

Why we demand an unconditional basic income: the ECSO freedom case

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Philippe Van Parijs's (1995) *Real Freedom for All: What (If Anything) Can Justify Capitalism* makes a very thorough and challenging philosophical argument for basic income. But I believe that it has two important limitations that inhibit it from giving a compelling explanation why basic income supporters believe that support for the disadvantage must be not only universal but also *unconditional* and enough to meet an individual's basic needs. This essay briefly discusses those limitations and then proposes an alternative argument for basic income that I believe relies on a more compelling concept of freedom, defined below as "Freedom as Effective Control Self-Ownership" (ECSO freedom). This concept of freedom provides a stronger explanation why basic income must be universal, unconditional, and large enough to meet a person's basic needs.

Two limitations to the real freedom defense of basic income

Van Parijs's (1995) justification of basic income is founded on the notion of what he calls, "real freedom," the freedom to do whatever one might want to do. Van Parijs argues that the more resources people have available, the freer they are to do whatever they might want to do. The highest sustainable unconditional basic income gets everyone access to as many resources as possible and leaves them free to do whatever they might want to do with those resources—even if what they want to do is to pursue leisure. One difficulty with this concept is that "the freedom to do whatever one might want to do" might not be the most compelling conception of freedom for society to promote and protect. But even as it is, the contention between the real-freedom-based argument and basic income has two important limitations.

The first limitation is that the concept of "real freedom" is so broad and hard to measure that it is unclear what kind of policy it supports (Barry 2003). Everyone in a "real freedom" promoting society is entitled to something, but it is not clear whether that something is unconditional, basic, or an income. Van Parijs (1995: 35) specifically rules out any connection between basic income and basic needs, opting for the highest sustainable basic income, which can fall short or exceed the amount necessary to sustain a decent existence depending on various economic factors.

The highest sustainable unconditional basic income makes people free to do some things that they might want to do but other kinds of government spending make people free to do other things they might want to do. A smaller income combined with other government services makes them free to do other things they might want to do. Devoting the highest sustainable level of taxation entirely to the provision of government services makes people free to do things they might want to do; a guaranteed job makes people free to do other things they might want to do; infrastructure makes people free to do other things they might want to do; conditional welfare programs make people free to do other things they might want to do.

It is difficult—and perhaps impossible—to measure which policy gives people the "most" real freedom (Barry 2003). To give a definitive argument that the highest sustainable basic income provides the most real freedom, Van Parijs would need some theory of how to measure freedom and how to weigh one type of freedom against another. He would then need to give a definitive answer that the freedoms provided by the highest sustainable basic income add up to "more" than the freedoms provided by other government spending. I'm not convinced that it is possible to do so. If this can be done, it could turn out that real freedom justifies an unconditional basic income, but it

could also turn out that it justifies a very restrictive, conditional welfare state with strong funding of public infrastructure and services.

The second limitation of the real libertarian argument for basic income follows from the first. Because it does not give a compelling reason to show that individuals are unconditionally entitled to a cash income large enough to meet their basic needs, it does not provide a compelling reply to the reciprocity or exploitation objection to basic income. According to this objection, workers are needed to produce the income that will be distributed unconditionally. If recipients are not held to a reciprocal objection to help produce that income, they supposedly exploit the workers who do (White 1997; van Donselaar 2009). Although Van Parijs argues that basic income does not violate several definitions of exploitation, his central response to this objection relies on the concept liberal neutrality. Basic income gives people the opportunity to choose to work or not to work. These choices reflect two different notions of the good life, and a liberal government should be neutral between different individuals' notions of the good life.

This response is not sufficiently compelling because the reciprocity objection is not simply based on a desire to promote one version of the good life. It is based on a moral claim to resources. If one party has earned the right to use resources while another party refuses to do what is necessary to earn that right, neutrality is no reason to treat them both equally. Society should not be neutral between thieves and non-thieves. A more compelling argument for basic income has to explain why an unconditional basic income does not violate—or why it is important enough to override—the reciprocity objection.

The following section explains a conception of freedom that I believe is intrinsically more compelling than real freedom. It shows how this conception of freedom can be used to make a clearer case that individuals are entitled to an income that is unconditional and sufficient to meet their basic needs. The final section shows how this argument for basic income provides a stronger reply to the reciprocity objection.

