



AUTHOR MEETS CRITICS

Working Oneself Up and Universal Basic Income

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Abstract

I respond to a challenge raised by Jordan Pascoe: Kant's conception of obtaining full citizenship through working oneself up necessarily condemns some people to passive citizenship. I argue that we should not focus on work to establish universal full citizenship. Rather, a Universal Basic Income, an income paid regularly to everyone and without conditions, can secure everyone's full citizenship. Moreover, I argue that such a scheme is more Kantian in nature than hitherto assumed.

Keywords: citizenship; work; Universal Basic Income

In *Kant's Theory of Labour*, Jordan Pascoe argues that Kant's idea that full citizenship can be obtained through working oneself up necessarily condemns some people to passive citizenship. I agree with this but argue that in response, we should not focus on labour to establish universal full citizenship. Rather, a Universal Basic Income (UBI) can secure everyone's independence and full citizenship. A UBI is an income paid regularly to everyone and without conditions, such as, most significantly for my purpose, that someone performs (paid or unpaid) labour. The idea of a UBI has not received its due attention in the Kant literature. Yet, I will show that a UBI is a Kantian solution to the problem Pascoe poses.

1. The significance of labour in Kant

Jordan Pascoe's (2022) monograph reveals that within Kant's published and unpublished works, we can find a sophisticated theory of labour including domestic and reproductive labour. In my opinion, Pascoe's most significant claim is that Kant provides a systemic justification for the dependency of women and non-whites who perform dependent labour. Dependent labour is labour for another person 'in which one rents out one's labour through either wage labour or managerial contracts, making one a dependent labourer and, thus, a passive citizen' (p. 10). This type of work is typically precarious and low-paid (if at all). Dependent care work in particular

is frequently performed by women or (outsourced) migrant workers. Such work makes workers susceptible to domination because they are dependent on specific other people for their sustenance. According to the *Doctrine of Right*, ‘anyone whose preservation in existence (his being fed and protected) depends not on his management of his own business but on arrangements made by another (except the state)’ (MM, 6: 314.29–31)¹ is excluded from full or active citizenship. We can here already note the exception Kant makes for those who depend on the *state* for their existence or who serve no one ‘but the commonwealth’ (TP, 8: 295.12–2). I will come back to this.

According to Pascoe (p. 46), it is ‘the crux’ of Kant’s argument ‘that asymmetrical forms of dependence are just, so long as “anyone must be able to work his way up”’ to full citizenship. That anyone can work their way up serves as a justification for the subservient status of those who failed to do so. However, working oneself up only transforms the status of *individuals*, not the structure of dependent labour that keeps workers in a state of passive citizenship. Kant does not mean to uplift dependent labour itself. Rather, ‘while it may be the case that *anyone* can work his way up, it is not possible for *everyone* to work their way up, since *someone* will have to do dependent labour’ (p.18). Therefore,

Kant’s thinking about labour presents us with a set of contradictions we have not resolved: contradictions between, on the one hand, an egalitarian vision of independent citizens and meritocratic pathways by which workers (and, perhaps, women) may ‘work their way up’ to full political participation, and on the other, deeply ingrained practices of enclosed economic dependency that make caregiving and reproductive labour precarious and insecure, and that shape and perpetuate stark raced, gendered, classed, and global inequalities. (pp. 2–3)

Kant’s distinction between active and passive citizens is central to Pascoe’s discussion. This distinction might, at first glance, appear antiquated. However, it can be made sense of if we assume that Kant was concerned that those dependent on others can be manipulated or coerced into voting a certain way. This would give the rich and powerful, those who can dominate others, a greater say in public affairs and undermine civic equality. Moreover, we should bear in mind that even nowadays children are barred from central aspects of full citizenship, such as voting, and this is not usually considered a problematic form of exclusion. Furthermore, people can lose the right to vote if they are declared legally immature or, much more controversially, if they are incarcerated (in the US and UK). In fact, the US bans or disenfranchises a significant number of poor or racialized people from voting. Distinctions between levels of citizenship are still significant as a heuristic tool for analysing the structure of the public sphere as well as for helping us to think about social and economic inequalities and injustices.²

A stay-at-home mum or a nurse might work themselves up by becoming a business owner or CEO. Yet, child minding and nursing are vital societal functions, and someone else will have to fulfil these functions now. By filling these positions, other people would then be locked into unpaid or low-paid work that (often but not always) comes with low social esteem. Even if *these* people manage to work themselves up as well, someone else will have to take their position. The recent pandemic has reminded us

once more that certain forms of paid work, those often performed by low-paid so-called 'key workers', are vital for society. On top of this, there is also domestic labour and care work that has traditionally not been paid at all. Pascoe's basic point is that it is unjust if people can work themselves up from such socially necessary work without a transformation of the underlying social infrastructure that would eradicate the need to work oneself up from work that is needed.

