

Philosophical Reflections on the Idea of a Universal Basic Income

CATHERINE ROWETT

Abstract

A universal basic income is an unconditional allowance, sufficient to live on, paid in cash to every citizen regardless of income. It has been a Green Party policy for years. But the idea raises many interesting philosophical questions, about fairness, entitlement, desert, stigma and sanctions, the value of unpaid work, the proper ambitions of a good society, and our preconceptions about whether leisure (time for recreation and free creativity) or jobs (working to give the proceeds of our labour and the luxury of free time to someone else) are the thing we should prize above all for free citizens. Coming from the perspective of ancient philosophy, I consider the answers offered in the ancient world to some of these questions, and how we might learn from re-thinking our notions of how to create a good society in which people can be free and realise their creative and intellectual potential.

1. Introduction: if we had a Universal Basic Income, what would change?

My proposal is that we – the UK, or whatever country or federation of countries you belong to – should have a universal basic income. A ‘universal basic income’, or UBI, is an unconditional allowance or stipend that is paid out in cash to everyone in a society, out of the public purse, like a universal tax-free allowance, and regardless of income (in the same way as, for instance, child benefit is, or at least was, paid in the UK).¹

I shall sketch the political reasons for instituting such a universal benefit at the start of this paper, as a kind of manifesto, and briefly consider the economic questions of affordability and whether it carries any net costs to the tax payers, before moving on to the philosophical issues that are the subject of my discussion in Sections 2 to 4.

So if we had a UBI what would change? Let us begin by thinking about which things matter most in our life. We might start with a list

¹ An accessible account of the idea, together with many of the practical and economic implications of introducing such a scheme, can be found in Standing (2017).

Catherine Rowett

such as this, and see if we could put them into categories according to whether they are important for our lives and for our sense of well-being:

- Having lots of money to spend
- Love and friendship
- Caring for others, seeing family
- Creativity, music, art, sport, outdoor activities, inventing stuff, comedy
- Being out in the natural world, working with nature and animals
- Working hard to make money for the boss
- Doing a worthwhile or satisfying job
- Changing people's minds, campaigning, ending injustice.
- Time to study and improve oneself.

And then, having considered the things that seem important and valuable, we might think about which things are most costly to society and to its ability to provide us with the circumstances for a good life. Can we order them from worst to least? For sure, we might need some detailed information to be sure of which of the costly things are most costly, but here are some suggestions for our list:

- Mental health and depression
- Debt and loan sharks
- Drug addiction
- Stress-related illnesses (hypertension etc)
- Family breakdown
- Poor diet and fast food
- Child poverty and malnutrition
- Social stigma and bullying
- Benefit fraud
- Tax evasion
- Unfair taxation
- Subsidies to employers (i.e. in-work benefits to low paid workers)

Next we should ask why our society is so full of those terrible things, and why it proves so hard to improve the situation, no matter how much resource we throw at it. Why would we want a world so full of misery? Why not change it? Many of these things could be changed if we introduced a UBI, or so I shall suggest.

In the most recent available statistics for the UK, over £15 billion of means tested benefits went unclaimed by those who are entitled to

Philosophical Reflections on the Idea of a UBI

them.² This is money that is not paid out because people never ask for it, perhaps because they are too proud, or too ashamed, or unaware that they qualify – resulting in the persistence of unnecessary poverty and hardship that the system is supposed to eliminate. Indeed far more is underpaid in this way than is overpaid to people who are not entitled to it (known as ‘benefit fraud’), which was estimated at no more than about £2 billion in 2018/19.³ Meanwhile, the tax gap (people avoiding tax, undeclared income etc, so not paying tax that should be paid) is officially said (by the government) to be ‘only’ £35 billion (much of it avoided by cash-in-hand self-employed people), though the real figure has been calculated by Richard Murphy to be more like £90 billion, if we include the avoidance schemes used by the super rich such as using offshore havens (Murphy, 2019). It is striking that such tax evasion seems to draw much less anger and attention in right wing media than the much smaller losses due to benefit fraud, and tax evasion is addressed with less assiduous staffing, while the pursuit of those suspected of benefit fraud represents a considerable cost in staff time and legal action.

Both the unclaimed benefits that leave needy people in poverty, and the misery and criminalisation that comes from sanctioning people guilty of benefit fraud, could be easily solved if the benefits in question were universal and unconditional. It would simplify the distribution, there would be no complex process or intrusive questions in order to qualify, and there would be no ‘fraudulent claims’ because the people collecting it would be properly entitled to it.⁴ The simplicity of such a system would save many of the costs associated with the current system: not just the legal costs of prosecuting fraud and the personnel employed to detect and challenge potentially

² This was the estimate reported by the UK government in 2020. It relates to figures no later than 2018/19, so it is far from up to date: see Jayaram et al. (2020) and for the methodology see Sorensen et al. (2020). In addition, the statistics concern only the take-up (or failure to take up) for some specific benefits (housing benefit, pension credit etc) but exclude the large majority of benefit claimants by not counting anything relating to Universal Credit (which has been excluded from the figures ever since it was introduced seven years ago) or council tax relief. For discussion and analysis see (on the ‘Entitledto’ blog) Entitledto (2021).

³ The basis of this estimate is explained by Boulwood (2019).

