

Universally Basic: An Ethical Case for Universal Basic Income

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Abstract: Radical issues require a radical solution. If we are to combat the widening inequalities in our current economic paradigm, revolutionary thought is needed. We can find one such source of revolutionary change within the call for a universal basic income (UBI). While often deemed a utopian fantasy, a UBI now lies within our grasp. We need only to make the moral and ethical choice to embrace it. Defenses of a UBI have come from every political quarter, from the staunchest libertarians to the most egalitarian liberals. Here is presented an argument for UBI based upon a recognition of the dignity of the human condition. Drawing upon the work of a diverse cast of thinkers from Adam Smith and Martha Nussbaum to Paul Goodman and John Kenneth Galbraith, amongst others, UBI can be shown to support a level of universal basic human dignity that allows for an agency and a capacity for a wide-range of capabilities, otherwise stifled in our current socio-economic regime.

Keywords: basic income; income inequality; ethics

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*“I am. We are.
That is enough.” – Ernst Bloch (1964)*

Much has been talked about in regards to combating the growing gulf of wealth and income inequality. The Fight for 15, Piketty’s much loved global wealth tax, the Occupy movement; all offer solutions, of varying sorts, to bridge this divide. Few have gained much traction, and fewer still can address the myriad of problems that contribute to wealth inequality. The time has come then to turn to a more radical solution. We must dust-off an old idea that has fallen out of vogue with much of the economics community, the idea of universal basic income.

By universal basic income we invoke the definition popularized by Phillippe van Parijs that it is:

“An income paid by a government, at a uniform level and at regular intervals, to each adult member of society. The grant is paid, and its level is fixed, irrespective of whether the person is rich or poor, lives alone or with others, is willing to work or not. In most versions— certainly in mine—it is granted not only to citizens, but to all permanent residents.” (Van Parijs 2000, p. 2)

Utopian? Perhaps, but then again perhaps not. Given the vast increases in wealth that has occurred in the developed world, the very wealth that has fueled the widening gulf in inequality, universal basic income has never been more within our reach. We need only the political will to reach out and grasp it. If we hold that it is possible, the question then becomes: is it ethical? Yes, resoundingly yes.

We shall go on to show, using the Aristotelian-Marxian conception of human dignity conceived by Martha Nussbaum, as well as aid from such luminaries as Adam Smith, that a universal basic income magnifies the dignity of the human experience, allows an individual to walk without shame, creates choice where once there was none, and enhances the capabilities of individuals to experience the full range of life’s experiences.

I: A (Mostly) Basic History of Basic Income

Van Parijs refers to universal basic income as a “beautifully, disarmingly simple idea” (Van Parijs 1992, p. 1) but it is by no means a new idea, having been reborn time and time again in different guises over the last two centuries. Thomas Paine, in his pamphlet *Agrarian Justice*, makes the radical claim that:

“Taking it then for granted that no person ought to be in a worse condition when born under what is called a state of civilization, than he would have been had he been born in a

state of nature, and that civilization ought to have made, and ought still to make, provision for that purpose, it can only be done by subtracting from property a portion equal in value to the natural inheritance it absorbed.” (Paine, p. 401)

Paine places his argument within the tradition of social contract theory starting with the premise that then the earth in its natural, uncultivated state is the “common property of the human race” (Paine, p. 398), and following that, a la Locke, the institution of private property is based upon one’s improvements to the land. However, these improvements are not without cost. The cost as Paine sees it is the loss of a natural inheritance, in that some are made worse off by the trappings of civilization than they would have been in the hypothetical “state of nature.” This would stand in violation of any social contract, namely because one would’ve only entered into a social contract if it was welfare improving as compared to the state of nature. This requires restitution, “a generous man would not wish it to continue, and a just man will rejoice to see it abolished.” (Paine, p. 402)

Here we also hear an echo of what is to come in the work of Robert Nozick. In Nozick, as in Paine, we see a call for restitution of past injustices, indeed it is one of the three principles of justice that Nozick erects his whole edifice upon (the other two being the justice in acquisition and justice in transfer). (Nozick 1974) However, Nozick only supports the use of restitution in the case where one can prove that one of the other two principals were violated. However, as Steve Pressman is quick to point out, “unjust behavior was common in human history” (Pressman, p. 5), indeed a lot of civilization is built upon injustices being perpetrated by one group upon another. This would seem to leave open an opportunity for a universal basic income on the grounds of restitution for the past transgression of civilization, for as Paine states poverty is “a thing created by that which is called civilized life. It exists not in the natural state.” (Paine, p. 397) Even within the strict confines of the Nozickian State, we can find a glimmer of justification.

