Original Article Doi:10.1590/0100-512X2026n16308ap

NEEDS, PERSONS, AUTONOMY*

NECESSIDADES, PESSOAS, AUTONOMIA

Alessandro Pinzani
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8721-2134
alepinzani@gmail.com
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC), Florianópolis, Brasil.

ABSTRACT *The article aims to show that a need-based theory of social justice can give personal autonomy its due relevance while, at the same time, highlighting its embeddedness within a socially and historically defined view of well-being, as shown in the first section of the article. A need-based approach focuses first on the material conditions that must be satisfied to attain freedom of action and agency (section two), and subsequently personal autonomy (sections three to five). These last sections highlight that autonomy can be reached to different degrees in different spheres and at different moments. It also stresses its relational character, which points to the unavoidable mutual dependence that binds members of society.*

Keywords: *Needs. Person. Autonomy. Social Justice.*

RESUMO *O artigo pretende mostrar que uma teoria da justiça social fundada nas necessidades pode atribuir à autonomia pessoal a relevância devida e, ao mesmo tempo, apontar para o fato de que ela está inserida numa visão de bem-estar definida social e historicamente, como mostrado na primeira seção do artigo. Uma abordagem centrada nas necessidades foca nas condições materiais*

* Article submitted on: 03/31/2025. Approved on: 11/26/2025.

que têm que ser satisfeitas para alcançar, primeiramente, liberdade de ação e agência (seção dois) e, secundariamente, autonomia pessoal (seções três a cinco). Estas últimas seções salientam que a autonomia pode ser alcançada em níveis diversos, em esferas e momentos diferentes. Aponta também para seu caráter relacional, que evidencia a inevitável dependência recíproca que liga os membros de uma sociedade.

Palavras-chave: *Necessidades. Pessoa. Autonomia. Justiça social.*

When discussing the currency of justice, most social and political theories focus on rights, capabilities, resources, choices, and similar concepts. Only a few authors have centered their analyses on needs (e.g., Braybrooke, 1987; Thomson, 1987; Doyal; Gough, 1991; Brock, 1998; Wiggins, 1998; Hamilton, 2003; Reader, 2005). We have examined elsewhere the reasons for this neglect and argued that the concept of need should occupy a central place within critical theories of society (Pinzani, 2019 and 2022). In those texts, we have distinguished needs from preferences, wishes, desires, and interests, and argued that needs possess an objective character and can be identified even when the individuals who have them are not aware of them. Moreover, we have defined "basic needs" as those whose satisfaction constitutes the condition for satisfying others, which we have termed "derived needs." This does not imply establishing a fixed hierarchy of needs, as some theories do (e.g., Maslow, 1943), but it does allow for a case-by-case evaluation of the urgency of specific needs. We will not revisit these issues here.

In this article, we discuss the relationship between the concept of need and two other central concepts that traditionally play a major role in political and social theory: 'person' and 'autonomy.' We aim to demonstrate that a need-based theory of social justice does not have to forgo giving personal autonomy its due relevance while simultaneously emphasizing its embeddedness within a socially and historically defined conception of well-being. A need-based approach focuses on the material conditions that must be fulfilled in order to attain autonomy, highlighting that autonomy can be achieved to different degrees across different spheres and at different moments. We cannot provide a full elaboration of this argument within the constraints of a single article; a more detailed treatment will be developed elsewhere.

The article, therefore, does not aim to offer a complete theory of social justice or to define the normative principles such a theory should follow. Its

goal is to underscore the necessity of placing the concept of needs at the center of such a theory. Furthermore, it seeks to identify the categories of needs that must be satisfied if persons are to develop both basic and substantial levels of autonomy. To that end, it first offers a brief characterization of needs with respect to the effects of their non-satisfaction on individuals and their well-being. In particular, it draws on the concept of "function," which points to the social and cultural environment in which individuals develop and satisfy their needs. Needs have an essentially historical and social nature, which manifests itself on several levels. The most relevant consequence for a need-based social theory is that needs reveal the unavoidable mutual dependency of human beings and the limited character of their autonomy.

