

**What is a Need?: Evaluating Needs Theory as a Solution to Conflict
through a Critical and Psychoanalytic Approach**

I. Introduction

Conflict resolution is a field of academic study that is relatively new. According to John Burton, one of the earliest pioneers and scholars in the discipline, its origins can be traced back only to the 1960's.¹ Prior to that, approaches to conflict relied largely on tacitly traditional approaches, which involved some form of negative peace such as pacification or “power-political” approaches.² Rather than *resolve* situations of conflict, the aim there was merely to put an end to them, usually involving members of an elite class dominating members of a “lower” political or socio-economic class. Perhaps obvious to us, such tactics could not result in a lasting peace, for the underlying problems that created the situations of conflict were not properly addressed in such approaches. This is Burton's contention as well.

Conflict resolution (CR) can take many forms and is interdisciplinary in nature. It may be approached psychologically, philosophically, politically, even mathematically, and can be applied in fields as diverse as social work, psychology, international politics, business, sociology, counseling, and the list goes on. Defining the parameters of the field can, therefore, be a challenge. Burton's own focus was to analyze conflict in terms of fundamental human needs whose violation could be seen as the cause for deep-rooted, entrenched conflict. This focus displaces the attention paid to the external, particular eruptions of conflict, which could merely signal the end-result of a long, complex process. Alternatively, people may also have *disputes*, which Burton believed was not deep-rooted and may be *settled* through a negotiating process.

In his article, “Basic Human Needs: The Next Steps in Theory Development”, Richard E. Rubenstein evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of shifting the focus of CR to human needs, and also what we may expect or hope from such scholarship in the future.³ Rubenstein gives us a succinct account of how conflict was interpreted historically and how Needs Theory (NT)⁴ helps to correct some of its errors. In a nutshell, he argues that previous interpretations of conflict relied on paradigms of “...postwar social science: mechanistic utilitarianism, behaviorism, cultural relativism, and Hobbesian ‘Realism’.”⁵ These paradigms both cast the individual as the source of evil and irrationalism, as well as justified the use of “countervailing forces” to stamp out said evil. The source of the good was outside of the individual in society – society could civilize the beast within us through socialization, or to phrase it negatively, manipulate us through “social engineering”. Burton and others saw this outlook as elitist and unhelpful.⁶ They sought to reverse this outlook to reveal that the real cause of evil was actually one’s social and economic environment. They also sought to reveal the fundamental, universal nature of human needs. By recognizing that these needs could not be engineered away and that they should simply be satisfied, one could effectively resolve conflicts.

However, there are a number of problems associated with the NT approach, some that are very deep. The most fundamental problem is determining the very ontological status of needs. What, in fact, is a need, and which ones are truly fundamental? There are many lists offered by a variety of CR scholars, usually inspired by Abraham Maslow, but include needs for identity, belongingness, personal growth, and security.⁷ The question is on what basis may we attribute them absolute, universal status such that they

completely resist social engineering? The very attempt to absolutize them is problematic, especially given that they are usually reified into an unreflective form of biologism.

Enter Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse interprets needs and conflict through the lenses of Critical Theory and psychoanalysis.⁸ These approaches are well suited to addressing some of the aporias that are caused by interpreting needs in a positivistic framework, as scholars in the field of CR have done, although both approaches find precedence in CR scholarship. I want to first make a case for the psychoanalytic approach, and then go on to address how it and Critical Theory may clarify the status of needs specifically, and its relation to larger societal values, which I think form the crux of the problem of NT.

II. The Case for Psychoanalysis

For Marcuse, the subject is not primarily cognitive, but steeped in instinctual and social life as Freud talked about. This new model of the subject that psychoanalysis has to offer has a number of important features and implications. Firstly, it would support Burton's emphasis on primordial needs as constituting the individual in a more or less ontological way. For Freud, drives (his take on needs), the two basic ones of which are sex and death, are primordial and biologically derived. However, an important qualification that needs to be made is that Freud never conceives of instincts as purely biological. The last time he made such a claim was in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, one of Freud's earliest meta-psychological works, which he also left unpublished.⁹ From *Studies on Hysteria* onward, Freud's understanding of the instincts was that they were always mediated by the unconscious and, in its full depth, this mediation ultimately tied drives to history and values. Marcuse writes, "To Freud, the

universal fate is in the instinctual drives, but they are themselves subject to historical ‘modifications’.”¹⁰ Much more could be said about exactly how instincts may be both biological *and* historical, which I will do when I discuss the relation of needs and values below (and besides that, it could take a whole book, which I am currently working on).

