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"NEED" STATEMENTS

By PAUL W. TAYLOR

WE speak of human beings and of animals as having certain needs. In the case of humans, we distinguish conscious needs (hunger, thirst) from unconscious needs (neurotic compulsions, anxieties, wishes, etc.). We also speak, in a different way, of someone's having a need for, being in need of, or simply needing something. ("I need a hammer to fix the roof.") We use the noun "need" sometimes to refer to a strong conative disposition (desire, craving, drive), and sometimes to refer to the something-that-is-needed, i.e., the something which is necessary for fulfilling a conative disposition. Thus we say a drug addict has a need for a drug, and we also say that the drug is, for him, a need. Another use of the noun "need" occurs in such phrases as "the needs of a free society", "the needs of the educational system", "the needs of national defence", etc. And there are statements in which the verb "need" has for its subject not persons or animals, but things: "My pen needs refilling", "That building needs fire escapes", "This room needs brighter lights".

Not only may one type-statement about needs be used for different purposes in different contexts, but one token-statement may be used for a variety of purposes in a given context. Sometimes we say that a person needs something to describe a state of affairs or to explain an event. But we may use the same type-statement, and even the same token-statement, to recommend that an act be done, or to guide conduct, or to teach someone how to do something, or for many other purposes.

Thus we have considerable diversity in the meaning and use of "need" statements as they occur in the language of everyday life. Still, I think all "need" statements in ordinary language can be reduced to four kinds. The first three differ with respect to the states of affairs which would make them true, and the fourth differs from all the others in not referring to a state of affairs in the way they do. Each of the four kinds of "need" statements may be seen to have a variety of uses, depending on their linguistic contexts and the purposes for which they are uttered. I shall indicate only a few of the various uses for each kind of statement. Finally, I shall point out what I think is the principal error of those who claim to be able to establish a

“ scientific ethics ” on the basis of our knowledge of human needs.

(1) A “ need ” statement of the first sort refers to a state of affairs in which something is required or demanded by a prescriptive rule or law. In certain obvious contexts, the following type-statements belong to this class: “ One needs a licence to go fishing here ” (laws of the state); “ You need a membership card to enter the clubhouse ” (institutional regulations); “ He needs the jack of spades to have a straight flush ” (rules of games); “ We need to draw this conclusion if we accept those premises ” (rules of inference). In each case, the statement is not a statement of the rule or law (which is presupposed), but an assertion of the fact that the something-that-is-needed is required or demanded by the rule or law. Such an assertion could be made for any number of purposes: to *recommend* that the act needed be done or that the thing needed be obtained (e.g., getting a fishing licence or a membership card), to *guide* a person’s conduct (e.g., not to go fishing without a licence), to *warn* someone about the consequences of his act (e.g., being fined for fishing without a licence), to *teach* a person how to do something (e.g., to play a game, to reason validly), to *explain* an occurrence (e.g., a doorman’s preventing someone from entering a clubhouse), and so on.

(2) A second kind of state of affairs referred to by “ need ” statements is one in which the something-that-is-needed is a *necessary means* to the attainment of a goal of the person who is said to have the need. A necessary means is a means without which the person cannot attain his goal. The “ need ” statement contextually implies that such a necessary means is absent or wanting. Examples are: “ I need a watch ”, “ He needs a doctor ”, “ The student needs a dictionary ”. Sometimes the person who has the need for the necessary means is not specified in the statement. Thus it is the public in general who are implicitly referred to in the statement: “ There is a need for traffic lights at this intersection ”. In all cases of “ need ” in this sense, some goal or purpose is presupposed. If we say, “ People need food, clothing, and shelter ”, the purpose of survival at a certain minimum level of comfort and health is presupposed. We might make this point more emphatically by saying that what people need in this sense is always relative to what they want. A nudist does not need clothing, and a person who has decided to commit suicide does not need food or shelter.

Here again “ need ” statements may be used for a variety of

purposes: to *give information* about a situation (e.g., informing us that a person is so ill that a doctor's help is necessary for his recovery), to *recommend* an action (e.g., getting a doctor, buying a dictionary for the student), to *explain* behaviour (e.g., why one is calling a doctor, why the student makes so many mistakes in spelling, or why one is buying a dictionary for the student), to *make a request or suggestion* (e.g., "What would you like as a gift?" "Well, I need a watch"), and so on.

(3) A third type of "need" statement refers directly to the conative dispositions of human beings or animals. To say that a person has a certain need in this sense is to say that his behaviour is motivated by a certain dominant conative disposition, which may be conscious or unconscious. To use current psychological terminology, a need in this sense is a comparatively strong "drive", "wish", or "motive". By saying that behaviour is motivated by a *dominant* conative disposition, all that is meant is that a person (or animal) so motivated has a tendency to act so as to bring about a certain result (achieve a certain goal) even in difficult or frustrating circumstances and even when there are other dispositions in conflict with the one in question. By saying that a person's conative disposition is *unconscious* we mean that the person either does not know that the behaviour so motivated is motivated or that he does not know what the motivating factor is, and that such behaviour is not under the person's immediate control. To say that the person does not know that his behaviour is motivated is to say that he is not aware of his seeking any goal which would provide a plausible reason why he acts as he does. He believes his act is without a motive, i.e., that it is involuntary, spontaneous, accidental (in the way that a slip of the tongue is usually thought to be accidental), or the automatic exercise of a habit. To say that a person does not know what the motivating factor of his behaviour is is to say that the reasons he gives for his behaviour do not furnish as plausible an explanation of his behaviour as other reasons which he does not acknowledge or of which he is unaware. These other reasons explain better why he acts as he does than the (justificatory) reasons he gives for acting as he does.¹

Examples of unconscious needs in this sense would be a mother's unconscious need to compensate for her rejection of her child, a guilty man's unconscious need for punishment, and

¹ This way of characterizing unconscious needs (motives) has been derived from Antony Flew's "Motives and the Unconscious" (*Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. I, pp. 155-172).

the unconscious need of a person with inferiority feelings to boast. These may readily be contrasted with conscious needs in this third sense, such as an ambitious man's need for success, a drug addict's need for a drug, an artist's creative need, an outraged man's need for revenge.

