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Unconditional basic income: why would we (not) want to have it?

Ethical Annotation #6

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Unconditional basic income, or basic income for short, is a weekly or monthly income paid by the state to every citizen of a country. It is unconditional, which means that in order to receive it, one does not have to work, or to be willing to work, or to fulfil certain specific characteristics, such as being disabled or living in long-term poverty.¹ Unconditional basic income is an old idea (see Van Parijs 2000) but is currently being widely discussed in public debates, both in the Netherlands and in many other countries. Proponents see it as a radical proposal that will restore real freedom to people living in a capitalist economy, or as a proposal that will put an end to long-term poverty. Opponents argue that it is an inefficient way to fight poverty and that the sustainable level of a basic income is too low to make a real difference.

This Ethical Annotation does not aim to argue for or against a basic income but rather to better equip the reader to form their own opinion. A judgement about whether a basic income would be desirable in the Netherlands is a *normative* judgement, which means it is a judgement about what is desirable or undesirable given the circumstances and given the other options for changes in the social system that are on the table. This Ethical Annotation therefore starts by providing an overview of the values and moral principles that are relevant in the debate about a basic income and that one needs to know about to arrive at a well-considered decision. In addition, this Annotation provides a critical analysis of

the (sometimes hidden) assumptions made by both supporters and opponents of a basic income. The aim of this text is therefore also to help people examine more critically the proposals for a basic income that are being formulated. This Annotation ties in with the report that the research team of the Centre for Social Policy of the University of Antwerp is releasing at the same time as the publication of this Annotation, in which they have mapped out the expected empirical effects if a basic income is introduced in the Netherlands (Boone et al. 2018).²

The structure of this text is as follows. In section 2, I discuss a number of methodological issues that are relevant for an ethical analysis of basic income. Next, a number of values relevant to the basic income debate are reviewed: freedom (section 3), poverty reduction and securing basic needs (section 4), well-being and quality of life (section 5), and social justice (section 6). These values are important for the analysis of all socio-economic institutions. In addition, two moral principles play an important role in the debate on basic income and require specific attention. An important argument or principle put forward by proponents is the principle of the shared inheritance of previous generations (section 7). The main ethical principle that opponents of a basic income use in their rejection of it is the reciprocity principle (section 8). The last section summarises how we can answer in a sound way the question of whether we would prefer a basic income to other reforms of the welfare state, the labour market, and the fiscal system.

¹ This is the standard definition of an unconditional basic income, but sometimes modifications are made to this definition. There are also proposals to introduce a basic income for couples at a lower level than two basic incomes for single people, as is the case in the current Dutch social security legislation. There are also proposals to introduce a basic income at the municipal level rather than at the national level or at a standard level across the European Union. In this Ethical Annotation we work with the standard definition, and adaptations are discussed when relevant.

² This Annotation will not deal with the specialist philosophical literature on basic income, since that would require the reader to have extensive knowledge about all kinds of philosophical discussions and concepts, and this Annotation is written for a broader audience. The main philosophical book defending basic income was written by Philippe Van Parijs (1995); for an extensive philosophical criticism, see Gijs Van Donselaar (2009).



In ethics, normative political philosophy, and related normative disciplines (abbreviated as ‘ethics’ in what follows), there is a method for making a normative analysis of institutional change. This method can be used both for changes that have already taken place and for changes that have not yet taken place but are being considered, as is the case with a basic income. The method consists of systematically identifying the relevant values and moral principles, analysing how the institutional change relates to those values and principles, and, finally, considering what other possible relevant effects can still be expected (Robeyns 2015).³ Thus, in order to properly evaluate and normatively assess a basic income according to this method, we need to know the following things:

1. What values and moral principles are relevant to the institutional change under investigation?
2. How *exactly* can we understand these values and moral principles (their conceptualisation), how convincing are they, and what reasons do we have for choosing certain values and moral principles?
3. What are the effects of institutional change on values and the realisation of moral principles? (To consider this we need to carry out empirical analysis.)

4. Once we know the answers to questions (1) to (3), we can weigh the various effects of the institutional change to arrive at an overall judgement.

What is described in (4) above — weighing the effects of a basic income on the relevant values and principles — is a normative process. Ethicists and political philosophers can provide arguments to suggest how this weighing can be done, but when considering the introduction of a basic income in a political community, it is the citizens in a democracy (whether a representative democracy or otherwise) who make the final decision: do we want a basic income or not? I will not comment on (4) in this Annotation, but I will try to clarify as much as possible which values and principles are relevant, map out how they can be interpreted and conceptualised, and what the insights from those analyses mean for the evaluation.⁴

By following this method closely, we are working within the domain of analysis and argumentation rather than the domain of persuasion and rhetoric, where political debates often take place. When conducting scholarly analysis, the logical consistency of propositions and reasoning is the most important aspect, as well as the degree to which one has strong *substantive* arguments (hence, reasons) for a particular conclusion. The aim of scholarly analysis is to arrive at a conclusion that is true — even if that conclusion is different from the one we expected or hoped for, even if that conclusion

³ This is not the only method available in the ethics of institutions, but it is a method that fits very well with how the public debate is conducted.

⁴ The report on the research conducted by the University of Antwerp’s Center for Social Policy Research (Boone et al. 2018) provides answers to the question listed in (3).

is unpopular, and even if we would prefer that the conclusion should not be drawn. In contrast, the domain of rhetoric is not about reaching the correct conclusion but about convincing others that a particular position is true. To this end, persuasion techniques can be applied, such as framing (Lakoff 2014), through which an issue is presented in such a way that it helps to convince the listeners or readers, even if the arguments give reasons for the opposite conclusion. The systematic method used in normative analysis of institutions deals with argumentation, not framing or rhetoric.

