Elgar, 2006.
- . *Basic Needs in Developing Countries*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.
- Stiglitz, Joseph, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi. *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*. Paris: Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques, 2009.
- Stocker, Michael. *Plural and Conflicting Values*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Thomson, Garrett. *Needs*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987.
- Veenhoven, Ruut. "Subjective Measures of Well-Being." In McGillivray, *Human Well-Being*, 214–39.
- Voorhoeve, Alex. "How Should We Aggregate Competing Claims?" *Ethics* 125, no. 1 (2014): 64–87.
- Watson, Gary. "Volitional Necessities." In *Agency and Answerability: Selected Essays*, 88–122. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Wiggins, David. "Claims of Need." In *Needs, Values, Truth*, 1–57.
- . "Deliberation and Practical Reason." In *Needs, Values, Truth*, 215–37.
- . "An Idea We Cannot Do Without: What Difference Will It Make (e.g. to Moral, Political, and Environmental Philosophy) to Recognize and Put to Use a Substantial Conception of Need?" *Philosophy of Need, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 57 (2005): 25–50.
- . "Incommensurability: Four Proposals." In *Needs, Values, Truth*, 356–80.
- . *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Williams, Bernard. "Conflicts in Values." In *Moral Luck*, 71–82. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- . "A Critique of Utilitarianism." In *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, edited by J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, 77–150. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.
- . *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. London: Fontana/Collins, 1985.
- Wolff, Jonathan, and Avner de-Shalit. *Disadvantage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Woodard, Christopher. "Classifying Theories of Welfare." *Philosophical Studies* 165, no. 3 (September 2013): 787–803.