

Necessities

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Necessities may be defined as imperative needs that motivate wants and desires. Survival necessities such as food and water motivate intense wants and desires; so intense that people may struggle to the death to satisfy them. However, humans live “not by bread alone”, and they may go on hunger strikes for what they see as higher imperatives than survival. This essay deals with both survival necessities, and “higher” necessities.

Survival necessities may be divided into physical, social and psychological. *Physical* necessities include air, food, water, shelter, warmth, excretion, and exercise.

Social necessities include sex, reproduction, and caretaking of children. Reciprocally, children must have caretakers and require constant attachment figures. Sexual and caretaking necessities require families, and families have been the core of evolutionary survival groups. Such groups comprised clans and tribes consisting of up to hundreds of individuals. These survival groups in turn had two necessities: territory and organization. Territory provided a defensive perimeter and sources of shelter and food. Organization provided specialization of roles and a hierarchy of leaders and followers. A well functioning group could now compensate for human biological vulnerability to predators and natural disasters. It could coordinate hunting and defence, distribute resources down a hierarchical line, regulate sexuality, and care for its offspring.

Psychological necessities are sensations and emotions of satisfaction and pleasure that signal and regulate fulfilment of physical and social necessities. Dissatisfactions and displeasures signal lack of fulfilment of such necessities. Examples of pleasurable and unpleasurable opposites are satiety and hunger, security and fear, sexual satisfaction and frustration, belonging and being alone. The intensity of the quest for satisfactions and avoidance of unpleasures reflect the importance of the necessities that sensations and emotions regulate.

“Higher” necessities. Humans share with other social animals the necessities examined thus far. “Higher”, exclusively human, necessities reflect evolution of ever newer platforms of organization in the human brain and within the mind. Once basic survival necessities are satisfied, fulfilments of ever higher levels of necessities take over the insistent motivation of earlier necessities. Though higher necessities appear to fulfil purely human desires and motivations, they are ultimately connected to survival needs, and assume their urgency.

Aristotle already noted progression of human desires from the body to reason or soul. In modern times, Maslow described a hierarchy of human needs, ranging from physiological needs through needs for safety, love and esteem, to actualization of potentials. Both Aristotle and Maslow maintained that once basic needs were satisfied, higher needs took over their urgency.

In my view, divergence from animal necessities to purely human ones may be seen in moral necessities. Some animals, such as dogs, exhibit primitive guilt, but only humans have complex moral necessities that align individual and group survival needs. Moral necessities include positive external judgements (of virtue, worth, and justice), and a corresponding praiseworthy conscience (that one is good, lovable, and righteous). Negative judgements of badness, worthlessness and injustice evoke guilt, shame, and a sense of wrongdoing.

The level above morality is that of ethics. It includes ideals of proper behaviour and codes of conduct, values such as honour and human dignity, and principles of justice such as human rights. Such concepts subsume survival needs such as space, territory, and distribution of resources, but go beyond them. Even so, the abstract concepts and ideas maintain the original motivations and urgency. For instance, people may risk survival in struggles for justice, freedom and dignity, or kill themselves if they feel that they have lost their honour.

The level of beliefs, religions and ideologies encompasses all prior levels, and in addition provides theories of causation of the world and its disasters, and blueprints for action that bring imminent earthly solutions, or resolutions in the next world.

This level also includes evolution of symbols that stand for complex issues. For instance, a flag may symbolise patriotism which itself symbolises the whole path back to tribe and territory and defence against enemies. Symbols can assume the intensity of their precursors. People may die for the flag or the cross, or an idea such as democracy. This level and subsequent ones fulfil necessities that have been called spiritual.

The next level contains the necessity to be part of a sensible universe in which one has a significant niche. Such a universe provides answers to questions of life and death, order and chaos, good and evil, beginnings and endings, times and connections. It provides a sense of awe and sacredness, of mystical consciousness, of the numinous and the sublime.

With the evolution of self-consciousness, humans developed a need to see themselves as significant identities who subsumed all prior levels, but now in addition to those levels required existential meanings and purpose. Without them people could feel that their lives were pointless. It became necessary for people to be self-consciously content and happy, fulfilling their human capacities at all levels and in all forms of loving and satisfying relationships. In addition, meaningful self-awareness involved creativity, ranging from procreation to creation within different art forms and in science. Helping others to feel secure and fulfilled and providing comfort and beauty for others could also be existentially meaningful.

Finally, humans have a need to know and understand the truth about themselves and their universe. This necessity is expressed variably as the need to discover the face of God, the human soul, beauty, reason, wisdom and truth. They may be necessities for the completion of a full, wholesome life.

To summarise: As each level of necessity is satisfied, it is subsumed by the next level which assumes the urgency of the prior level. The more distant the social level, and the

higher the evolutionary level the more mental, abstract, specifically human, and spiritual are its contents.

Because fulfilment necessities derive from survival ones, and because survival necessities may vary and be contradictory according to circumstances, fulfilments at higher evolutionary levels may also display conflicts and contradictions. For instance, sometimes it is noble to kill, at other times it is evil. Even wisdom can reflect contradictory survival experiences, as seen in the sayings, “You reap what you sow,” and “The good die young.” Understanding strategies of survival (caretaking, attachment, goal achievement, goal surrender, fight, flight, competition, cooperation) and their ramifications may provide a framework for understanding the intricacies of necessities at different levels. Understanding survival necessities may help us both to survive better, and to fulfil our higher human necessities.

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