2. Kant on working oneself up

The promise of working oneself up to full citizenship is essential both for Pascoe's account of Kant's conception of citizenship and for her criticism of Kant. However, a closer look reveals that working oneself up is potentially not as significant for Kant as she assumes. The central passage for this is *MM*, 6: 315.13–22:

For from their being able to demand that all others treat them in accordance with the laws of natural freedom and equality as passive parts of the state, it does not follow that they also have the right to manage the state itself as active members of it, the right to organize it or to cooperate for introducing certain laws. It follows only that, whatever sort of positive laws the citizens might vote for, these laws must still not be contrary to the natural laws of freedom and of the equality of everyone in the people corresponding to this freedom, namely that anyone can work his way up from this passive condition to an active one.

According to Pascoe, this passage constitutes evidence for both the crucial role of labour for Kant and for the fact that, for Kant, asymmetrical forms of dependence are just, so long as anyone can work their way up. However, Kant does not maintain here that it is *only* through work that one can obtain full citizenship.³ Rather, Kant's, at the time, revolutionary point is that everyone must be able to become an active citizen and that thus the possibility to work oneself up may not be curtailed by positive law as this is *one* way to attain full citizenship. I accept Pascoe's point that labour, as conceived of by Kant, cannot set everyone free since it is essentially a zero-sum game.⁴ Some labour that Kant would think of as dependent is necessary, and for anyone working themselves up from this labour, someone else will have to do it. Working oneself up therefore cannot be possible for everyone. However, working oneself up is not the *sole* Kantian route to active citizenship.

As I suggested in Section 1, Kant's rationale for barring certain people from full participation in society is that he is worried about dependent workers being dominated by others who could pressure them to vote their way.⁵ Jacob Weinrib (2008: 13) argues persuasively that the distinction between passive and active citizenship is fundamentally concerned with whether someone is dependent on other private citizens or on 'the impartial state'.⁶ This suggestion accounts for the, otherwise puzzling, claim that civil servants enjoy full citizenship (*MM*, 6: 314.30), even though they are dependent, namely, on the state. The state is an impartial entity, which does not dominate those who depend on it nor sway them to vote in a particular way.

Kant's remark about civil servants demonstrates that the independence required for full citizenship can be acquired via dependence on a sufficiently well-run state not captured by private interests. This dependence, however, does not necessarily have to

come in the form of *working* for the state. Working for the state was presumably the only form of dependence Kant himself envisaged. After all, in eighteenth-century Europe, many of the functions that states fulfil nowadays (paying pensions, providing health care and education, subsidizing childcare, etc.) were, if at all, fulfilled by (often religious) non-government entities or the family. Relying on the state was therefore only an option for those working for it. It is still the case that welfare provisions as they currently exist frequently make recipients vulnerable to domination because these schemes are conditional and intended to get recipients back into the workforce as quickly as possible. Recipients are thus often required to take up any job offered or be sanctioned. Yet, governments do have the capacity to genuinely enhance people's independence. What I have in mind here is a form of unconditional support enjoyed by everyone no matter what, a UBI. A UBI would ensure that everyone is able to meet their basic needs indefinitely and unconditionally, and thus, no one would be in danger of domination by others due to desperate poverty.⁷ This would secure the ability of those performing (necessary) dependent labour to participate in society as full citizens, and they would do so without the need to work themselves up. It would also secure the independence of those performing independent labour, which still comes at least with the risks of bankruptcy or poverty due to falling demand, illness, competitive pressure, etc.