The following sections further develop this point. Section 2 defines freedom of acting and agency as two basic forms of autonomy that can be attained only when specific needs are satisfied. Sections 3 through 5 examine more complex levels of autonomy and the material conditions for achieving them—conditions that depend on the satisfaction of certain needs. This analysis shows the relationship between personal autonomy and the socially enabled satisfaction of needs, and it underscores the fact that autonomy is attainable only through interaction with others, as emphasized by care ethics and other relational theories of autonomy.

1. Humans and Their Needs

Humans can be described from a plurality of points of view: as living beings, as members of a species, as juridical, moral, and political subjects, etc. From any of these perspectives, humans have specific needs whose satisfaction enables them to achieve a more or less accomplished realization of their personhood in that corresponding aspect. This implies a weak teleological view of well-being, understood as a condition in which a person can exist, develop, and function (possibly at an optimal level). Following Andrzej Sicinski's remarks (Sicinski, 1978, p. 73), we suggest that needs be classified as follows:

(1) Needs whose non-satisfaction results in the individual's death.
(2) Needs whose non-satisfaction results in the individual's inability to perform some of their functions.
(3) Needs whose non-satisfaction results in disturbances in the performance of some functions.
(4) Needs whose non-satisfaction results in disturbances in the development of the individual.

In other words, needs concern humans' capacity (1) to exist; (2) to perform basic physical, psychological, and social functions; (3) to strive for optimal performance of these functions; and (4) to develop the physical, psychological, and social abilities required to perform them. When a person has reached a satisfactory level of need-satisfaction in all these categories, we can say they have attained a satisfactory level of well-being. Contrary to perfectionism, our approach assumes that there is no way to determine when a human being has fully reached optimal well-being; however, it is possible to compare situations across persons (or across stages of a single person's life) and determine whether one enjoys a higher level of well-being as an animal, a human being, or a moral subject. Further clarification is necessary.

The notion of function—and especially of optimal function—requires explanation. We are not referring merely to what Sen calls "functioning," which denotes activities or states that an actor values (Sen, 1992, p. 39ff.). This definition introduces a subjective component that contradicts the idea that needs have an objective character. It is not entirely up to individuals to define their functions. Thus, when we refer to "functions," we are not using the term as synonymous with Sen's "functioning."

Nor are we referring solely to biological functions, such as gene or species reproduction (Dawkins, 1976), or to unavoidable sociocultural functions, such as guaranteeing social reproduction through having children and transmitting values (Bezanson; Luxton, 2006; Bhattacharya, 2017). Claiming a definitive *raison d'être* for human beings invites a strong teleology tied to metaphysical conceptions of nature and risks generating normative claims ("Humans ought to fulfill this function," or "Humans ought to achieve their natural *telos*").

Conversely, we can define human functions contextually, according to their social and cultural environment, by resorting to descriptive assertions that do not refer to an unchanging human nature—for instance: "In society X, individuals are expected to fulfill functions a, b, and c." From this perspective, human functions—like human well-being—are socially and culturally determined. Even biological functions are never entirely divorced from cultural interpretation: having a child may be framed as patriotic duty, a contribution to the pension system, a religious mandate, or a step in self-realization. In short, defining a person's functions depends on their societal role, normative expectations, and contingent biographical or institutional factors.[1]

1 Searle speaks of "status functions" to indicate this kind of socially defined functions (Searle, 2010, p. 7ff.).

This points to the essentially historical and social character of needs, which manifests on three levels. The first concerns the possibility of defining needs independently of individuals' subjective attitudes, by referring to their objective character (Pinzani, 2022). Needs are not preferences or desires. I may think I "need" a cigarette while in reality I need to quit smoking. Smoking *objectively* harms me (threatening my existence or impairing functions), even if—*subjectively*—it provides momentary pleasure. Yet this does not mean that needs express an immutable human nature. Their objectivity differs from the objectivity of natural facts (such as atomic structure). Even when appealing to human nature, we must consider its historical becoming. Human needs also undergo this process and thus possess a plastic quality despite their objectivity because the latter is *historically* determined.

The second level concerns how cultures define needs and their satisfiers (the means for satisfying them). Becoming human did not entail renouncing animal needs (i.e., the needs we share with other animals for survival or basic functioning) but involved redefining them. They became human needs through reinterpretation in the context of cultural meaning. Humans cannot justify actions merely by appealing to animal necessity. They must situate their needs and satisfaction strategies within a collectively recognized system of beliefs and values. Only this allows needs to be formulated as normative demands. This is evident, for instance, in the complex normative regulation of sexual needs across cultures. Thus, strictly speaking, there are no "natural" needs in human beings—not because humans are not natural beings, but because their needs are socially defined and satisfied. Human beings have no immediate relation to nature; they relate to it through cultural and social mediation.

