

AUTONOMY AND FLOURISHING: THE INTERPLAY OF DIVINE AND HUMAN FREEDOM

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INTRODUCTION

While the focus of this paper is on autonomy, I would like to engage how autonomy is related to human flourishing. Human flourishing, on a summative biblical picture, is a whole-hearted orientation toward God.¹ Ultimately, this will be expressed through union with God, which has been the intended *telos* (goal) of humanity since its inception and Jesus is the fullest expression of that *telos*. On such a picture, I have proposed elsewhere that humans need to relate to God second-personally in order to flourish, thereby constructing a needs-based theological anthropology.² Such an anthropology can be helpfully complemented by psychology even though flourishing from a psychological point of view does not require an orientation toward God. Specifically, Basic Human Needs Theory (BHNT), provides a psychological dialogue partner for my own work.

Of course “autonomy,” “freedom” and “free will” are notoriously difficult concepts to nail down, so for clarity, the version of autonomy and free will that I will be using pulls from Kevin Timpe’s work. He distinguishes between free will as “being able to do otherwise than one in fact does” and, as “primarily a function of an agent being the source of her actions in a particular way.”³ This latter definition most directly overlaps with “autonomy,” according to Basic Human Needs Theory.

In order to put my own work into conversation with BHNT, I will first provide a brief overview of my proposal for a needs-based theological anthropology. Second, I will introduce BHNT, which is one constituting theory out of a meta-motivational theory, Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT is consistent with the broader movement of positive psychology that posits flourishing as integrity, or wholeness, wherein one’s motivations and actions are self-regulated and consistent with one’s sense of self.⁴

¹ Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 73-78.

² Christa L. McKirland, *God’s Provision, Humanity’s Need: The Gift of Our Dependence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022).

³ Kevin Timpe, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 8. His account of free will is known as “source incompatibilism” in that he sees the agent as the source of her own actions and also that theological determinism is incompatible with this view.

⁴ Maarten Vansteenkiste, Richard M. Ryan, and Bart Soenens, “Basic Psychological Need Theory: Advancements, Critical Themes, and Future Directions,” *Motivation and Emotion* 44, no. 1 (February 1, 2020): 5. For the relationship of SDT and positive psychology see Edward L. Deci and Maarten Vansteenkiste, “Self-Determination Theory and Basic Need Satisfaction: Understanding Human Development in Positive Psychology,” *Ricerche Di Psicologia* 27, no. 1 (2004): 23–40.

Specifically, BHNT has proposed that human beings have psychological needs, two of which are autonomy and relatedness. Finally, the concluding point of this paper will be to integrate my needs-based theological anthropology with BHNT to propose that understanding God as autonomous actually enriches our own relatedness to God, thereby enhancing human flourishing.⁵

A NEEDS-BASED THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

My own theological work has proposed a specific psycho-spiritual need as fundamental to all humankind: a second-personal relationship with God.⁶ This need is satisfied through the experience of union with God. I use language of “psycho-spiritual” because this is not a strictly physiological need like food or water, but at the same time, it does affect the physical well-being of the person. The “psycho” modifier is thus meant to indicate that this is a psychological need, which is an embodied need due to our being psychosomatic unities. Yet, unlike BHNT’s strictly psychological needs, the psycho-*spiritual* aspect indicates a relationship to a spiritual reality. However, to simply call this a “spiritual” need, given some cultures’ proclivity toward dualism of spirit and matter, could implicitly make this need the only one that matters (overemphasis on the spiritual) or an unnecessary add-on (underemphasis on the spiritual). The language of “psycho-spiritual” thus seeks to maintain the importance of the human body, including the mind, while also recognising that the need satisfier is ultimately non-physical.

Qualifying as a fundamental need requires meeting a high bar.⁷ This bar is helpfully articulated by analytic philosopher, Garrett Thomson. In his work, aptly titled *Needs*, he provides four criteria for establishing the fundamentality of a need which I use to construct a needs-based theological anthropology.⁸ The first criterion pertains to flourishing and harm. If the need is met, this must causally contribute to the flourishing of the entity.⁹ If it is not met, this must causally contribute to harming the entity. Second, the need must be non-derivative in the sense that there is no additional scaffolding beneath it. For instance, I need a car to drive to work to earn money to buy food to feed myself. The need for the car is instrumental whereas the need for food is non-derivative. Third, the need must be inescapable in that no matter the internal state or stage of development that entity has that need because of being the kind of entity it is. I

⁵ Both the theological and psychological theories discussed here are proposing something universally true of humankind while also not undermining particularity. Ryan and Deci explain their universalising results in that SDT “is not a relativistic framework; it hits bedrock in its conception of certain universals in the social and cultural nutrients required to support healthy psychological and behavioral functioning,” Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development and Wellness*, (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2017), 4.