⁴ Difficulties are often raised about how the class of recipients is to be defined. We do not need to settle those questions here, though I think they are easily settled once we see what the rationale of the scheme is and once its intended outcomes and advantages are made clear.

fraudulent claims, but also the paperwork, the process of assessing people, determining whether they qualify, handling appeals, sanctioning those who fail to attend for interviews or struggle to comply with the conditions. The current system is designed to be miserable, intrusive and punitive, and as a result it is hugely costly, both in the endless work required for constant monitoring and sanctioning the recipients, and in the misery caused to the families who struggle to make ends meet and are oppressed with the demands of meeting the conditions. Our current system is not designed to deliver a happy society, but rather to shame and embarrass those who are in need, and force them to undertake penance. The result is that many would rather not claim, and would sooner choose to live in poverty than endure the indignities associated with asking for help.

So the first practical benefit of changing the normal economic support for those in need into an unconditional automatic payment to everyone is clear. It eliminates a vast army of bureaucrats, it eliminates fraud, it eliminates the misery of a shame-based system and it cuts costs – including the invisible costs that come with misery, desperation and anxiety. For sure, there would always need to be some additional support for specific categories of people with additional needs, especially those with costly needs in personal care due to disabilities. But most short term needs such as short breaks in employment due to illness, maternity, paternity etc would be automatically covered by the weekly universal payment, while retirement would be an option at any age since the state stipend would be there anyway. Students would be supported with an automatic maintenance grant with no need for questions about their parental income or any other intrusive discrimination, and with no need to disrupt their studies by taking a job alongside a full time course, just to pay the bills, and no loan repayments dragging their income down as they start their career. This would benefit both the students (better marks), the lecturers (better concentration and attendance), the country (better educated graduates), and the local economy where students currently take jobs and leave the local population unemployed, and where students would have more time to spend the money they did not have to earn.

A second practical and economic pay-off from such a system would be that there would be no penalty or deduction for earning a little, or a lot, of extra money on top of it. On the contrary, everyone is most welcome to earn, and encouraged to earn, and there is no disincentive to take employment or to engage in enterprising ways of making money, as there is in the current system. No one is forced to

Philosophical Reflections on the Idea of a UBI

conceal additional earnings, to avoid the sanctions that currently prevent those on benefits from taking up employment. And because the stipend arrives automatically every month, whether you need it or not, there is no delay in getting help should the enterprise you were engaged in suddenly fall on hard times. It is abundantly clear why such a scheme would vastly help with ensuring the resilience of sectors such as the arts, music, culture, enterprise and self-employed activities in dire situations such as the epidemic we have been experiencing at the beginning of this decade. For everyone it would be best to earn a bit more, and always better to earn a bit more than that, to have more money to spend. And yet the fear of finding there was nothing in the bank and nothing in the larder, because no pay cheque arrived that week, would be removed.

This brings us to the third economic and practical advantage, which relates to mental health and happiness. For many the daily grind of going to a hateful job, and returning with not enough to live on, only to be obliged to apply for in-work benefits just in order to keep the family going, is the source of enormous misery and distress. Stress from the workplace and stress from money worries are blighting our society. A basic income to cover the bare necessities would rid us of some of the anxieties, the pressures to stay in an unsafe or oppressive workplace, the dependence on an abusive partner, the disputes over scarce household resources.

So in general, it might well turn out that providing what looks like a hugely costly movement of wealth from the top to the bottom of society could in fact deliver economic gains that more than cover its cost. Among the reasons to think that the effect of UBI would be a net benefit to the treasury, and a great boost to enterprise, the arts and local businesses are these: People spend money if they have it. People create businesses if they have the security to do it. People get themselves better educated if they have the time to do it. People can achieve things if they are not depressed or struggling to pay the bills. People can see their loved ones and give them the attention they need if they are free to work part time. When people are happy they do things to make the world a better place. They smile.

These benefits – which are hardly in doubt – span a huge range of the things that matter to us far more than money; but even if you were only concerned to count up monetary gains there are many indications that the outcome would be a net gain, not a loss, in economic terms. A careful economic analysis that models (for the USA) the economic effects of various levels of UBI scheme, to show that they would deliver net benefits, increased productivity and increased employment, can be found in Michalis Nikiforos et al. (2017). They

model three different levels of proposed UBI and show that there are net economic benefits to the economy at all three levels. This is so whether you fund the scheme from government borrowing or by taxation. One might also address some doubts on this score by comparing the likely costs of a fully funded UBI scheme for the UK with the UK's recent hike in public spending in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the year 2020-21 the amount spent from the public purse for Covid-related costs amounted to somewhere between £315bn and £410bn (Brian and Keep, 2021). This is the equivalent of between £4,700 and £6,100 per person (counting people of all ages), which is roughly the cost of a UBI of £500 per month for adults and children alike. Some of that money was directed to procurement (e.g. PPE, test and trace systems etc), and some to schemes to support business and wages (such as the furlough scheme and support for self-employed workers). In effect, this amount of money was borrowed by the government and injected into the economy, either directly to businesses or to supporting people who were forbidden to go to work or to open their business. In effect much of that money paid people to stop being productive and to become idle (or, in many cases, to engage instead in creative and self-improvement activities and in home-making). Three things should be noted about the effect of this injection of funds from the public purse: first, that it was distributed unevenly so that those who earned more in normal times received more of it in times of crisis; it was therefore a regressive system as compared with the more progressive effects of a UBI.⁵ Second, unlike a UBI, it was a scheme to reduce productivity (it paid people on condition that they must do no work) and was distributed at a time when it was also impossible to spend the money they were given in the local business economy because the local economy was closed for business, so