Finally, although they may appear tied to individual wants, needs have a social nature insofar as their satisfaction depends on others—both regarding relational needs (love, recognition, admiration, respect) and material needs related to physical existence. Only in exceptional cases can individuals secure survival alone. Generally, we depend on others from the womb until death.

2. Needs, Freedom of Acting, and Agency

In the previous section, we used the terms "individual" and "person" interchangeably. From this point on, we will reserve the former for the specimen of the species that has specific needs related to its biological existence and animal well-being. By contrast, a person may be understood, first, as a human subject endowed with basic forms of autonomy—namely, (1) as an actor and (2) as an agent. A person exists and functions as an actor and as an agent only

when specific needs are met. When this is the case, a person can attain a certain basic level of autonomy.

At a first level, a person possesses basic autonomy as an *acting subject*. This form of autonomy implies the ability to choose among different courses of action: to formulate punctual goals, to hold beliefs about which strategies are most likely to achieve them, and to understand—at least to some extent—the short-term consequences of one's actions. These capacities may exist in varying degrees and are not exclusive to humans. Non-human animals can also display this form of basic autonomy if they can choose among goals and courses of action. Reaching this level of autonomy, that is, *freedom of action*, means being able to exist and function as an *actor*.

This basic autonomy requires certain material conditions—freedom of movement and a minimum level of physical strength—as well as the development of elementary intellectual capacities. These give rise to *acting needs*, that is, the needs whose satisfaction enables the subject to exist, develop, and function as a fundamentally autonomous actor. They include the need for bodily mobility and for cognitive development sufficient to understand available options and likely outcomes.

Freedom of action is never exercised in a vacuum. It is always mediated by the subject's relationship with their environment. It depends on bodily integrity and development, which are possible only through the support of others (family, community, and/or public institutions). Moreover, acting involves navigating a specific environment, physically and cognitively. A bear foraging in the forest would be helpless in a desert; an academic lost in a wilderness may not survive without knowledge of the terrain. Freedom of acting, then, is always conditioned by the actor's familiarity with and access to a given environment—it is not an absolute, context-independent capacity.

At a second level, basic autonomy may be defined as the capacity to take responsibility for one's actions—that is, to give reasons for them to oneself and to others. This defines the person as more than a mere actor: it makes them an *agent*. This form of autonomy—*agency*—is distinctively human, as we are not aware of any non-human animals capable of propositional language and, consequently, of articulating reasons for their actions. It presupposes the ability to grasp the non-immediate, long-term consequences of one's actions and the ability to use propositional language to articulate motives and justify behavior. These capacities give rise to *agency needs*: the needs whose satisfaction enables a person to exist, develop, and function as a responsible agent.

Agency needs are inherently social. They arise within relationships with others. First, persons must acquire language, which allows them to

express motives and justify their actions; this occurs already at the level of their socialization into a social and cultural community. Second, they must possess adequate cognitive abilities to understand the medium- and long-term consequences of their actions. A person suffering from severe mental illness, for example, cannot be held responsible for actions taken in a state of delusion.[2] Third, agents must recognize themselves—and must be recognized by others—as responsible actors capable of being held accountable. This constitutes a minimal form of recognition. Denying that someone acted autonomously by claiming they acted on instinct alone (as sometimes occurs in discriminatory discourse)[3] not only misrepresents human behavior but also denies their moral subjectivity.

Both freedom of acting and agency underscore the relational character of personhood: they are not merely individual capacities but social achievements, dependent on institutional, interpersonal, and cultural frameworks.

A third, equally basic form of autonomy is *epistemic autonomy*: the capacity to construct and express one's epistemic identity as an agent (i.e., to offer reasons for one's actions and acting strategies) based on the use of propositional language—that is, a self-understanding and self-definition that are granted credibility by others. The corresponding need is the need for self-definition and epistemic recognition—being taken seriously as a knower and as someone whose interpretation of the world matters. This dimension has been explored extensively in the literature on epistemic injustice, which shows how epistemic power structures shape a person's capacity to exercise autonomy (see Fricker, 2007; Kidd; Medina; Pohlhaus, 2017).