The ECSO freedom defense of basic income

My argument is based on a concept I call, “freedom as effective control self-ownership” (ECSO freedom). ECSO freedom is the effective power to accept or refuse active cooperation with other willing people (Widerquist 2006). I believe that it is more compelling in itself than real freedom and that a case for basic income premised on ECSO freedom does not suffer from the two limitations in the real-freedom-based argument discussed above. ECSO freedom is defined in relation to self-ownership but it is a separate concept. It is narrower in some ways, and broader in other ways than self-ownership. It is narrower in that it concerns only the control aspects of self-ownership (as opposed to the income aspects). It is broader in that it involves the effective power (not merely the nominal right) to exercise “control self-ownership” (the control rights of self-ownership). I passively cooperate with other people if I simply stay out of their way. As long as any two people disagree about whether they're willing to get out of each other's way at any particular time, it is impossible for all passive cooperation to be voluntary. But it is possible for all active cooperation to be voluntary, if we each have the power to refuse interaction. It is not a certainty that some people must be forced to actively serve the interests of other people. If all people have an exit option, and the benefits to cooperation are sufficient, it is possible for all active human cooperation to be voluntary.

ECSO freedom is a theory of what I call "status freedom" as opposed to what I call "scalar freedom" or "freedom as a continuous variable." Although we do not have different words for these two meanings of freedom, the distinction is well understood in ordinary English. Scalar freedom is the absence of impediment, restriction, or interference. It treats freedom as a continuous variable, as a matter of degree as on a scale or a continuum. Status freedom captures another common definition of freedom: the absence of slavery, detention, or oppression. A conception of status freedom tries to capture the crucial distinction between whether an individual fits into the category of a free or an unfree person. Real freedom, along with freedom as noninterference, is a scalar freedom, under which a person can have more or less freedom, but it does not identify a cutoff between categories of free and unfree. A theory of status freedom is meant to identify the most important aspects of what it means to have the status of a free person. A theory of status freedom is not about counting the (possibly uncountable) number of freedoms a person has, but identifying the most important

freedoms, those that divide a free person from an unfree person such as a slave, a serf, or a subject of a totalitarian regime.

ECSO freedom has two components. A free person can interact with other willing people as they choose. A free person cannot be (directly or indirectly) forced to serve the interests of others. To have the first component a person must have the familiar civil rights of freedom of speech, movement, association, political participation, and so on.

To have the second component, the effective power to refuse unwanted cooperation, people need unconditional access to resources. Human beings are biological creatures who need a sufficient amount of food, water, and air to survive. They need shelter, a place to sleep, a place to stand, and a place to interact with other willing people. If someone can come between you and the minimum amount of resources you need to survive, not only do they directly interfere with your ability to live a decent and free life; they can also force you to do just about anything.

These basic needs are defined in an absolute and physical sense but they include the human need for interpersonal interaction and fulfilling them will require access to different goods at different times and places. See “the Physical Basis of Voluntary Trade” (Widerquist 2010) for discussion of what level of basic income is required to meet basic needs. This argument also implies that society has a responsibility to make sure that a basic income high enough to meet basic needs is sustainable. See *Property and the Power to Say No* (Widerquist 2006) for discussion of how to do that and what to do if it turns out to be impossible

For millions of years, our ancestors had unconditional access to the resources they needed to survive. They were free to hunt and gather for themselves or with other willing people as they pleased, and no one would interfere with them. The Earth was their exit option.

The rules we live under today do not make most people free to refuse unwanted active cooperation with others. Land that was once free for all to use is now claimed by governments, businesses, and individuals. Most people reach adulthood with no direct access to the resources they need, they can only obtain resources by meeting conditions set by others—by employers or governments. They have the nominal right to refuse but they do not have the effective power to refuse; someone will interfere with anything they might do to support themselves (alone or in groups). They cannot work for themselves; they must work for a property owner or a government.

The preservation of this second component of ECSO freedom explains why individuals need an income that is unconditional and large enough to meet their basic needs. Such a policy is not simply desirable because taking leisure time to surf is something someone might want to do. It is needed because the power to refuse is essential to ensuring that *all of us* who work for others do so voluntarily.

People with an unconditional basic income still have to buy things from property owners, but they are not forced to serve them. Government taxes property, distributes revenue to everyone, and presumably the propertyless use their money to purchase things from property owners. But this cannot be called a form of service *to* property owners. Suppose you agree to give me \$50 and I agree to spend all of it in your store. Obviously, the whole of this transaction does not involve me serving you.

The power to refuse to work is important because working in a cash economy is very different from working for oneself directly with resources. With direct access to resources, a person works directly for her own goals. Without it a person must work for her employer’s or her clients’ goals all day to receive the cash to pursue her own goals when work is over. There is nothing wrong with working for cash as long as it is voluntary, but if the laws of the state put anyone in the position in which they have no direct access to resources, they give that person no choice but to work for someone who controls resources.

