**Basic Income and The Collective Benefits of Work**

**I. Introduction**

Universal Basic Income (UBI) has been presented as one of the most targeted and effective solutions to the problems raised by increasing levels of unemployment across the western world (Van Parijs 2014, Ford 2015, Srnicek and Williams 2015, Standing 2017). If the opportunity for jobs decreases as a result of advancements in technology, and wages decrease and conditions worsen as companies attempt to reduce labour costs, people will have very few opportunities to earn money through traditional employment. By offering a replacement for the money a person usually earns through their job, a UBI has the potential to ensure a basic standard of living that is *not* dependent on an individual’s wage earnings. It ensures that every individual has the financial means to support themselves and their dependents without having to engage in traditional employment, if they so choose. In a world without enough formal employment for everyone, this seems to be an appealing solution.

There are at least two persuasive criticisms which can be made regarding UBI’s role in a post-work world. The first points out that, although UBI can replace the monetary or material benefits of work, it does not offer a replacement or alternative to many of the non-material, non-financial benefits that work provides. Given that many of these benefits are nevertheless essential to a good life, universal basic income faces a challenge if it cannot ensure that people have continued access to those benefits in a post-work world. Unfortunately, there is a problem for this line of argument: many of the benefits of work may be found through other activities, especially if a person has ample time to pursue them. This is because work activities are not fundamentally special: what is considered work in one context may not be considered work in another.

There is, however, a second criticism which can be raised, regarding one particular benefit of work that UBI cannot account for. This benefit is that work not only provides the opportunities for a person to acquire benefits for themselves, but also *connects* an individual to the rest of society. In doing so, it makes what matters to me matter to others, and vice versa. This is a collective, rather than individual, benefit and provides a shared system of meaning and value by which members of a community or society can communicate intelligibly about the value of their often very different contributions. For the time being, I call this benefit ‘integrated social membership’. By signalling, to the individual and to the community,the value of an individual’s contribution, work not only benefits the individual by providing a sense of community and societal membership. It may also influence the cohesion of the group. Since this is one of the benefits of work which will be lost in a post-work world, this feature causes a problem for UBI policy, as a solution to the unemployment crisis. While other forms of state-sponsored income, such as a participation income scheme, may help preserve this feature of institutional connectedness, a universal basic income alone cannot.

**II. UBI as a Solution to Unemployment**

A UBI – also known as a basic income, a citizen’s income, or a guaranteed income – entails several central conditions. First, it is a grant paid to all members of society, regardless of marital status, age, ability to work, or income: in short, an “individual guaranteed minimum income without either a means test or a (willingness to) work condition” (Van Parijs 1991, 102). In this sense it is both unconditional and universal: it is independent of need and available to all members of society. It requires no contribution, economic or otherwise. Some proposals differ on how frequently it should be dispersed, over what period of a person’s life they should receive it, and whether all ages should have access, as well as whether or not it should replace existing welfare programs.

Many advocates for UBI see it as one of the most effective solutions to the economic and social problems raised by increasing levels of unemployment. Experts in the fields of economics and in the tech industry have predicted the large-scale job that will accompany technological advancements in artificial intelligence and automation (Oxford Economics 2019; Reisinger 2019). In *The Rise of the Robots*, Martin Ford argues that the advent of an age in which machines are responsible for the vast majority of jobs is not in the far dystopian future, but immediately around the corner (Ford 2016). Whether or not this prediction is realistic, many see this approaching possibility as cause for concern, since this technological take-over of the workforce will, in essence, make people (and their labour) economically superfluous. Without jobs, a new system will need to be in place to ensure that people can acquire the material necessities required for themselves and their families – not only for basic subsistence, but for an appropriately high standard of living.

