

Universal Basic Income and Self-Respect

Oskar Tellhed

John Rawls has stated that “those who surf all day off Malibu must find a way to support themselves and would not be entitled to public funds” [1]. In recent years, the interest for unconditional/universal basic income (UBI) has steadily risen, with many pilot programs launched across the globe [2]. UBI means that every person in a society receives a grant (of everything from \$3 to \$3000) regardless of work contribution and willingness to work. The arguments from proponents range from the fact that it could end poverty, that it would “break the cycle of dependency among the disadvantaged, giving them time and money to seek the training and higher education they need to climb the economic ladder” [3] and, as some Silicon Valley billionaires have suggested, “bring on a cultural revolution by allowing people time from toil to contemplate the meaning of life.” (ibid.)

The purpose of this paper is to, with the help of a paper from Catriona McKinnon [4] and one from Satoshi Fukuma [5] argue for the position that UBI could be used to enhance a society’s level of self-respect.

In both McKinnon and Fukuma’s papers, they claim that much of what can be found in Rawlsian liberal egalitarians’ apparatus of political justification can be used to mount a case for UBI, even though Rawls (and his followers) has been against it. Their hope, as is mine, is that their arguments could force Rawlsians to understand that they ought to have UBI as a standing item on their agenda for political reform.

McKinnon writes that a large reason for mounting a Rawlsian self-respect-based argument for UBI is the turn that liberal egalitarian thinking has taken in the last twenty years. With Ronald Dworkin’s introduction of the terms ‘brute’ and ‘option’ luck, a lot of focus when it comes to redistribution has come to be about assessing whether a person’s suffering is something the person should be held responsible for themselves, and thus not be deserving of compensation. Many claim that this type of thinking can be traced back to Rawls’ famous idea of the ‘veil of

ignorance', but here there does not seem to be consensus. Either way, the notion of 'the original position' remains a corner stone of egalitarian thinking; the rational choice being that the distribution of goods is such that the worst-off group are better off than in any available alternative distribution. That is how to treat people as equals in a just society.

Rawls claims that self-respect is "perhaps the most important primary good." [6] What primary goods are, he explains in the following way: "characterized as what persons need in their status as free and equal citizens, and as normal and fully cooperating members of society over a complete life." [7] His definition of self respect is that it "includes a person's sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of the good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out. And second, self-respect implies a confidence in one's ability, so far as it is in within one's power, to fulfill one's intentions." (ibid.)

Being a primary good means that a just society should maximise the opportunities for self-respect among its citizens through its institutions, and basic structure of society — the so-called social bases of self-respect. This can take the shape of *recognition bases of self-respect*, meaning recognition from one's fellow citizens which supports a person's confidence in her abilities to succeed according to her standards, and *resource bases of self-respect*, meaning resources serving as means for the pursuit of success according to personal standards (McKinnon, 147).

A large part of the social bases of self-respect is income. McKinnon identifies three ways in which income can be a resource basis of self-respect. *The freedom benefit* means that a person can be free to change jobs (or not work altogether). She points out that work sometimes demands activities in direct conflict with the values informing one's self-respect. *The leisure-quantity benefit* entails the leisure time someone in paid employment has available. Some, she argues, need to look outside of their working life to find activities that support their self-respect. *The leisure-quality benefit* means that the quality of one's activities sometime requires funds, which UBI would accomodate.

Going back to the veil of ignorance, McKinnon clarifies who we're to take as the "worst off" in her argumentation. She uses Rawls' interpretation of equality as maximin: "insofar as we care about equality we ought to choose any distribution of a good in which the worst off are made as

well off as possible.” (McKinnon, 148) The worst off are “those in paid employment which is directly damaging their self-respect, which leaves them no time to pursue self-respect related projects in associational life, and which pays them so little that — even if they had the time — they could not afford to participate in the communities wherein rewarding associational lives can be led.” (ibid.)

At this point it might be timely to mention that Rawls, according to Fukuma, does not assume that self-respect must be derived from wage labor alone, and that Rawls with his theory of justice in fact aims to criticize the work-centered society and to overcome it. Everyone does not find value in labor. The way he understands Rawls, any activities accorded by the Aristotelian principle — which states that “other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity.” [8] — should be part of the social bases for self-respect, and “to enable everyone to engage in such activities, we need a social minimum in the form of a BI.” (Fukuma, 1)

One thing at UBI’s core is that it does not have a willingness-to-work condition on receipt of funds. McKinnon lays out two scenarios, job abundance and job scarcity, claiming that in both, removal of the willingness to work condition would have an advantage when it comes to self-respect for the worst off. In conditions of job abundance, people without independent means has no option but to work. There will likely always be people in this scenario that are forced to take jobs that are disadvantageous to their sense of self-respect, so coercion conflicts with the maximin of opportunities for self-respect for the worst off. If they would receive UBI, without a willingness to work condition, their freedom, leisure-quantity and leisure-quality would serve as a resource basis of self-respect. As Fukuma puts it: “Omitting a willingness-to-work condition will support the resource basis of self-respect for people who find meaning in activities other than work.” (Fukuma, 7)

McKinnon goes on to argue that removing the willingness to work condition wouldn’t only help the worst off, but also those who are more lucky, since they might at some point want to change jobs, and the vacancy left by the worst off now offers a broader selection of work to choose from, thus increasing their freedom, too. Here it would be easy to make the

counterargument, however, that it would be rare that those currently in self-respect-providing positions would choose the jobs with lower pay and lesser working conditions previously held by the worst off, but I'm willing to give in to the possibility of subjective standards.