⁵ The 'Corona Virus Job Retention Scheme' (CVJRS) was paid to employers, at a rate of 80% of the employee's full wage up to a limit of £2,500 p.m. so an employee paid at a higher wage received more than an employee paid at a lower wage, and only those in employment could access the money. There was no requirement for the employer to make up the missing 20%, so those on minimum wage were left with only 80% of the minimum wage. A scheme for self-employed people was later added which allowed them to claim on the basis of earnings from the previous year (resulting in extreme poverty for those with low or zero earnings in 2019, and extra support for those with unusually high earnings in 2019). Both schemes worked on the principle that those with more get more and those with less get less. This is regressive. While UBI superficially does not look progressive, in practice it is when combined with a progressive income tax.

Philosophical Reflections on the Idea of a UBI

the high street stimulus effect of injecting extra cash was suppressed and there was no knock on effect in improving takings, and thence wages and employment, as there would be in normal times. Third, despite the addition of an uplift in the Universal Credit benefit for low income households, the outcome was increased inequality, with the very rich becoming much richer during the pandemic and the middling to poor becoming poorer (alongside increased inequality of life expectancy), and a sharp rise in inflation (which was partly due to the high public spending, including procurement contracts, and partly due to non-covid-related price rises caused by other problems such as Brexit, energy shortages and so on). The increased inequality and inflation are a direct result of regressive policies, giving more to the wealthy than the poor and failing to recover it from the wealthy and super-wealthy in taxation, while instead increasing taxation on the low paid workers. Neither of these effects, nor the reduction in productivity or local business takings, would result from a normal UBI scheme in normal times, if it was accompanied by proper taxation of those who had no need of income support, to return the money to the treasury and ensure no devaluation of the currency resulted from a borrow – (or print money) – and-spend regime.

Many opponents of UBI say that there is no need to change the system from having a tax-free allowance to having a cash hand-out instead. If you think of the tax free allowance as an allowance ('Here, you can keep this money: we won't even tax it!') it looks as if it too is an allowance that everyone gets, including the wealthy and the super wealthy. Except, actually, that is not so. In fact the very wealthy get it, but the very poor do not. ('Here you could keep this money untaxed, if you had it. But sorry, you don't, so shucks'). UBI turns that round and says to everyone: 'Here, you can have this money, untaxed. Just pay tax on what you have in addition'. When you have nothing, when you lose your job, become ill or have to self-isolate, what you need is a cash hand-out, not an imaginary opportunity to earn some money and not pay tax on it. Your problem is that you don't have the money to not pay tax on. You don't even have a way to get it.

Only a UBI offers the ever-present safety net that sets you free. And while it is immediately recovered in tax from those with so much wealth that they have no need of it, so that it makes a real difference to the incomes only of those who are short of money, anyone who suddenly finds themselves without the income they used to have will be immediately supported, with no questions asked, and no five week delay while the claim is considered.

So much for the basic practicalities. My purpose here is not so much to explore the political, economic or practical advantages or the costs of such a scheme, though these are indeed interesting,⁶ and suggest that the balance of cost to savings, combined with the gain in economic activity that would result, is such that a generous scheme, sufficient to cover basic living costs fully, would probably be cost-neutral or even a gain to the public purse – and indeed to the tax-payers. It is worth noticing that in our increasingly unequal society money trickles up, not down, and money added at the bottom is never lost to those at the top of the wealth scale.

But those are issues that would be addressed in economics. My task here is not to complete the work on those questions, but rather to examine the abstract issues, the philosophical issues. I shall divide these into three headings. First, issues about fairness and equality of opportunity. Second, a question about the values of our society, in particular in relation to what we think is a good life for a free citizen (and an exploration of what they thought about this in the ancient world). And third, some questions about freedom, slavery, exploitation and power.

2. The Philosophical Issues I: Fairness, justice, entitlement, and desert.

Naturally we are all in favour of making a system that is fundamentally fair and equitable. But people come to the question of what counts as fair with radically different preconceptions, many of them unquestioned until they encounter the philosophical challenge ‘what exactly counts as making life fair?’. The notion of fairness is closely related to ‘justice’ and we could, for instance, take Plato’s *Republic* to be at least partly a treatment of how to make a society fair (and just).

‘Fair’ and ‘just’ are the goals we want for a society. But what would a fair society look like? Do we live in a fair society at present? At the two extremes of preconceptions about fairness are these:

- (a) It’s fair if people receive rewards according to what they deserve. It’s unfair if some get something for nothing.
- (b) It’s fair if initial disadvantages are remedied and reparations are made, to make good the unfairness of life-chances.

The first model tends to widen the inequalities in society, as those who fall into poverty or sickness find themselves less and less able to

⁶ For further reading on these issues, see Santens (2016).