But let us return now to Paine, in his conception this restitution comes in the creation of a:

“National fund, out of which there shall be paid to every person, when arrived at the age of twenty-one years, the sum of fifteen pounds sterling, as a compensation in part, for the loss of his or her natural inheritance, by the introduction of the system of landed property. And also, the sum of ten pounds per annum, during life, to every person now living, of the age of fifty years, and to all others as they shall arrive at that age.” (Paine, p. 400)

Here we have the beginnings of a basic income, one that Paine claims is “not charity but a right, not bounty but justice.” (Paine, p. 405)

A similar ideas as Paine’s resurfaces in Charles Fourier’s work. Fourier contends that:

“Jesus by these words consecrates the right of taking, when one is HUNGRY [sic], what is necessary, where it may be found; and this right imposes the duty upon the social body of securing to the people a minimum of maintenance; - since civilization deprives it of the first natural right, that of *the chase, fishing, gathering, pasturage*, it owes it an indemnity.” (Fourier, p. 190)

Again we are confronted by this notion that, due to the inequities inherent in civilization, that there is an obligation owed by those who own property and those without. Fourier sought to solve this through his *phalanxes*, or planned communities, which would provide a minimum for all within them, the minimum being five meals a day, a decent suit and work clothing, individual lodging and access to public halls and events. (Fourier, p. 192)

Basic income entered the classical economic conversation in the writings of John Stuart Mill. Mill, when reflecting on the collected work of the Fourierists, wrote that:

“The most skillfully combined, and with the greatest foresight of objections, of all the forms of Socialism, is that commonly known as Fourierism. This System does not contemplate the abolition of private property, nor even of inheritance; on the contrary, it avowedly takes into consideration, as elements in the distribution of the produce, capital as well as labour. [...] In the distribution, a certain minimum is first assigned for the subsistence of every member of the community, whether capable or not of labour. The remainder of the produce is shared in certain proportions, to be determined beforehand, among the three elements, Labour, Capital, and Talent.” (Mill, p.166)

Here we find an unabashed support for universal basic income from an economic luminary. But he wouldn't be the last intellectual to throw their weight behind universal basic income, we see it crop up time and again amongst scholars of multiple fields. The British philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote that “a certain small income, sufficient for necessities, should be secured for all, whether they work or not. A larger income ... should be given to those who are willing to engage in some work which the community recognizes as useful.” (Russell, p. 110) Even Friedrich Hayek, the celebrated Austrian economist, found the idea appealing. In *The Road to Serfdom* Hayek writes that:

“But there are two kinds of security: the certainty of a given minimum of sustenance for all and the security of a given standard of life, of the relative position which one person or group enjoys compared with others. There is no reason why, in a society which has reached the general level of wealth ours has, the first kind of security should not be guaranteed to all without endangering general freedom.” (Hayek, p. 66)

This sentiment is not universal amongst libertarians (or Austrians), indeed Peter Boettke and Adam Martin “take issue with this conciliatory attitude.” (Boettke and Martin, p. 1) They argue that the government implanting such an action is vulnerable to two critiques “means-ends coherence and robustness against opportunism” (Boettke and Martin, p. 2) and that while this critiques may not be enough to derail basic income entirely they should “at least be grounds for revising one's estimate of the potential gains from attempting to implement it.” (Boettke and Martin, p. 1)

In 1947 the discussion of basic income took a turn in the writings of Paul Goodman. In *Communitas: Means of Livelihood and Ways of Life*, co-written with his brother Percival Goodman, Goodman puts forward a concept of an in-kind formulation of basic income. Goodman dismisses the “indirect solution” (i.e. forms of social insurance) in favor of what he calls a “direct solution” which would be to:

“Divide the economy and provide the subsistence directly, letting the rest complicate and fluctuate as it will. Let whatever is essential for life and security be considered by itself, and since this is a political need in an elementary sense, let political means be used to guarantee it.” (Goodman 1947, p. 191)

