The Normative Context of Needs

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

Jacob D. Heim
May 2014
© 2014 Jacob D. Heim. All Rights Reserved.
This thesis titled
The Normative Context of Needs

by
JACOB D. HEIM

has been approved for
the Department of Philosophy
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Mark LeBar
Professor of Philosophy

Robert Frank
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
ABSTRACT

HEIM, JACOB D., M.A., May 2014, Philosophy

The Normative Context of Needs

Director of Thesis: Mark LeBar

This paper will argue that claims of need cannot be fully understood, and their normative import cannot be adequately assessed, without first understanding the purpose which gives rise to the need and then making a normative judgment of some kind about that purpose. This view is contrary to the position argued by David Wiggins, which appears to be the standard view in contemporary philosophy of need, that there is a class of so-called “absolute” needs which can be understood and addressed even in the absence of such a context. In this paper I give some prima facie reasons for thinking that need claims always take place within a context of normatively weighted purposes, discuss Wiggins’ opposing view, and expose certain problematic elements of that view. I then consider and reject several possible ways of trying to salvage the absolute need concept before ultimately rejecting the concept altogether.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Mark LeBar for being receptive to my (occasionally rambling) ideas, and for being merciless with my earlier drafts so that I could get clear on what it was I really wanted to say. Thanks also to the faculty and graduate students at Ohio University's Philosophy Department for the positive environment they have helped create, and for the many enlightening conversations I have had with them. Finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my wife Shauna for all of her support, companionship, and in particular for her invaluable insights that have helped me throughout the process of writing this thesis; and to my daughter Alana for being the best little cheerleader I could ask for.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract........................................................................................................................................3

Acknowledgements..........................................................................................................................4

Chapter 1: Introduction..................................................................................................................6

Chapter 2: Need Claims and Unstated Purposes........................................................................10

Chapter 3: Wiggins on the Absolute-Instrumental Distinction.....................................................18

Chapter 4: The Relativity of Harm...............................................................................................26

Chapter 5: Wiggin, Thomson and Korsgaard on Essential Humanity.........................................34

Chapter 6: Absolute Needs as Identity-Based...............................................................................18

Chapter 7: Conclusion...................................................................................................................48

References......................................................................................................................................50
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Actions that aim at responding to needs are a staple of everyday human life. People frequently claim to need things, and we often direct these claims of need at one another. Some need claims seem to carry greater normative force than others. At one end of the spectrum, there are some claims of need that we cannot ignore without being subject to severe moral criticism, while on the other end there some need claims that we feel more or less free to ignore. Between these two extremes, however, there are degrees of importance, and in many cases the mere citing of a need is not sufficient to tell us how important we should take that need to be.

Typically, when a need claim is made, we have to know why something is needed before we can assess the normative force of that claim. If someone simply says, “I need ten thousand dollars,” and nothing more, we as potential respondents do not have enough to go on. It lacks the necessary context, and so it comes across as an incomplete statement. We are not sure what to make of the claim as it stands, so we must ask, “Why?”: why does she need ten thousand dollars? The answer will be in the form of some purpose or end, something that she needs ten thousand dollars for. And the purpose that she gives, depending on how important or valuable it is, will give us the proper context in which to determine the normative strength of the need claim itself. If she needs the money for a life-saving kidney transplant, then it is obviously a claim with serious moral import, with the necessary force to make legitimate demands on those who are able to help. If she needs the money to pay for a month-long vacation in the Bahamas, then we
are free to dismiss her claim and go on as we were. That purpose is not one that has authority to require anything of us.

We might observe, however, that in practice there do seem to be times when a purpose does not need to be cited as part of the relevant context for needing, when a claim of the form “I need X” is taken as a complete functional statement because its normative force is obvious. Think of the claim, “I need cancer treatment.” To ask about the purpose for which someone needs cancer treatment in ordinary conversation would appear not only unnecessary, but insensitive at best and reprehensible at worst. Purpose does not seem to enter into the conversation at all, and to bring it into the conversation is likely to be considered a social offense of some kind. So are there, in fact, some claims of need that can stand on their own, that can demand a response without having to be placed in the context of any particular purpose?

I will argue that there are not. The appearance of need claims which are not purpose-bound is misleading. I argue that it is impossible to make sense of any claim to need something except in the context of some purpose for which it is needed; and further, that the context is incompletely understood unless it includes some kind of judgment about the value of the relevant purpose. Sometimes that context is implied because it is mutually understood, and other times it is simply assumed. I intend to show that one or the other of these is the case whenever we encounter need claims that, like the claim to need cancer treatment, appear to stand on their own.

The case I am trying to make is especially important, practically and philosophically, in a modern social and political climate in which claims of need are
frequently made in isolation from any reference to a purpose which could provide context for the claim being made. There is a tongue-in-cheek example from Douglas Adams’ *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, in which protagonist Arthur Dent is about to have his house bulldozed so that a bypass can be constructed in its place. Arthur demands to know why the bypass needs to be built, and the construction foreman replies, “What do you mean, why’s it got to be built? It’s a bypass. You’ve got to build bypasses.”1 This kind of logic seems to have become commonplace in public discourse, whether the claim being made is that we need to stimulate the economy, or that we need greater diversity in the workplace or classroom, or that every young person needs a college education, etc. These things may well be needed for some purpose, and the purposes may in fact be good ones. But the conversation is certainly not helped by avoiding or suppressing questions about what those purposes are or why we ought to care about them. Part of what I want to argue is that, just as needs are always connected with some contextualizing purpose, purposes are always subject to normative appraisal. For any particular purpose, we can ask whether it is a good one, or whether it is reasonable, obtainable, consistent with other purposes we value, or worth the cost of pursuing. And it is my view (although I will not do much to argue for it here) that a reluctance either to recognize the purposive context of our need-claims, or to evaluate the merits of the purposes themselves, is harmful to the kind of transparent discussion on which democratic societies depend.

My argument will take the following course: first, I will present some initial reasons for thinking that discussions of need always take place within the context of

1 Adams, 9.
purpose and value, even if that context goes largely unstated. Next I contrast my view with that of David Wiggins, who represents a majority view among contemporary philosophers of need. Wiggins and his followers argue that there is a special class of need claims, typically referred to as “absolute” claims of need, which by their nature have significant normative force and can stand on their own without any contextualizing purpose. I will argue against and ultimately reject the claim that there is any distinction between need claims that must be made in the context of normative purposes and need claims that do not rely on any such context. I consider a potential response from Wiggins and his followers that absolute needs could be preserved as a distinct category of values by grounding them in a conception of human nature, making use of the practical identity view argued by Christine Korsgaard. Finally I conclude that even when defined in terms of the subject’s essential nature, the normative force of need claims cannot be explained without referencing some purpose which we find to be independently valuable. Thus there are no special claims of absolute need, all need claims are instrumental for some particular purpose, and purposes can always be examined and revised in light of some broader conception of value.
CHAPTER 2: NEED CLAIMS AND UNSTATED PURPOSES

Picture a corporate planning meeting in which the board of directors is trying to establish their company’s priorities for the upcoming year. One of the board members gets up and firmly declares that what the company needs is to focus on cutting costs as much as possible. After a few moments a second member objects, replying that what they really need is to make customer satisfaction their number one priority. The two go back and forth, each in turn insisting that the other is obviously mistaken, and neither seems to be able to get the other to budge. Finally a third member intervenes, and after calming the first two begins to question them, one after the other, about what purposes will be accomplished by the course of action they recommend. After some initial reluctance they cooperate, and it quickly becomes apparent that there were two different purposes in mind from the outset. The first speaker, who advocates cost-cutting, is intent on increasing short-term profits, while the second, who is in favor of emphasizing customer satisfaction, aims to ensure greater long-term success. Now that the underlying difference is out in the open, the board is able to discuss both of these purposes and their relative merits in light of the company’s larger goals and values. And once they come to agree on a synthesis of the two views, and define the purpose on which they want to act, they are able to determine what course of action they need to take in order to bring about that purpose.