Philosophical Reflections on the Idea of a UBI

meet the standard of ‘deserving’ anything, and those who are born lucky and have ample resources can acquire an expensive education and move into well-paid and secure jobs, or even live in complete idleness on inherited wealth and investments. The second model seeks to make society fairer by reducing the inequalities and giving everyone a fair chance to do something meaningful to the best of their ability.

Some advocates for universal basic income try to connect it with that idea of giving people only what they deserve. How can it count as fair in that way?

Maybe we could say that we all deserve something?

But why?

One argument for this tries to suggest that everyone, including the least productive members of society, are entitled to a share of the earth’s resources, as if we owned our own little bit, and are entitled to reap the dividends from our share, even if someone else is actually extracting the resources.

This seems to me fanciful. It also buys into a problematic notion of private property and the right to proceeds from that property. And even if we did think we all own some bit of nature, who is to say that the dividend from that share would be exactly the right amount of income to cover the basics of a good life? Indeed this seems to me to conflict with a more plausible thought, that none of us is entitled to own any part of the earth or its resources, and that most of our problems stem from privatising the earth’s resources and capitalising on them for the exclusive gain of those who have the ownership. The claiming of private income from what are essentially shared resources seems dodgy. That is what has led us into inequality, between citizens and between nations. Do we inherit our right to own the earth? If so, it seems that inheriting wealth is a way of becoming entitled. But then inherited wealth seems to bear no relation to deserving, and ‘entitlement’ bears no relation to any real entitlement or desert.

But on the second notion of fairness, which tries to remedy the inequalities in life, how can a UBI count as fair? It doesn’t actually give more to those who have less, or less to those who have more. How is that fair? While fairness initially seems to be related to the notion of equality, what counts as equal can sometimes be a matter of proportional equality. Those who focus on deserving are presumably trying (and failing) to make the equality proportional to the deserving. But equality can also involve being proportionate to need. For instance, shoes: I need size 4, and you need size 11. It’s no good giving everyone a size 9 to ensure that no one has a bigger share than anyone else,

and it would be silly to demand a larger size just because it was larger or the same as someone else's.

Disability benefits are like that: to make life equal, a person needs whatever will bring their quality of life up to that of others without a disability. Similarly we don't necessarily all benefit from exactly the same type of education whether our talents lie in maths or in music. But when it comes to the basics of life, for those without significant disabilities or limitations that need special support, there is nothing substantial that differentiates us such that one of us needs more than another. The cost of a good life is roughly the same for all: everyone needs a room in a house, a bed of the same size, enough good high quality food, and a bicycle. Children need the same (or maybe a bit smaller). This is roughly true, no matter whether we are large or small, rich or poor, wise or foolish. So why not just give everyone the same?

For sure, this does not take account of the differential level of risk faced by someone with large savings compared with someone who just gets by. But as a blunt tool, it gives everyone the same protection in times of dearth and when savings have run dry. (And we should remember that if and when a person does have a substantial income, the handouts provided under a basic income scheme would be immediately returned in the tax deductions, so it is not in reality given to everyone regardless of need. Realistically it is only there on the day that you find yourself in need.)

In sum, a Basic Income scheme looks as if it is not *quite* fair by either model. It does not give people more resources, or less, based on desert. It does not make reparation by giving substantially more to the least well off. It does not (by itself) level up the poor or level down the rich, though combined with progressive taxation it can do that. But it does take everyone's basic needs and it says 'Don't worry about those: they're covered'. No one is left out – there is no moralising or judgement, no penalty for being rich, no penalty for being disadvantaged. So it is a kind of fairness that says that being human is the same for all, and no one is worth more or less than anyone else.

Is our current society, without UBI, fair by either standard?

Do the people who deserve more currently get more in our society?

We have a regressive tax system. Poorer people work long hours for low pay, and then pay a higher proportion of their income in taxes than the wealthy. The billionaires pay the lowest proportion of all.

Philosophical Reflections on the Idea of a UBI

This is partly because of the stealth taxes (e.g. VAT and duty on things like cigarettes, which are predominantly paid by the poor) and National Insurance taxes, which are paid by employers and employees – amounting to a tax that reduces the income of those who work, but not those with unearned income, and also increases the cost of employing someone – and partly because of the tax thresholds, aggravated by various loopholes that allow the super-rich to reduce their tax bills. So the poor pay more and earn less.

In terms of the contribution made by each sector of society in practical service and usefulness, again the situation is topsy-turvy. Many on low or middle incomes are servicing the fundamental provisions of a modern society (as we saw so clearly during the Covid-19 epidemic): teachers, nurses, health-care workers, those caring for the elderly, postmen, bin men, road maintenance, plumbing and heating engineers, doctors, scientists and police. Many of these jobs are ‘vocation’ careers: people choose to do them not for the pay but to do something good. This reveals a mismatch between the value of the work and the monetary rewards, or indeed the status of such people in society.

And besides, there is another huge body of work that is completely unpaid: nurturing relationships, caring for the elderly, nursing a sick child, not to mention political campaigning, standing for election, and all the other things that good citizens do for nothing.

When we look at this range of things and ask ourselves who is doing the most for our society, and to whom should we be most grateful, it is clear that the measure of their contribution is not their earned or unearned income, nor whether they are in a job that pays wages sufficient to meet or exceed their daily needs. The measure is whether they are doing something worthwhile and rewarding: something that we value. Forcing those people to stop doing those things and get a job ‘to earn money’ looks nonsensical, if by doing that we take them away from this care and attention to the things that need doing. And then again, suppose that they were doing something, and then through no fault of their own, the employer who needed their skills is forced to close? Nothing about that misfortune means that the person is no longer a useful member of society, or that they are deserving of being condemned to poverty.

