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Retrospective: “A Capitalist Road to Communism – Twenty Years After”

Basic Income and the Value of Occupational Choice

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Why prefer the universal grant?...ultimately it comes down...to the relative importance we attach to liberty. A universal grant cannot be justified by reference to solidarity (in favour of the “unlucky”) or to any desert principle (nobody “deserves” it). It can only be justified in terms of the real freedom from toil for everyone.

— Robert van der Veen and Philippe Van Parijs

There are various philosophical strategies available to show the desirability of instituting a basic income unconditional upon its recipients’ willingness to pursue paid employment. Revisiting the classic paper “A Capitalist Road to Communism” (Van der Veen and Van Parijs, 1986a), should remind us of an important distinction amongst such strategies. An interest-based strategy assumes our reasons to value occupational choice possess a special moral urgency, which enables them to ground the specific unconditionality that many critics of basic income allege is its most morally objectionable feature. In contrast, alternative strategies maintain a less partisan stance regarding our occupational interests’

1 Unspecified page numbers throughout this comment refer to this paper.
importance relative to other concerns, such as our interest in material consumption. Consider, for illustration, the value-sharing case for basic income as the fair way to distribute the benefits generated by certain natural or social resources in which each individual possesses an equal entitlement (Steiner, 1993; Van Parijs, 1995).

Although the alternative strategy is now, nearly two decades later, more influential, it is clear that “A Capitalist Road to Communism” employs a version of the interest-based strategy. Thus, appealing to the second half of the distributive principle “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” (p. 636), its authors countenance various proposals aiming to limit the degree to which individuals’ willingness to contribute to the social product via their paid labour should determine their receipt of that product. For example, they mention a Marxian proposal about the relative size of the social product distributed conditionally and unconditionally, according to which communism’s achievement requires distribution of the whole product to proceed regardless of contribution. They contrast this view with a number of other nonrelative proposals (p. 644), including a more radical one that requires maximising the prospects of the least advantaged, understood as those individuals who receive only the unconditional income, and so permits distribution on the basis of contribution when it enhances their prospects. They also include a more moderate proposal that requires instituting an unconditional income sufficiently large to free individuals from being bound to accept paid employment in order to meet their fundamental needs.

Despite their differences, such proposals are all animated by the common aim of enhancing individuals’ occupational freedom, and diminishing the extent to which alienating external rewards motivates its exercise, by reducing the degree to which income depends upon paid employment. Thus, liberation from the need to toil is the proposal’s primary purpose, and not merely a welcome byproduct. The proposal’s Marxian pedigree, however, could suggest that the interest-based strategy relies upon the type of sectarian, perfectionist account of human flourishing unsuitable to guide political action in a liberal society. We might then speculate that an awareness of this reliance partly explains the reduction in philosophical attention to interest-based arguments. Nevertheless, it would be too hasty to conclude those arguments should be abandoned. In societies, like ours, where jobs vary greatly in their desirability and access to them is very unequally distributed, it is possible that even a liberal concern for occupational choice supports basic income.
To understand that possibility, consider first the importance attached to occupational interests by the leading liberal political conception, John Rawls’s theory of justice as fairness. Thus, Rawls includes in his account of social primary goods, or citizens’ needs, “free choice of occupation against a background of diverse opportunities” (Rawls, 2001, p. 58). The legal right to enter into the competition for jobs, and related prohibitions on various forms of conscription and lump-sum talent tax, are also present amongst the list of basic civil liberties protected by his first principle of justice (Rawls, 2001, pp. 157–158). Moreover, Rawls’s second principle gives priority to protecting individuals from being disadvantaged, by class origin in the competition for jobs and by other misfortunes in the social lottery, over maximising the income and wealth of the least advantaged.

As well as having immediate appeal, attaching special significance to occupational interests seems plausible because of those interests’ connection with a number of other morally relevant concerns. These concerns include our interests in the pursuit of a determinate conception of the good, and in social status and self-respect. After all, most individuals spend a sizable portion of their lives in employment, and few select their occupations based on financial rewards alone, disregarding the demands involved in the job and the relationships with others they involve. Whether it constitutes an avenue of self-realization or a source of frustration, work tends to matter deeply to most of us. Moreover, work’s impact on our lives is usually pervasive, influencing – both positively and negatively – our attitudes to each other, and confidence in the worth of our ambitions and capacity to achieve them.

These various reasons for individuals to care about occupational opportunities support their inclusion in Rawls’s account of the goods relevant when evaluating distributive institutions, and his liberal egalitarian conviction that those institutions must ensure that citizens enjoy certain types of control over their occupations. Nevertheless, it is arguable that Rawls is insufficiently attentive to the risk of individuals failing to enjoy an adequate range of occupational opportunities as a result of factors additional to governmental conscription and relative disadvantage in the social lottery.

A number of Rawls’s remarks suggest he accepts that not only comparative but also noncomparative considerations may favour enhancing individuals’ occupational opportunities, and so would not in principle rule out the possibility of such a failure. For example, Rawls’s infrequently noted suggestion that an inequality in opportunity may be defensible when it enhances the opportunities of those with lesser opportunities (Rawls, 1999, p. 266) suggests a
noncomparative concern to enhance opportunities, as does the remark, mentioned earlier, about the value of “a background of diverse opportunities” against which to exercise legal rights to occupational choice. It is possible, however, that Rawls assumed that societies organised according to his two principles would, in practice, deliver the requisite background. If so, given the relevant mechanisms are so underdescribed, that assumption is surely debatable. It seems far more likely that such societies will sometimes leave many of their least-skilled members without the appropriate range of opportunities even if their institutions secure fair equality of opportunity, and maximize the expected income and wealth of the least advantaged.

Under such conditions, consider the case for introducing a moderate form of basic income, freeing individuals from the necessity of accepting paid employment in order to meet certain fundamental needs. As often noted (Van der Veen et al., 1986b, p. 733), there are various reasons to believe that such a reform would be likely to increase diversity in the range of occupations available, especially in the case of the least skilled. For example, the unconditional character of a significant part of their income will increase their bargaining power with employers, and enable them to accept types of work that would otherwise be unsustainable financially. Assuming the disruption to incentives is not sufficiently grave to reduce their occupational opportunities on balance, the introduction of a basic income will therefore increase the likelihood of the legal right to occupational choice having fair value to those least equipped to compete for more desirable positions. Some might nevertheless object that their increased opportunities will come at the expense of reduced opportunities to acquire income and wealth. In this respect, however, basic income resembles other policies that protect the fair value of basic liberties, such as public funding for political parties or restrictions on campaign expenditure. Because of the relative importance proponents of justice as fairness attach to the interests at stake, such reductions should not strike them as a decisive objection to basic income.

Of course, far more needs to be said to elaborate the Rawlsian case for basic income I have just barely sketched. Fortunately, one of the authors of “The Capitalist Road” has provided a very useful guide to relevant arguments and sources (Van Parijs, 2003, pp. 216–222). Anyone who agrees with Rawls that “[w]hat men want is meaningful work in free association with others” (Rawls, 1999, p. 257) but worries that what too many people actually get is drudgery and compulsion has ample reason to explore those arguments.
References


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