How should we describe what has just taken place, and what general principles can we draw from it? In the beginning we had a disagreement between two people as to what was needed. As long as they persisted in talking about needs as if those needs were
simply given, the discussion could not progress. Neither could say anything that could get a grip on the other, because both were sure that they were seeing things rightly and that the other was mistaken. The reason that conversation could go nowhere was that they were both correct. For the first speaker, thinking about short-term profits, cost-cutting was the most effective means and thus the action that was needed, while prioritizing customer satisfaction was not. For the second speaker, thinking in the context of long-term profits, customer satisfaction was plainly where the focus needed to be, and cutting costs was simply wrong-headed. As it became clear when the third speaker intervened, this was never really a contest of free-standing need claims; nor was it a disagreement over the best means to an agreed-upon end. Each of the two board members was making his need-claim in the context of a specific purpose from the very start; the problem was that neither thought to state the purpose he had in mind, because each assumed that it was tacitly understood by all and thus not worth mentioning. In this both were mistaken, and therein lay the intractable nature of the dispute.

Disagreements of the kind that we have just witnessed are not all that uncommon. A parent and a little league coach disagree about how a child needs to be spending his time after school; legislators from opposing parties debate how the nation needs to respond to some domestic or international crisis. As long as the language of needing is used without tethering it to anything more basic, these discussions cannot come to any satisfying resolution.

A possible explanation for this frustrating phenomenon might be found in a statement by Garrett Thomson: —Neds are unimpeachable values. We cannot say truly
that a person ought to have different needs and, in this sense, they are fundamental.” ² It is my aim in this essay to show that needs are not fundamental. The first part of his statement, however, seems to be onto something. If someone claims to need something and I reply with →You should stop needing that,” there is pretty clearly something wrong about what I’ve said. Either I am being coldly sarcastic, or I am making an unreasonable demand, or I do not understand what this person means when they say that what they have is a need.

Thomson thinks that the unimpeachable nature of need makes it a promising concept for developing an understanding of practical reasoning.³ While I share Thomson’s general view that the concept of need has untapped philosophical potential, I tend to view its →unimpeachability” as a frustrating obstacle rather than a theoretical advantage. Unimpeachable values do not make for productive conversations.

What I want to do is rein in Thomson’s →unimpeachability” claim and narrow its scope to be more manageable – and, I think we will find, more accurately representative of the ways that we actually talk and think about values. Needs are unimpeachable, but only as long as we are talking purely at the level of what is needed. Once we begin inquiring about why you need what you need – what you need it for – the conversation shifts up one level, and we are now discussing the purposes which define our needs. Now at this level we can do some impeaching, if you will, and in a roundabout way come to say something about the need you have is one that you ought to continue having. For

² Thomson, 175.
³ Ibid.
while needs in themselves are not subject to evaluation or rejection on normative
grounds, purposes are. They are ends that we seek, or things that we are committed to or
care about. We can talk meaningfully about why we choose certain purposes but not
others, our reasons for caring about the purposes we view ourselves as having, and
whether or not we ought to affirm the purposes that we currently do.

If you tell me that you need an elephant, it would not make sense to simply tell
you to stop needing that, because I know that you have in mind some as yet unstated
purpose for which you need the elephant. If having an elephant is really necessary to
achieving that purpose, you cannot simply stop having the need as long as you retain the
purpose. But what I can do is ask some questions which will draw out that purpose, and
then we can proceed from there. As it turns out, you have decided to open a private zoo,
and you cannot do that successfully without an elephant. While I could not tell you not to
need an elephant, I can tell you, now that I know the purpose behind your need, that you
ought to stop pursuing this goal of opening a zoo. I can tell you about the many
difficulties involved, and lead you to see that pursuing this goal will prevent you from
obtaining many other things that would be more valuable to you. In the end, you decide
to give up your short-lived ambition of being a zookeeper, and as soon as you have done
that – *poof!* – you no longer need an elephant. So needs *can* be responsive to normative
reasons, but only indirectly, by way of reasoning about purposes and their value.

It is one thing to say that purposes are relevant in situations like the one I have
just described. If you tell me you need an elephant and I ask why, you had better be able
to back up your claim with something fairly specific – something like the fact that you’ve
decided to open a zoo. But isn’t there a large and familiar class of needs – for food, shelter, respect, and so on – which we could say that we “just need?” If you come in from the hot sun saying you need a drink, and I ask what purpose you need to drink for, couldn’t you reasonably complain that I am unnaturally importing into this conversation a notion of purpose that doesn’t belong there?

Certainly that would be the commonsense diagnosis. But I want to argue that that is not what is really the complaint at all. Rather, I think the reason you find it unnatural to have the question asked is that it is a stable part of the context in which our everyday talk about need takes place. You already had some purpose in mind which you could not obtain without getting a drink, whether that purpose happened to be preventing dehydration, quenching your thirst, cooling off, or something else along similar lines. Whatever it was, the purpose was almost certainly related in some way to your sense of physical well-being. Moreover, you generally expect that when you cite a need of this kind, I will understand that you do have such a purpose. Even if I do not know the specifics, I ought to know that it is in some close way related to your well-being, or your health, or quality of life – some kind of general human value which has a kind of stable, almost unquestionable importance for you. And expecting as you do that I will understand you as having such a purpose, you probably also anticipate that I will respect your purpose and the value it has for you.

If you did not expect these things of me, you would have stated why you needed a drink, or if not, you would at the very least been prepared with an answer you could give were I to ask you why. The situation would then have been no different from the one in
which you claim to need an elephant. There, you did not expect me to anticipate your reason for needing an elephant, and so you were ready to explain it to me. That is what happens when we talk about needs for which there is no background assumption of commonly known purpose. The reason you were caught off guard, when I asked why you needed a drink, was precisely because of that background assumption. You were not expecting me to need to be told what kind of purpose would cause you to need a drink on a hot day. And the reason you may have been annoyed or offended, rather than merely surprised, is that you expected me to agree with you on the value of your purpose in needing it. The assumption that I know the purpose is still there. If you are offended it is because you take me to be asking, not what your purpose is, but why it matters. Since I could not possibly fail to be aware of the kinds of purposes for which you would need a drink, I must be challenging the legitimacy of those purposes, calling for you to reconsider whether purposes related to your well-being are really worth caring about. By asking about the purpose of something I should not have to ask about, I have disrespected you.