Freud’s emphasis on the drives as a fundamental component of the individual also required an expansion of the mind that was up until Freud’s time unconsidered. He posited a topographical view of the mind, or what Marcuse might call ‘depth psychology’. The cognitive mind or ego-consciousness, the one capable of reason, morality, and discipline was only one part of that topography, and the smallest part at that. The instinct-governed part of the mind constituted the largest field in the topography, the “unconscious”, which as the name suggests is by its very nature uncognizable, at least at first glance.

The unconscious is the realm of the repressed, whose contents are prevented from coming to consciousness in a *dynamic* way. It is not like a distant memory, which is still a part of the explicit narrative of consciousness, but is actively kept hidden by the psychism through various censoring mechanisms. The unconscious, which later evolves into the id, is the receptacle for banned instinctual thoughts and wishes, but these in turn shape and determine conscious thoughts and activities behind the veil of darkness. There are a number of disturbing consequences to this new view, including the partial loss of ethical control by the individual. Much more could be said about this aspect of Freud’s thought, but I will only discuss it as it relates to NT. What we can get out of these thoughts in Freud is that they support Burton’s contention that needs/drives are a primary facet of the individual, and they are not easily manipulated by cognitive claims.

III. The Status of Needs and Values

A. Its Place in CR Scholarship

The chasm between needs and values is exactly what perpetuates the contradictory strains of NT that both conflates and dichotomizes the individual and her society in the problematic ways that I have discussed. I want to demonstrate that needs and values are ontologically connected, and that by framing issues in terms of this connectedness resolves the tensions in the predominant NT approach. Firstly, let me justify the validity in conflating needs and values on the terms of CR scholarship itself. I will then move on to Marcuse's own view to show how his approach is perhaps an improvement.

There are a number of CR scholars who attempt to pinpoint the exact relationship between needs and values in a way that confirms the need for an alternative framework. But let it suffice to address Burton himself. I quote him at length in regards to how he sees the relationship between needs and values:

Values are those ideas, habits, customs, and beliefs that are a characteristic of particular social communities. They are the linguistic, religious, class, ethnic or other features that lead to separate cultures and identity groups. Values, which are acquired, differ from needs in that the latter are universal and primordial, and perhaps genetic.

In conditions of oppression, discrimination, underprivilege and isolation, the defense of values is important to the needs of personal security and identity. In this sense they impinge on our needs and can be confused with them. Preservation of values is a reason for defensive and aggressive behaviors. It is the pursuit of individual needs that is the reason for the formation of identity groups through which the individual operates in the pursuit of a wider ego and of security and cultural identity.¹¹

One struggles to delineate where needs end and values begin, which is a delineation that Burton would like us to draw. Needs are primordial, perhaps "genetic", and values are constructions relative to a group's linguistic and cultural ethos. However,

what are “personal” needs for belonging and identity without their relation to the group? Do they not speak to communal values, which is why he suggests that in times of oppression, our sense of identity seems to hinge upon defending values? And in what way does the pursuit of individual needs lead to the formation of “identity groups”? He describes the individual’s pursuit of cultural identity as a pursuit of a “wider ego”. But is cultural identity merely an expansion of the self? The difficulties here, as I am interpreting them, seem to be that Burton attempts to impose a rift that is not truly there between needs and values. Once they are situated within an appropriately historical and instinctual ontology, we can see that the very formation of needs is shaped by values.

B. Needs and Values as Ontologically Tied According to Marcuse

Marcuse would recognize a distinction between the individual and group life, but he saw them as two modalities of a shared phylogenesis rather than as two distinct fields of inquiry. Burton seems to conflate the two as well above, but when it occurs, it is unintended and without philosophical support. Needs are always and already inculcated by a value system, whether this system is right or wrong as we might judge them. Even what appears to be a basic need for material sustenance, such as hunger, can actually be tied to cultural determinants. For example, whether to breast-feed a child or give him formula in the U.S.A. has been determined by cultural factors. In the 1960’s, a child would have been giving formula, whereas in today’s climate, a child would more likely be breast-fed. These decisions have consequences to how a child experiences the need of hunger. There have been studies, for example, that link formula feeding in the infant to obesity in later life.¹² Various explanations have been offered, including the possibility that the biochemical composition of breastmilk may offer future protection from obesity.