When we ask who is doing the most for our society, and who is most highly rewarded, we see that there is no correlation. This tells us something about our values, and the mismatch between the good things we choose to do, and the monetary rewards, which do not track the good. Is a society that gives higher rewards to those who do nothing good and lower rewards to those who do the best and

most important things making a mistake? How does it match with the idea that our priority should be to match rewards to desert, if the society is to be a fair one?

So even if we were tempted to think that fairness is about distributing things unequally, according to what people deserve rather than what they need, a genuine understanding of which people do and which people do not have more than they deserve would not leave us where we are now – not by a long way. Given the huge contribution made by those who work for nothing or for very low pay, and the huge potential of those who could (if they had the resources) do creative things or access education, but are prevented from doing so because they have to take menial jobs, it is clear that giving a basic wage to everyone, and a basic stipend to every child, would result in a fairer and more equitable provision, where no one is working for nothing and no one is at a loss for the resources to better themselves or make their contribution meaningful.

3. The Philosophical Issues II: What is a good society, and what is eudaimonia?

Now consider the idea of sanctions. In our current system the department responsible for ensuring that people are supported in times of need devotes a huge amount of resource to taking money away from the needy, if they are thought to have tried to cheat the system or have not fulfilled some punitive conditions designed to humiliate them and discourage reliance on help. This is our system of ‘sanctions’ against those we think of as the lazy and undeserving poor. At the same time huge numbers of charities are run on volunteer time, trying to give to these needy and struggling people the things that are being removed by the employees of the state. So while the state is aiming to ensure that large numbers of people are made hungry or homeless, if they fail to do what that they have to do in order to be entitled to help, others, not employed by the state but relying on the kindness of donors, do their best to help those people and give them a chance to turn their lives round, or at least to cling on to life. The result of this bizarre and incoherent struggle is a huge increase in misery, homelessness, poverty and the widespread destruction of families. Our official system is designed to aggravate the miseries of those who are struggling to make ends meet, by putting extra hoops to jump through – in the expectation that many will fail, and apparently in full knowledge of the fact that that some of these will end up in prison or imposing additional demands on

Philosophical Reflections on the Idea of a UBI

the mental health service, though it often appears such knowledge is never actually joined up, and no real connection is made between the humiliating and punitive benefits system and the crisis in mental health, domestic abuse and dysfunctional parenting.

This regime of sanctions for benefit claimants is supposed to be good because it gives the appearance of reducing the number of people on benefits and ‘saving the taxpayer money.’ By picturing this misery as a way of saving money, or preventing the undeserving poor from becoming scroungers and good-for-nothings, it gains the approval of the wealthy who have no personal acquaintance with any of the victims targeted by the system. The result is a society in which the wealthy congratulate themselves on their right to keep what they earned, while other members of the same community are literally starving to death with no money for food or rent at all.

Eudaimonia

At this point we should stand back and ask what kind of society we could be proud of. What are the goals of a good society? What is our ambition for our community, or, as the ancients would say, our ‘*polis*’? Do we, for example, prize freedom? Or culture? Or intellectual achievement? Or the leisure time to pursue these goals? Or do we prize conformity, drudgery, compliance, servitude? What is it to be a great and admirable human being, and in what kind of society is it possible for people to live well to the best that a human being can achieve?

When ancient philosophers asked this question, they would be asking about *eudaimonia*: enjoying the blessings of good fortune. How can we create a society that delivers that?

The Platonist asks ‘What is the good, and how can we create a society oriented towards that?’. Or how could we, in practical terms, approximate the best that can be done here on earth – bearing in mind that we can never achieve perfection? What must we do to make something *close to perfect*, to approximate the ideal as nearly as possible? That would be the Platonic question (and I am a Platonist). We find that kind of thinking in Iris Murdoch for instance.

An Aristotelian would think similarly, asking ‘What would allow human beings to achieve a life that approximates to that of the God, who just sits and thinks, and who has no need to work?’.

These are ancient questions; but they are also questions that we really should ask for our own time, and we really should answer them properly. There seem to me to be two answers from the

ancient world that deserve attention, and two from the modern world that need to be rejected.

From the ancient world, first, the idea that the good life is the life of leisure (as distinct from the life of a slave), and second, the idea that what makes leisure important is the freedom to do the unslavish things that one can do only if one has the leisure to do them. The value of being free is here pictured in contrast to the life of a slave, though there is also a more positive model of a worker who is a self-employed craftsman or doctor, whose primary goal is to produce good work and be pleased with it, not in service to a master but for the inherent value of what is achieved.

By contrast in the modern world, at least in the protestant north, it is hard to resist the impression that the primary goal is to accumulate wealth (and we seem to think that this goal is successfully achieved if a small minority are very wealthy and the rest destitute: hence the use of generic GDP figures or rises in ‘average income’ to measure improvements); and our second priority seems to be to see that the rest of the people, the ones who have little, are gainfully employed in creating the wealth for the lucky few, and that no one is evading that duty.