Goodman is suggesting a severing of subsistence from the greater consumption economy and then guaranteeing a certain level of subsistence to all who take part, citing that:

“Subsistence is not something to profit by, to invest in, to buy or sell. On the part of the consumer, it is not something to choose or reject or contract for or exchange his labor for, but simply to work for.” (Goodman 1947, p. 192)

Here we find Goodman’s second break from more conventional basic income (notice we have dropped “universal” for his is not a universal basic income), not only is his conception an in-kind transfer but it requires an action to be able to collect on it. Goodman considers that individuals could perform “universal labor service similar to periods of military conscription” (Goodman 1947, p. 198) to be guaranteed a level of subsistence.

Later theorists returned to a more recognizable theory of universal basic income. John Kenneth Galbraith in *The Affluent Society* aimed for a similar end as Goodman, albeit by different means, going so far as to call his chapter “The Divorce of Production from Security¹.” Galbraith seeks to find some way of “diminishing the reliance now being placed on production as a source of income.” (Galbraith, p. 264) This alludes to Keynes as well, who stated that “much lower stakes will serve the purpose equally well, as soon as the players are accustomed to them.” (Keynes, p. 374)

Galbraith envisions this being done in three steps, the first of which is to bring unemployment compensation much closer to the average weekly wage while simultaneously extending the period of eligibility. The second step is one that has become familiar to us, Galbraith supposes that we must provide alternative sources of income, unrelated to production, to those who would have difficulty obtaining employment. Galbraith muses that:

“In recent years, this has come extensively into discussion under various proposals for guaranteed income or a negative income tax. The principle common to these proposals is provision of a basic income as a matter of general right and related in amount to family size but not otherwise to need. If the individual cannot find (or does not seek) employment, he has this income on which to survive.” (Galbraith, p. 266)

The advantage of this would be that “the minimum income so provided once again reduces the pressure to produce for welfare reasons.” (Galbraith, p. 267) So Goodman and Galbraith are agreed on the ends, if not the means

Galbraith may have entertained the notion of a negative income tax but it would find its greatest supporter in Milton Friedman. A negative income tax is a proposal that is often discussed in the same circles as basic income, but is radically different in scope. A negative

¹ Security in this sense being a watchword for subsistence.

income tax works on the premise that in most tax systems one is allowed to make a certain amount of income before that income becomes taxed, which we shall refer to as our 'allowance,' any income accrued past the level of your allowance becomes taxable. But what of those you make *less* than their yearly allowance? As Friedman wrote "under the current system, those unused allowances in general are of no value. You simply pay no tax." (Friedman, p. 121)

What do we do then? With a negative income tax one would receive "from the government some fraction of the unused allowance" with the goal being to:

"provide a straightforward means of assuring every family a minimum amount, while at the same time avoiding a massive bureaucracy, preserving a considerable measure of individual responsibility, and retaining an incentive for individuals to work and earn enough to pay taxes instead of receiving a subsidy." (Friedman, p. 121)

This applies only to those at the bottom income brackets, and only those who already have an income and the capability to work. It does not provide for the unemployed, the permanently disabled, or other vulnerable groups in society.

Attempts at a negative income tax were carried out in the United States in the 1960s up into the early 1980s. The first experiment, in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, lasted from 1968 until 1972. Following that there were experiments done in Iowa and North Carolina (from 1969-1973), Gary, Indiana (from 1971-1974), and in Seattle and Denver from 1971 to 1982. (Munnell, p. 32) These experiments were met with mixed results, and were plagued with bureaucratic issues and experimental concerns. While the results of these experiments would be picked over in the decade to follow, they had an effect of chilling the conversation towards any sort of guaranteed income scheme, despite the fact it was only a negative income tax that was attempted.