In a free society, with an economy built on truly voluntary trade between truly free individuals, it is unacceptable for any group of people to force others to serve them by taking control of all resources. That this force is indirect and systemic (rather than direct and individual) makes it no less powerful and threatening to freedom. It is not any particular employer’s fault that the laws interfere with any independent use that propertyless people might make of resources. The government, which has the ultimate responsibility for making the rules of resource ownership, has the responsibility to make those rules in a way that respects the free status of each individual. That is, in a way that respects ECSO freedom. I argue elsewhere that although direct access to resources and in-kind benefits could conceivably provide the access to resources necessary to maintain this aspect of ECSO freedom, it is

best protected in a modern market economy by an unconditional, in-cash basic income (Widerquist 2010).

It is easy to see how this argument provides a much more compelling reason why benefits must be unconditional and at least enough to meet a person's basic needs. Basic income is not about providing leisure for those who might want to pursue leisure. Basic income provides an exit option that is an important component in protecting all people's standing as a free individual. It protects a worker from an unacceptable job. It protects a parent from a spouse who controls the family's access to resources. It protects a disabled person from an overly intrusive welfare state.

ECSO freedom and reciprocity

This argument for basic income is also better able to address the reciprocity objection. Rather than relying on a weak application of liberal neutrality, an argument based on ECSO freedom can show that the reciprocity objection is misplaced entirely. All able-bodied adults with the right knowledge can meet their own basic needs without working for property owners, if they are sufficiently free from interference. All an able-bodied individual needs from others to have ECSO freedom is a negative duty, a duty of forbearance. Others need only refrain from interfering with a sufficient amount of resources so that individuals can provide for themselves.

Our societies are badly failing in that duty. All the resources that a person might use to secure their own needs are claimed by property owners and governments. Basic income, in this sense, is a replacement for the direct access to resources that our ancestors enjoyed. Basic income is not "something for nothing:" individuals who receive it are held to the reciprocal obligation to respect other people's property claims.

Rather than relying on the neutrality principle to trump reciprocity, this argument employs the reciprocity principle *in defense* of basic income. Those who control resources are currently held to no reciprocal duty to compensate the propertyless for the loss of freedom created by the assignment of property rights over natural resources to some individuals and not others. Unless all property owners pay a rent sufficient to maintain an unconditional basic income for everyone, they violate the reciprocity principle by indirectly forcing the propertyless to work for some member of the very group whose property claims interfere their efforts to provide for themselves. To satisfy reciprocity the assumption of private property rights has to come with an obligation to contribute to an unconditional basic income large enough to provide a reasonable exit option for everyone.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued for basic points. First, Van Parijs's real-freedom-based argument for basic income does not fully explain why unconditional basic income must be unconditional, basic, or an income. Second, the real-freedom-based account doesn't present a compelling response to the reciprocity objection. Third, the ECSO-freedom-based argument provides a compelling reason why all individuals are entitled to an income that is unconditional and large enough to meet their basic needs. Fourth, the ECSO-freedom-based account provides a stronger response to the reciprocity objection.

References

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ENGLISH ABSTRACT

This essay argues that Van Parijs's notion of "real freedom" does not capture the most important reasons why an adequate social protection system must include an unconditional income. "Real freedom," the freedom to do whatever one might want to do, is neither the most important freedom for people to have nor a freedom that necessarily explains why benefits must be unconditional and large enough to meet a person's basic needs. It might not be possible to determine what kind of redistribution plan gives people the most "real freedom." Instead society must focus on protecting the most important freedoms, especially the freedom of voluntarily interaction and the freedom to refuse involuntary interaction: the power to say 'no'. This understanding of freedom provides a compelling reason why basic income must be unconditional.

FRENCH ASBTRACT

Dans cet article, j'explique pourquoi la notion de "liberté réelle" forgée par Ph. Van Parijs ne permet pas de saisir les raisons fondamentales pour lesquelles une protection sociale adéquate doit inclure un revenu inconditionnel. La "liberté réelle", la liberté de faire tout ce que l'on pourrait vouloir faire, n'est ni la liberté la plus importante dont devraient bénéficier les individus, ni une liberté qui justifie nécessairement des allocations inconditionnelles permettant de couvrir les besoins de base d'une personne. Il n'est peut-être tout simplement pas possible de déterminer le type de redistribution qui fournit aux individus le plus de "liberté réelle". La société devrait plutôt se focaliser sur la protection des libertés les plus importantes, à commencer par la liberté d'entrer volontairement dans une interaction, et celle de refuser les interactions non-souhaitées: le pouvoir de dire non. Cette conception de la liberté fournit une justification convaincante du caractère inconditionnel de l'allocation universelle.