Facing this possibility, a number of authors such as Kathi Weeks, Jon Danaher, and Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have argued for the desirability of a post-work world. This is “not a world of idleness; rather, it is a world in which people are no longer bound to their jobs, but free to create their own lives” (Srnicek and Williams 2015, 86). Weeks echoes this idea when she writes, “The struggle against work is a matter of securing not only better work, but also the time and money necessary to have a life outside work” (Weeks 2011, 13). As Guy Standing has pointed out, what counts as ‘work’ and non-work has been arbitrarily divided along the lines of formal remuneration: after all, “A parent who looks after their own child is doing just as much ‘work’ as someone who is paid to look after the child of another” (Standing 2017, 76). A post-work world would no longer unfairly reward those jobs which are part of the formal economy while neglecting to acknowledge the work being done by caregivers, domestic workers, or volunteers. Further, it opens up the possibility for people to spend their time doing what they would like to do, rather than being forced to spend the vast majority of their waking life in a meaningless or ‘bullshit’ job (Graeber 2019).

UBI is an especially appealing as a way to protect individuals from the adverse effects of a future without enough work for everyone. Some authors argue it is the only real option among alternatives, since all other solutions are worse for the worker. According to Phillipe Van Parijs, for example, several alternative options for re-imagining employment within those parameters include reducing the length of the work week, rationing jobs, or providing subsidies to employers of low-paid jobs. Ultimately, however, these options fail to provide an outcome which is advantageous for the worker. Instead, Van Parijs argues that a UBI – which can be understood as a kind of wage subsidy, paid directly to instead to employees rather than employers – would give people the opportunity “to take a break between two jobs, reduce working time, make room for more training, take up self-employment, or to join a cooperative” (Van Parijs 2014). A UBI confers power and agency to the individual and, as a result, may improve the conditions of low-wage work. Further, it would be more likely to encourage the creation of attractive jobs, since workers would never be forced to take a bad job. Therefore, “any strategy for reducing unemployment without increasing poverty” demands giving up a notion of full-time employment.

UBI also appears to be a natural companion to the proposals for a post-work world. The purpose in bringing about such a world is, as many of the advocates argue, to anticipate and confront the emerging crisis of work: “the breakdown of stable jobs in developed countries, the rise of unemployment and surplus populations, and the collapse of ‘work’ as a disciplinary measure holding society together” (Srnicek and Williams 2015, 86). But the hope, of many post-work theorists, is that this would lead to a larger shift in culture around the value of work in society. According to Kathi Weeks, imagining a post-work future will open up the possibility for a truly radical shift in gender and class-based norms, and the way work is valued in society. To imagine such a world is not, she writes “to claim that work is without value.” Instead, “[i]t is, rather, to insist that there are other ways to organize and distribute that activity and to remind us that it is also possible to be creative outside the boundaries of work” (Weeks 2011, 12). While UBI can offer a practical solution, by providing an alternative source of income for the masses of unemployed, it can also encourage a cultural change in how we think about work, by severing, or at least weakening, the formal relationship between work and income.

Therefore, UBI might not only make life materially better and more secure for many people, but it could also help facilitate the conceptual shift that post-work theorists hope for. It may even open up new possibilities for what constitutes a full or flourishing human life. Danaher, for example, argues that, in abandoning work and previous conceptions of the ‘good’ life in pursuit of a virtual, game-oriented ‘ludic’ life, we will gain access to previously unexplored opportunities for happiness and human flourishing (Danaher 2019). While Danaher advocates for a somewhat radical proposal, his underlying point is less so: we have exhausted the possibilities for flourishing within our current capitalist economic paradigm, our current framework of work. Large-scale implementation of UBI offers the chance for better possibilities to be realised.

**III. The Benefits of Work**

In this paper, I will use the term ‘work’ to refer primarily to employment, or work which is compensated with some form of income. But this is, in truth, only one form of work. The reason I focus on it here is that a UBI is a replacement for or supplement to a traditional income, which is acquired through paid work. As such, we could say that it targets paid work more directly than other forms. However, the non-financial benefits of work that I will discuss below are not limited to employment. In the widest sense, work can be defined as “purposeful human activity involving physical or mental exertion that is not undertaken solely for pleasure and that has economic or symbolic value” (Budd 2011). Since it is only in recent history that a person’s work has been defined by a pay cheque, a definition for work should not delineate in these terms. But here, for a simplification of the terms, I will use work and employment interchangeably.

