

Twitter Thread by Per Bylund



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Needs do not matter. History is full of thinkers falling into the trap of referring to needs as were they something real and distinct. But by referring to what people "need," you're really using rhetoric without substance. You are creating the illusion that your claims are

objective, whereas they are not. To put it differently, it sounds smart but isn't. Economists recognized this fact in the early 1870s, which caused a revolution in the study of economics. Until then, they had, like everybody else, been trapped by thinking of people's needs in the

objective meaning that the term seems to imply. But there is nothing objective about it, and even if there were--it would still be irrelevant. So referring to "need" in your argument is akin to the trade of stage magicians: what you're doing looks impressive, but it's not. When

we think of a need, we think of something fundamental, basic, and necessary--without it, we could not survive. So our "needs" include food, shelter, and clothing, all those "life's necessities" without which we could not go on. A want, in contrast, is ephemeral, volatile,

unnecessary (in the strict sense), and could be (often is?) based only in the whims of whoever expresses it. But there are two fundamental problems with using the seemingly much more important concept of "need" when trying to explain or understand the world. Because it is, in a

very real sense, as unreliable and indeterminate as wants are. And, in fact, needs are not very important at all for understanding the world. Because needs, using the definition above, are not objective and are also not what makes people act or behave in the way they do. It's

nowhere near as clear-cut and obvious as those using the term make it out to be. (I've long stopped using it, because it is at best unhelpful.) The first problem of "need" is that it is not objective and cannot even be measured. In fact, it only works when we're using it in a

vague and indistinct way, such as "we need food to survive." That's kind of true. But what does food mean? It includes a lobster tail in a fancy restaurant. But nobody needs that. Similarly, someone can be allergic to shellfish, so that doesn't work either. Maybe what we really

need from food is energy. But is survival the bar we need to meet? Because I don't need food today to survive. I can live without food for several days. So is it not food today but an average intake of calories over time? That's also not true, because the distribution of calories

matter. And mere survival isn't enough, because one survives while starving (until one doesn't), so is it enough to have people starve but give them calories just before they die? No, because the body's organs need more calories than the mere survival level to function, and more

than that to work well. And calories is not enough for this purpose, we also need nourishment (proteins, vitamins, minerals, etc.). So is our need a certain level of health? How do we determine this level and how do we measure it? "Need," as soon as one tries to be specific, is

elusive and becomes simple opinion. Which means that *your* statement of what people need is your opinion of what they should have. But it might differ from what they themselves consider needs, and it might be very far from what would make them flourish. And if they're allergic,

ill, etc.? Similarly with healthcare: "people need healthcare." No they don't. They might need to become healthy, which could be accomplished through healthcare. But wouldn't it then be better to make sure they don't get sick? So we should restrict them from making choices that

could be harmful to their health--that's what they really "need"? As should be clear by now, a "need" is not objective and cannot even be determined. It hides a value statement, which means it is simply rhetoric. To demand that society gives "to each according to their needs" is

a political slogan that doesn't mean anything. The other problem is that whatever we might call a need is unrelated to how people actually act. Say we agree that people "need food" (let's also say we believe that this can be clearly understood). Then anyone who chooses anything

but food is not acting in accordance with their needs. It need not be the seemingly simple case of the addict choosing a high instead of a meal. It can be the stressed parent skipping a couple of meals to care for their children. You might say that skipping a couple of meals is

no biggie. But what if doing so affects the immune system and causes disease? Or the person is undergoing chemo to treat cancer, so skipping meals would likely mean the treatment is ineffective? Further: what if the parent knows this? A choice can be different from and even

directly opposite to the person's need, however we choose to define it. And they can make the choice consciously and willingly: we need air to breathe, but that doesn't stop people from diving into cold, treacherous waters to save others from drowning--even if is likely that they

themselves will drown. In many cases, a person's actions are contradictory to what you have determined (or that we might even agree) is a need. So we cannot even use the concept of need to understand people or society. And to impose some needs on people means taking their choices

away: it means they no longer have the right to choose differently. In other words, you are making *your* values the standard for their lives. Does anyone need you to rule them? Hardly. Then what is it all for? Referring to "needs" is simply rhetoric, a trick to make one's

opinion appear legitimate and more reliable than it is. But you cannot understand (or analyze) the world based on your opinion. That's why economists rejected the need for the concept of want. It sounds much less reliable, if not squishy, but it is not. The individual chooses her

action, but the choice is not based on some objective need (if such were possible). So we cannot understand the action using any conception of need. The action is chosen for some reason that is valued in her mind: a want. It can be aimed at the present or the (distant) future,

and it can be based on a misunderstanding. None of this matters for the fact that the individual chose to act in some way based on a want that she, for whatever reason, considered a want. This is not a normative statement, but descriptive. To add "need" to the picture is to be

prescriptive, to judge their actions. But judging based on something as elusive as the concept of "need" is only rhetoric and opinion. You cannot get further than the logical fact that someone's action is taken for the purpose of some want (in their mind). But from such sound

understanding of actions we can start producing theory that explains the world as it is and to construct counterfactuals for comparing alternatives. "Needs" cannot be used to this end, and the term should be scrapped altogether. It is only confusing.