Last but not least, the idea of working oneself up is a *meritocratic* one. Pascoe points out that Kant's emphasis on working oneself up was, at the time, progressive: what is required for full citizenship is no longer inherited privilege or property *per se*, but certain capacities for labour ('any skill, trade, fine art or science'), which allow people to maintain themselves (TP, 8: 295.16–7; Pascoe, p. 9).⁸ However, it is questionable whether someone who owns a small business, a civil servant working for the UK home office, or the CEO of a hedge fund has amassed more merit, on any plausible understanding of merit, than, say, a nurse. Meritocracy as such, and even more so the question of what specific conception of merit we should assume, is highly contentious.⁹ A UBI would provide everyone with the means of independence, and it would allow us to bypass difficult questions about what kind of work is of sufficient merit to warrant full citizenship.

3. Kant and UBI

Kant has other and more transformational resources to address Pascoe's challenge than the opportunity to work oneself up. In recent years, the idea of a UBI has gained traction in philosophical debates as well as in public discourse. The latter has been partly inspired by (relatively small scale) recent or ongoing UBI trials in countries such as Finland, Wales, and Germany. Due to the time-limited and selective nature of these schemes (e.g. in Wales, only young care leavers are eligible, and the scheme is limited to two years), many of the results of these trials are relatively inconclusive. Yet, it is significant from a Kantian perspective that those who have received a (time-limited) UBI frequently describe it as more respectful and dignified than welfare systems (Calnitsky 2016).

The increasing popularity of UBI is not yet reflected in scholarly and philosophical debates about Kant's practical philosophy. Pascoe does not mention it, nor do other progressive readings of Kant. For instance, Holtman's (2019) *civic respect* account

explicitly warns against welfare-to-work schemes (pp. 65–6), since Kant is concerned with independence and respect and not all (paid or unpaid) work facilitates a person's independence, and some work might even undermine (self-)respect and a person's social standing. However, it should be pointed out that even with many of the goods that, following the civic respect account, a Kantian welfare state is supposed to facilitate, a UBI could also facilitate them and could do so even better. After all, UBI schemes are typically designed to respect individual's choice and independence rather than to get people back into the labour force as quickly as possible.¹⁰

The omission of UBI from the Kant literature is all the more striking since a UBI is very Kantian in spirit. Kant thinks that the poor are cared 'for better and more economically' (*MM*, 6: 367.27–8) when they receive cash that they can spend as they see fit. It is indeed one of the driving forces behind a UBI that it is both more efficient and more respectful to provide cash with no strings attached rather than targeted and conditional support, which imposes constraints on people's behaviour as well as on what the support can be used for (if the support is in kind or in the form of services). Following this line of thought, Alessandro Pinzani (2023: 233) emphasizes that securing agents' material existence without imposing conditions is *anti-paternalistic* and Kantian in nature since Kant is strongly opposed to paternalism (*MM*, 6: 230.29–32, 318.4–14; *TP*, 8: 289.9–291.18, 297.2–299.21). Moreover, in the only in-depth discussion of Kant and UBI that I am aware of, Pinzani argues that, besides anti-paternalism, there are a number of Kantian core tenets that constitute reasons to support a UBI. The economic security that a UBI would provide facilitates the kind of leisure that allows agents to develop their talents. These talents can include those not necessarily in demand on the job market, such as *moral self-perfection* (Pinzani 2023: 234). He also suggests that Kant's notion of citizenship and equality provides grounds for a UBI (pp. 232–4).¹¹

Most significantly for my purpose, a UBI satisfies Kant's demand that active citizens must be independent and their own master. Even if welfare recipients, too, rely on the state for their subsistence (as UBI recipients do), the conditional nature of welfare schemes creates dangerous forms of domination. Since the goal of many welfare schemes is to get recipients off welfare, there is pressure on them to take up low-paid and potentially exploitative labour. Moreover, even if the state is impartial, this might not be true for (often outsourced) bureaucrats, administrators, and enforcers who check whether a recipient has met all the stipulated requirements, such as applying for X number of jobs per week. Welfare recipients are frequently at the whim of caseworkers and subject to constant oversight. They are not their own master in any meaningful sense.