Guaranteed income found a new champion in the late 1980s with the philosopher and political economist Phillippe Van Parijs, a prolific author on the subject of basic income. Van Parijs proudly proclaims that:

"Liberty and equality, efficiency and community, common ownership of the Earth and equal sharing in the benefits of technical progress, the flexibility of the labour market and the dignity of the poor, the fight against unemployment and against inhumane working conditions, against the desertification of the countryside and against interregional inequalities, the viability of cooperatives and the promotion of adult education, autonomy from bosses, husbands and bureaucrats, have all been invoked in favour of what will here be called, in agreement with prevailing English usage, a *basic income*." (Van Parijs 1992, p. 1)

For Van Parijs, the greatest defense of universal basic income is the promotion of basic justice. Social justice, of a real-libertarian conception, must be consistent with the security of *real freedom* for all. Individual within any such society must be "formally free, with a well-enforced structure of property rights that includes the ownership of each by herself." (Van Parijs 2000, p. 6) This includes not only the protection of those rights, but the value of those rights as well. To

this end “anyone who finds it [a just, free society] attractive, there cannot but be a strong presumption in favor of UBI.” (Van Parijs 2000, p. 6)

II: Come Affluence, Come!

Why now? Why send up the call for universal basic income if it has been discussed for so long? Simple. We’ve reached a point in civilization where it has become a real and true possibility. As Galbraith concludes in *The Affluent Society*:

“To furnish a barren room is one thing. To continue to crowd in furniture until the foundation buckles is quite another. To have failed to solve the problem of producing goods would have been to continue man in his oldest and most grievous misfortune. But to fail to see that we have solved it, and to fail to proceed thence to the next task, would be fully as tragic.” (Galbraith, p. 317)

We can produce, we can produce on a scale undreamed of in previous generations. The room is stocked, and stocked to a level of richness that would bring Crassus to shame. Now we can proceed to our next task, the rest of the rooms in the house.

Scarcity, that is to say scarcity *in production*, is no longer the barrier that it once was. The Affluent Society is here. Our attention should now turn from production to distribution. From creation to circulation. The rest of the house must be furnished, and the foundations would better support a more equal load. That we haven’t done so does not mean such a transition is impossible. Rather it is that we have “ceased to be able to imagine alternatives. We seem to have lost our genius for inventing changes to satisfy crying needs.” (Goodman 1960, p. x) The current system, one of inequality and burden, continues, in part, because it:

“Is in these circumstances that people put up with a system because “there are no alternatives.” And when one cannot think of anything to do, soon one ceases to think at all.” (Goodman 1960, p. xi)

Imagination is needed. Utopian thought is needed. Distributions must be confronted and when one confronts distributional issues, ethics become key. Here now we can enter into a conversation on ethics, on dignity and the need for not only prudent but just economics.

III: Universal Dignity

WWASS, or What Would Adam Smith Say? A common question that arises in economic circles when discussing a new theory, or in this case a resurrected one. So let us ask ourselves, what would Adam Smith say in regards to universal basic income?

Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*, argues that it is necessary to have a level of subsistence that not only allows one to eke out a bare existence but is sufficient so that one can “appear in

public without shame.” A life of barest sustenance is no life at all, one needs a level of dignity that allows one to interact with the world around them from a place of equality. To wit:

“A linen shirt, for example, is, strictly speaking, not a necessary of life. The Greeks and the Romans lived, I suppose, very comfortably, though they had no linen. But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-laborer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty, which, it is presumed, no body can well fall into without extreme bad conduct.” (Smith 1776, p. 939)

From this passage, we can ground universal basic income on a desire for universal basic human dignity.

Dignity, we can argue, is intrinsically important to humankind. Human dignity acknowledges that there is something within us, as human beings, that is worthy of respect from our fellow humans. Nussbaum recognizes a unique take on dignity inherent in Smith, the idea that:

“All human beings are profoundly equal with respect to the set of capacities that are the source of human dignity, and that distinctions of class and rank are artificial, is an old Stoic idea, of course. But Smith gives it a new twist, in two significant ways. First, he emphasizes the importance of work and the influence of occupation on one's human abilities, something that did not particularly interest the Stoics. Second, he shows that different conditions of life do not merely create different classes and ranks of people in the eyes of those who are foolish enough to care about such things; they actually form the person himself, directly affecting the development of human abilities.” (Nussbaum 2002, p. 9)

In this way economic standing, both material and immaterial, has an effect on our expressions of our dignity as humans. The set of capacities from which dignity flows can be *relatively* aided or hindered by our economic standing. Our view of dignity is thus distorted, it is then, as Smith is wont to call it, a corruption of our moral sentiments.