Indeed it looks uncannily like a goal of enslaving the many to deliver wealth for the few, but with a total lack of any consideration of whether the resulting life (for anyone, either rich or poor) is a good one or worth having for anyone.

a) Jobs and the value of idleness

This focus on jobs is common to both communist and capitalist societies. In the UK, both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party always want people to be in jobs. But why? Let us look at some thinkers who have challenged that corrupting obsession, and tried to speak out against the peculiar values that underpin it.

In 1932 Bertrand Russell published a wonderful little essay called ‘In Praise of Idleness’⁷ in which he notes that both communism and the West have an excessive focus on work and the constant demand for long hours over and above what is necessary. Russell’s proposed solution is to reduce the working week to four days a week. ‘I want to say, in all seriousness, that a great deal of harm is being done in the modern world by belief in the virtuousness of work, and that the road to happiness and prosperity lies in an organized diminution

⁷ First published in Harper’s Magazine (Russell, 1932) and then reprinted in his collected Essays *In Praise of Idleness* (Russell, 1935).

Philosophical Reflections on the Idea of a UBI

of work,' he says (Russell, 1935, pp. 10–11). After showing that the wartime period proves that the country can exist, and produce enough to live on, with a massively reduced workforce while the rest are diverted to fighting or making ammunition, he suggests that work should be more evenly distributed. In practice, in a market economy, the effect of making too much stuff is that some people work long hours and others end up out of work and destitute. He illustrates the problem with the example of the pin makers:

Suppose that, at a given moment, a certain number of people are engaged in the manufacture of pins. They make as many pins as the world needs, working (say) eight hours a day. Someone makes an invention by which the same number of men can make twice as many pins: pins are already so cheap that hardly any more will be bought at a lower price. In a sensible world, everybody concerned in the manufacturing of pins would take to working four hours instead of eight, and everything else would go on as before. But in the actual world this would be thought demoralizing. The men still work eight hours, there are too many pins, some employers go bankrupt, and half the men previously concerned in making pins are thrown out of work. There is, in the end, just as much leisure as on the other plan, but half the men are totally idle while half are still overworked. In this way, it is insured that the unavoidable leisure shall cause misery all round instead of being a universal source of happiness. Can anything more insane be imagined? (Russell, 1935, pp. 13–14)

Russell's solution is a redistribution of work, together with a rejection of the idea that we should constantly increase demand, so as to make more work for ourselves. We could also see this proposal as a redistribution of leisure: rather than having some people out of work, with more than enough leisure, and others in work with not enough leisure, everyone has less work, and more leisure. Should we see this solution as *taking some work away* from the one group, to let everyone have some, as if work was a good thing? Or should we see it as taking away some leisure from one group to allow everyone to have some, because leisure is precious, and something to be earned and enjoyed? The latter view, it seems to me, makes us more happy with the outcome. And that is because in fact the opportunity for leisure, not the opportunity for work, is the thing we should and must prize for free human beings.

From the late twentieth century, the problem that Russell had in mind was partly solved by the throw away society and the role of advertising. Advertising can make us want more and more stuff we don't

need, and encourage us to throw away more and more perfectly serviceable stuff, so as to keep buying ever more stuff and never have enough. Settling for enough would undermine the need to employ more and more people doing pointless things and selling wasteful products to make money for the rich.

This was the situation that Herbert Marcuse diagnosed in his *One Dimensional Man* (Marcuse, 1964), in which he showed how we have become trapped in a system designed to pretend that we must have more stuff, and then to have more stuff we must work longer hours and earn more money, as if happiness could be bought with material objects; he illustrated the ways in which this system, built up through advertising and propaganda, traps us into a cycle of unnecessary work, destroying our judgement and leaving us with no time, energy or inclination to resist.

In my manifesto here, I could have chosen to propose a shorter working week, as Russell suggested. That is also a Green Party policy. But that proposal seems to me to be still somewhat stuck in the notion that it would be good to ensure that there are always jobs for everyone, which is still in thrall to the old model that thinks that people should and must be employed, gainfully employed in some kind of drudgery, for at least part of their time. So his practical solution seems not fully to have taken on board his correct observation that idleness is better than drudgery.

Why might we be tempted to think that people *ought* to be employed in paid drudgery for all or some of their time? Here is Bertrand Russell again:

The idea that the poor should have leisure has always been shocking to the rich. In England, in the early nineteenth century, fifteen hours was the ordinary day's work for a man; children sometimes did as much, and very commonly did twelve hours a day. When meddlesome busybodies suggested that perhaps these hours were rather long, they were told that work kept adults from drink and children from mischief. When I was a child, shortly after urban working men had acquired the vote, certain public holidays were established by law, to the great indignation of the upper classes. I remember hearing an old Duchess say: 'What do the poor want with holidays? They ought to work.' People nowadays are less frank, but the sentiment persists, and is the source of much of our economic confusion. (Russell, 1935, p. 14)

In this attitude we can hear an echo of Aristotle's idea of the natural slave, used to justify exploitation of the enslaved on the grounds that

Philosophical Reflections on the Idea of a UBI

the slave lacks the rational part of the soul and is best fitted for manual work.⁸ This is what allows the free man to free ride on the back of the labour of others. Only the master gets the leisure to pursue the good life, and his good life is supposed to suffice to make the slave's life a good one too, because he vicariously takes care of ensuring that the slave has no spare money or leisure time lest he spend it irrationally on unsuitable things.