⁶ By second-personal, I mean that this is knowing God relationally, not just knowing things about God. Also, “psycho-spiritual” is a helpful term for me to use in light of this need not being merely physiological, nor only psychological nor only spiritual. Helpfully, Miner, Dowson, and Malone have used psycho-spiritual in the same way I am intending it here. See Maureen Miner, Martin Dowson, and Kim Malone, “Spiritual Satisfaction of Basic Psychological Needs and Psychological Health,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 41, no. 4 (December 1, 2013): 300.

⁷ Such a high bar persists whether the need is physiological, psycho-spiritual, or otherwise.

⁸ Garrett Thomson, *Needs*, International Library of Philosophy (London; New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 1987.

⁹ A definition of flourishing, for Thomson, is conspicuously absent from his account.

need nutrients whether I receive them in utero, later through breastmilk or formula, and still later, through solid foods. Thus, the need for nutrients is consistent no matter my developmental circumstance. Finally, the need must be non-circumstantial in that no matter my external context, I still have this need. So, whether I am on the moon, in a submarine, or on a beach, I will need to consume nutrients because of being the kind of entity that I am. The need itself is dispositional and not a mental state. To quote Thomson, there “is no act of needing water.”¹⁰ However, the *meeting* of that need does require mental states (even if they are very thin).

Returning to the proposed psycho-spiritual need of a second-personal relationship with God, I have argued elsewhere that such a need can meet that high bar of fundamentality while also being a distinctively human need. By way of overview, second-personally relating to God contributes to the flourishing or harm of humankind and is seen throughout the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. This is perhaps best seen through the opening chapters of Genesis and the closing chapters of Revelation. The centrality of relating to God’s presence bookends the entire collection of sacred texts. From the Garden story of unmediated access to God’s presence as God walks with the man and the woman, to the closing Garden-City vision of unmediated access to God’s presence, the theme of God’s relational presence is a consistent through-line of the (Protestant) canon. The more human persons are whole-heartedly orientated relationally toward God’s presence, the more they flourish.

Turning briefly to the other three criteria, the need for God’s second-personal presence is non-derivative in that in order to flourish holistically, humans need to be in this kind of relationship. Nothing else undergirds this need, and in fact, we see the fundamentality of this need parsed out in Scriptural texts as even greater than physiological needs. For instance, we see in Jesus’ temptation in Matthew 4:4 and Luke 4:4, Jesus quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3: “one does not live by bread alone.” Elsewhere, Jesus reveals that there is more to life than only physical survival, explaining that “life is more than food” (Mt 6:25 par. Lk 12:23). Humans are psycho-spiritual beings, and Jesus calls humanity to holistic flourishing. The meeting of this psycho-spiritual need directly contributes to flourishing without any additional scaffolding.

The criterion of being inescapable means that this need is experienced by all human persons throughout their lives because of the kinds of creatures they are. Consequently, this presumes a thin account of human nature because the need is bound up with the kind of creature humans are: to be human is to have this need. Further, this need, because it is a disposition, exists for as long as the entity is human.¹¹ Such an account envisions a dynamism to this need in that it is not a static state but ongoing experience of being or not being satisfied. Yet, even as it is satisfied, the need remains since the disposition remains. This allows for the presence and persistence of a need without entailing a lack.

The fourth criterion is that of being non-circumstantial. This requires that no matter the external circumstances of living before sin, after sin, being redeemed, or glorified, humankind has this need.

¹⁰ Thomson, *Needs*, 100.

¹¹ This constancy relies on the fact that the need and the meeting of the need come apart.