A corruption of our moral sentiments can occur from many quarters, time, distance, a love of wealth or, as Smith is quick to recognize, the disposition to “despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition... is, at the same time, the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments.” (Smith 1759, p. 73) The corruption of our moral sentiments is synonymous with a lack of respect for the dignity of others. We can no longer recognize the complete dignity of others through our distorted lens. While the Impartial Spectator may still resonate with some modicum of shared humanity between them, for “how selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others” (Smith 1759, p. 13) they are not resonating as equals, and therefore dignity is lost.

Here is where universal basic income can play a profound role. Imagine if you will a level of universal basic income that covers the subsistence of individuals as well as a lifestyle that allows them to appear in public without shame. Maybe our universal basic income follows Goodman's minimum model of necessity (with cash as opposed to his in-kind proposal) in that it includes payment enough to cover:

- “1. Food sufficient in quantity and kind for health, palatable but without variety.
2. Uniform clothing adequate for all seasons.
3. Shelter on an individual, family, and group basis, with adequate conveniences for different environments.
4. Medical service
5. Transportation.” (Goodman 1947, p. 201)

Or perhaps we'd follow another prescription, such as Van Parijs's more expansive one, which advocates simply the “highest level that is economically and ecologically sustainable, and on the highest scale that is politically imaginable.” (Van Parijs 1992, p. 19) Regardless of the level of universal basic income we provide, what we have done is created a consistent level of dignity afforded to every individual within society.

No individual need feel less dignified than another, because at their heart everyone will start at the same basic level. Sure, other may gain more wealth over time but every individual will know with certainty that they will never drop below a certain threshold. There is a minimum standard of dignity that all are afforded, our relative dignity is then bounded by that. None need then feel shame when they walk in public, for their most basic needs will be met at such a rate that they need not feel lesser than another.

We cannot, nor is it possible to, make every pauper a king. But we can elevate paupers to the dignity of citizens.

IV: Free to Work, or Not

The acknowledgement of your dignity from your fellow human beings is not the end of it. Dignity is far more nuanced than that. Dignity implies choice, a freedom to choose. There is one place in our current capitalistic society in which we have little choice, yet we often do not acknowledge it as such, and that is in employment. The term ‘wage slavery,’ employed by both Marxist and anarchist thinkers, is not far from the truth. We *must* work to survive under capitalism, there is no other alternative. If one does not sell their labor, they cannot buy the commodities that they need to survive. There is no choice.

Choice however is essential to dignity. One cannot have dignity without choice. Nussbaum describes choice as being “at the core of what human dignity requires, plainly, is an ample measure of liberty for workers, including free choice of occupation and free movement from place to place.” (Nussbaum 2002, p. 11) Labor is the most intrinsic thing to us, it is our effort, our will, our substance. That the system that we exist within requires our toil to take part of it is itself an egregious offense to our dignity. Smith concurs writing:

“The property which every man has in his own labour, as it is the original foundation of all other property, so it is the most sacred and inviolable. The patrimony of a poor man lies in the strength and dexterity of his hands; and to hinder him from employing this

strength and dexterity in what manner he thinks proper without injury to his neighbor, *is a plain violation of this most sacred property.*” (Smith 1776, p. 140)

A universal basic income severs the connection between subsistence and survival from labor. It allows individuals the freedom to choose, not just in what capacity they wish to work but whether or not they wish to work at all. We have not eliminated the coerciveness of labor within capitalism, but we have alleviated it. Labor still is coercive in that one need work for what one *wants* but one’s *needs* will now be uncoupled from coercive labor.

First, the capacity to choose where and in what capacity to work. Imagine being unfettered by the fear of starvation, or losing the roof over your head, what job would you choose then? As Goodman contends basic income:

“Would give a new security, a breath of freedom, and the possibility of choice. He [the recipient] is independent... By the same token, people in general, including the small enterpriser, would be more fearless, for their risks are less fatal.” (Goodman 1947, p. 193)

Imagine the explosion of creativity in the arts, literature, painting, and music that would emerge if artists are no longer held back by subsistence woes. How many more artists would emerge as well? The cultural gains could be invaluable, a new Renaissance.