Admittedly, the particular case I have just discussed might be a bit exaggerated. But I think that it points out a pattern that we do in fact observe in our regular interactions. When we talk about things we need for purposes that seem universal – things like health, survival, emotional or physical well-being, etc. – we do not typically cite any purpose for which we need things, and we are generally do not expect to be asked. It is the expecting that I find significant. When the purpose of a need is more particular to our circumstances, we usually either say it, or are prepared to say it: I need
to go to the store to get laundry detergent;” or – need to go to the store.” – Why?” – To get laundry detergent.” It is only in the case of our really deep-rooted, instinct-driven purposes, the kind that we usually do not even think about questioning, that we are really caught off guard when someone asks us why we need what we say we need. And the reason, I think, is not that those purposes are irrelevant, but precisely the opposite. They are so relevant, and so obvious, that we feel licensed to assume that everyone who hears us will know what we mean without our having to say it. These purposes are part of the assumed context in which everyday conversation takes place.

Having said all that, there is a way in which those basic, common purposes or ends are taken for granted that sometimes gives rise to a misconception. Since as far as we can tell we cannot in normal circumstances help but care about things like our survival or well-being, we might be led to assume that the values of those purposes are fixed for us in the same way the purposes themselves are. This can lead to a kind of quietism, an attitude that there is simply no point in asking about how or why we care about such things. We simply care about them, and we simply care about them as much as we do.

I think this is a mistake, and one that can be blamed for keeping us away from precisely the kind of value talk that could do us a great deal of good as a society. The general state of our society and culture might be very different if more of us would reflect long enough to realize that, even if there are some things we cannot help caring about to some degree, we can through a kind of moral self-critique come to adjust the degree to which we care about them. Even if there are needs we cannot help having, we can
influence the degree to which we are attached to those needs by critically examining the purposes from which they arise. We can reorder the ranking of those purposes, and by extension those needs as well, to bring our practical preferences more closely in line with the kind of people we feel we ought to be. That is one of the things that I think we sometimes lose by divorcing our commonplace needs from the purposes that ground them; for as we have said, needs cannot be evaluated in isolation.

Having said all that I can say for the time being about needs and purposes, I want to turn our attention to an opposing view, which challenges my claim that purposes for needing are always up for evaluation. In facing that challenge I hope to be able to show in a more rigorous fashion the relative merits of my position.
CHAPTER 3: WIGGINS ON THE ABSOLUTE-INSTRUMENTAL DISTINCTION

David Wiggins, who has long argued in favor of the philosophical importance of need, offers a different interpretation of seemingly free-standing need claims. Wiggins is also aware that there appears to be a correlation between need claims with obvious normative import and claims presented in the (apparently) free-standing form, “I need X.” His approach is opposite from mine, however, in that he is looking for a way to make sense of such claims in practice without having to appeal to some underlying purpose:

Something that has been insisted upon in most analytical accounts of needing is that needing is by its nature needing for a purpose, and that statements of need which do not mention relevant purposes (or ‘end-states’ as White calls them) are elliptical – some will say dishonestly elliptical – for sentences that do mention them.

One thing seems right with this claim, and another seems wrong. The thing that seems right concerns what may be called purely instrumental needing. Someone may say ‘I now need to have £200 to buy a suit’, or, speaking elliptically, ‘I need £200’. If he can’t get the suit he has in mind for less than £200, then it is true, on an instrumental reading of his claim, that he needs £200….

But there is something else the elucidation fails to make sense of. This is the fact that, if we have already been through everything this man can say about his need, then we can properly and pointedly respond to his claim with: ‘You need £200 to buy that suit, but you don’t need £200 – because you don’t need to buy that suit.’ The ellipse theory suggests that he ought then to insist that there is an end of his for which the suit is necessary. But it is plain that without deliberate misunderstanding of what we are now saying, he cannot make this retort. If he did respond in this way, then it would be open to us, meaning our remark to him in the only way we could mean it, to say that he was simply missing the point. What he has to show, if he wants to make more than the instrumental claim, is that he cannot get on without that suit, that his life will be blighted without it, or some such thing.

According to Wiggins, then, there are two ways we can say we need something. In the first, I say that I need X for Y. Or I might simply say that I need X and leave it at that.

---


5 Wiggins 1987, 8-9.
unless I am pressed further, but if asked why I need X, I can readily respond that I need X for Y. Whether or not I state the claim in its complete form, I understand that the claim I am making takes the form of need X for Y,” where X and Y are both specified; they are clearly defined things and I know what Y is at least as well as I know what X is. In Wiggins‘ example need £200 to buy a suit,” the claimant knows that what he is claiming to need is £200, and he knows that what he is claiming to need it for is to buy a suit. The end is (at least) as well known as the means. What is suggested by this account is that in practice, we first identify some Y that we aim for, and then identify some X which we need in order to obtain Y. Two questions can be raised about a need claim of this type, aside from the question of what is the Y for which X is needed: (1) whether it is true; and (2) whether it is normative. To the first question, the need claim is true if and only if having X (in these circumstances, etc.) really is a necessary condition of having Y. To the second, the claim has normative force if and only if I can make some legitimate normative demand for Y (I have a reason for seeking Y, Y is good or good for me, I have a right to Y, etc.). If the claim that I need X for Y is true, the normative force of the claim that I need X is identical with the normative force of my demand for Y. This kind of need claim Wiggins labels ‘instrumental.’

Wiggins goes on to contrast what he has labeled ‘instrumental‘ need claims with a second kind of claim. This type of claim always takes the simpler form, need X,” unlike instrumental need claims, which can be stated either way but always mean need X for Y.” On Wiggins‘ view, this second type of claim is different from the first in that it is not open to the same kind of questioning. If I claim to need X, meaning it in this
second sense, and you ask me why I need X, something has gone wrong. It is very plausible in this kind of situation that I would not have in mind any particular Y I could supply as an answer, to which I could point as that for which I need X. But the more essential point here is that even if I could supply some Y, to do so would be inappropriate, because in doing so I would be trying to respond on the terms of what is by its nature an illegitimate question. If I claim in this second sense that I need X and you ask me what I need X for, the only adequate response I can give is to challenge the legitimacy of the question by asserting that it is based on a misunderstanding. In asking me to name some Y for which I need X, you reveal that you have misunderstood the essence of what I was saying. You have taken me to be making a need claim of the first kind, the instrumental kind, when in fact I am not. I am making a claim of a fundamentally different kind. It is a kind of claim which, by its nature, is subject to only one of the two questions to which instrumental needs claims are subject. It can be asked whether claims of this kind are true; but it cannot be legitimately asked whether they are normative. It is an essential part of what it means to be a claim of this kind that, if it is true, it is thereby necessarily normative; and according to Wiggins, the normativity belonging to this type of claim is always powerful (though he does not go so far as to say it is always conclusive). This second type of need claim is what Wiggins calls ‘absolute.’