In any enumeration of the benefits of work, the most basic of these – and, in modernity, perhaps the most obvious – are the financial ones. For some this is a wage, for others a salary or collection of benefits, but regardless of what form it takes, an income is normally the compensation given in exchange for work.[[1]](#footnote-1) An income provides me with the means to access a variety of basic goods and benefits. It provides access to the everyday material necessities which allow me to survive and participate in modern society. With it, I can buy food, clothing, a bus ticket, a cell phone, and a computer. I can use it to pay the bills which are also necessary for my survival and participation in society: rent for my apartment, electricity and heating bills, access to wireless internet, a cell phone bill. In some countries, an income will determine what quality of healthcare I can access; it might also determine quality of education my children can have.

Thus, the financial benefits of work cannot be understated – without them, many people would be and are unable to afford even the most basic necessities required for life. Beyond the financial benefits, however, work affords a whole host of non-material benefits that, although harder to pin down, are no less important. Anca Gheaus and Lisa Herzog, for example, identify four primary non-financial goods of work: attaining various types of excellences, making a social contribution, experiencing community, and gaining social recognition (Gheaus and Herzog 2016). By ‘excellences’, Gheaus and Herzog are referring to the wide variety of skills and competencies which we are given the opportunity to develop through work. In other words, work gives us the opportunity to become *good* at something: we could call this the good of “mastery”. This, in turn, has the potential to contribute positively to our own sense of self-worth and the way we are perceived by others around us. In addition, having the opportunity to excel at a particular set of skills and abilities, which are unique to the individual and her particular interests, desires, and personality, is, for many people, central to their conception of a good life. In addition to the list put forward by Gheaus and Herzog, Jon Elster argues that work provides the opportunity for active self-realization, the process through which an individual is able to freely develop and exercise the full range of her powers and abilities, as the individual that she is (Elster 1986).

Here I have highlighted five potentially discrete benefits of work: mastery, recognition, contribution, community, and self-realisation. This list is by no accounts exhaustive. Instead, I have tried to highlight a range of the benefits associate closely with modern work. Of course, identifying the benefits of work does not mean that all forms of work will ensure the acquisition of these benefits, or even that all work will provide adequate opportunity for them. As Gheaus and Herzog point out, one could achieve some but not others: “A lonely gravedigger can see that her work makes an important social contribution, while lacking any sense of accomplishing excellence, receiving recognition, or experiencing community” (Gheaus and Herzog 2016, 76). Further, different individuals may have different sorts of preferences and needs, when it comes to personal and social benefits, so not all work needs to provide them to the same degree. And work that fails on all accounts may be properly described as ‘bad’ work. However, articulating the benefits of work is important here because it shows that work indisputably provides a wide range of important, if not essential, benefits in addition to money.

**III. Two Criticisms**

Given the importance of these benefits, and the central role they play in most people’s lives, they can reasonably be understood to serve as the driving motivation behind a person’s choice to work. If employment provides such benefits, then in order to have the genuine choice not to be employed, people must be able to acquire them elsewhere. And they must have a free and relatively unhindered choice about where to do so. Without such a choice, a person may be forced to choose employment over other more desirable options, simply because a life without paid work would lack adequate opportunity for these other benefits. Thus, although UBI can replace the monetary or material benefits of work, its failure to adequately replace to many of the non-material, non-financial benefits that work provides raises the question of whether it could truly offer an alternative to the current system of work.

The reasons which compel a person to work may go beyond the need for an income. In addition to obviously exploitative cases where a person is literally or physically forced to labour, Kory Schaff points out that paid work can still be coercive in spite of an absence of explicit threat (Schaff 2019). A person can be, in a sense, forced to accept a work offer if they have no access to a better alternative and need the income to survive. He calls these conditions, conditions of “social unfreedom”, since they restrict freedom through subtle social pressures, rather than physical or legal force: “After all, without inheritance or other sources of income, most individuals are obliged to find (and keep) paid work in the labour market. Doing so is what gives them independence and self-sufficiency, features we typically associate with what it means to live a free life” (Ibid., 97). So while individuals are “apparently free” to choose from a wide variety of options for work, this is a set of options “the structure and consequences of which tend to exclude rational consideration of the alternative *not* to work” (Ibid., 97).

