The human race consists of a diverse array of individuals who differ from one another in terms of culture, goals, circumstances, and a myriad of other factors. Yet no matter how much human beings seem to vary, we all share a common nature. Regardless of one’s social status, personal interests, or objects of worry, all human beings are united by at least a few basic needs, desires, and fears. Close analysis of human nature reveals that we all share the same basic need to survive, the same basic desire to be happy, and the same basic fear of future misery. These truths are portrayed in a number of utopian and dystopian novels, the stories of which contain elements that reflect aspects of humanity. Ultimately, the union and division of individuals by needs, desires, and fears together reveal aspects of what autonomy truly means to people. At the end of the day, humans want more than the freedom to realize their own desires; we also want our needs to be fulfilled and our fears to be eliminated. Only then will we feel as though we have a firm hold on the greatest extent of autonomy in life.

The need to survive is one thing that unites us all. The course of human existence is a constant struggle to postpone the inevitable and live as long as possible, which is derived directly from the universal fear of death and what may lie beyond the grave. (Although it is appropriate to mention it here in order to relate it to the need to survive, the fear of death will not be covered in this paper as a common fear.) In order to avoid death for as long as possible, not only must people have their physical needs fulfilled, but also their needs for bodily security from external threats to their lives. Looking to the aforementioned novels to support this argument, Edward Bellamy captures the former need in his utopian novel Looking Backward: 2000-1887, whereas Octavia Butler captures the latter need in her dystopian novel Parable of the Sower.

In Bellamy’s novel, one of the primary principles by which the utopian society abides is that every person’s physical needs ought to be taken care of. The society no longer wages war
against foreign nations, for the federal government no longer has any power to do so. Rather, the society has decided to wage war against what they perceive to be the true enemy, which to them is domestic poverty. They believe that the true threats that people need to be protected from are “hunger, cold, and nakedness” (Bellamy 78). In order to accomplish this goal, the government directs the industry of all the workers, who are consolidated into an industrial army which replaces the formal system of a military. This substitution is significant because it shows that the society holds that providing for the physical needs of the citizens is the function of the government instead of national defense, thereby indicating that they view want as the true foe of humanity. Although this is a rather extreme utopian example that presently exists only as an idea, Bellamy uses it to draw attention to the fact that what humans truly need is to be fed, clothed, and sheltered from the elements.

In contrast with Bellamy, who replaces national defense with an entirely different system, Butler focuses on the need for self-defense in her novel. Living in a society in which crime is out of control and the government has failed to protect the people, the main characters in her novel live within a walled community in order to keep invaders out. Conditions in the outside world are so bad that the rule for venturing outside the wall is to “Go out in a bunch, and go armed” (Butler 8). There is strength in numbers, and there is safety behind the barrel of a gun, so going out in an armed group is the only sure way to keep most of the criminals at bay. Within the wall, the community sets up a neighborhood watch at night to protect each other’s property from intruders, demonstrating the interdependence of the neighbors for their personal safety (72). After the walled community is destroyed and the protagonist is forced to flee, she invites a number of seemingly harmless fellow travelers to join her as she goes along because she understands that “five is better than two” (208). The guns and ammunition that her group obtains
become invaluable one day when a gang attacks them, leaving them with only one casualty instead of many. Even though the novel is set in extremely violent dystopian conditions, Butler chooses to incorporate these examples in order to draw attention to the human need for security against external threats. She especially makes it clear that self-defense is enhanced when you stick together with friends and allies for that purpose.

The examples from both novels serve to illustrate that humans have a basic need to survive. The vulnerability and mortality of the individual is what prompts people to seek to fulfill their physical needs and defend themselves. This tells us that a significant part of human nature is the drive to avoid death and prolong life.

Moving on from needs, another thing that unites humans is the desire to obtain happiness. People have sensory bodies that are made of flesh and bone, and our bodies love to experience pleasure and avoid pain. When these desires are fulfilled, people often feel happy. However, it is also possible for pain or loss to contribute to one’s happiness, such as when a person feels the burn of physical exercise or makes a sacrifice for the sake of someone else. Humans simply want to be happy, so we have the tendency to spend every waking moment of our lives in the constant pursuit of happiness. The source of one’s happiness varies from person to person. We can see this aspect of human nature and the variability of it clearly portrayed in Brave New World by Aldous Huxley and Waiting in the Silence by Rosalyn Berne.