Additionally, and often the deal-breaking challenge, is whether this criterion can apply to Jesus' humanness. Even though his mode of existence is different than common humanity's existence, as the second person of the Trinity hypostasised to a human nature, that human nature is shared in common with humanity. As such, this need for a second-personal relationship with God must also apply to Jesus' humanity.¹² Fortunately, this does seem to be the case, especially in looking at the Bible and biblical scholarship on Jesus' relation to the Father and the Spirit. While he is distinct from the rest of humanity, as the incarnate Logos, he is similar to the rest of humanity in his need for God's second-personal presence (as well as physiological and psychological needs). He is led by the Spirit, he retreats to pray, and he believes in his belovedness. In fact, he models what the fullest flourishing human life can look like on this side of the eschaton. He is whole-hearted in his orientation toward God as the perfectly integrated person—volitionally willing within the will of God.

The criterion of being non-circumstantial highlights the depth of fundamentality of a psycho-spiritual need over and against physiological needs. While descriptions of the glorified state of humanity do include food, such as the marriage supper with the Lamb, whether or not eating will continue to be necessary for humankind is underdetermined. However, what is clear is that humankind will continue to need God's presence as the fulfilment of this need. Therefore, a needs-based account of theological anthropology can centralise humanity's relationship with God while also providing a minimalist account of human nature. Such a minimalism opens up possibilities of coherence with other disciplines while also proceeding from the sacred texts of the Christian faith.

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY AND BASIC HUMAN NEEDS THEORY

In 1985 Edward Deci and Richard Ryan introduced Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in their book *Self Determination and Intrinsic Motivation in Human Behaviour*. With SDT, a meta-theory of human motivation, they focused on proposing and testing innate psychological needs that have undergone cross-cultural scrutiny for nearly four decades. In 2017, they wrote *Self Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness*, summarising their work and independent empirical studies testing their views. As a theory of motivation, SDT looks at how we are motivated, and why we act the way we do. Needs are important to this discussion since we are motivated to get our basic needs met, and will act in ways that seek to satisfy them.

One aspect of their theory, Basic Human Needs Theory (BHNT), identifies the needs for autonomy and relatedness that they have found consistently across times and contexts.¹³ Of course, how these manifest across cultures is different and the order of priority can also shift. However, they have found these

¹² Christa L. McKirland "Did Jesus Need the Spirit? An Appeal for Pneumatic Christology to Inform Christological Anthropology," *Perichoresis* 19, no. 2 (2021): 43–61.

¹³ They also include the need for "competence," but this paper will not be able to address that need due to space constraints.

to stand the test of time.¹⁴ When these needs are met, people flourish—meaning, they are well-integrated both internally to themselves and externally to their social contexts.¹⁵ Specifically, BHN theorists define autonomy as “the experience of volition and willingness. When satisfied, one experiences a sense of integrity as when one’s actions, thoughts, and feelings are self-endorsed and authentic.”¹⁶ In other words, when I perceive that my actions are my own and that I am choosing to make these choices free from coercion and control, this need is satisfied. They define relatedness as “the experience of warmth, bonding, and care, and is satisfied by connecting to and feeling significant to others.”¹⁷

With BHNT, Ryand and Deci have proposed that the basic psychological needs are “*objective* rather than merely subjective phenomena”; they have argued this by showing what a lack of need satisfaction produces.¹⁸ In other words, when needs are not met, people suffer harms, and these harms can be measured. By measuring need *un*fulfillment, SDT has identified harms. They go on to make claims about human nature, pushing against the idea that we are something of a blank slate with no content to our human nature:

The SDT alternative [to behaviorism’s blank slate theory] is to begin with the assumption that there is a human nature, which is deeply designed to be active and social and which, when afforded a ‘good enough’ (i.e., a basic-need-supportive) environment, will move toward thriving, wellness, and integrity.... If basic needs are thwarted, there is alternatively fragmentation and defense rather than integration.¹⁹

Thus, on their account, humans are the kinds of creature that can have certain needs because they are human. This is the case even as other species, such as primates, show needs for intrinsic motivation and developmental integration.²⁰ Within theoretical biology, these needs are due to the principle of organisation, which is “the tendency of living entities, under supportive conditions, to progress toward increased differentiation and integration.”²¹ For humans, being intrinsically motivated to pursue autonomy and relatedness is how our species manifests the undergirding principle of organisation. However, whether or not someone gets these needs met, they still have them because of being human.

¹⁴ For their cross-cultural application, see Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*, 50, 70.