Wiggins says that unlike instrumental need claims, which can be made for any X and any Y regardless of whether Y has any value, when I make an absolute need claim I

---

6 In using this distinction he is followed by what seems to be a majority of contemporary need-theorists. See for example McLeod 2011 and 2012, Brock and Reader 2002, and Thomson 2005, as well as various other entries in Reader (ed.) 2005.
am always making a strong normative claim. But a problem arises from the way that Wiggins tries to justify his definition of absolute need claims as inherently normative. First he says an absolute claim that I need X implies that \( \neg \text{cannot get on without it, or my life would be blighted without it, or some such.} \) Then he formalizes this as

\[
\text{I need [absolutely] to have } x \\
\text{if and only if} \\
\text{I need [instrumentally]) to have } x \text{ if I am to avoid being harmed} \\
\text{if and only if} \\
\text{It is necessary, things being what they actually are, that if I avoid being harmed then I have } x. \tag{7}
\]

He does not give a clear argument to get us from the informal version to its formal counterpart. It seems the only sensible way to interpret the shift is to take him as intending for the various negative outcomes referred to in the first statement (\( \neg \text{cannot get on, life blighted, etc.} \)) to be either equivalent to, or contained within or subsumed under, the single negative outcome of \( \neg \text{being harmed} \) referred to by the second.

A consequence of his setup is that the different ‘absolute’ needs which could be expressed either in terms of something the claimant cannot get on without, or something the claimant’s life would be blighted without, or in any of the various other unspecified formulations, must all be expressible in terms of harm. And what that means is that the ‘distinctive normative force’ which Wiggins wants to find in all of these various ways of expressing an absolute need claim must always be adequately captured in the claim that if

\[7\] Wiggins 1987, 10.
I do not have X then I will necessarily be harmed. But why think that every claim of the kind which Wiggins wants to call absolute need claims can be adequately expressed in terms of harm? And just as importantly (since we are dealing with a biconditional in the definition), why think that every case in which not having X will cause me some harm can generate the kind of strong normativity that Wiggins wants to see as distinctive of absolute need claims?

It is on the second question that I want to focus for the time being. One problem with using the notion of harm in the unqualified way that Wiggins does is that it is far too broad. I am harmed when I scratch my finger, or when I am embarrassed in front of my friends. While it is of course true that there are reasons to avoid these things, the reasons are not terribly compelling in comparison when stacked up in an all-things-considered judgment about what we have most reason to do. This is a special problem for Wiggins, since he argues emphatically that absolute needs ought to be treated by policymakers as a distinct class of values which cannot be swamped by any amount of less-than-vital gains in a cost-benefit analysis. In order for that argument to be effective, he has to preserve the integrity of the absolute-need concept by defining it in such a way that only need claims having strong normative force will qualify. Without further refinement of the notion of harm, it is unclear how he can manage to make 'absolute need' mean what he seems to want it to mean.

Having pointed out the potential weakness of a definition using an unqualified notion of 'harm', I now want to move us past that question to a closely related worry that

---

I suspect will lead us to uncover a deeper problem in the way that harm is used. The worry is that the avoidance of harm may turn out to not be a purpose in itself at all, but merely a kind of shorthand that can stand in for any one of a diverse class of purposes.

We might think of “needing X for the purpose of avoiding harm” as analogous to something like “needing X for the purpose of getting something to eat.” If getting something to eat is taken literally as defining the extension of outcomes that would count as satisfying the purpose, eating anything at all would be enough, so almost any specific need claim (“I need $5,” for example) would be false. I can get something to eat without that. But what we actually mean, when we say that our purpose is to get something to eat, is not really quite that broad. At the very least, what we mean is shorthand for the purpose of getting something edible to eat. Probably we mean a good deal more in any particular instance, and precisely what we mean more than that will vary with circumstances. What we really have in mind as the purpose for our need-claim might be something filling, something tasty (or even within a certain specified range of tastes, e.g. savory rather than sweet), or something above a certain rough threshold of nutritional value. Any time I say I need $5 (or whatever) to get something to eat, the ‘get something to eat’ acts as a placeholder pointing to something more specified, and what that ‘something more’ amounts to varies considerably, not just from one person to the next, but from one situation to the next for the same person. We understand this in conversation; somebody says that she needs to borrow $5 so she can get something to eat, and we know that she probably has at least some general specifications in mind, although she does not say what they are. We do not even know how narrow or broad of an idea she
has at this point, but we can and often do pose a series of questions aimed at figuring out more clearly the boundaries she has in mind for what would count as satisfying her present purpose and what would not. Sometimes these questions are not just for our own understanding, but for the sake of helping the claimant herself come to a more complete knowledge of what specifications she has in mind; or we might pose the same kinds of questions to ourselves, when we tell ourselves we want something to eat and we want to be clear about what we really mean by that.

Many statements of purpose are like that, explicit only as far as the genus level but with a particular species implied, even if it starts out being opaque to the listener or the speaker herself. ‘Avoiding harm’ has all the marks of being a purpose-statement of this kind, and as a genus it is, as already mentioned, especially broad. What is problematic for Wiggins is that, like any statement of purpose with that kind of generality, what specifies the purpose beyond the genus level is going to be determined by what is actually sought or cared about in the particular instance in which the purpose statement is made. What I might mean this time is that I want to avoid harm to my reputation: If I am campaigning for public office, I will consider myself harmed if I suffer a serious embarrassment or if something from my past is revealed which casts me in a negative light. At another time I might want to avoid being harmed, and have in mind that the harm I want to avoid is in the domain of my academic standing: I am trying to gain admission to a graduate program in a competitive field, and so I will be significantly harmed by receiving a D for a course grade.
Although Wiggins would probably not want to admit cases like the ones above as instances of genuine harm, it is unclear how he would try to go about showing, with the very little he gives us to go on, that such cases are inconsistent with the notion of harm he is working with. At the very least we know that his understanding of harm cannot be restricted to instances of direct bodily damage, since he agrees with Adam Smith that it extends to “whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people even of the lowest rank to be without.”9 And in discussing the events which led to his philosophical interest in the concept of need, he points in particular to a case in which a number of people were forced to relocate from their homes and established patterns of living as an instance of absolute needs being ignored.10 So he must concede that drastic disruptions of one’s way of life, if nothing else, qualify as instances of harm as it relates to the definition of need. But in conceding that, he opens himself to a serious objection.

9 Smith, V.2.2., quoted in Wiggins 1987, 26.

10 Wiggins 2005, 27.
CHAPTER 4: THE RELATIVITY OF HARM

To illustrate the objection I have in mind, consider a case like the one Wiggins himself cites. Imagine that Oscar lives in an urban neighborhood that is about to be demolished to make way for some large-scale construction project. Oscar and everyone who lives in his vicinity, as well as all the nearby businesses to which the locals go for most of their daily needs, are forced to relocate to new homes or business locations at various points throughout the city. Communities are broken up, old neighbors are dispersed from one another, mutually satisfying business relations are cut off, and in general, the whole pattern of living with which these people are familiar is completely disrupted. This, by Wiggins' own account, is a harm to be avoided, and in general we might be likely to agree with him. On the face of it there does seem to be a kind of normative force to the claim that these people need to be left alone to continue as they are. I am not disputing that there can be normatively strong need claims made in cases like this. What I am disputing is the idea that calling forced relocation harmful is enough on its own to ground the kind of normativity that is involved here.

Suppose that Oscar's neighbors are very distraught at having to give up their homes, and they lament the destruction of the close-knit community to which they have belonged. But Oscar, as it turns out, has never felt the sense of community to which his neighbors all seem so attached. In fact, he has secretly hated living here for many years, and has only stayed this long because he could not afford to move. He finds employment opportunities unsatisfactory, he feels claustrophobic on the narrow streets around his home, the noise levels give him headaches, and he finds most of his neighbors to be
obnoxious busybodies. At his new location, however, he finds conditions to be the exact opposite. There is more open space, better-paying opportunities to practice his occupation as a sanitation worker, noise is no longer an issue, and most importantly for him, his new neighbors respect his desire for privacy.