In Huxley’s novel, the majority of the people in the dystopian society continually occupy themselves with the constant pursuit of physical pleasure. For example, at the end of the work day, people usually come together to play games and sports. Also, unrestrained sexual intercourse is a cultural norm to the point that promiscuity is practically the law. If someone is having a bad day or if any amount of stress arises, one can simply take a half-gram of a perfect
drug called “soma” and go on a so-called “holiday” in order to escape the problems of life (Huxley 54). Huxley incorporates this extreme pursuit of fun, sex, and drugs into his novel in order to draw attention to the human desire to have pleasure in order to escape boredom and feel good. Pleasure contributes to happiness, which is the primary goal of the society in the novel, which emphasizes that “everybody’s happy now” because of their system (75). Therefore, Huxley draws a direct connection between pleasure and happiness, demonstrating how happiness is the ultimate human desire that drives people’s actions.

Physical pleasure is not the only contributing factor to happiness, however. Berne makes this evident in her novel in which she emphasizes the desire for friendship. Humans are social creatures, and so it is only natural for us to desire to fit in and have the company of others. The protagonist of Berne’s story demonstrates this desire. For example, she suffers exclusion from other kids her age because she is not fully connected to the virtual information system that everybody else on the island is connected to. As a result, she feels left out and lonely. However, while she is not yet connected, she greatly values the companionship of her one and only friend Emmanuel and becomes upset when his parents decide that he can no longer visit her (Berne 48). When she is finally fully connected, much to the dismay of her father, she defends herself by telling him that she is happy because other kids finally talk to her (83). These examples in Berne’s novel draw attention the direct relation between the human desire for friendship and the happiness that it often brings in life.

Being in a state of happiness makes humans feel good and light up with joy, so it is only natural for people to pursue it in order to avoid unhappiness. The examples from the novels demonstrate how people constantly seek happiness in various ways. Whether the source is
physical pleasure or the company of friends, the desire for happiness is a significant part of human nature because the human body craves it.

If one’s needs are not met and one’s desires are left unrealized, a feeling of despair may develop within the person, leading to the fear that conditions will never improve in the future or that they may worsen. This fear is an emotion that unites human beings of all walks of life, including the rich, because they may fear that they will lose their wealth. However, the sense of hopelessness is more often felt by the poor because they already experience hardship firsthand. The fear of enduring ongoing or sudden hardship in the future is unlikely to come true for most people in accordance with what they perceive to be hardship, but it is an understandable fear. After all, as mere human beings, we never know what a day is going to bring. Not many people expected the stock market crash of 1929, and yet millions suddenly found themselves struggling financially. Therefore, it is a very reasonable fear because of our lack of ability to know the future. Whatever the subject of the fear may be, it is natural to worry, and this kind of worry is something that all humans can relate to. Bellamy and Butler once again effectively capture this human emotion in their novels.

In Bellamy’s novel, the working classes of the late nineteenth century were weary and downtrodden. They were very discontent with their wages, hours, dwellings, education, and angry for being excluded from the luxuries that the rich enjoyed (Bellamy 52). Therefore, they often went on strike, making the lives of some rich people miserable because of their refusal to work. Bellamy includes a stagecoach analogy for the socioeconomic divide between the rich and the poor. In the analogy, the rich ride the stagecoach while the poor toil continuously in pulling it along the road. The main fear of the poor was that “It had always been as it was, and it would always be so” (50). The main fear of the rich, however, was that they would lose their precious
seats on the stagecoach by some great misfortune (49). Either way, the rich and poor alike shared the same fear of the future, but differed in their perspectives. The poor feared that there was no hope for upward social mobility, whereas the rich feared that their cushy way of life would be suddenly snatched away from them. These examples from Bellamy’s novel draw attention to the general fear of future trouble that humans share.

Butler’s novel emphasizes the horrible social and economic conditions brought upon the United States by factors such as a corrupt government and unchecked violence and robbery. The fall from glory as a nation prompts the citizens to fear that conditions will never get any better. For example, most people have given up on politicians because they overpromise and under deliver (Berne 20). Even the protagonist’s father who was planning on voting for the new presidential candidate ends up staying home on Election Day because he has no faith in politicians (27). Toward the end of the book, Berne captures the fear of worsening conditions by having one character comment that, as bad as things were, “We haven’t hit bottom yet” (328). These examples from Berne’s novel draw attention to the fear of future chaos which humans have the tendency to worry about.