¹⁵ The basic criteria that each of these needs had to satisfy were: *Psychological* in that “A basic need concerns the psychological and not the physical functioning of human beings.” *Essential*, “The satisfaction of a basic need contributes to growth, well-being, and adjustment *and* the frustration of the need predicts problem behaviour, ill-being, and psychopathology.” *Inherent*, “A basic need represents an evolved aspect of our psychological nature due to adaptive advantages associated with need satisfaction.” *Distinct*, “A basic need concerns a distinct set of experiences and its emergence is not contingent upon or derivative from the frustration of other needs.” *Universal*, “Felt need satisfaction and need frustration should predict the thriving and ill-being of *all* individuals, regardless of differences in socio-demographics, personality, cultural background or need strength.” These are taken from Table 2 in Vansteenkiste, et al. “Basic psychological need theory,” 3.

¹⁶ Vansteenkiste, et al. “Basic psychological need theory,” 3.

¹⁷ Vansteenkiste, et al. “Basic psychological need theory,” 3.

¹⁸ Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*, 84.

¹⁹ Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*, 9. They are also pushing against behaviourists who see the whole of human nature as a stimulus-response structure that simply responds to environmental cues. There is no internal structure for the behaviorist, as it is all external.

²⁰ Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*, 5.

²¹ Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*, 5.

Notably, BHNT defines a fundamental psychological need as a “*psychological nutrient that is essential for individuals’ adjustment, integrity, and growth* (Ryan 1995).”²² This raises one point of contrast between Thomson, and Ryan and Deci. Thomson would say that fundamental physiological needs continue to persist even as they are sated: “I need food even when I am eating.”²³ In contrast, Ryan and Deci see hunger and thirst as drives, and as such, homeostatic.²⁴ They argue that the psychological needs for autonomy and relatedness “cannot be sated in the same way as can a drive such as hunger or thirst. People can indeed eat too much, but they cannot have too much autonomy or too much relatedness in the way we define these terms.”²⁵ This difference seems to come back to the conflation of the need and the need satisfier for Ryan and Deci. By keeping these separate, we are able to talk more clearly about how a person goes about meeting their need—which is active—versus having the need—which is passive. While Thomson would likely agree that you can eat too much, he does not see the act of eating or over-eating undermining the *dispositional* need for food. Instead, for Thomson, the act of eating satisfies hunger—the desire to eat—not the need. For Ryan and Deci, given the conflation of the need and need satisfier, this distinction is not clear. However, even with this lack of semantic nuance, Ryan and Deci’s main point is that the needs for autonomy and relatedness are persisting and dynamic. There is also a difference between physiological needs and psychological needs, and on both of these points, I agree. Finally, they recognise that these needs work together: “people have the experience of relatedness and intimacy especially when others willingly care for them and/or they are willingly connected and caring for the other. Nonautonomous connections do not satisfy this need for relatedness, except in degraded forms.”²⁶ In other words, if someone feels loved because they have to be loved, this undermines meeting the relatedness need. Such an insight becomes important when we turn to divine freedom in our integration section below.

INTEGRATING PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL NEED WITH BHNT

As we make an integrative turn in this paper, one important methodological note is that psychologists study measurable phenomena. In the case of discerning if basic human needs are affected by one’s conception of God, the issue is not trying to prove God exists, but how people conceive of this Being regardless of the veracity of God’s existence. This is a disciplinary prerogative not a theological problem. What I am seeking is theological coherence with the proposed psycho-spiritual fundamental need articulated above. In other

²² Vansteenkiste, et al. “Basic psychological need theory,” 1.

²³ Garrett Thomson, “Fundamental Needs,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 80, no. 1 (December 15, 2005): 175. Most of Thomson’s work focuses on physiological needs as examples of fundamental needs. However, he does also recognise friendship as a fundamental need. “A deprivational view of harm also clarifies the relationship between need and survival. The need for food, water, and air are commonly thought to be among our basic fundamental needs. Yet people have a need for friendship even when it is clear that they won’t die without it. So, survival needs can count as fundamental needs, and yet fundamental needs cover more than survival,” Thomson, *Needs*, 38.

²⁴ Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*, 91.

²⁵ Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*, 91.

²⁶ Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*, 97.

words, psychology cannot tell us if God is autonomous in Godself, but it can tell us how these conceptions of God bear upon the believer's psycho-spiritual well-being. Theology, on the other hand, has the disciplinary task of speaking (partial though that may be) about who God is, how God relates to the contingent order, and how that contingent order is meant to relate back to God.