Epistemic autonomy illuminates the relationship between persons and their environment, including other people, institutions, social structures, and cultures. This processual dimension is also present in the other two forms of autonomy—freedom of acting and agency—but in a less immediately visible way. Individuals may perceive themselves, at different moments, as free actors or agents regardless of how others view them, even though such perceptions can be misleading given the social nature of both forms of autonomy. By contrast, epistemic autonomy fundamentally depends on recognition by others:

2 This is why crimes committed under such conditions are typically treated differently: the actor is regarded as someone suffering from a psychological disorder rather than as a criminal *stricto sensu*. As a result, the 'punishment' usually consists in confinement within a psychiatric institution—often a secure hospital facility—rather than imprisonment in a conventional penal facility.

3 There is ongoing controversy over whether humans possess and follow instincts. For a classic perspective on this issue, see Lorenz, 1970/1. For more recent views, see Blumberg, Freeman, and Robinson (2009) and Pinker (2002).

it requires not only self-definition but also the credibility accorded by one's social environment.

These three dimensions of basic autonomy—freedom of acting, agency, and epistemic autonomy—challenge the liberal conception of the person as an isolated individual who autonomously pursues self-chosen preferences so long as others do not interfere. They instead support a relational and processual view of autonomy, according to which the latter is not an innate property of individuals but the outcome of networks of support and recognition that allow persons to act in accordance with their beliefs, goals, and values. This point will be further developed in the next sections, where more complex forms of autonomy are discussed.

3. Personal Autonomy: A Matter of Degrees

The forms of autonomy discussed in the previous section—freedom of action, agency, and epistemic autonomy—constitute basic forms of autonomy insofar as they provide the foundation for acting as subjects who pursue higher goals than the mere satisfaction of immediate preferences, who assume responsibility not only for individual actions but for life plans, and who affirm their identity not just as actors or agents but as *ethical* subjects. These are subjects who seek to live according to more general goals, for example, to what they regard as a good life—whether their choices are guided by tradition, family, and cultural norms, or inspired by alternative or critical sources. As such, the person is, above all, a subject embedded in familial, social, and political relations, capable of leading a good life within any or all of these domains. Persons must be able to act in accordance with a self-conceived plan of life and to recognize both themselves and others as capable of entering into mutual relations of moral and legal obligation.

This form of ethical personhood gives rise to a type of autonomy that extends beyond the basic autonomy associated with actors and agents. It, too, exists in degrees: a person becomes increasingly autonomous in this more complex sense (1) the more they define their life plan independently of the models offered by their surrounding environment—both proximate (family, friends, local community) and broader (cultural, religious, or national traditions)—and (2) the more they define moral rights and duties, for themselves and others, based on universal rather than merely local or parochial principles (such as those learned from family or religious authorities). In the first case, increasing autonomy pertains primarily to the individual, insofar as it enhances their prospects for pursuing a good life; in the second, it has broader implications,

as it contributes to fostering a more inclusive and just normative environment for others.

For example, a woman from a deeply patriarchal family who chooses to live independently—even at the cost of relocating far away—expands her own autonomy and possibilities for a good life. Her brother, who comes to accept her life choices and begins attributing moral and legal rights to women more generally (despite the family's opposition), helps reshape the normative environment, thereby enhancing others' autonomy as well.

Here again, autonomy is not an intrinsic attribute possessed or lacking in absolute terms. Rather, it emerges through a person's relationship with their social environment—beginning with family and immediate community—and manifests to varying degrees across different life domains and moments. This higher-order autonomy is therefore not static but processual: it is realized in degrees, and the process of becoming more autonomous is, in principle, open-ended. There is no definitive threshold beyond which a person becomes "fully" autonomous. Nonetheless, the process is bounded by several objective, subjective, and biological constraints. Objective conditions include the historical period in which a person lives and the cultural and social structures shaping their development. Subjective factors include formative experiences, educational opportunities, levels of self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-reliance. Biological limitations concern genetic predispositions or illnesses that may, over time, reduce one's capacity for autonomous action, as in the case of neurodegenerative diseases.