Russell's defence of idleness has been followed by a trickle of similar advocates over the century.⁹ There is also a parallel discussion concerning the idea of meaningful work, as opposed to useless toil (as William Morris put it).¹⁰ Here the idea is that some work is worth doing, whereas some of it is work in bullshit jobs – a theme explored famously by David Graeber.¹¹ But it is worth noting that meaningful work need not necessarily provide a wage. If it is worth doing, and important, people want to do it anyway. Setting people free to do that, and to spend their precious time on what is actually meaningful and creative, would be an act of superb transformation. That, as I shall suggest, is what a universal basic income could do.

I am suggesting that the provision of leisure (and opportunities for good use of that leisure) should be a dominant goal for society. Our focus for creating the good society should be on how to ensure that as many as possible – ideally everyone, young and old – have as much access to leisure as possible, while still providing everyone with *enough* income for their basic needs, and the respect they need for a sense of self-worth. Currently this situation is enjoyed exclusively by the rich, who, for the most part, lack neither goods nor leisure, whereas the working population mostly lacks either the leisure to do meaningful things or the means to keep their family housed, clothed and shod – the basic animal needs, the things that even Aristotle's slave never went without.

4. The Philosophical Issues III: Exploitation and power.

Introducing a UBI would effect a moment of unparalleled transformation for society, not just in enabling that kind of free use of leisure by everyone, but also because it would undo a very destructive power

⁸ See Aristotle *Politics* Book 1, 1253b15-55b40.

⁹ Josh Cohen summarises his top ten list of works on this theme in *The Guardian* for February 2019 (Cohen, 2019), and see also Cohen (2018).

¹⁰ See Morris (1888).

¹¹ See Graeber (2018).

system that makes our society deeply exploitative.¹² Most people are not free to leave their job even if it is a bullshit job, even if it is a job producing stuff that makes the world a nastier place for everyone. People have to stick with a job that keeps the wolf from the door. Employers have no incentive to make their workplace civilised, pleasant, or free of bullying and intimidation. Picture a society of utterly miserable people, commuting miles, to work in horrible jobs all day, getting home too late to see their children, because if they didn't go they wouldn't be able to pay the bills.

A universal basic income would reverse this situation. People would need some additional income for sure: it will always be desirable to add a little luxury to the basics that might be covered in a generous and sufficient basic income. So people would want jobs, or various kind of productive employment. But no one would be at risk of destitution if they turned down a job that was worthless or badly paid.

Beggars can't be choosers, but once you make them no longer beggars, you can make them choosers. And to have the choice of saying no to a job, if the work is appalling or distressing, is to be free. And to decide to take a break from the job and do something different; to have the means to better yourself, to take yourself to college and find a new skill; to start a business in a niche that you would love to fit – these are the things that make life worthwhile, and lead to a creative and inventive society instead of a society of drudgery and pointless toil. Our current focus on jobs – any old jobs, including the jobs that are destroying our own planet – creates a situation of exploitation. It makes people wage-slaves. And this is still true, whether the jobs are unionised or not. It still creates a dependence of the worker on the employer, and it gives the employer the power to extract labour and make a profit from the work of others.

5. How, if at all, would this address the ills of modern society?

If you change this situation from the bottom up, various things happen. Jobs that are crucial to society have to be paid at a level that reflects their importance and their working conditions. We are already seeing something of this kind in the UK, after creating a shortage of labour in a range of tasks that used to be covered by cheap imported labour from Europe. But if no one in the community actually *needs* a job, even to cover the cost of their basic subsistence,

¹² On the emancipatory power of a basic income see the evidence from the pilot study in India (Davala et al., 2015) and Howard (2017).

Philosophical Reflections on the Idea of a UBI

employers can no longer rely on exploiting a workforce so desperate that they will do horrible work for wages that are barely enough to live on. Some jobs would have to pay more than they do now, including some public sector jobs. Some jobs would get better, because working conditions would have to improve. And some jobs in really worthwhile occupations would be able to pay less. No minimum wage would be necessary, and people would take work that they enjoyed doing even if it paid less than it does now. The cost of things produced by real craftsmen would go down, and the products of bad factories and foul meat processing plants would go up.

As things stand we pay people too little so that they are unable to afford decent food. We then have to produce terrible food for those who can't afford to eat well. The UK minimum wage is not enough to enable anyone to eat well. This has two consequences: it is damaging to the planet and the ecosystem and it is costly to the health service.

As things stand people are stressed by hours of commuting, unpleasant jobs that they must go to every day, pressure from the stigma of poverty and the money worries that break up families and destroy relationships. The savings in mental health, physical health, stress related illness, family breakdown and domestic abuse would be considerable. But we should count those savings not just in terms of the monetary costs. If we go back to that question of what kind of society we want to live in, the real question is: why would we ever set up a set of values that delivers such misery for so many people? And how easy would it be to change that?