But the more likely explanation is that breastfeeding promotes healthier eating behaviors, like feeding based on hunger-cues (v. scheduled feeding). If this is right, it shows that our very ability to experience a need can become alienated through training. One also thinks of the rise in obesity associated with the growth of fast food chains. Corporations often target very young children in their ads because they are aware that children can be “branded”, or in other words, their needs can be imprinted with a certain brand. The implication for CRS is that we should be concerned about “social engineering” well before NT had previously thought. What if needs are corrupted from the inside out? Who is then the violator? Is it social values, the parents who follow them, or the child who has been fundamentally changed by them and perpetuates the alienation through his very actions?

Let me demonstrate more concretely how, for Marcuse, needs and values develop together. Marcuse does acknowledge a relative distinction between an individual who is governed by the pleasure principle, and an external world governed by necessity and the reality principle. They develop in an intertwined, but distinct, way. At first, the individual exhibits undifferentiated instincts, though even then they are mediated by the psychism as Paul Ricoeur makes clearer in his *Freud and Philosophy*.¹³ His basic point is that whatever is going on on the neuronal level, the infant experiences a felt need, a hunger, which is phenomenally represented. The *modus operandi* of this infant is the gratification of needs, which she relies on the caretaker for, or, she may wish it in phantasy. These are her two alternatives.

The infant butts up against the reality principle right away when her needs are delayed or denied, which are inevitable. Both the gratifications and delays in

gratification relate to values in terms of the choices of object for gratification, and the choices the parent makes in deciding which are and which are not appropriate needs to satisfy and when. The choices the parents make can also further be deconstructed, for they themselves are inculcated in a culture with certain values and products.

Furthermore, any given culture has its own history as well with its own archaic core established through the development, enforcement, and overthrow of values and instinct .

The infant takes in these choices and their accompanying prohibitions at a time when they are not yet fully conscious. These earliest experiences form the core of the unconscious that influence, or perhaps more strongly, determine the actions and behaviors of that individual throughout her life. These experiences are assimilated into the unconscious through a process that takes into account both the infant's instinctual make-up and the explicit actions and choices that go into the gratification or denial of those instincts. Gratification does not cause the infant to take notice. It is the denials that do. Through denials, the child is "trained" into a social being, who is expected to forgo gratification sometimes for the sake of higher, social goals. Indeed, "Civilization begins when the primary objective – namely, integral satisfaction of needs – is effectively renounced."¹⁴ The child learns which drives are allowed and which are not. The drive that is most consistently prohibited is the sexual one. All prohibited wishes and thoughts are cast into the unconscious, and is there kept by an active censoring mechanism that must, somehow, "speak" the language of instinct (that is, endowed with force or energy) that counteracts the instincts (this is "counter-cathexis").

What the individual feels free in gratifying and what he does not are part of one and the same censorship that is already at work in his choices. Needs are subject to moral

forces that the individual may never even be cognizant of. As Marcuse writes, “...[R]epression from without has been supported by repression from within: the unfree individual introjects his masters and their commands into his own mental apparatus.”¹⁵ Generally, the *super-ego* accounts for the introjected authority involved in all forms of *conscience*. For Freud, indeed, the super-ego is the hallmark of modern conscience in contrast to the “primitive” mind which required external motivations for behaving, such as a fear of getting caught.

The super-ego shows that needs, values, and power all work in conjunction to form a moral conscience. This is one reason for questioning the assumption that all needs should be satisfied and that all individuals are the source of good as Burton seemed to say earlier. As we just saw with Marcuse, needs are caught up in a dynamics that can easily become aggressive. Its very constitution and enforcement are steeped in aggression. He believed, along with Freud, that civilization need to maintain some restraints on the drives, with both the libido and the death instinct in mind. He thus makes a distinction between “basic” repression, which is necessary, and “surplus-repression”, which is the excessive repression of needs demanded by an unjust social system.¹⁶

