

Needs and their relevance to questions of justice

Both modern and traditional debates about justice make reference to needs or to the distributive principle “to each according to need”. However, it is often left open, what needs actually are, what their basic conceptual structure is and how this relates to specific problems of justice and social justice. Taking as a departure point the grammar of need sentences, I want to show how insights into the conceptual structure of needs can help to demonstrate their relevance for questions of justice.

1) What are needs? And which needs are relevant for questions of justice?

The general structure of a need sentence is: “A needs x (for y)”. This means that needs are necessities or requirements which can be further specified by saying what A is or what y is. Specification of A generate needs which are important for the carrying out of a certain role, e.g. a bassoon player needs certain things like a bassoon to be able to fulfil that role. Specification of y mentions an aim or purpose, e.g. it describes what is needed for “baking a cake”. If the task is to find out which needs are relevant for questions of justice one can either give an “A” or a “y” which is relevant for justice. Many approaches in political philosophy can be classified as “autonomy-need-approaches” which hold that the relevant A is “autonomous person”. However, this leads to the problem that the needs of human-beings who cannot be autonomous or who are no longer autonomous are excluded. I want therefore to argue that A must be specified as “human-being”, i.e. that the relevant needs for justice are needs for a human form of life. This starting point allows us to address key questions about needs, such as how to assess the severity and urgency of a need, how to distinguish between human needs and societal needs, and how to respond to the special needs arising from disability.

2) How can needs be relevant for questions of justice?

In general needs can be relevant for questions of justice in different ways, depending on the general conception of justice that is being invoked. I do not want to propose a detailed theory of justice but my aim is to show that the grammatical structure of human needs as requirements for a human form of life leads to claims of justice. It follows directly from my analysis of needs that human needs might ground some very basic claims of justice, especially those involving human rights. In the field of social justice it is interesting that specific needs, because of their grammatical structure, can lead to specific problems but that the conceptual structure can as well help to find solutions to this problem. This can be shown with regard to the need for health. The main problem of health care allocation consists in the scarcity of resources. This scarceness is triggered by grammatical facts about the need for health, e.g. by the fact that there is a huge variety of illnesses, the fact that new illnesses come up all the time and that illnesses are often part of becoming older. The satisfaction of this need will therefore always be more difficult than the satisfaction of other needs. This leads to the unavoidable problem of setting priorities in the distribution of health care resources. However, the parameters of urgency and severity of health care needs can help with this situation because they allow us to develop “needs-priority-principles” as an alternative to the economic and utilitarian priority setting principles.