The theological purchase of BHNT comes to bear especially in its combination of needs. Relatedness and autonomy work as conditions on one another to help make theological sense of how we conceive of God. In other words, while humans may need a second-personal relationship with God, this is intended to be met in a way that also meets the contemporaneous psychological needs of autonomy and relatedness. While my needs-based proposal lacks a description of how the psycho-spiritual need is best met phenomenologically, BHNT can enrich that picture. For instance, if the need for a second-personal relationship with God is the dispositional need, when this is met in a way that a person experiences warmth, bonding, care, connection, and being significant to God, she will more fully flourish.²⁷ This is different from feeling related to God but impersonally, or if God is perceived as distant. Further, if a person knows that God did not have to choose to relate to her, but freely chose to relate to her, this understanding of God's autonomy deepens the sense of relatedness. In other words, believing that God has freely chosen to be in relationship with her, will better meet her psychological need for relatedness to God.

Consequently, this divine freedom is important for our God-conceptions as people need autonomous connections in order to satisfy the need for relatedness. So, how we think of God's autonomy conditions how we can receive that relatedness phenomenologically. Fortunately, there are robust theological accounts of God's freedom. In fact, for many, this is a theological non-negotiable. Quoting theologian Tom Greggs, "God has determined Godself for all eternity to be for creation and to be the God who makes Godself known as being *pro nobis* for the world by being *pro nos* within God's community of the church."²⁸ On this account, which is widely accepted in the Christian tradition, God is completely free in God's loving response to creation. God both self-defines and self-determines. In this self-definition and self-determination God has chosen to be for humanity and all of creation. Thus, knowing that God did not *need* to create the world but *wanted* to create the world strengthens the relatedness of the human to the divine. There is thus a complementary nature of relatedness and autonomy as God freely chooses to love the world. Yet, in this absolute freedom, God's graciousness to create a world at all, let alone a world in which humans need a relationship with God in order to flourish, is even more profound. Knowing that God could have not created at all or could have chosen not to relate to humankind in a loving way, further enriches the picture of God's loving relatedness because of God's autonomy. While, on my account, the

²⁷ And this is indeed the case, see Maureen Miner, Martin Dowson, and Kim Malone, "Spiritual Satisfaction of Basic Psychological Needs and Psychological Health," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 41, no. 4 (December 1, 2013): 298–314.

²⁸ Tom Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology: Volume: The Priestly Catholicity of the Church* (Baker Academic, 2019), xxxvii. Resources attesting to this view are too numerous to count but see Timpe's section on divine freedom his account that is also consistent with his understanding of sourcehood free will for human beings, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology*, 103-118.

need to relate to God is passive, how once conceives of the God who meets this need can be helpfully supplemented by Basic Human Needs Theory leading to greater flourishing in human relatedness to God.

The importance of such integration is not simply to have a more accurate understanding of God, but also because this accurate understanding has a phenomenological effect of leading to greater flourishing. In my own experience, I do not ever recall hearing sermons or teachings on God's absolute freedom. While this may not indicate a widespread neglect of this aspect of the doctrine of God, my proposed integration underscores the value of articulating divine freedom. This God did not have to create the world or the world as it is (wherein human flourishing is, in part, constituted by union with God), and yet God chose to do this. God wants to be in relationship with us. Thus, the value for this integration is not only an emphasis on God's freedom, but also on the critical pairing of the human need for both autonomy and relatedness. I could easily imagine more teaching on God's absolute freedom but in a way that makes the Creator/creature ontological gap so stark that receiving God's loving-kindness becomes even harder to grasp. So, while we can do better to talk about God's freedom, we must also be mindful of how we talk about this freedom. It is not a freedom from humanity due to some disdain for the creaturely order. Instead, it is a freedom to be for us, which is then pursued relationally to the greatest extent possible through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and ongoing ministry of Jesus in the heavenly places.

CONCLUSION

I have proposed that human beings need to be in a second-personal relationship with God. Alongside this proposal, I have given an overview of Basic Human Needs Theory, as an aspect of a meta-theory of motivation (SDT), wherein humans need autonomy and relatedness in order to flourish. If my proposal about needing a second person relationship with God is true, and if BHNT is true, then it would follow that getting the second personal need met would involve autonomy and relatedness. Such seems to be the case as the belief that a person is chosen to be loved more fully meets the need for relatedness to the other than when a person believes they must be loved. Given the historical belief in God's freely acting out of God's own character, belief in God's autonomy can helpfully enrich human relatedness to God.