This might be the case if the cultural and social emphasis on work is so strong that there are very few structural institutions outside of work which allow a person to pursue these benefits in the company of others. Of those structural institutions that do exist, they may present significantly inferior or inadequate options for the acquisition of such benefits, since they have been culturally neglected at the expense of paid work. Therefore, such “social unfreedom” comes in a variety of forms. For some people, the ability to go to a place of work, away from their homes, is a matter of gaining independence and liberation from familial relationships that are oppressive or even outright abusive. This might include, as some examples, victims of domestic abuse, women who belong to families and cultural backgrounds in which women’s liberties are severely restricted, or previously incarcerated people who are engaged in rehabilitation programs. Such a person may feel that they *must* go to work every day, whether to protect their physical safety, to preserve some independence from the people who dominate their home lives, or to find a way out of otherwise oppressive circumstances. The benefits of work enumerated above may *only* be available to these individuals through their employment friendships or community. Thus, in these cases, the choice to work is not made free by the replacement of an income.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This line of argument, however, cannot decisively answer some of the responses commonly brought against it. Advocates of basic income will argue that it will always be able to alleviate at least *some* conditions of unfreedom associated with work because it reduces the pressure to acquire an income exclusively through work. And as Robert Goodin writes, “Time is the ultimately scarce good; and time is a crucial component in the fully-specified production function for any other good” (Goodin, 285). Thus, any income scheme that directly or indirectly offers the recipient more control over their own time will achieve this. Since any reduction in unfreedoms is better than none, and any increase in agency over one’s time is an improvement, it will look like UBI is still the preferable solution.

Further, work activities are not inherently special. Think about the differences between cooking for one’s family and being paid to prepare meals for someone else’s family in a restaurant, or between taking care of one’s elderly parents and being paid to take care of someone else’s elderly parents. Sometimes the difference is simply in the conditions of the activity: in these cases, one activity is compensated and the other is not. Thus, many of the benefits of work are not exclusive to work and may be found through other non-work, or unpaid activities, especially if a person has adequate time to pursue them through other means.

But you might think that there is something unsatisfying about the assertion that these benefits are identical regardless of where they come from or how we go about getting them. There seems to be something unique about work and the benefits it gives us. In what other contexts are our obligations to others so concretely rewarded, so explicitly signalled to and acknowledged by the rest of society? Through voluntary work, engagement in associations, or collectives formed around shared interests, we may find opportunities to do activities which matter to others in local or small communities.[[3]](#footnote-3) But it is largely through formal employment, and perhaps some commonly held forms of unpaid work, that our contributions are explicitly regarded as meaningful and important to the rest of our society.

In this sense, there may be an additional dimension to the benefits of work which I have previously discussed. On the one hand, through work, I benefit individually and directly from the opportunity for mastery, contribution, recognition, community, or self-realisation. That is to say, these benefits are important, if not essential, for my living a good life. At the very least, they are benefits which would improve, at least to some degree, any person’s life. On the other hand, there seems to be an additional category of ways in which work expressly benefits not just me, but the community as well. Work that requires collaboration, cooperation, and negotiation with others not only benefits the person who does it, but also provides what we might call collectivegoods.

Generally speaking, collective goods are those whose production and enjoyment requires a group or community, although individuals may still also benefit from these goods. Some collective goods are collective only by accident – their production require more than one person, but only because the particular arrangement of society and its resources has made it the case that it is easier and more efficient to work together to create those goods. Like clean air, a functioning public water supply, or accessible electrical grid, these goods require many people to work together to produce them, but they mainly benefit and can be enjoyed by individual persons on their own. Other collective goods require more than one person for their production *and* enjoyment, because the good simply could not be enjoyed if only one person were alive to experience it. Think of a good such as friendship, which requires reciprocation and collaboration by more than one person in order to be enjoyed by either of the individuals involved.

Returning to the goods which Gheaus and Herzog identify, ‘experiencing community’ or “the experience of doing things together with people with whom [I] stand in relatively free and equal relationships,” looks like an example of the kind of collective good I have described (Gheaus and Herzog 2016, 76). But I need to say something more, since this articulation focuses primarily on the way in which this experience of community is beneficial for the individual. It is also significant that work gives me the opportunity to pursue that benefit, and all of the other benefits I have mentioned, in the company of others, in a shared system of meaning and value. A labour market, or some equivalent formal economic structure – like a currency or a language – gives us objective standards about how to communicate and weigh the value of different activities against each other. And good, paid work subjectively connectsme asan individual to the rest of society, by making what matters to me matter to others and vice versa.