Now the question I want to ask is, does it make sense for us to say that Oscar, in particular, was harmed by this forced relocation? His settled pattern of life was destroyed, but it was one that he hated and he was happy to see it replaced. He likes his new life better, and by all observable metrics he really is better off. So clearly we cannot say that the move was harmful for him, at least as long as we want to retain harm as a normative concept worth paying attention to.

It seems natural, then, to ask why Oscar was not harmed while his neighbors were. What made the difference? In this case we could perhaps point to certain external features of the location change, such as better employment or a more healthful environment, that make it objectively better for him to live in his new neighborhood than in his old one. But what if that were not the case? What if no such external factors could be pointed to, and yet he still was more satisfied in his new home?

Consider now the case of Ernie and Bert, two of Oscar’s old neighbors. Both have lived on Oscar’s street for a number of years, and both have on the whole found it to be a pleasant experience. But while Bert is characterized by anxiety, adherence to routine, and a general fear of change or anything unexpected, Ernie is a more adventurous sort. While he likes his home and neighborhood well enough, he been growing restless for some time, and has quietly been looking for the right time to spread his wings and move on.
When word comes that they must relocate, Ernie is excited and hopeful, while Bert is deeply distraught. Ernie thinks that life has given him a lucky break; meanwhile, Bert is full of worry, frustration, and moral outrage at this unexpected and unnecessary turn of events. They end up settling on the same street as one another in a new neighborhood that resembles their old one in many respects. The new neighbors are friendly and welcome them without hesitation; local conditions such as traffic, cleanliness, crime rate, and availability of goods and services are basically equivalent; and their commute to work is roughly the same time and distance that it was before.

Ernie takes to his new habitat easily, and quickly finds that the change was just what he needed. For Bert, however, things do not go so smoothly. He cannot get over the loss of his old home, neighbors, and his beloved routine. Life is just not the same for him, and he is convinced that it never will be. He tries his best to adapt, but cannot shake the feeling that this move was the worst thing that has ever happened to him. Now I think it is fair to say, at this point, that the change of lifestyle has indeed been harmful for Bert. I think it is equally clear that the same cannot be said for Ernie. If we want to say anything at all in Ernie’s case, it would have to be that he was helped or benefitted, or that the move was good for him.

What is the cause of these differing outcomes? The external difference-makers that were obvious in Oscar’s case do not seem to be present here. More importantly, there is no significant difference in circumstances between Ernie’s move and Bert’s. So why is it that one is harmed while the other is not?
The only thing we can plausibly point to, I think, is something like each subject’s preference, or *attitude* towards his changing circumstances. What is harmful then is not really the destruction of one’s settled pattern of living, but the destruction of a pattern of living that one is interested in preserving, or that one finds to be worthwhile. This gives us a plausible explanation for Oscar’s case as well: he, like Ernie (though for different reasons) finds his new life to be better or more worthwhile than his old one. For both of them, the new life is more conducive to purposes that they care about: a change of pace for Ernie, and an escape from an unsatisfactory situation for Oscar. For Bert the reverse is true: he has been (and we might say still is) deeply attached to the purpose of leaving things as they are, and moving has been quite destructive in terms of that purpose.

To be fair, it is worth mentioning that Wiggins himself devotes considerable discussion to the ways in which harm can be relativized according to contingent circumstances. But he does not think the kind of relativity he has in mind poses any threat to absolute need, and that is where I disagree. Omitted from his otherwise insightful discussion is one particular kind of relativity which he does not anticipate, and it is one that makes all the difference: that for any person in any circumstance, what can be considered harmful is strongly related to what purposes matter to that person. As

---


12 *Ibid.* 11: “Relativeness to something else is no obstacle in itself to the most extreme or perfect kind of objectivity. Indeed making such relativeness fully explicit sometimes has the effect of revealing the subject matter in question as a candidate for unqualified or absolute truth.”

13 Although it is not something I intend to work out at present, I think a fairly compelling case could be made that this relation holds for anything that can be harmed. In the case of animals, for instance, I think it likely there is some argument that could show that certain purposes, such as survival, reproduction, and pain-avoidance, are things that *matter* to the animal even if it lacks the ability to be self-reflective about those purposes. With the exception of pain-avoidance, the same
discussed in Part 1, there may be some purposes or ends that we all have and that most of us, most of the time, take for granted. But if there is some purpose to which I am deeply committed that requires me to abandon one of those more general ends, it may not be too much of a stretch in some cases to say that I am not really being harmed at all. At the very least, I may have good reason not to consider choice a harmful one.\textsuperscript{14}

Think of Socrates in the Apology and the Crito. (Using this example has the added benefit of serving to answer the counterargument that Wiggins could simply restrict his definition of harm to those things that directly damage the body or its functionality.) Socrates insists that death cannot harm him at all\textsuperscript{15}, but that his soul would be harmed either by ceasing to practice philosophy,\textsuperscript{16} or committing injustice by his escape.\textsuperscript{17} He is deeply committed to being just, to the extent that he views life itself as merely (or at least primarily) instrumental to the development of a just and virtuous

\textsuperscript{14} The question of whether I consider myself harmed might at first seem irrelevant, but I will presently show that it is in fact the central question to the subject both Wiggins and I are concerned with, the normative force of need claims (as opposed to needs themselves). This objection will be considered in more detail shortly; I mention it here mainly as a promissory note, to prevent it from distracting the reader unnecessarily in the meantime.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Apology}, 30c and 41d

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}, 37c-38a

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Crito}, 47c-48d
soul.\textsuperscript{18} So when being alive is no longer an effective means to that end, he gives it up willingly without any feeling of having been harmed. The purpose to which he is truly committed as an end in itself remains intact.\textsuperscript{19}

We might feel compelled to reply on behalf of Wiggins that what Socrates takes himself to be committed to, or what he thinks of as harm, is not all that is at issue. We might even want to say that it is not really the issue at all. After all, what if Socrates is mistaken? Many people seem to believe, and may very well have good reasons for believing, that some things are objectively harmful and that death is one of them. In that case, the objection goes, survival (construed as the avoidance of a harm, namely death) is a purpose that Socrates has whether he accepts it or not, and therefore it does in fact generate absolute needs for him regardless of what he thinks he needs.

All of that might be correct, as far as it goes. Perhaps there is an objective fact, external to anything Socrates thinks or feels, that death is always harmful for human beings. That kind of metaphysical stance, even if true, would not be any help to Wiggins here. The possibility of objective, metaphysical truths about what is or is not a harm – or even what is or is not needed – are largely irrelevant to the discussion of this paper, because both Wiggins and I are primarily concerned with the normative force involved in claiming to need, rather than in needing itself.\textsuperscript{20} If Socrates does not view himself as being harmed by death, he cannot with any sincerity make the claim that if he does not

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}, 48b: “it is not living which is of most importance, but living well… But _well_‘ is the same as honorably and justly”

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Apology}, 28b-30d and 38e-42a; \textit{Crito}, 54b-c.

