

# Teaching & learning guide for: Basic needs in normative contexts

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## AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

From the day on which humans are born they need things. Some of these needs seem “basic,” such as our needs for food, water or shelter. Everybody has these needs. We cannot escape them. We also cannot escape the serious harm that arises when these needs remain unsatisfied. It is thus no wonder that in thinking about what we ought to do some researchers have suggested to first and foremost focus on people's basic needs. Such need-based theories must answer three main questions: What are basic needs? What are their implications for normative questions? And how can these needs and their satisfaction be measured? Proponents must also defend these theories against objections, such as against the objections that the theories are paternalistic, materialistic, and passivity-promoting. Depending on their goals and contexts (distributive justice, sustainable development, human rights, etc.), appeals to basic needs may take various different forms.

## AUTHOR RECOMMENDS

**Brock, Gillian (2005): Needs and global justice.** *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 57, 51–72. In this accessible paper Brock defends a need-based account of global justice, that is, of duties towards people in other countries. She also argues that basic needs are more important than human rights and can partially justify them.

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**Copp, David (1998): Equality, justice, and the basic needs.** In: Brock, Gillian (ed.): *Necessary Goods*, Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 113–133. According to Copp, citizens have a right against the state to be enabled to meet their basic needs. The chapter is one of the clearest expositions of what (domestic, intragenerational) distribution according to need might entail.

**Doyal, Len; Gough, Ian (1991): A Theory of Human Need.** New York: Guilford. This book represents one of the most influential, comprehensive and plausible attempts to develop a basic needs theory and make it applicable to international development. A “must-read” for anyone who is interested in basic needs in normative contexts.

**Meyer, Lukas; Pözlner, Thomas (forthcoming): Basic needs and sufficiency: The foundations of intergenerational justice.** In: Gardiner, Stephen (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Intergenerational Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Meyer and Pözlner argue that our first and most important duty of intergenerational justice is to enable future generations to meet their basic needs. They defend this principle against a number of potential objections.

**Miller, David (1999): Principles of Social Justice.** Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. In this influential book Miller argues that depending on the context, social justice varyingly requires promoting equality, desert and need. Each of these principles is explained in detail. What makes the book especially interesting is that in defending the importance of needs Miller does not only appeal to traditional philosophical evidence but also to empirical studies.

**Reader, Soran (2007): Needs and Moral Necessity.** London: Routledge. To those who are interested in the role of (basic) needs in private (as opposed to public) morality I recommend this excellent book by Soran Reader.

**Wiggins, David (1998): Claims of need.** In: Wiggins, David (ed.): *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1–58. Wiggins explores the concept of needs and its normative implications. He distinguishes various kinds of needs, including basic needs. A tough read, but very influential.

## ONLINE MATERIALS

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/needs/>

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Needs in Moral and Political Philosophy, written by Gillian Brock and David Miller.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtBGDSfsLyc>

Presentation of Ian Gough's book “Heat, Greed and Human Need: Climate Change, Capitalism and Sustainable Wellbeing”, in which he applies his theory of basic needs to the issue of climate change.

## SAMPLE SYLLABUS

### Week 1: Introduction & Overview

Pözlner, Thomas (2021): Basic needs in normative contexts. *Philosophy Compass*.

Brock, Gillian; Miller, David (2019): Needs in moral and political philosophy. In: Zalta, Edward N. (ed.): *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/needs/>.

### Week 2: The Nature of Basic Needs 1

Doyal, Len; Gough, Ian (1991): *A Theory of Human Need*. New York: Guilford, 49-75.

Braybrooke, David (1987): *Meeting Needs*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 29-59.

### Week 3: The Nature of Basic Needs 2

Wiggins, David (1998): Claims of need. In: Wiggins, David (ed.): *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1-58.

Fletcher, Guy (2018): Needing and necessity. In: Timmons, Mark (ed.): *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 170-192.

**Week 4: The Universality of Basic Needs**

Doyal, Len; Gough, Ian (1991): *A Theory of Human Need*. New York: Guilford, 9-45.

