

## COMMENTARY

### SECOND AND THIRD THOUGHTS ON NEEDS AND WANTS

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#### I

I am grateful to Professor Kontos for having raised objections to my "Needs and Wants" paper, especially as one of his objections has led me to some second and third thoughts. Let me take up first his criticism of my having continued to use the needs/wants distinction after I had said that it was both insular and ideological. The reason for my having done so is that I was chiefly addressing an insular and ideological audience, *i.e.* English-speaking liberal-democrats, who are best addressed in terms familiar to them. Current English usage commonly treats needs and wants as different, which perhaps just shows how fully that usage has been shaped in the liberal tradition.

After Kontos's criticism, on second thoughts it occurred to me that another reason might be offered; but on third thoughts I am inclined to reject it.

The other reason is that the needs/wants distinction might still be thought useful in enabling us to carry the analysis a little farther than can otherwise be done. There is obviously a difference between those things that are necessary for the maintenance of individuals' lives (air, water, food, and in most climates clothing and shelter) and all the other things that may in different societies be wanted but are not absolutely necessary to maintain life. Why should we not call the first "needs" and the second "wants"? Could we not, by so doing, advance our analysis by considering separately two rather different phenomena: (1) the obvious ways in which "wants" change over time, through various levels of complexity of civilisation, and (2) the evident fact that some "wants" change over time into "needs", not only in Rousseau's pejorative sense, but also from real changes in the requirements of life in increasingly complex

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organizations of society (*e.g.*, in crowded cities, (a) sewage systems became a "need", for mere life-support, and became possible after Sir John Harrington's invention of the water-closet; and (b) transportation systems to get people to and from work, and to and from the holidays needed from modern work, become "needs" with increasing urban spread. Both of these phenomena must clearly be taken into account in any analysis of human needs, but are they best taken into account by starting from the needs/wants distinction? I think not.

Although that distinction is general enough to be held to be valid for all times and places, it is in fact only useful in respect of the most primitive humans. For at any more advanced level, some of what were "wants" become "needs", or if you prefer, "needs" change and increase. The point is, that there is really no difference in saying "some wants become needs" and saying "needs change and increase". So we are not any farther ahead by keeping to, or re-introducing, a needs/wants distinction.

The most useful distinction, I suggest, is not between needs and wants, but between needs defined narrowly, defined intermediately, and defined still more broadly. This is a more meaningful distinction if we are trying to cope with the question of changes in needs over time.

By the narrow definition I mean those needs that are required simply to keep alive (air, water, food, shelter). These do not change over time.

By the intermediate definition I mean those things that are necessary to keep people efficient as workers. Those needs do change over time, as the nature of the socially required work changes, *e.g.* from predominantly rural labour (hedging, ditching, ploughing etc.) to modern factory work and the still more highly skilled work required to sustain modern society (airline pilots and air traffic controllers). These may be described as social needs, but they are individual needs too; they are needs imposed on the individual by the society. They require more complex food and drink, and sedatives or other releases from tension.

A still broader definition of needs is not only possible but also required, if one starts from the humanist assumption that individuals ought to be enabled to make full use of, and to develop, their human capacities. In that case, "needs" will include whatever is required, and possible given the full use of existing technology (which in our time is generally far from fully used), to enable that use and development. Clearly, these needs do change with changes in what technology makes possible.

On this third definition of needs, and I think only on it, the distinction, made by Marcuse and championed by Kontos as against Leiss, between *true* and *false* needs becomes of utmost importance. For by the third definition, some needs that emerge at successive levels of social organization will be truly

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necessary (those which would need to be incorporated into the most advanced human society), and some will be falsely necessary (those which are required only by an exploitive class-divided society, whose maintenance economically requires the endless creation of artificial needs, and politically requires an ideology which legitimizes both those needs and the state which upholds that economic system).

It seems to me therefore that, whether or not we fully accept the third definition of needs, we are farther ahead, in coping with the problem of changes over time, if we abandon the needs/wants distinction and move to the distinction between needs defined narrowly, intermediately, and more broadly. If we accept the third definition, the superiority of the latter distinction is obvious. Even if we do not, it appears more promising. If we are not to stay at the level of "universal" statements about needs, which as I have argued are not universal but only applicable at the level of the most primitive society, we need to go beyond "needs" and "wants". Change over time is surely more important than Robinson Crusoe universals.

## II

Let me now turn, more briefly, to Kontos's other criticism of my position. He contends that the opposed ontological postulates I employ — man as infinite consumer/appropriator, and man as exacter/developer of human capacities — are not exhaustive "except in the content of liberal-democratic theory", and that therefore, even if my rejection of the former is granted, the validity of the latter is not thereby demonstrated. "There can be, and have been other quite different postulates," he writes. The only example he mentions is "the ascetic rejection of both capitalist possessiveness and rational-technological foundations of freedom."

I grant him the ascetic rejection, and would grant him others that he might have mentioned from the past. I do not however, see any *present* contexts where my two ontological postulates are not exhaustive. They are, surely, in Marx: is it not essentially those two postulates that he had in mind in his distinction between the wealth and poverty of political economy and the rich human need of a totality of human life-activities (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. M. Milligan, 1959, pp. 111-112)? Would anarchists or Maoists see it any differently, or conservative libertarians such as Nozick and Milton Friedman, or non-liberal idealists such as Leo Strauss and his followers? I do not think so, nor do I see any other significant schools of political theory in our time which would dissent more than marginally from the exhaustiveness of the opposed postulates I have used.

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### III

Let me conclude with a remark on the issue raised at the end of Kontos's paper — the question of the validity of the distinction Marcuse has made and Leiss seems to reject, between true and false needs. I begin with the well-known remark by Pontius Pilate as quoted by Aldous Huxley: ' "What is the truth?" asked jesting Pilate, and did not stay for an answer.' This is not to suggest that disputes about true and false needs are entirely semantic or unreal or irresolvable. They are real, but they may not be irresolvable.

We may find a clue in Rousseau's insight that with advances in techniques of production individuals came to desire more and more material satisfactions; that at each new level these became real needs, in the sense that it was more painful to be without them than pleasant to have them; and that the multitude of new needs "subjected man to all of nature and especially to his fellow men", since the only way to gratify the new desires was to dominate other men.

I think we may extrapolate from, and perhaps improve on, Rousseau's still profound perception. Needs induced by advances in techniques of production have in fact led to domination and class exploitation, imposed by the institution of an unlimited right of private appropriation. As I suggested earlier, from any humanist position (such as Rousseau's), needs which are so imposed must be considered adventitious, not truly but falsely human needs. However, we may add, following Marx's remark about "crude communism" as "a regression to the unnatural simplicity of the poor and undemanding man" (*op. cit.*, p. 100), that increases in needs are not always vicious. They are so in circumstances such as bourgeois society, where they do lead to domination; they are not so in an imaginable communist society, where increase of needs goes along with fully human existence.

In this view, there is a real distinction between true and false needs. False are those imposed by relations of production which require domination: these are false in any circumstances, such as our present ones, where it is possible to envisage meeting a civilised level of needs without domination. True needs are those which could be met by a rational, non-class-dominated, organization of production (work and leisure), given the presently available technology; and these can be seen as increasing indefinitely with future improvements in technology, provided that those improvements are no longer harnessed to the right of unlimited private appropriation.

I conclude that the distinction between true and false needs is real, pressing, and not be lightly abandoned.

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