\textsuperscript{20} For an incomplete sample of statements to this effect, see Wiggins 1987, pp. 2, 4-6, 8, 19, 21-23, 27-30, 48, and 50.
survive he will be harmed. Thus, Socrates cannot claim an absolute need to survive, which will be strongly normative in the way Wiggins wants it to be.

It is here that we find the deep problem with Wiggins‘ harm formulation, as it concerns the normativity of need claims. The range of outcomes we can cite as harms in the context of making absolute need claims is limited to the range of outcomes that we consider harmful to purposes we care about or take ourselves to be committed to. For most of us, most of the time, purposes like survival, avoidance of pain, and preservation of bodily functions will predictably rank near the top in an ordered list of purposes we value. I think it just as likely (though perhaps not quite so obvious) that for most people, most of the time, those purposes such as survival which we might describe as expressive of our animal nature will not be found in the very top rank of such an ordered list. We are generally not surprised when we find out, of any particular person, that there is something he or she values more than his or her own survival. There are numerous possibilities here, and we might be surprised to find which particular purpose a person holds more valuable than life (e.g. freedom, religious convictions, the lives or well-being of family or close friends, etc.); but we are not surprised, except in the case of truly base individuals, that there is something to which they attach that kind of importance. In any case, the point that I want to draw out here is that, while there is a certain level of predictability and consistency to what people will consider harmful – after all, we do share a great deal in common with one another simply as human beings – there are nevertheless variations, and those variations make a difference to what things a particular person can claim to need. Perhaps the more essential point is that wherever we find variation in what people
consider harmful, we will almost certainly find variation in the purposes that people are committed to.\textsuperscript{21}

The conclusion we seem to have been led to is that what makes something a harm is that it is damaging to some purpose in which the subject is interested. But if that is true, then avoiding harm is not really a purpose in itself at all, but merely an empty indicator for some further, unspecified purpose. So claims of need for the purpose of avoiding harm are really \textit{elliptical} (to use Wiggins\textquotesingle terminology) for some other purpose which is the actual basis of the need claim. So there is no distinction between absolute and instrumental needs.

\textsuperscript{21} Except, I suppose, in cases where two or more people disagree as to whether a certain outcome will be damaging to some purpose whose value they agree on. That kind of case would either be more of a factual dispute, or a difference of definitions. But I think it is fairly obvious that neither of these is what is going on in paradigm cases like Socrates denying the harmfulness of death.
CHAPTER 5: WIGGINS, TOMSON AND KORSGAARD ON ESSENTIAL HUMANITY

For many, the result of the previous section will be unsatisfying. After all, Wiggins does seem to have a genuine insight in that some claims of need come across as obviously more pressing than others. Even if we concede that harm is always relative to purpose, it is hard to deny that some purposes are intuitively more plausible than others as bases for claiming to be harmed. Of the ends that we pursue, there are many whose frustration we may justly consider inconvenient or disappointing, but that we could not call harmful without appearing silly or obsessed. There are plenty of ways I could diagnose what is wrong with you tracking mud on a carpet that I am intent on keeping clean. But if I say that you have harmed me, I am clearly getting something wrong (at least in the absence of some truly extraordinary circumstances).

Is there some way to salvage Wiggins’ attempt to cash out this insight in terms of a distinction between absolute and (merely) instrumental needs? There is a possibility worth considering, hinted at in a statement Wiggins makes right at the outset of his discussion of the relativeness of harm:

First, the suggested elucidation in terms of harm exposes a certain parameter that is always there to be discovered within claims of absolute needing. This is the idea, not innocent of the metaphysics of personhood, of well-being or flourishing, by reference to which we make judgments of harm.22

Garrett Thompson, in a later attempt to expand on Wiggins’ theory, works out this idea in greater detail:

22 Wiggins 1987, 11
The notion of inescapability can help explain why or in what sense fundamental needs may form part of the essential nature of a person. ‘Need’ contains the idea that A needs X to be A or to function as A, and this implies that the end-state for which X is needed by A is defined by A’s essential nature.\(^{23}\)

We require the notion of interest to explain what harm is, and we require the notion of harm to explain what a fundamental need is. The concept of an interest demonstrates in what sense our well-being consists of living in accordance with our nature, rather than consisting of getting what we desire. The significance of inescapable interests is that these define in what way we must treat this nature as given. They provide a certain starting-point for deliberation and a certain fixedness in what is to count as good or bad for a person.\(^{24}\)

Thomson himself does not develop these ideas in a direction that would be helpful to Wiggins in his current predicament. But from the passages quoted above we can take a recommendation for how we might rescue a distinction between types of need claims: by defining harm, and by extension absolute need claims, in terms of the essential nature of the person to be harmed. Absolute needs are those things that we need in order to live in accordance with our nature, because what it means to be harmed is to be prevented in some way from functioning within the parameters of that nature.

The idea of grounding absolute needs in our essential nature seems a promising one. In order to be able to determine whether it can preserve Wiggins’ distinction without falling to the criticisms we have raised, we are going to need to work out the proposal in more detail. One useful starting point is to ask how we might come to know what our essential natures are, and what things are defined as needs by virtue of the nature that we have. We require an account that can make sense of the claim that some needs are

\(^{23}\) Thomson, 177

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 185
grounded in our essential nature while others are not; that can draw that line in a way that is faithful to common-sense paradigm cases of essential versus non-essential needing, or actual harm versus some lesser form of undesirableness; and that can consistently locate the strong normativity Wiggins is looking for on the correct side of that line. This account must also preserve what we have already come to see about the relationship between need, harm, and purpose. Finally, we need to be thinking from the outset about the epistemological problem of what makes our essential nature (or some aspects of it) accessible to us in such a way that we can use it as a basis for making claims of need.

Fortunately, there is an account on offer that does most of the work for us. The theory of human nature laid out by Christine Korsgaard in *The Sources of Normativity* meets all of the desiderata that we have just mentioned. We can use her view as a framework with which to test the possibility suggested by Thomson, that a satisfying account of absolute needs, understood as more than merely instrumental, can be grounded in our essential nature. Moreover, since her view of essential humanity begins with the fact that we are self-conscious beings and proceeds systematically from there, she is able to sidestep the kind of epistemological difficulties that could prevent us in practice from being able to make claims of need on the basis of what we know about ourselves.

Korsgaard takes as her starting point the fact that one of the most universal and persistent features of human life is the experience of being obligated, both to ourselves

---

25 I do not think that Korsgaard herself is primarily concerned with explicating what it means to be human; as her title suggests, it is an account of normativity that she is really after. But in the course of her argument she develops what she seems to think of as a fairly comprehensive view of human nature and identity, and it is one that will work well for our present purposes.
and to other people.\textsuperscript{26} In trying to bring out what this obligation means and how it could arise, she reaches the conclusion (through a series of arguments that need not be explored here) that our capacity to be obligated must arise from our nature as self-reflective beings. So that is the basic fact with which her account of humanity begins: as humans, we can think about ourselves, about what we do and how we feel.\textsuperscript{27} Korsgaard sees a number of implications arising from this fact, and the most important is that we need reasons for what we do.\textsuperscript{28} What it means for something to be a reason is that we decide, upon reflection, that we endorse it as a reason. With the need for reflective endorsement of our own reasons comes the further requirement, taken from Kant, that the only reasons we can endorse upon full reflection are those that we can will in the form of a universal law.\textsuperscript{29}