And then there is the environment. Maybe people would commute less far, take more interesting jobs close to home, set up a small business, do voluntary work in the neighbourhood, make their community a happier place. Automation makes many jobs that used to be necessary unnecessary, but no one gets to benefit from that if we keep making more tat in order to make more paid jobs. The tat, the fast fashion, the latest fad gadgets, the fossil fuels we use to make them, the waste from throwing the old ones away, and the energy used to transport it and sell it, – these are the things that are killing the planet.

To sum up, I would like to suggest that not only would this system constitute a much simpler solution to the conundrum that Simon Duffy and Jo Wolff address in another chapter of this volume, in connection with the poverty trap that criminalises those who earn a little extra money while on benefits – it would also have much greater and more meaningful transformative power. As we come through the

worst years of peacetime any of us have known, we have been forced to realise how easy it is to find that the income has just dried up, and there is nothing. The devastating effects of the failure to provide any safety net for freelance workers, musicians and actors, for example, during the pandemic shows that some of the things that are most important to a free, creative and leisured society require a safety net that keeps them alive in times of crisis. Such direct support does not do anything to reduce the economic and creative activity that such people contribute; in fact it makes it possible for them to maintain their professional skills so as to return to professional work again when the troubles are over.

A widespread and pernicious myth about the way public finances work and where the money comes from has made people suppose that the poor must always pay the costs of whatever the state has to subsidise, and that state borrowing must be reduced by cutting the things it funds. But that is a confusion. Spending is an investment that reaps dividends, if it is spent on enterprising solutions to the things that are costly and destructive.

Austerity programmes increase hardship, put more workers onto benefits, and more people out of work. They generate a spiral of increasing misery and despair and a collapse in public revenue. In building back better, we need to think about what kind of better we want to build. The fact is that, so far from being unable to afford this Universal Basic Income system, it is pretty clear that the lack of it is the source of many of our costs, and of the uncoded problems that are destroying the planet and leading us to exhaust the entire resources of the planet. In reality we cannot afford not to change the model of what is costly and what is the affordable solution. And besides, as suggested above, there is real evidence that this kind of redistribution of wealth could actually increase economic activity and enterprise, as well as cutting costs in a range of public services, especially those related to solving the problems caused by the misery and stigma of debt, poor health, poor education and home life, and poor diet. Solving these damaging problems would pay dividends not just in the economy, but more importantly in every single measure of the good life. Meanwhile it would terminate the employment of a huge army of bureaucrats whose current task is to assess whether the poor have reached a sufficiently dire level of poverty to be worth saving.

University of East Anglia
c.rowett@uea.ac.uk

References

- Sinéad Boulwood, 'There's no easy way to compare benefit and tax fraud.', *Full Fact*, (31st July 2019) <<https://fullfact.org/online/comparing-benefit-and-tax-fraud/>> accessed 23rd September 2021.
- Philip Brien and Matthew Keep, 'Public spending during the Covid-19 pandemic', *House of Commons Library, UK House of Commons* (2021), <<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9309/CBP-9309.pdf>>.
- Josh Cohen, *Not Working: Why We Have to Stop* (London: Granta Books, 2018).
- Josh Cohen, 'Top 10 books about idleness', *The Guardian*, (6th February 2019), also available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/feb/06/top-10-books-about-idleness>.
- S. Davala, et al., *Basic Income: A Transformative Policy for India*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
- Entitledto, '£15+ billion unclaimed means-tested benefits – but the sketchy take-up data makes it hard to say for sure', *Entitledto* (January 05, 2021) <<https://www.entitledto.co.uk/blog/2021/january/15plus-billion-unclaimed-means-tested-benefits-but-the-sketchy-take-up-data-makes-it-hard-to-say-for-sure/>> accessed 23rd September 2021.
- David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: a theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).
- Neil Howard, 'Basic income and the anti-slavery movement', *Etica & Politica/Ethics & Politics*, XIX (2017), 213–17.
- Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1964).
- Nikiforos Michalis, Marshall Steinbaum, and Gennaro Zezza, 'Modeling the Macroeconomic Effects of a Universal Basic Income', *Roosevelt Institute* (2017), <<https://rooseveltinstitute.org/publications/macroeconomic-effects-universal-basic-income-ubi/>>, accessed 6th December 2021.
- William Morris, *Useful work versus Useless Toil* (The Freedom Library; London: Reeves, 1888).
- Richard Murphy, 'The UK tax gap is £90 billion a year', *Tax Research UK*, (June 19th 2019) <<https://www.taxresearch.org.uk/Blog/2019/06/19/the-uk-tax-gap-is-90-billion-a-year/>>, accessed 23rd September 2021.
- Russell, Bertrand, 'In Praise of Idleness', *Harper's Magazine* (1932); *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1935), 9–21

Catherine Rowett

Scott Santens, 'The BIG Library: Books About Universal Basic Income (UBI)', <<https://medium.com/basic-income/the-big-library-books-about-basic-income-b9763071b987>>, (2016, updated September 14th 2021), accessed 23rd September 2021>.

Neil Sorensen, Narayan Jayaram and Jonathan Howard, 'Background information and methodology 2018 to 2019', *Official Statistics*, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/income-related-benefits-estimates-of-take-up-financial-year-2018-to-2019/background-information-and-methodology-2018-to-2019>>, (2020, updated 29th October 2020), accessed 23rd September 2021.

Guy Standing, *Basic income: and how we can make it happen* (Pelican Introduction; London: Pelican/Penguin, 2017).