Whether one fears future hardship or anarchy, it is completely justifiable for humans to worry about what may happen, because anything could happen and we are unable to foresee it with absolute certainty. This uncertainty is what gives rise to the fear that one’s circumstances in life will remain bad or become bad. Because all humans share this lack of assurance due to our limited knowledge, fearing the hereafter is yet another significant but unfortunate aspect of human nature that cannot be shaken unless we have the hope of a guarantee that everything will be all right in the end, such as the hope of eternal life beyond death.
Now, thus far we have discussed how humans are connected by common needs, desires, and fears. What people want most of all is the ability to have control of their persons, their lives, and their circumstances in order to satisfy their needs, fulfill their desires, and eliminate their fears if possible. In order to have such control, people need the freedom to do so. This freedom is commonly known as autonomy. Although what constitutes true autonomy is entirely subjective and varies from person to person, the most general definition of the term is the freedom of the individual to do whatever he wants to do without any hindrances.

Now, what may be autonomy to one person may be tyranny to another. For example, many liberals believe that poverty limits people’s autonomy and that it is the duty of the government to provide for their needs. Therefore, they tend to support coercive programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and public education (Gaylin and Jennings Ch. 1). However, some libertarians and most conservatives believe in minimal government intervention in people’s lives and are often opposed to social welfare programs because they feel as though their autonomy is being encroached upon by the government through the taxes that are levied. The unanswered question that society therefore continually faces is what the perfect balance between absolute liberty and coercion is in order for people to enjoy true autonomy. However, because opinions vary and nobody judges by the same standard, that perfect balance will probably never be agreed upon and therefore never realized.

Even though we have defined autonomy as the freedom to pursue one’s desires without any obstacles, this definition is very broad and cannot be narrowed any further because of the unsolvable disagreement. Some people feel like they have a firm hold on autonomy if they have negative liberty such as privacy, whereas others only feel so if they have positive liberty such as the opportunity to master oneself (Ch. 2 & 3). Some people favor negative rights such as
maintaining free markets wherein private enterprise can thrive, while others favor positive rights such as having government regulations in place in order to protect employees and consumers from possible harm and abuse (Ch. 2 & 3). Although these two views clash and are irreconcilable, the broad definition of autonomy applies to both of them; people want the liberty to have everything their own way without anyone else telling them what for. Only then will the individual feel like he has enough autonomy to confront his needs, desires, and fears.

The examples from the four novels discussed earlier support this view of autonomy. For example, when analyzing the need of human beings to survive, we can see that there are multiple needs that factor in. In Bellamy’s novel, the need to have provisions to protect the body against hunger, cold, and nakedness takes precedence in the utopian society and it becomes the government’s job to distribute such provisions. This society clearly favors fulfilling positive rights in order to maximize their own perception of autonomy, which to them is freedom from want. The society in Butler’s novel has a different approach because its people care more about satisfying the need to defend themselves from harm. Therefore, they chiefly value the liberty to exercise their negative rights guaranteed by the Second Amendment in order to maximize their perception of autonomy, which to them is freedom of self-defense.

In the analysis of the human desire to obtain happiness, the factors that contribute to happiness also vary. For example, in Huxley’s novel, the dystopian society occupies itself in the pursuit of physical pleasure and various forms of escapism. They clearly value the right to pursue happiness to an unrestrained libertarian degree because they perceive autonomy to be thus. However, in Berne’s novel, the protagonist finds happiness in friendship, which is something completely different. She apparently finds autonomy in not being isolated from her peers.
The universal fear of the future is directed in opposite ways in the novels. For example, in Bellamy’s novel, we see both; the poor fear that conditions will never improve, whereas the rich fear that they will worsen, as do some of the characters in Butler’s novel. The former group therefore views autonomy as being set free from their miserable circumstances, whereas the latter group views autonomy as being insured against losses.

Therefore, as the novels indicate, different people have different perspectives on what we need, desire, and fear. After all, what a person needs, desires, and fears is unique to the individual. These differences in perspective clearly illustrate the variability of the definitions of autonomy. Nevertheless, the basic definition still holds; people want what they want when they want it, whether it is food, guns, sex, social acceptance, hope, or a guarantee.

We could learn a lot as a real society by reflecting on fictional utopian and dystopian societies. For example, we can learn to respect each other’s differences with the understanding that one person’s perception of liberty may be another person’s perception of slavery. Furthermore, we can hold a civil discourse on the perfect balance between freedom and coercion that will maximize autonomy for the greatest number of people by focusing on issues that most people agree on and moving forward with those. We can continue to debate the more controversial issues in a better light when we have the variability of autonomy in mind.

When we take into account everything discussed up to this point, it is apparent that there is no objective meaning of autonomy. The amount of autonomy that a person perceives to possess depends on the unique needs, desires, and fears of that individual and the freedom he has to confront them. However, as diverse as human beings are in their personal lives, we are all united by a common nature, and thus we have common needs, desires, and fears that make us
part of who we are. Our differences arise from our interpretations and evaluations of those aspects.
Works Cited