Another, closely related feature of humanity, also arising from our self-reflective nature, is that we must view ourselves within some generally coherent idea of who we are as a person:

\begin{quote}
The reflective structure of the mind is a source of ‘self-consciousness’ because it forces us to have a conception of ourselves…. When you deliberate, it is as if there were something over and above all of your desires, something which is \textit{you}, and which chooses which desire to act on. This means that the principle or law by which you determine your actions is the one that you regard as being expressive of yourself…. The conception of one’s identity in question here is not a theoretical one, a view about what as a matter of inescapable scientific fact you are. It is better understood as a description under which you value yourself, a description under
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{27} 92-93
\textsuperscript{28} 93-94
\textsuperscript{29} 97-100
which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking. So I will call this a conception of your practical identity.\textsuperscript{30}

These practical identities may include a broad variety of things with which we might identify ourselves: human, rational being, animal, moral agent, man or woman; roles related to family or work relationships; nationality, ideological commitments, profession, interests or hobbies; in short, anything about which we could say, \textit{I am X.}” It is in these practical identities that Korsgaard thinks we can locate all of our reasons for being or acting as we do.\textsuperscript{31} And because they are the source of reasons, our practical identities, like the reasons themselves, must pass the test of reflective endorsement. Reflection demands consistency, so we must be consistent in the things we value. And what that means, among other things, is that we cannot value any aspect of our practical identity unless we also value that quality whenever we encounter it in others, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{32}

So we value the humanity of others, and we value the reflective nature and thus the reasons of others. This makes us deeply social beings, and moral beings as well. It is what makes us obligated to one another, and able to obligate one another.\textsuperscript{33} It is what makes personal relationships such an important part of our lives. And since valuing ourselves requires us to value our animal nature, including our innate drive for survival and aversion to pain, we are committed to valuing the life of all beings who share that
animal nature, and we have an interest in seeing that they do not suffer unnecessarily.\textsuperscript{34} Finally, since we can recognize that in order to act from reasons we must always have some conception of our practical identity, we each value the various contingent identities we have chosen to conceive of ourselves under, and we value and respect the contingent identities of others.

Now that we have the basics of Korsgaard's view laid out, we can consult the view itself and attempt to work out what Korsgaard would have to say about needs. We can see that she has already marked out a number of things as absolute needs or their functional equivalent, either explicitly or by implication. First and foremost, as humans we are reflective beings, and as reflective beings we need reasons. The need is simply part of what it means to be reflective, and being reflective is simply part of what it means to be human. If I did not need reasons, I would not be a human; but I am a human, and so I need reasons. Thus the need for reasons fits perfectly into our proposed formulation for absolute needs. Many of the further needs she argues for, such as the need to abide by the moral law, the need to respect the reasons of others, and the need for personal relationships, might at first glance be best construed as instrumental to the need for reasons, so while not absolute needs in their own right, they would by extension be things that are needed simply in virtue of being human. I think that on closer reflection, however, we ought to see that this is not the way to understand them. What the relationship between those further needs and the need for reasons most closely resembles is not the relationship between an instrumental need and an absolute need, but between an

\textsuperscript{34} 149-157
absolute need and the identity that grounds it. I do not need to be moral so that I can have reasons; I need to be moral because I just am a being who needs reasons, and part of what is entailed by that is that I need to be moral. The reasons both enable the morality and require it; but they do not require it in an instrumental kind of way.

There are other needs operating in her theory as well, which are not solely derived from the need for reasons. The needs that constitute our animal nature are perhaps the most obvious; we need to maintain our physical identity, to seek nourishment and reproduction, to avoid pain, and so on, because needing those things is simply part of the definition of what it means to be an animal; and an animal is one of the things that we are as a matter of strict necessity. So those are absolute needs as well. Finally, the need to conceive of myself under a practical identity is entailed by, though not instrumental to, my need for reasons. So having a conception of my practical identity is an absolute need as well.

\[35 \text{Ibid.}\]
CHAPTER 6: ABSOLUTE NEEDS AS IDENTITY-BASED

So far so good. We have a systematic understanding of our essential nature as humans, and we have needs that we can trace directly back to elements of that nature that characterize us as a matter of natural necessity. Those are the things that we can claim to need absolutely. We also have an understanding of the need that each of us has for a coherent set of views about who we are; I need a conception, not just of who I am as a person, but who I am as this person, as myself. The way that conception gets filled out will be different for each of us, and can evolve in various ways throughout our lives; and it is subject to governance by, and appraisal in terms of, the general facts about our rational self-reflective nature. So what I need in order to maintain some contingent practical identity of mine cannot override what I need in order to maintain my more basic identity as a human being. That seems to give us a promising avenue for distinguishing between two types of needs: those things needed for the purpose of maintaining our essential or inescapable nature as human beings, which we can classify in Wiggins’ terms as absolute needs, and those needed for the purpose of maintaining some particular practical identity under which I conceive of myself.

Things do not line up quite as neatly as we may have hoped, however. For what we have now are not two distinct classes of need, but three: (1) needs related to our essential human nature, such as the need to avoid unnecessary pain; (2) needs related to one’s contingent practical identity, such as Beethoven’s need as a composer to be able to write music; (3) and needs that are instrumental for some contingent purpose which is not related to one’s identity in any meaningful way, such as my need to use an umbrella so that I don’t get wet. We might think, since what we are searching for is a distinction
between absolute and non-absolute needs, that the simplest solution would be to simply group (2) and (3) together as broadly instrumental (whether or not we find it useful to maintain the internal distinction between them), and define “absolute needs” as constituted exclusively by (1).

Though it might seem a convenient way to respond, I think that it would be a mistake to restrict absolute needs to (1). To divide things along that line would fail to match up with the range of need-claims having the “unique normative force” Wiggins was concerned about in the first place. It would also, I think, fail to capture what is meant by a person’s “essential nature.” Both failings involve an underlying false assumption, which is that there is nothing more to a person’s essential nature than his nature as a human. On this mistaken view, the set of properties that make up the essential nature of some particular human being is completely exhausted by the set of things that we come to know about someone that he or she is human. But this cannot be the right way to carve things up. Individualized factors such as psychological profile, physiological makeup, genetic health risk factors, and gender might all give rise to needs that are very strongly normative and not at all avoidable, yet not shared in common with humanity at large.

More importantly, for many of us there seem to be certain individualized ways of being or living that become so deeply ingrained in our sense of self that we feel we could not possibly conceive of ourselves as remaining the same person if we were to somehow lose them. Unlike our more transient practical identities such as (for many people) resident of a certain state or employee at a certain company, which we can give up if necessary without any serious internal struggle, we sometimes have conceptions of
ourselves that, although perhaps contingent or changeable in an objective sense, feel from a first-person perspective to be every bit as vital and inescapable as our more general human nature. Consider Socrates’ identity as a philosopher, or Beethoven’s identity as a composer. Preserving those identities is a purpose to which Socrates and Beethoven are at least as committed to as the purpose of maintaining their physical well-being. There is nothing at all puzzling, in ordinary language, about the claim that Socrates would not really be Socrates if he were not a philosopher. Nor should there be anything puzzling about the idea that the things Socrates needs for the purpose of being a philosopher should have comparable normative weight to the things that he needs for the purpose of maintaining his unique existence in a more straightforward biological sense.