The idea that autonomy exists in degrees is not new, even among authors who conceive of it as a property of individuals. Joseph Raz, for instance, introduces the concept of *significant autonomy*, which he attributes to "those who actively shape their lives and determine their course." Significantly autonomous individuals "are not merely rational agents who can choose between options after evaluating relevant information, but agents who can in addition adopt personal projects, develop relationships, and accept commitments to causes, through which their personal integrity and sense of dignity and self-respect are made concrete" (Raz, 1986, p. 154). Raz emphasizes the close connection between autonomy and dignity or self-respect. A person who perceives herself as lacking autonomy—who feels compelled to act in ways she did not choose—will experience a decline in self-esteem. She will struggle to recognize her actions as truly her own and to assume responsibility for them. Instead, she may feel like a puppet controlled by external forces.

This sense of lacking control over one's life and actions is a central aspect of what has traditionally been described as alienation (e.g., Jaeggi, 2016). In

a certain respect, this feeling is justified by the influence of factors beyond our control—whether external (natural or social) or internal (psychological or biographical)—on shaping our decisions and capacities. Yet awareness of such conditioning can itself constitute a form of responsibility, insofar as one acknowledges how these external or internal factors influence one's actions. Knowing that some strategies are foreclosed by external conditions may objectively restrict one's range of options but does not eliminate the possibility of autonomous choice among the remaining ones—even when such choices reflect adaptive preferences. Conversely, ignorance of such limiting factors can lead individuals to pursue unattainable goals, increasing frustration and deepening alienation.

Often, we experience our actions as shaped by a dialectic between what we aim to achieve and what we are able or permitted to accomplish. This leads to the insight that our subjectivity acquires objectivity through action: we become who we are by acting in particular ways rather than others, and others recognize us as the persons we are on the basis of those patterns of action.[4] Yet our actions remain subject to the constraints of the natural and social worlds. We cannot, for instance, flap our arms and fly because natural laws make this physically impossible; nor can we simply take whatever we want from stores or homes because civil and penal laws prohibit such actions. These are, of course, different types of limitations—natural laws being inviolable, whereas legal norms can be transgressed, though not without sanctions. Still, both types delineate the boundaries within which human action takes place.

Autonomy should not be understood as indifference or arbitrary will. Rather, its possibilities are defined by the social contexts in which it is exercised. In this sense, Amartya Sen's understanding of freedom as the availability of real options aligns with this view (Sen, 1992, p. 31). A child from an extremely poor family is "free" to become a brain surgeon only if freedom is interpreted in a purely formal or legal sense—as the absence of coercion (as in Hayek's view, presented in Hayek, 2011) or legal impediments. Such a child is genuinely free to pursue such a career only if she has real access to quality basic and higher education—whether through public educational systems, scholarships, or grants.

To the natural, social, and legal constraints on autonomy, one must also add psychological limitations—those mechanisms that shape goals, inhibit certain

4 This form of personal identity differs from the epistemic identity described in Section 2. It concerns not only our agency and capacity for taking responsibility for our actions, but also the character traits that make us the specific person we are, rather than merely a responsible agent.

choices, and predispose individuals toward specific identities, often without their awareness. We may refrain from pursuing certain life goals not because they are forbidden or physically impossible, but because of unconscious inhibitions or psychological conditioning. Thus, autonomy is always *situated*: it is realized only within the constraints imposed by the natural world, the social order, and the architecture of the mind.

4. The Role of External Conditions for Attaining a Higher Level of Autonomy

Our actions are always motivated by the impulse to satisfy a need—whether material or immaterial. In other words, they are instrumental to the satisfaction of needs that themselves arise from conditions we do not fully control. These include *external* factors, such as the kind of society we inhabit, the roles we are assigned or assume within that society, the institutional and systemic frameworks within which we act, and broad environmental contingencies (the scarcity or abundance of resources, and negative conditions such as war, famine, pandemics, or natural disasters). They also include *internal* factors—our bodily requirements, genetic endowments or limitations, cognitive capacities, psychological dispositions, and physical or mental impairments. In many cases, our options are tightly constrained by structural necessities: for instance, the need for money in capitalist societies or the obligation to conform to collective expectations in traditional communities.