Enterprise would not be left behind in this. How many business, how many ideas, how many innovations die on the drawing room floor due to the risk involved? Or for fear of failure and the economic destitution that would follow? What new innovations and business ideas would we see? Of course, the doubting Thomases among us would say, wouldn’t you just be providing incentives for people to engage in riskier actions? Taking away the fear of failure, the risk of poverty, would provide perverse incentives for people to behave in ways that are far too risky, far too potentially damaging to the economy. Could this be a possibility? Yes. There is no denying that there is a chance for riskier actions to take place under a guaranteed basic income. However, that is a small risk in the face of a much, much greater social benefit. As the renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote:

“But the danger that we shall be underwriting the failures of skid row is trivial compared with the benefits the guaranteed annual income would give us. It would provide dignity for every citizen and choice for every citizen. It would free us from the stigma of poverty and the demoralization of welfare, and turn out affluence from a reproach into a point of pride among nations.” (Mead, p. 116)

But let us play Devil’s Advocate. Let’s consider for a moment that more business rise and fall, that fool-hardy entrepreneurs flush with the added income from our universal basic income rush to start business. This is not necessarily a bad thing, failure is not necessarily a bad thing. The work of Bunten, et al. (2015) show that “entrepreneurial projects have a positive and determinative effect on employment growth in local economies” (p. 575) and that

“Current establishment births feed off past entrepreneurial projects: the establishment birth and death rates, as well as their product, enter positively in determining future rates of establishment births—even in the presence of a full suite of control variables.” (p. 576)

This is to say that there is real learning taking place, that entrepreneurs, financiers, and firms draw new information from the successes and failures of each entrepreneurial project. Our universal basic income proposal would then serve to bolster this learning process, increasing this “important casual input to local economic growth.” (Bunten, et al., p. 576)

V: California Dreamin’: Rawls and the Surfers

The question then revolves around the issue of those who exercise their dignity of choice to choose not to work in any capacity, regardless of their aptitude to do so. This has long been a thorny issue within basic income. Paul Goodman thought a work requirement was necessary before one could draw upon his guaranteed subsistence. Famously, John Rawls himself, the celebrated author of *Justice as Fairness*, decried that:

“Those who are unwilling to work would have a standard working day of extra leisure, and this extra leisure itself would be stipulated as equivalent to the index of primary goods of the least advantaged. So those who surf all day in Malibu must find a way to support themselves and would not be entitled to public funds.” (Rawls, p. 257)

This however is contrary to our conception of universal human dignity. For our basic income to be truly universal, to achieve the maximum enhancement of human dignity, it must be both means and work-unconditional. Imposing a work requirement put us back into a situation in which work returns to its previously highly coercive levels. We have not solved the problem of Smith and Nussbaum, we have only redressed it in new clothes.

We’ve established the ethical righteousness of a minimum standard level of human dignity. If we are to truly have a minimum standard level of human dignity it must be universally available to all within society, whether they work or not. To do anything otherwise would be to create an inequality of entitlement. True agency of labor requires the choice of not working.

The lack of a work-requirement for basic income also serves as a protection for the impoverished against exploitive labor. As Van Parijs writes:

“The very unconditional nature of a basic income is a crucial advantage: it makes it possible to spread bargaining power so as to enable (as much as is sustainable) the less advantaged to discriminate between attractive or promising and lousy jobs.” (Van Parijs 2003, p. 13)

If we were to force a work-requirement for access to basic income we would not only be violating an individual’s agency of labor, but may also be forcing them into exploitative working conditions. People may take poor quality jobs purely to be able to access the basic income that should be their right, their bargaining power is thus reduced for the employer has power over not just their paid wage-labor but also acts as a gatekeeper to their basic income as well.