“ Need ” statements of this third sort may, as in the case of the two preceding sorts, be used for a variety of purposes. Thus the statement “ Children have a need for love and affection ” may be used to *explain* a child's behaviour, or to *guide* parents' behaviour, or to *criticize* the way a child is being treated, or to *recommend* a certain kind of early childhood training, and so on.

The phrases “ community needs ”, “ the needs of the group ”, “ the needs of society ”, “ the needs of the educational system ”, “ the needs of national defence ”, etc. are commonly used to refer to the necessary means for achieving the community's, group's, or society's goals, the goals of the educational system, the goals of national defence, etc. Statements to the effect that a community, group, or society has certain needs, then, are of type (2). However, we also speak of the needs of the members of different groups or societies in statements of type (3). Thus we speak of the adolescent's need for security, the racist's need to dominate others, the Tchambuli's need to be skilled in some form of art, the Zuni's need for strict observance of ceremonial rituals, the Oriental's need to save face, and the contemporary American's need to buy a new car every year (as distinct from his need *for* a new car every year). In all of these cases, the needs are dominant conative dispositions of typical members of the groups or societies.

The phrase “ human needs ” may refer either to dominant conative dispositions of all human beings, or to those things which are necessary for the attainment of human goals. Sometimes the term is used especially to designate those dispositions and necessary means which are peculiar to man. The need to give expression to one's experience in some “ symbolic form ”, and the need to have a well-defined role in society, have been supposed to be uniquely human dispositions. Having an orderly view of the world as a “ frame of orientation ”, and having self-respect and the respect of one's peers, have been thought to be necessary means to uniquely human ends. The “ biological ” or “ physiological ” dispositions of hunger, rest, and sex, and such things as food, sleep, and a sexual mate, would be instances of human needs not peculiar to man.

(4) In addition to the foregoing types of “ need ” statements,

there are what may be called purely normative "need" statements. To utter in earnest a "need" statement of this sort is simply to make a recommendation that a certain course of action be taken, and this always, of course, contextually implies the speaker's value judgment that it is better to do what is being recommended than not to do it. At a labour union convention the statement "We need leaders who cannot be bribed" might simply be a call to action, in which the speaker is recommending to others that they vote for certain candidates. The speaker need not be making the assertion that having incorruptible leaders is a necessary means to the union's goals. It is to be noted that the same statement which in one context is purely normative may in other contexts have other functions. Suppose we did not know the circumstances in which a government official uttered the statement "We need to make the highways safer". We would not know whether his statement was purely normative—i.e., a simple recommendation in which the word "need" could without distortion be replaced by the word "ought"—or was instead a justification (e.g., justifying the speaker's advocacy of higher gasoline taxes) or an explanation (e.g., explaining new activities of the State Highway Commission).

The same possibility of multiple usage in varying contexts applies to those "need" statements whose grammatical subject is not a person or animal but a thing. These statements may be of any of our types except type (3). Examples are: "The slums need to be replaced by good housing", "That building needs fire escapes", "My car needs new brakes", "This room needs brighter lights". It will not be difficult for the reader to imagine everyday circumstances in which a given token of each of these statements may correctly be taken as an instance of type (1), type (2), or type (4).

I shall now briefly consider the claim on the part of some social scientists and psychologists to be able to establish a "scientific ethics" on the basis of our knowledge of human needs.¹ I think that this claim rests on a twofold failure: first, a failure to notice that statements about human needs may be both factual assertions which are empirically verifiable (types (2) and (3)) and pure recommendations (type (4)), and second, a failure to realize that to verify statements of types (2) and (3) is

¹ A. H. Maslow's *Motivation and Personality* (Harper, 1954) and Erich Fromm's *The Sane Society* (Rinehart, 1955) are two cases in point. Maslow explicitly proclaims: "... We are working up what amounts to a scientific ethics" (p. 336).

not *eo ipso* to establish the rational justifiability of making recommendations of type (4). For even if it can empirically be shown that man has certain basic needs in senses (2) and (3), it is neither self-contradictory nor logically odd to refrain from recommending that such needs be satisfied, or to recommend that they be not satisfied. The purposes and goals to which needs in sense (2) are relative may, after all, be morally undesirable. And we may disapprove of certain human conative dispositions (needs in sense (3)), however dominant they might be in some individuals or groups. That human beings have a need for love, or for freedom, or for knowledge (assuming that assertions of this kind could be empirically confirmed) is not in itself a justification for, or even a good reason in support of, the recommendation that these needs be met. What human beings need might not be for their good. (They might have a need for destroying one another, for example.) Whether human needs *ought* to be met must be established on grounds independent of the "need" claims themselves. This follows from the principle that there is neither logical entailment nor contextual implication holding between any statement of types (2) and (3) and any statement of type (4). And this principle is one of the lessons we have learned from Professor Moore's "naturalistic fallacy".

The reason why arguments going from empirical assertions about human needs to recommendations that such needs be met appear so convincing is that empirical statements about needs, which belong to types (2) and (3), are, as we have seen, so frequently used in everyday life for the purpose of making recommendations. But when social scientists and psychologists make statements of types (2) and (3), they are making them not as recommendations but as confirmable statements of matters of fact. And *this* usage is only psychologically connected (by association), not logically connected (by implication), with the everyday recommendatory use of "need" statements.

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