From this perspective, the claim that we are free to choose our preferences and desires—central to many normative theories, especially within mainstream economics—appears highly implausible. Preferences and desires emerge from the existence of needs that impose themselves on us and are shaped by the environments in which we are embedded and the subjectivities into which we are socialized. Our very motivational structure is the product of processes that far exceed individual control.

From the foregoing, it follows that, in order to develop a significant level of autonomy within contemporary capitalist societies, individuals must satisfy certain needs. These include: receiving a basic (formal or informal) education that enables them not only to communicate and interact with their immediate environment (as in the case of basic autonomy) but also to grasp the general principles and values that structure their broader social world; being exposed to different principles and values and capable of understanding them; being able to compare these with those they have been socialized to accept; critically interrogating the latter and adopting a stance toward them (total acceptance,

partial acceptance, partial rejection, or total rejection); being capable of formulating a conception of the good life, whether grounded in traditional principles and values, in alternative frameworks, or in some synthesis; and being able to articulate and defend this conception against criticism. Furthermore, individuals must be able to recognize the internal and external factors that influence their decisions and assess the impact of such influences.

These conditions, in turn, presuppose the fulfillment of a set of meta-conditions—enabling conditions that make the previous ones possible. Among these are: the existence of an inclusive educational system that transmits traditional principles and values while also fostering critical thinking; the ability to freely express dissent and personal opinion without fear of punishment or social stigma; and opportunities to engage with different cultural or social environments—whether directly (through travel or interpersonal encounters) or indirectly (through books, media, or film). In other words, autonomy becomes attainable only when certain institutional, relational, and epistemic prerequisites are in place; in other words, when certain needs are met. The satisfaction of these needs becomes, therefore, an object of a theory of social justice, although it remains to be determined whether this implies adopting a sufficientarian stance or a more ambitious distributive theory concerning satisfiers.[5]

This higher level of autonomy is vital for the development of persons and for their (potentially optimal) functioning within their social environment. Societies expect their members not only to act and to take responsibility for their actions (as actors and agents), but also to formulate life plans and pursue long-term goals (as substantially autonomous subjects). While some societies prioritize conformity and expect individuals to adopt traditional life plans, others valorize individuality and encourage distinctive personal trajectories. In the former, high levels of individual autonomy may be perceived as a threat to social cohesion and sanctioned accordingly. In the latter, uncritical adoption of traditional roles may be seen as evidence of a lack of personal integrity, character, or freedom—particularly when it appears that the individual has yielded passively to familial or communal pressures.

In this sense, it is society—both the narrower environment of family and community and the broader social and institutional structure—that determines what it means to be a “functioning” member.

5 Once again, we cannot elaborate such a theory in this context. Our aim is simply to highlight the reasons it should be grounded in the concept of need.

5. A Relational View of Autonomy

Autonomy—across all its dimensions and manifestations—can be developed and exercised in multiple domains, including everyday life, morality, politics, and the economy. In each domain, it can appear at varying levels. Autonomy is therefore a gradational concept: it is never absolute but always exists in degrees, whether in comparison to the autonomy of other individuals or to that of the same individual at different moments and under different circumstances. Complete independence or self-sufficiency is illusory; some degree of *dependence* is always present—particularly dependence on the material and social conditions that make autonomy possible (Friedman, 2014, p. 16). The notion of autonomy as complete independence from others, characteristic of certain liberal traditions, is therefore a fiction that fails to acknowledge the fundamentally social nature of freedom (Honneth, 2014).

Relational theories of autonomy—such as the ethics of care developed by Joan Tronto, Eva Kittay, and Virginia Held—emphasize the inherent vulnerability and mutual dependence of human beings (Tronto, 1993; Kittay, 1999; Held, 2005; Meyers, 2005; Friedman, 2014). These theories show that autonomy is possible only within networks of relationships grounded in care, support, and mutual responsibility. They also highlight a crucial normative implication: a society must be regarded as unjust if it fails to provide the concrete social and institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of care—particularly when it possesses the material and organizational resources to do so. This injustice is especially visible in situations of poverty, which entail not only material deprivation but also a lack of real opportunities and viable options for action. When the means to eradicate poverty exist but are not mobilized—especially by governmental institutions—society cannot plausibly claim to be just.