Finally, I note two caveats for a Kantian UBI. Firstly, labour is undoubtedly significant for Kant. He thinks of it as an essential part of being human (*Anth*, 7: 276.2–27; *CB*, 8: 118.fn; *Ped*, 9: 471.6–472.10) and contrasts it sharply with laziness.¹² A Kantian UBI would not have the purpose of freeing people of work altogether. Rather, it would provide a firm economic basis, which allows people to determine the contribution they want to make to society, or how they can fulfil their duty to be 'a useful member of the world' (*MM*, 6: 446.1–3; see also *G*, 4: 422.37–423.16 and *MM*, 6: 391.30–392.9).¹³ Here Pascoe's analysis of labour is once more very insightful, as she emphasizes that dependent labour is often essential. Performing such labour is a way of being useful to others and the world. Individuals performing such labour should see

the contribution they make acknowledged and their active citizenship secured, rather than merely given the opportunity to work themselves up. In fact, securing one's livelihood and independence via a UBI might result in agents doing *more* rather than less socially useful work. After all, much socially useful work, such as raising one's children or caring for elderly relatives, is currently unpaid. People might not be able to afford to do as much of this as they want. Moreover, many extant welfare schemes are designed such that additional income is effectively taxed at a high rate, for instance, because means-tested benefits are reduced or workers incur additional commuting or childcare costs that leave them out of pocket. Thus, these schemes might actually disincentivize (additional) paid work (van der Veen and Van Parijs 1986: sec.7).

Secondly, in the most explicit passage that we find in Kant concerned with the government's role in poverty relief, Kant repeatedly speaks of *permissions* for a state to tax the rich in order to support poor citizens (MM, 6: 325.35–326.28). He does not speak of an *obligation* to do so. Government provisions for the poor here seem merely discretionary. However, poverty relief is only one reason why someone might endorse a UBI. Whilst UBI advocates generally agree that a UBI would have positive effects on those living in poverty and that this counts in favour of the scheme, philosophically elaborate arguments tend to focus on goods other than poverty relief that a UBI can provide to everyone, including but not limited to individuals living in poverty. Examples include left-libertarian 'real freedom', the economic security to pursue one's freely chosen ends (Van Parijs 1997), and the republican notion of non-domination (Pettit 2007) or of an exit option that allows agents to opt out of the employment market (Widerquist 2013).

Along those lines, I have argued that Kantians should be in favour of a UBI because it would allow people to be their own masters regardless of the type of labour they perform. This does not require me to say anything about the kinds of duties states have specifically to relieve poverty. A UBI that ensures full citizenship and welfare provisions that alleviate poverty differs in what they are supposed to achieve. It might well be a duty of a modern state to secure every adult's full citizenship, and thus, a discretionary nature specifically of poverty relief is a moot point.¹⁴

4. Conclusion

I consider the challenge Pascoe raises for Kant strong grounds for expanding the scope of ideas that Kantians should consider when they think about independence and full citizenship. For this purpose, I contrasted a model that gives workers the opportunity to work themselves up with a UBI. A Kantian UBI would not render the category of passive citizenship obsolete since there will still be dependent citizens (children, severely cognitively disabled people). Yet, the proportion of passive citizens would be drastically reduced by adopting a UBI and especially those who do provide necessary but dependent labour would have their status as active citizens secured.

A full discussion of a Kantian UBI would of course have to address many difficult questions that I bracketed, such as how to finance a UBI in a sustainable and just manner, whether there are alternative schemes that can protect people's independence, be these conditional and targeted schemes or unconditional services

rather than income,¹⁵ and how a UBI would change agents' attitude toward work, the relation between employers and employees, and between fellow citizens more generally.

I hope to have shown that Kant is amenable to a UBI. This is significant given that current debates about social and economic justice have questioned the status of (paid) labour as the prime venue of being useful to the world (Graeber 2019), as well as of the requirement, often accepted by both the left¹⁶ and the right, that people should work for a living (Anderson 2023; Cholbi 2018; Widerquist 2013). I believe that Kant has much to offer to these theorists and that their work, in turn, can help us better understand Kantian resources for social and economic justice beyond the promise that one can work oneself up.

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Notes

1 Kant's writings are cited by volume: page.line(s) of the Academy edition. The following abbreviations are used: G: *Groundwork*; MM: *Metaphysics of Morals*; Anth: *Anthropology*; CB: 'Conjectural Beginning of Human History'; TP: 'On the Common Saying'; Ped: *Pedagogy*. Translations follow the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, edited by P. Guyer and A. W. Wood.