For now, I will call this benefit of work ‘integrated social membership’. In addition to its collective benefits, it has a dimension at the level of the individual: it is no coincidence that three of the five benefits identified in the previous section concern our shared life with others. However, ultimately, the two dimensions should be understood as interrelated. At the level of the individual, the social benefits are some of the most essential benefits we obtain through work. This is particularly true in the modern world when work dominates so much of our waking lives, leaving us little time outside of work to cultivate rich personal relationships or satisfy our wide range of social needs. Our ability to build substantial, fulfilling relationships with those we work with is therefore an important aspect of our wider success as social creatures. And as Gheaus and Herzog point out, the ability to contribute to one’s community and simultaneously be recognised for it can be a significant source of personal meaning and fulfilment, and therefore an essential aspect of positive psychological health and well-being.

At the level of the community, this integrated membership amounts to a formal, shared structure which allows for measurement, comparison, and objective valuation of member’s contributions to the community or society of which they are a part. This benefit not only has implications for individuals, but it may also affect the structure and cohesion of a community and society. Like a language, there is an internal logic to the system: in western, capitalistic economic systems, the concept of work tends to revolve around productivity, compensation, and contribution. Within that logic, even the most apparently useless or ‘bullshit’ tasks can be considered work if they are valued enough to be paid for.[[4]](#footnote-4) And we often take payment – a formal wage, a salary, a paycheque – as indication that a person is, in some sense, contributing to society, regardless of what their job or the activities associated with their job actually entail. Whether this is the *right* system, or a system that *accurately tracks the value* of certain activities, is another question entirely. But the fact remains that work provides some kind of institutionalised framework that allows us to communicate intelligibly with each other about how we value different contributions to society.

Although a guaranteed basic income can indirectly ‘replace’ the non-financial, non-material benefits of work by ensuring that I have greater choice about how and where to acquire them, it can do nothing for the loss of this collective benefit, the shared social context that a system of work provides. This is not, strictly speaking, a failure of the policy itself, since UBI is a solution which in some sense is only concerned with the problems of income loss at the level of the individual. But this failure does support the conclusion that UBI could only be one element of a solution to the problems that accompany a post-work future, because it cannot address the collective and community-based problems that will additionally accompany a large-scale loss of work.

This criticism echoes a point made by André Gorz, who has argued that a UBI alone is not enough to confer social membership (Gorz 1992). In fact, Gorz argues that such social membership – either in the ‘macrosocial’ political community of society, or the ‘microsocial’ community of a family, a club, or an association – can *only* be acquired through full participation in society, in which a person can feel equal to others. As Gorz writes, “To feel anyone’s equal, you also need to feel that you are useful to that society as a whole, and that it needs whatever skills or capabilities you may have.” (Ibid., 180). Therefore, supplementing the income of those who have, in various ways, been excluded from society cannot ensure access to membership, since membership depends on a fuller and deeper understanding of ‘participation’. Good work, on the other hand, is one of the main ways that we access and communicate such membership.

**IV. Solutions and Conclusions**

This criticism is not meant to suggest that the existing economic framework and current opportunities for work should be left unchallenged. But rather than thinking about how to replace paid employment at the level of the individual, as UBI theory has predominantly done, we might additionally need to think about how to replace the labour market at the level the communities. Kory Schaff argues that “[i]n the absence of work, and without a sense of worth that accompanies engaging with others to achieve a common purpose, a basic income will leave individuals without a major source of social interaction” (Schaff 2019, 108). The problem, however, is not that social interaction alone cannot be replaced through other activities. Instead, the problem is that many other forms of social interaction may not offer the same complex opportunities for self-realisation, self-respect, or building a sense of community, in the way that work does. That is because these social benefits “depend on standing in social relations with others, while lacking work undercuts the ability of one to stand in such relations” (Ibid.). A UBI, as a solution which targets the problems at the level of the individual, simply cannot confer a benefit like integrated social membership.