In the case of job scarcity, a willingness to work condition is again considered an obstacle for self-respect. Here, a person might be forced to take a job in which the personalized criteria for self-respect is not met, while a person for whom the job would be of benefit for self-respect, goes without one. Thus, it potentially makes *everyone* worse off in terms of opportunities for self-respect.

Furthermore, McKinnon hopes that a removal of a willingness to work condition would force employers at workplaces that are menial, dangerous, degrading, etc. to improve conditions for the workers, to increase the opportunities for self-respect.

In Fukuma's paper, a lot of focus lies on what he calls "meaningful work." So what is meaningful work? It is not, as Rawls writes, that which is "deadening to human thought and sensibility." [9] These occupations are frequently monotonous, jobs in which, as Adam Smith writes, the person "has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention, in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occurs. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become." [10] If workers become stupid and ignorant, Fukuma writes, their moral powers can't be expected to develop, something that he assumes Rawls would consider a grave effect for a just society.

One definition of meaningful work comes from Norman E. Bowie [11]:

- a. freely entered into;
- b. allowing the worker to exercise their autonomy and independence;
- c. enabling the worker to develop their rational capacities;
- d. providing a wage sufficient for physical welfare;
- e. supporting the moral development of employees; and
- f. not interfering with the worker's conception of how they wish to obtain happiness

Fukuma points out that this definition can be regarded as meeting the Aristotelian principle. With the help of Gregory Pence he divides work into three categories — *Labor*, *Workmanship* and *Calling* — and Pence writes that “we can define work is better and meaningful in direct proportion to the degree to which the following [criteria for Calling] are realized: (1) development and exercise of unique personal qualities, (2) intrinsic satisfaction in the activity, and (3) personal choice in accepting job.” [12] Here it is important to note that a job that for one person is considered Labor, can for another be a Calling, and vice versa. And one’s Calling does not have to do with paid work. This is Fukuma’s point. Based on the rational perspectives of people, they may willingly choose in which activities to participate, be it NGOs, NPO, etc. As these can accord with the Aristotelian principle, they can form the social basis of self-respect. For those not engaged in paid work, they need UBI to guarantee their livelihood.

When it comes to means-testing — the process of surveying applicants prior to receipt of funds — both McKinnon and Fukuma contend that this can have a damaging effect on self-respect. Not only can it result in the feeling that one is not trusted by their government or fellow citizens, the payments under a system of means-testing can also carry with them a social stigma, both examples damaging the recognitional bases of self-respect.

Furthermore, UBI “can contribute to decrease the socio-economic gap between the most and the least advantaged. From the relative income hypothesis of social epidemiology, the more the gap in society narrows, the more its citizens’ health status is improved.” (Fukuma, 7) Additionally, the future might present another gap between the privileged and those not. Due to the predicted decline in employment resulting from artificial intelligentization, those lucky enough to have a job — which, according to Jon Elster, “can be an opportunity for self-realization ... a source of the esteem of others and hence of self-esteem ... provide a social environment, an escape from isolation ... impose structure of everyday life, an escape from limitless and alienating freedom” [13] — enjoy benefits, on top of a steady income, which would not be in accordance with a sense justice that aims to maximin the opportunity of self-respect for the least advantaged.

We have looked at why UBI could be considered an attractive alternative for Rawlsians. It can be argued, however, that these arguments deal exclusively with an assumption of acceptance of Rawls' ideas — and McKinnon does admit that her arguments stand and fall with the assumption that Rawls' justifications are accepted (McKinnon, 144). This might be, for all others that need be convinced for an implementation to take place, their weakest point. For instance, someone might argue, like Massey does [14], that self-respect should not be considered the most important primary good at all. Is not health, for example, a more important primary good? I would argue that it is not self-evident that it is. One might be healthy but without the social bases for self-respect, which, in Rawls' terms, would mean to live essentially a meaningless life, without aim or purpose. If one feels a sense of purpose during sickness, one would at least actually want to become better. A person without self-respect might not see the point.

NOTES

- [1] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 181-2, n.9
- [2] <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2020/2/19/21112570/universal-basic-income-ubi-map>
- [3] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/miltonezrati/2019/01/15/universal-basic-income-a-thoroughly-wrongheaded-idea/?sh=48b4b5c645e1>
- [4] McKinnon, C. 'Basic Income, Self-Respect and Reciprocity' *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20 (2003)
- [5] Fukuma, S. 'Meaningful Work, Worthwhile Life, and Self-Respect', De Gruyter (2017)
- [6] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 440.
- [7] *ibid.*, xiii
- [8] *The Cambridge Rawls Lexicon*, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-rawls-lexicon/aristotelian-principle/FC10ABE932AC10FC1BDD3E9F129FFE56>
- [9] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 463f
- [10] Smith, Adam. (1994) [1776]. *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*.

- [11] Bowie, N. E. (1998). A Kantian theory of meaningful work. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 17, 1083-1092.
- [12] Pence, G. (2001). *Towards a theory of work*, pp. 94
- [13] Elster, J. (1988). *Is there (or should there be) a right to work?*, pp. 62
- [14] Massey, S.J. (1995) *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*. Routledge.