McGregor; Allister J.; Camfield, Laura; Woodcock, Alison (2009): Needs, wants and goals: Wellbeing, quality of life and public policy. *Applied Research Quality Life* 4, 135-154.

**Week 5: The Measurement of Basic Needs 1**

Hicks, Norman; Streeten, Paul (1979): Indicators of development: The search for a basic needs yardstick. *World Development* 7, 567-580.

Costanza, Robert et al. (2007): Quality of life: An approach integrating opportunities, human needs, and subjective well-being. *Ecological Economics* 61 (2-3), 267-276.

**Week 6: The Measurement of Basic Needs 2**

Doyal, Len; Gough, Ian (1991): *A Theory of Human Need*. New York: Guilford, 151-170.

Doyal, Len; Gough, Ian (1991): *A Theory of Human Need*. New York: Guilford, 171-221.

**Week 7: Basic Needs and Justice 1**

Copp, David (1998): Equality, justice, and the basic needs. In: Brock, Gillian (ed.): *Necessary Goods*, Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 113-133.

Miller, David (2020): Needs-based justice. Theory and evidence. In: Bauer, Alexander M.; Meyerhuber, Malte I. (eds.): *Empirical Research and Normative Theory. Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Two Methodical Traditions between Separation and Interdependence*. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter.

**Week 8: Basic Needs and Justice 2 (Global and Intergenerational)**

Brock, Gillian (2005): Needs and global justice, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 57, 51-72.

Meyer, Lukas; Pözlner, Thomas (forthcoming): Basic needs and sufficiency: The foundations of intergenerational justice. In: Gardiner, Stephen (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Intergenerational Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Week 9: Other Normative Contexts: Human Rights and Sustainability**

Miller, David (2007): *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 163-200.

Holden, Erling; Linnerud, Kristin; Banister, David (2017): The imperatives of sustainable development. *Sustainable Development* 25 (3), 213-226.

**Week 10: The Plausibility of Basic Needs Theories 1**

Alkire, Sabine (2006): Needs and capabilities. In: Reader, Soran (ed.): *The Philosophy of Need*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reader, Soran (2006): Does a basic needs approach need capabilities? *Journal of Political Philosophy* 14, 337-350.

**Week 11: The Plausibility of Basic Needs Theories 2 (The Capability Approach)**

Sen, Amartya (1987): Equality of what? In: Rawls, John; McMurrin, Sterling, M. (eds.): *Liberty, Equality, and Law: Selected Tanner Lectures on Moral Philosophy*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.

Robeyns, Ingrid (2005): The capability approach: A theoretical survey. *Journal of Human Development* 6 (1), 93-117.

**OPTIONAL****Focus Questions**

What are basic needs? More specifically, what are needs? What distinguishes absolute needs from instrumental needs? What distinguishes basic needs from other kinds of absolute needs?

Some researchers argue that basic needs are independently normatively relevant, that is, their non-satisfaction by itself gives us a (defeasible) reason to satisfy them. What speaks in favor of this claim? What speaks against it?

Why is it implausible that basic needs satisfaction has strict priority over other obligations, and that satisfying the basic needs of the most needy has strict priority over satisfying the basic needs of less needy?

Why might measuring the satisfaction of basic needs and determining appropriate means of satisfaction (“satisfiers”) require very different approaches (especially in terms of the involvement of citizens)?

What are common objections against appealing to basic needs in normative contexts? How convincing are these objections?

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**Thomas Pözlner** is a postdoc researcher and lecturer at the Philosophy Department of the University of Graz, Austria. Before that, he was visiting the Psychology Department of the College of Charleston on an Erwin Schrödinger Fellowship by the Austrian Science Fund. His main areas of research are metaethics, moral psychology, distributive justice, climate ethics and the philosophy of Albert Camus. He is author of the book *Moral Reality and the Empirical Sciences* (Routledge, 2018). His articles have been published in journals such as *Synthese*, *Inquiry* and *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*.

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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