This is also a central point in Adorno's critique of contemporary capitalist society: although it already possesses the technical and organizational means to eliminate vast amounts of avoidable suffering, it fails to do so. According to Adorno, this failure is not due to lack of knowledge or capability but to the priorities of a system oriented toward profit rather than human flourishing. For Adorno, the ultimate task of society is "the preservation and satisfaction of mankind" (Adorno, 1976, p. 27)—that is, society is expected to help its members find the satisfiers necessary to meet the needs they must satisfy in order to exist, develop, and function. A society that has the resources to achieve this goal but chooses not to—because doing so would impede capital accumulation—cannot be considered rational or just. In this sense, we live in an irrational society that fails to fulfill its most basic task. It is therefore the

task of a critical theory of social justice to draw attention to this fact and to point toward possible solutions. Pursuing this, however, lies beyond the scope of this article.

Data availability:
All data underlying the results of this study are included within the article.

Conflict of interest:
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Handling Editor:
Mauro Luiz Engelmann.

References

ADORNO, T. W. “Introduction.” In: Th. W. Adorno *et al*. (eds.), 1976, pp. 1-67.
ADORNO, T. W. *et al*. (eds.). “The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology”. London: Heinemann, 1976.
BEZANSON, K., LUXTON, M. (ed.). “Social Reproduction”. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006.
BHATTACHARYA, T. (ed.). “Social Reproduction Theory. Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression”. London: Pluto Press, 2017.
BLUMBERG, M., FREEMAN, J., ROBINSON, S. (eds.). “Oxford Handbook of Developmental Behavioral Neuroscience”. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
BRAYBROOKE, D. “Meeting Needs”. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.
BROCK, G. (ed.). “Necessary Goods. Our Responsibilities to Meet Others’ Needs”. Lanham (MD): Rowman & Littlefield, 1998.
CHRISTMAN, J., ANDERSON, J. (eds.). “Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism. New Essays”. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
DAWKINS, R. “The Selfish Gene”. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.
DOYAL, L., GOUGH, I. “A Theory of Human Need”. London: Macmillan, 1991.
FRICKER, M. “Epistemic Injustice”. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
FRIEDMAN, M. “Relational Autonomy and Independence.” In: A. Veltman and A. Piper (eds.) 2014, pp. 42-60.
HAMILTON, L. A. “The Political Philosophy of Needs”. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
HAYEK, F. A. “The Constitution of Liberty”. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011.
HELD, V. “The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global”. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

HONNETH, A. "Freedom's Right". New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.
JAEGGI, R. "Alienation". New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.
KIDD, I. J., MEDINA, J., POHLHAUS JR., G. (eds.). "The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice". London: Routledge, 2017.
KITTAY, E. F. "Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency". London: Routledge, 1999.
LORENZ, K. Z. "Studies in Animal and Human Behavior". Vol. I and II. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1970/1.
MASLOW, A. "A Theory of Human Motivation". *Psychological Review*. 50/4, 1943, pp. 370-396.
MEYERS, D. T. "Decentralizing Autonomy. Five Faces of Selfhood." In: J. Christman and J. Anderson (eds.), 2005, pp. 27-55.
PINKER, S. "The Blank Slate. The Modern Denial of Human Nature". London: Penguin, 2002.
PINZANI, A. "The Grammar of Rights and the Grammar of Needs". *Human Affairs*, 29, 2019, pp. 328-338.
______. "Who Needs Needs? Defining a Contested Concept". *Lessico di Etica Pubblica* 12/1, 2022, pp. 91-105.
RAZ, J. "The Morality of Freedom". Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
READER, S. (ed.). "The Philosophy of Needs". Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
SEARLE, J. R. "Making the Social World. The Structure of Human Civilization". Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
SEN, A. "Inequality Reexamined". Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1992.
SICINSKI, A. "The Concepts of 'Need' and 'Value' in the Light of the System Approach". *Social Sciences Information*, 1978, 17, pp. 71-91.
THOMSON, G. "Needs". London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987.
TRONTO, J. "Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care". New York: Routledge, 1993.
VELTMAN, A., PIPER, M. (eds.). "Autonomy, Oppression and Gender". Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
WIGGINS, D. "Claims of Need". In: D. Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth. Essays in the Philosophy of Value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 1-57.

CC BY This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License.