A basic income that is to some degree conditional on social contribution or participation may go some way towards providing a viable solution. Several authors have proposed models of participation-based income, where ‘participation’ is construed much more widely than simply employment or engagement in the traditional labour market.[[5]](#footnote-5) Tony Atkinson, for example, also includes “people engaged in approved forms of education or training, caring for young, elderly, or disabled dependents, or undertaking approved forms of voluntary work” (Atkinson 1996, 68). What is important about this condition is that it “involves neither *payment* nor *work*; it is a wider definition of social contribution” (Ibid.). André Gorz has previously argued for guaranteed income for all that is “linked to all citizens performing the quantity of work required for the production of the wealth to which their income entitled them” (Gorz 2013, 300).

Gorz’s proposal is motivated, in part, by the fact that, “[a]s the need for work diminishes, fairness requires that it should also diminish in everyone’s life, and that the burden of work should be equally distributed” (Ibid., 299). Imagined in this way, a participation income promotes and facilitates a society in which work is shared. This is not only because work can be a burden, but also because because it offers valuable benefits to members of society: “[Work] gives recognition, socialises, and confers rights, because it is itself required as an obligation. In this way, ‘work’ draws people out of their private solitude, it is an aspect of citizenship” (Ibid.). If the burdens *and* benefits of work are treated as ‘aspects of citizenship’, then any proposals of guaranteed income must be paired with – in fact, are likely inseparable from – proposals for alternative economic systems.

Participation income proposals and workfare schemes come with their own shortcomings, especially in regard to feasibility and implementation. Jurgen De Wispalaere and Lindsay Stirton argue that the challenges of determining individuals’ eligibility would amount to an administrative nightmare, with the costs of implementation so high that it would be difficult to justify such a scheme on a practical level (Wispelaere and Stirton 2013). And Gorz’s chief concern, regarding his own proposals, is that a basic income scheme conditional on participation will have the unwanted effect of bringing previously voluntary activities and ‘spontaneous’ familial or social obligations under the control of the market. This would thereby corrupt or contaminate those responsibilities which, in some sense, *should* be undertaken freely (Gorz 2013, 304). However, if UBI is expected to play a significant role in bringing about and facilitating the functioning of a post-work world, it must be imagined in tandem with, or perhaps simply as a component of, alternative policies which protect the integrative social benefits of work or promote new avenues for those benefits.

The fact that they are considerable, and perhaps irreparable, problems with our current system of work and the economic framework that houses it – a justification often employed by UBI advocates – only further underlines this point. Our system may be desperately in need of an overhaul, but if it is to be successful, that overhaul must take into consideration the fact that the labour market is not only a mechanism for income distribution. It also plays an important, if not essential role, in connecting each of us to each other and signalling the value of our contributions to society.

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1. Sometimes compensation for work is not given in currency, but in a pre-determined set of goods, such as food and lodging. For the purposes of this paper, I will consider compensation in this form to be included in what I describe here as the financial or material benefits. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are certainly milder examples of this kind of unfreedom – I once tried to become a farmer, until overwhelming social pressure from family members to ‘get a real job’ proved to be too difficult to ignore. And while it is tempting to dismiss milder cases on the basis that they are less serious affronts to freedom of choice than other examples, I think it would be a mistake to do so. It is, after all, society-wide attitudes about what counts as ‘real’ work and what does not that contribute to very harmful stigmatisations and assumptions about groups of people who do fail to hold down the former. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The fact that non-work or unpaid activities begin to resemble formal work the more we do them only underscores this point. The more time a person devotes to these unpaid or so-called ‘leisure’ activities, the more embedded they become in a social community that values those activities, and the more they become committed to carrying out those activities on a regular basis, the more the activity seems to fit our intuitions about formal work. When a person volunteers at their local soup kitchen sporadically or once a year, we would be comfortable labelling this as ‘non-work’. But when a person voluntarily *runs* their local soup kitchen, regularly advocates for community aid to the hungry, or engages in many of the regular activities that are necessary to sustain the institution and keep the kitchen operating, this no longer fits comfortably into those ‘non-work’ intuitions. Now, it looks very similar to formal work, only without the paycheque. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See (Graeber 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In addition to those mentioned, see Claus Offe and Jeremy Rifken (1995) as well as Diane Elson (1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)