Once the work-requirement is removed from basic income, we have a strengthening of the bargaining position of citizens. Even a small amount of basic income allows for reduced labors hour for workers to reach a certain living standard. Their fallback position is raised,

allowing them to become more discerning in the kinds of jobs they take. This becoming increasingly important in our societies where:

“One can no longer assume that an overwhelming majority of households can cover their basic needs thanks to the wages they owe to the job one of their members currently holds or to the benefits they owe to the job one of their members used to hold.” (Van Parijs 1992, p. 5)

We are divided not just between capitalists and proletariat, rich and poor, workers and owners, but increasingly by those who can merely be supported by their wages and those who simply cannot. Van Parijs refers to this as a “dual economy,” or perhaps more accurately, a “two-thirds economy.” (Van Parijs 1992, p. 5) This cannot be overcome easily. Nor would basic income act as a panacea and solve it all but:

“The replacement of the safety net, in which the weakest and the unlucky get trapped, by a firm unconditional floor, on which they can securely stand, in other words the replacement of a conditional minimum income scheme by a genuine basic income, is increasingly viewed as an indispensable ingredient in any such strategy.” (Van Parijs 1992, p. 5)

VI: The Capacity for Dignity

Labor agency alone does not dignity make. It is but one facet of a life of dignity. We take up the Aristotelian/Marxist alternative to the Stoic and Kantian views on dignity put forth by Martha Nussbaum, that dignity is nested upon the capacity to fulfill capabilities. Nussbaum offers that:

“The basic idea in my own version of this tradition is that human beings have a worth that is indeed inalienable, because of their capacities for various forms of activity and striving. These capacities are, however, dependent on the world for their full development and for their conversion into actual functioning.” (Nussbaum 2008, p. 357)

The capabilities that Nussbaum describes have been born out of the work started in the 1980s by Amartya Sen commonly referred to as the “Capability Approach.” Sen identified a weakness in social justice framework since Rawls, that “what is missing in all this framework is some notion of “basic capabilities”: a person being able to do certain basic things.” (Sen 1979, p. 218) Sen has been hesitant to create a list of capabilities citing the difficulty in making such a list and remaining sensitive to differentiation, Nussbaum however has taken this up and created a (evolving) list of capabilities. Sen himself has referred to this list as being a “powerful use of a given list of capabilities for some minimal rights against deprivation.” (Sen 2005, p. 159)

Nussbaum’s capability list seeks to answer the Aristotelian question of “what is it to flourish as a human being?” (Classen, p. 6) The capabilities she currently espouses consist of:

- “1. Life
2. Bodily Health
3. Bodily Integrity

4. Senses, Imagination, and Thought
5. Emotions
6. Practical Reason
7. Affiliation
8. Other Species
9. Play
10. Control Over One's Environment" (Nussbaum 2003, p. 42)

For Nussbaum, a life of dignity is one that has the capacity, *nee* agency, to explore all of these capabilities. These capabilities then reflect the "minimum account of social justice: a society that does not guarantee these to all its citizens, at some appropriate threshold level, falls short of being a fully just society, whatever its level of opulence." (Nussbaum 2003, p. 40)

In our current economic regime, we fall short of allowing all members of our society access to these capabilities, thereby lessening their dignity. Play is superseded by the need to work for subsistence, senses, imagination, and thought are held in check by our material limitations, control over one's environment is limited by our reduced labor agency. Even our bodily health and bodily integrity is often beyond our grasp, one need only to read the literature on the increasing costs of healthcare in the developed world to see that. In this, and all other capabilities, a universal basic income can increase our ability to fulfill our capabilities.

Basic gives individuals the agency they need, through the severing of subsistence and shame, in the Smithian sense, from labor. When one has the bargaining power to be more discerning about one's job prospects, it increases the capability of affiliation. A guaranteed level of income also ensures that one has access to food (and perhaps a healthier level of food) and greater access to medical services increasing one's capability of bodily health and integrity. The freedom to work, or to not as the case may be, lends itself to an exponential increase in the capabilities for senses, imagination, and thought as well as play.

Perhaps most striking, particularly in the case of the American democracy, is the effects of a basic income on the capability of "Control over one's environment." Included within this capability is "being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association." (Nussbaum 2003, p. 42) The patriots amongst you would now cry that in American we already have these rights enshrined, and in a sense that is indeed true. However, having a right and having the ability to act upon those rights are two different things entirely. How many individuals are restricted from voting because they cannot afford the time off to wait in lines?

The ties between inequality of means and inequality of the political process is well documented. Martin Gilens stresses that "the ability of citizens to influence public policy is the "bottom line" of democratic government." (Gilens, p. 778) This line has blurred as inequality has risen. The wealthy can mobilize more money, more volunteers, more time, and thus bring more

influence to bear on our public servants. This translates into more policies enacted that benefit the wealthy in society, occasionally at the expense of the rest of the electorate.