One CR scholar who does address the possibility of negative needs is Christopher Mitchell in “Necessitous Man and Conflict Resolution”.¹⁷ He observes that “The need for ‘security’ may easily become the need for ‘dominance’; the need for ‘identity’ could become the need for an outgroup and an enemy; the need for ‘love’ could become the need for ‘admiration’ or ‘status’ or ‘success at the expense of others’.”¹⁸ Rather than conflict resolving, some needs seem to be the opposite – *conflict-promoting*. Mitchell sees that needs may admit of relativity, but his solution seems to miss the mark for the

very reasons I have been attempting to show. He does not fundamentally question the Burtonian account of the absolute nature of needs and the dichotomy between self and society. Mitchell's own solution interprets the relativity as stemming from the *satisfiers*. For example, the police and military would qualify as satisfiers for security, but "...those very satisfiers might play a major role in frustrating other basic needs including, quite probably, the need for security."¹⁹ What this does not address, however, is why needs can become negative. Without the appropriate framework, of course, it is difficult to evaluate needs for their positive or negative status (because that would exactly require a look at their *value*).

IV. Conclusion

What I hope I have shown in this paper, is that merely reframing the question of needs and its relation to values goes a long way in resolving some of the tensions and even contradictions that arise in NT scholarship. As much hope as CR scholars seem to have for NT as the basis for CR analysis and its relevance for a workable solution, not much seems to have progressed since its initial formulations. Rubenstein's article, which was published in 2001, seems to confirm that assessment. Decades after the introduction of the "new" theory of needs, the questions are still posed, 'what exactly are needs?' and 'where do we go with them?'. Many scholars have given a number of wonderful suggestions and insights by way of attempting to answer such fundamental questions. My contention is that the dual approaches of Critical Theory and psychoanalysis in the way Marcuse discusses them provides a framework that makes sense of the wide array of insights in terms of a coherent whole.

¹ Burton, John, *Conflict: Resolution and Provention* (New York: St. Martin's Press: 1990), p. 83.

² Toran Hansen calls it "pacification" in "Critical Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice, *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* (Summer 2008), vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 403-427. Deiniol Lloyd Jones calls it "power political" in his article, "Mediation, conflict resolution, and critical theory", *Review of International Studies* (2000), 26, 647-662.

³ Rubenstein, Richard E., "Basic Human Needs: The Next Steps in Theory Development", *The International Journal of Peace Studies* (Spring 2001), vol. 6, no. 1.

⁴ I interpret Needs Theory to mean a theory that places the existence and value of human needs at the forefront in any inquiry involving the human condition; conflict being one of them.

⁵ Rubenstein, "Basic Human Needs", p. 1.

⁶ Ibid, p.2. Burton discusses this issue in numerous places including in *Conflict: Resolution and Provention*, p. 4. Mary Clark also addresses this point in "Meaningful Social Bonding as a Universal Human Need," in *Conflict: Human Needs Theory*, ed. John Burton (London: The Macmillan Press Limited, 1990), p. 35. She attributes the origins of this assumption to Hobbes. There are many more instances in which conflict resolution scholars criticize this assumption in the "traditional" understanding of the individual.

⁷ To name a few, Burton, Sites, and Richard J. Fischer offer lists that include in various terminology the ones I mention above in John Burton, ed., *Conflict: Human Needs Theory* (New York: MacMillan, 1990) and Katrin Lederer, ed., *Human Needs: A Contribution to the Current Debate* (Cambridge, Mass: Oelgeschalger, Gunn, and Hain, 1980).

⁸ I focus primarily on two of his related works, *Eros and Civilization* and *One-Dimensional Man*.

⁹ Freud, Sigmund, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 1, *Pre-Psycho-analytic Publications and Unpublished Drafts* (London: Hogarth Press, 1966).

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 58.

¹¹ Burton, *Conflict: Resolution and Provention*, p. 37.

¹² For example in Koletzko, B. et al, "Can infant feeding choices modulate later obesity risk?", *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* (May 2009), Vol. 89 (5), pp. 1502S-1508S and in Kate Rowland and Rick Wallace, "Which factors increase the risk of an infant becoming an overweight child?", *Journal of Family Practice* (July 2009), Vol. 58 (7), pp. 383-384.

¹³ Ricoeur, Paul, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 35.

¹⁴ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 11. This is actually an attribution of Freud. Later, Marcuse questions whether this must be the case in a strong form.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 16.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ His paper may be found in *Conflict: Human Needs Theory*, edited by John Burton (New York: MacMillan, 1990).

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 156.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 169.