2 See also Lanoix (2007) who stresses the relevance of Kant's distinction between active and passive citizenship for understanding the shortcomings of liberal assumptions about full citizens as self-governing and perpetually active political participants. Moreover, Lanoix (pp. 125–7) argues that the Kantian category of passive citizenship can be used to grant protections to those who cannot attain full citizenship, for instance, because they are severely cognitively impaired. My position is complementary to this insofar as I think that social conditions should be such that everyone who can become a full citizen should be, but that there should also be provisions made for those who cannot. I am grateful to an anonymous *Kantian Review* referee for raising this point.

3 I take it that Pascoe, in principle, agrees with this point. After all, Kant presumably considers aristocrats and landowners active citizens regardless of what work (if any) they perform. This speaks to my broader point that it is possible to attain full citizenship (even without doing any work) if resources are allocated to support citizens' independence in a reliable manner that protects them against domination. I am grateful to Jordan Pascoe for discussion of this point.

4 Of course, technological progress might make *some* dependent labour redundant. However, dependent labour includes forms of care work, such as child and elder care, central aspects of which are very difficult if not impossible to automatize adequately.

5 That one of the major underlying concerns for Kant's distinction between active and passive citizenship is domination or subordination is, I take it, relatively uncontroversial (cf., for instance, Williams 1983: 148). The less charitable alternative would be that Kant thinks that women and financially independent workers are deficient in some way such that their participation would be detrimental to rational collective deliberation. See Malik (2014: ch. 3) for discussion.

6 See also Malik (2014: 108) who emphasizes the importance of being able to vote impartially because one does not answer to masters other than the state.

7 Of course, there can be sources of domination other than the inability to meet basic needs. Moreover, there can be certain laws that disenfranchise people even if their basic needs are met (e.g. Felony Disenfranchisement Laws).

8 See also Williams (2006: 369) who stresses that what matters for Kant is not inheritance or property but merit. He, however, concedes that this might appear 'in many respects elitist, discriminatory and snobbish' to us (p. 376).

9 See Sandel (2021) for a much more thorough problematization of meritocracy.

10 Wood (2008: 199–200) argues that, from a Kantian perspective, handouts and welfare in general could be considered degrading. However, he does not discuss UBI. See also Hasan (2017: 923) who suggests that a UBI could be a potential element of a Kantian state. However, he does not elaborate on this idea. Ali and Pinzani (2023) discuss a number of options for how everyone could become economically independent and a full citizen. The closest they come to a UBI is universal capital endowments (p. 105). Most recently, the duty to be a useful member of the world (MM, 6: 446.1–3) has been proposed as grounds for a Kantian UBI (Sticker 2024).

11 I fully agree with his insightful but brief discussion of UBI and Kant's notion of citizenship. In addition to the points Pinzani mentions, Kant's notion of external freedom (e.g. MM, 6: 221) and the idea that there is an original common ownership of the globe (MM, 6: 352.6–25) are reminiscent of Left Libertarian arguments for UBI (Van Parijs 1997). Kant also was a source of inspiration for a number of significant Marxist thinkers and their criticism of capitalism (Williams 1983: ch.9). It is perhaps not all that surprising that his theory lends itself to proposals that are commonly considered progressive.

12 Due to its racialized nature, Kant's conception of laziness has recently become the subject matter of critical debate (see Lu-Adler 2022; Pascoe 2022: ch.5).

13 Kant here overlaps with Marxist takes on UBI. Marxists tend to stress the liberatory and life-enhancing potential of work, whilst also being fully aware of how work under capitalist conditions fails to realize this potential. Moreover, Marxists sometimes worry that a UBI could weaken the power of organized labour and of solidarity between workers since UBI recipients can opt out of wage labour (Gourevitch 2016). They, like Kant, would want to hold on to a significant role for labour.

14 Weinrib (2008) argues that the state does indeed have a duty to support the poor in order to establish universal full citizenship. However, this duty would not help workers who perform dependent labour but are not poor. Only a scheme that covers everyone would secure everyone's full citizenship.

15 It is not clear that, according to a number of influential philosophical definitions of the term, only unconditional income would count as a UBI (see Sticker 2023: sec.4 for discussion). Further terminological clarification is required to ascertain whether there is a tension between unconditional services and unconditional income.

16 See, for instance, 'A general requirement to work for all who are able to do so ... is a matter of course in a socialist economy' (Luxemburg 2004: 347).

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