With the support of a universal basic income more citizens can become involved in the political process. More people would have the ability to take the time to vote, to protest without fear of economic difficulties. Indeed we would find that:

“A basic income would also support citizens’ participation in collective self-government by opening up opportunities for citizens to develop their political capacities and skills. A guaranteed standard of life would mean that participation in social and political life would not require heroic efforts on the part of any citizens.” (Pateman, p. 96)

One would be hard-pressed to argue against the spread of political action amongst the citizenry. More citizen participation, more time, more mobilization can help to offset the moneyed interests in politics. What they would lack in funds, they could make up in numbers. A democratic government that only responds to the influence of a wealthy minority is no democracy. As Gilens writes “the difference between democracy and plutocracy is one of degree.” (Gilens, p. 794) A universal basic income reinforces that degree.

The problems with democracy are not the end of it, indeed “this aspect of inequality ties economics to politics, in a way that is hard to dismiss or avoid.” (Galbraith, p. 9) The economic consequences of inequality are numerous and they have been documented in far greater detail in other works. (see Galbraith 2016, Atkinson 2015, and Wilkinson and Pickett 2009 for excellent overviews) Yet, it would be remiss if they were not mentioned in some small form here.

Wilkinson and Pickett remark that:

“It is a remarkable paradox that, at the pinnacle of human material and technical achievement, we find ourselves anxiety-ridden, prone to depression, worried about how others see us, unsure of our friendships, driven to consume and with little or no community life... we seek comfort in over-eating, obsessive shopping and spending, or become prey to excessive alcohol, psychoactive medicines and illegal drugs.” (Wilkinson and Pickett, p. 3)

These are just few of the health problems that have been shown to come about with increased income inequality. The sickness is not contained to our physical self, it is a malaise that permeates the entirety of our civilization. We see a growth in non-standard employment (i.e. part-time, “contractors”, and the like), wage stagnation, race and gender inequalities, erosion of trust and social cohesion, and increased rates of crime, just to name a few. (Atkinson 2016, Wisman 2013, Zak and Knack 2001) A universal basic income can relieve some of the pressure associated with these issue, though the specifics are best left to the work of others.

VII: Towards a Universal Basic Dignity

Universal basic income is possible. It is not a utopian fantasy, or the idle musings of ivory-tower academics envisioning systems that will never be. It is real, it is obtainable. The pieces are there, we need only seize them. Recent activity has renewed interest in universal basic income. Finland is starting research into a pilot program to give a “basic income” to a select group of its citizens. The province of Ontario in Canada is looking into a pilot program in basic income, as is multiple cities within the Netherlands. While Switzerland attempted, but failed to pass, a referendum for basic income in June of 2016. Basic income experiments are not limited to governments, Y Combinator, a Silicon Valley tech-company accelerator, is starting a short pilot program on basic income to be carried out in Oakland, CA in order to prepare for a longer term study. As of the writing of this piece, the Legislative Assembly of Prince Edward Island passed a motion to form a partnership with the Canadian federal government to explore the implementation of a basic income and the Economic Security Project, a collation of technologists, activists, investors, and researchers, has pledged ten million dollars to fund more studies on universal basic income.

We must not underestimate the challenges that the implementation of such a program would face. Even if we succeed at the political level and convince the populace of the necessity of universal basic income, the effects and organization needed to implement it will be immense and challenging, as the negative income experiments in the 1970s revealed to us. Goodman was right when he suggested that any such system of guaranteed subsistence would require “a change of social attitude so profound that we must think deeply about both the dangers and the opportunities.” (Goodman 1947, p. 193)

The costs will be high in any system of universal basic income, no one is disputing that fact. The question remains though, can we afford the alternative? With the challenges we face as we enter a new age of capitalism, one of widening income and wealth inequality, of wage stagnation, of increased moneyed interests (and influence) in politics, of the rise of multinational corporate power, how else can we provide and shield those who are most vulnerable in our societies, the poor and the impoverished? A radical issue requires radical action. We can no longer assume that the rising tide will lift all boats.

We are left with few options that can address these issues. A universal basic income, a guaranteed income for all in society regardless of wealth and of work, could help to empower our society. To reaffirm and protect the dignity that we see in our fellow human beings.

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