But now we find ourselves in a position where we resolve one problem only to have another immediately take its place. Where the extension of our absolute-need concept was previously too narrow, it now threatens to become too broad. The question we now face is how to admit deep-rooted, enduring aspects of one’s identity without opening the gates for less important or less stable attributes as well. If we want to maintain a special class of absolute needs with distinctive normative force, we need to be able to define its limits in such a way that the normativity of an absolute need claim cannot be hijacked on behalf of some illegitimate purpose that is not entitled to such force.

This new problem very closely resembles one that Raymond Geuss raises as an objection to Korsgaard’s view in its original form, that it is unclear whether the normative work is being done by what our practical identities really are in some objective
sense, or by the conceptions under which we subjectively identify ourselves. Geuss suspects Korsgaard of conflating the two, trying to capture the objective normativity of the former and dress it up in the first-personal guise of the latter. The solution he urges her to take is to abandon the view that first-personal reflective endorsement is where normativity comes from; rather, “[t]here should then be some kind of argument to the conclusion that I am essentially a member of the Kingdom of Ends.”

To apply Geuss’ recommendation to our version of the problem, we would need to set aside all talk of who we consider ourselves to be, and begin working out which aspects of our practical identities are really essential or definitive of who we are in an objective sense. We could then classify those objectively essential purposes as generators of absolute needs, and treat all other needs as merely instrumental.

Even if we were inclined to take that way out, it would not be available to us, however. For once again, we are examining claims of need; and we are trying to determine whether there is any special, distinct kind of need claim whose normativity is somehow immune to further argumentation. In order to take Geuss’ approach, several conditions would have to be met. There would need to be an objective fact about which attributes really are essential to our identity, independently of what we view our own identity as consisting in. It would have to be objectively true that certain aspects of this identity are inescapable, that is, unchangeable by any action on our part. These essential, inescapable facts about our identity would somehow have to give rise to needs – a difficult requirement to even conceptualize, much less demonstrate, since it is unclear

36 Geuss, 196.
how or why we would come to need anything for the purpose of realizing some end which is necessarily realized. And finally, we would have to have some special epistemic access – to others as well as ourselves – to those needs that are really expressive of our objective identities. Otherwise, we would not be able to tell when we were making or hearing a true absolute need claim, and so claims of this kind could have no special normative grip on us.

Even assuming the first three conditions were all met – which would be surprising, to say the least – the fourth condition will prove unobtainable. It is a frustrating but undeniable fact that we cannot step out of our first-person perspective to check whether we are "getting it right." When we talk about needs in relation to our identity, the only identity we can really be talking about is the one that we conceive of ourselves as having. So any claim of need that I make on the basis of my essential identity will really only be grounded in what I believe to be my essential identity.

Where does that leave us with respect to absolute needs? If we cannot appeal to an objective fact about our essential identity, we must look to some other source to explain why some need claims are distinctly normative in a way that others are not. It cannot be settled by an appeal to whether or not the relevant purposes really are essential to our identity. Yet we still need to evaluate need claims on some basis, if we are to distinguish in practice between claims that demand action of us and claims that do not (or between claims that demand action more or less forcefully). We have found that we lack the epistemic abilities that would be required to evaluate on a factual basis whether the purpose referenced by a particular need claim is one that we have necessarily. But that
seems to me to be the wrong way of looking at things anyway. Need claims must be made relative to some purpose; and if we are trying to assess the *normative* merits of a need claim, we should be evaluating the relevant purpose on its *normative* credentials rather than its factual ones. We should be asking whether it is a purpose that the claimant *ought* to have, or one that we *ought* to be supporting.

Identities, or rather our conceptions of them, can serve as purposes as well, and thus can be appraised on similar grounds. Just as Socrates needs to remain in prison for the purpose of maintaining his identity as a virtuous man, we construe our conception of our own identity as a purpose when we reference it as the basis for a need claim. To say that I need something because of who I am is to say that the identity I see myself as having is one that I find worth preserving and acting in accordance with. The thing that I am claiming to need is needed for the purpose of preserving or more fully realizing my conception of my identity. And just as with other purposes, the way to evaluate claims based in the preservation of an identity is to examine that identity from a normative standpoint – to ask whether it is a way of being, or of seeing myself, that is worth keeping. In essence, I am asking whether the life that I presently live is one worth living, or whether I ought to be looking for something better. It is an appraisal that must be made on the basis of some independent notion of goodness or fittingness. The normativity of need claims is derived from the purpose or identity to which the need is instrumental; and purposes and identities import their normativity from a broader, more general conception of value.37

37 I will not attempt to argue for any particular theory of value here; I think that my conclusions are general enough to be compatible with a variety of different theories, and my main purpose in
One might be tempted to think that the preceding two paragraphs have been mainly concerned with purposes or identities that we choose for ourselves; but matters are much the same for even the most purely biological aspects of identity. If I have accurately described the epistemic limitations to which we are subject, then whenever I reference my human nature or even my animal nature as the basis for a need, what I am really basing my claim on is my understanding of what it means to be a human, or an animal. We can ask normatively weighted questions about that understanding, about whether it is justified or consistent or whether it is the best way to think about humanity. And whatever strength of normativity we end up assigning to the conception of human nature will carry over into the related claim of need.

---

that regard has been to show that some theory of value is required to fully make sense of what we are doing when we respond to the normative force of need claims.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

What I have argued is that all claims of need are equally dependent on a connection to some relevant purpose to make sense of what is being claimed; and that it is from this purpose that we determine the normative strength of the need claim. I have considered, in a variety of forms, the view put forward by Wiggins and accepted by most contemporary need theorists that there is a distinction to be made between absolute and merely instrumental claims of need, according to which the unique structure and/or object of an absolute need claim gives it a special kind of normative force. I have tried to preserve Wiggins’ contention that the normative force of absolute need claims is resistant to being challenged in a way that merely instrumental need claims are not. My attempts to explicate the normative strength and resilience of absolute need claims in terms of harm, deeply held purposes, practical identity, and objective identity have all fallen short of the mark, and each failure has exposed new weaknesses of the distinction which the following treatment attempted to correct. The final attempt has led to the recognition that for any claim of need, the purpose which serves as the object of that claim must be assessed on its normative merits, in light of a more general theory of value. And it is this value-appraisal of the purpose, ultimately, that determines the value of thing needed and thus the normative strength of the claim to need it.

The final result is that there is no place for a distinction between types of needing, or types of need claims. Some claims of need are obviously more compelling than others; in that much Wiggins was right. But what makes them more compelling is just the fact that the particular purposes for which those needs are claimed stand up to our appraisal:
we find them to be independently valuable. Sometimes, perhaps even most of the time, Wiggins’ explanation that these claims are compelling because they seek to avoid harm is coincidental with the truth. Obtaining valuable things generally involves the avoidance of some kind of harm along the way. But that explanation does not get at what is really going on. It does not give us the whole story, or even most of the story, about the context in which that special normative force resides. And most importantly, we have seen that we are never in a position to fully endorse the normativity of a need claim without both understanding the purpose for what is being claimed, and making some kind of judgment about the value of that purpose.
REFERENCES


Plato, *Apology*.

———, *Crito*.


———, “An Idea We Cannot Do Without,” in Reader (ed.): 25-36.