

NEEDS AND VALUES

by Herbert W. Schneider

I find it both useful and factual to regard needs as a third dimension of moral life in addition to obligations (responsibilities) and values (goods). A theory that gives adequate recognition to human needs demonstrates the continuity between the actual and the desirable, and shows how artificial it is to make a sharp distinction between the realm of values and the realm of facts.

"NEEDS" IN THE CONSIDERATION OF VALUES

The term "human wants" is ambiguous. In one sense it denotes the needed, and in another the desired; in one direction it points to necessity, and in another toward possibility. "Needs" is a less ambiguous term. The chief obstacle in theory has been the ambition to distinguish between man's natural needs and his cultural wants. An eloquent passage in Adam Smith's chapter on "The Natural Wants of Man" concludes with the confession that it is impossible to identify the demands of human nature because man's nature is so "delicate" and sensitive that it continually generates discontents and keeps pushing happiness into the future. Psychologists today, after Freud's attempted diagnosis of civil discontents and natural drives, are inclined to agree with Adam Smith that it is idle to describe precisely the basic human drives, be they conscious or subconscious, natural or artificial. The environment in which men live is so thoroughly mixed, part natural, part cultural, that it seems prudent for moral theory not to stumble at the outset over the attempt to distinguish between the wants that are organic and those that are cultural. Let this be a subordinate, psychological problem, and let moralists concentrate on the difference between human needs and human objectives, between human necessities and human values.

Needs can be recognized as such before they are evaluated as goods or evils. We need existence, life, sanity, air and water, peace and government—an endless and varying list. Like obligations, needs may be welcomed or they may be regarded as necessary evils. Labor, hospitals, surgery, holidays, food and drink, and the rest of them, these necessities are primarily neither obligations nor values; they are requirements. Our

Herbert W. Schneider is professor emeritus of philosophy, Columbia University.

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needs are not merely material, physical, organic, or economic; they are a fluctuating, diversified lot. But together they constitute our moral prerequisites; they are the conditioning factors that make life tolerable. If we let our Platonist friends tell us about eternal values, we may well require them to listen to our recital of changing, diversified requirements. At a given time or locality they are fairly definite, but in general they are infinitely variable. I know persons who cannot eat, drink, or work unless the radio gives them music or other noise in the air; silence is to them a privation, intolerable. A silent airport would be regarded by many patrons as barbarous. "Background music" and "coffee breaks" are absolutely essential to prevent "tension." In the face of such facts, it would be stupid to quarrel about a "sense of values." Needs, in all their diversity, must be accepted, or dealt with clinically; they are not subject to moral persuasion, and it is vain to try to determine what men *really* need or ought to need. Imaginary needs, to be sure, may turn out in experience to be delusions; but for the time being they are categorical imperatives.

THE ACTUAL AND THE IDEAL IN MORAL EXPERIENCE

However, in the context of evaluation and moral art, needs are the raw material or resources with which morality and moralists must work. In a particular, problematic situation, it is necessary, or at least possible, by factual investigation to discover what is experienced as necessary, whether good or evil, and what is valued as an objective or end. To regard needs as mere means or as merely public utilities does not do them justice. In the context of moral criticism or art, they function as data, not as values. They might be termed "the invaluable" in the sense that they are the basis rather than the subjects of valuation. In any case, they are actual; and they are actually needed if there are to be any ideals. On them the pursuit of ideals is dependent; but they are not dependent on ideals or values. They are basic morally, but a life made up wholly of needs and obligations would surely not be a good life. To be able to use needs as the materials for creative living is the essence of moral freedom. Underlying freedom in human experience is this large element of moral necessities. Freedom is a luxury or privilege, a positive value; it is not the basic need.

Such considerations should aid in clarifying the relation between the actual and the ideal in moral experience, and to show the futility of separating facts and values in existence, whatever we may do with them in theory.