When we start from that systematic method of ethical analysis and look at the basic income debate, the following issues draw our attention.

First, we should seek *conceptual clarity* when conducting a normative analysis of a basic income (and other institutional proposals). For example, no one is against freedom and many people are explicitly in favour of more freedom. Values such as freedom are always invoked when evaluating a basic income, but this term is too vague. At this level of generality, terms such as ‘freedom’ and ‘well-being’ are merely *concepts* — general ideas. But each concept represents different conceptualisations — including the more concrete interpretation of that concept (Rawls 1971; Swift 2013). A basic income is often advocated because it is believed that it would lead to greater freedom — but, as we shall see in section 3, we can mean many different things by the term ‘freedom’. And the conceptualisation of freedom one chooses has quite a significant effect on the desirability of a basic income.

Second, we must take into account the underlying *unspoken assumptions* in normative discussions about institutions or institutional change. There are often implicit views of human nature underlying arguments, for example about what people can and cannot do, about the extent to which people are vulnerable or resilient, about the extent to which people can be influenced, and so on. These views on human nature can be more or less consistent with what we know from the social sciences and from the experiences of people who implement policies on the ground. Such views are used by both supporters and opponents of a basic income to reinforce their convictions, but this does not mean that they are consistent with what we know from research about how people act and make decisions, and what motivates them. An example of this inconsistency is the assumption by supporters of a basic income that many people see a job as a necessary evil and that people would be happier if they did not have to work in paid employment to support themselves. Opponents, on the other hand, generally assume that jobs, even if they make no net difference financially, have an overall positive meaning for people, citing the structure to daily activities and the social contacts they provide, as well as the positive effects they have on a person’s self-confidence and self-esteem.

The third point is the importance of looking at *human diversity and heterogeneity* when evaluating a basic income. This not only includes the question of what effects a basic income will have on people in different deciles of the income

distribution, but also how other groups would be affected by the existence of a basic income. Take the example of differences between men and women. Much of the basic income literature and activism does not take into account the fact that a basic income has different effects on men and women, even though this may have normative and political implications. Based on what we know about differences in the labour supply of men and women, as well as the gender effects of other policies that have enabled citizens to earn an income without doing paid work, the most likely expectation is that the introduction of a basic income will lead to a reduction in the number of hours in paid work by women and that the unequal distribution between paid market and unpaid care work between men and women will become even more unequal (Boone et al. 2018; Robeyns 2000). We could of course decide to ignore these effects. But potentially they have normative implications: the division between paid and unpaid labour is a political issue that goes to the heart of the demands of the women's movement and is seen by many philosophers as a question of injustice. In the academic basic income literature, therefore, a discussion has emerged in the last twenty years that has attempted to correct this absence of sensitivity to the gender dimension (see, for example, Bergmann 2008; Elgarte 2008; Gheaus 2008; Zelleke 2008; Robeyns 2000, 2001). In order to form an opinion on the desirability of a basic income, one must ask oneself whether it is undesirable if a basic income is likely to lead

to many women partially withdrawing from the labour market and taking on more care tasks (caring for children, parents, people who have a disability, or those who are living with a physical or psychological illness). There are different views on this, but the most important thing is that a careful evaluation should not hide this effect and ignore it. Section 5 elaborates on this example.

The fourth point is that the question about the desirability of a basic income should be answered in an *institutionally comparative manner*, by comparing a basic income with other alternatives to the welfare state using the relevant values and principles. This is what Barbara Bergmann (2008) did in her comparison of a basic income with a set of basic services: universally accessible good-quality education and care, generous parental leave, and high-quality child care (which are all lacking in the United States). This is also what Alfred Kleinknecht and his co-authors (2016) did when they argued in favour of basic jobs rather than unconditional basic income. Those who advocate institutional change for the sake of a particular set of values and principles should examine whether there is no other institutional change that scores better on the normative analysis. This was also done, for example, even if rather briefly, in the recent overview book by Philippe Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght (2017: ch. 2); the authors compared the basic income with other measures, such as wage subsidies and guaranteed employment.

The final point that applies specifically to the basic income debate is that only a *total package* can be judged. In the case of basic income, the devil is in the detail: only by clearly identifying all the relevant details can we make a responsible normative analysis of basic income. It is defined in terms of individuality, universality (everyone gets it), and unconditionality (differences in need and a willingness to make an active contribution to the economy play no role), but this definition leaves open how a basic income is financed, what the amount of a basic income is, and whether children would receive a basic income. For example, in some proposals, children would receive a basic income (in some proposals this would be considerably lower than the basic income for adults), but in many proposals this would not be the case. If a basic income is given only to adults, it matters a lot whether this is part of a total package of high-quality and low-cost childcare. If a basic income is accompanied by the withdrawal of such childcare facilities, it is questionable whether it is financially feasible

for both young parents to work (full time) if they so wish. The details of the total package are therefore important.

Another example of something that is often not made very specific is how a basic income would be financed. Someone might be a big supporter of a basic income based on the sale of the rights to emit greenhouse gasses until they read that it has been estimated that this would fund only a basic income of 75 euros per month.⁵ This underspecification of basic income also allows the idea of a basic income to be claimed by both the political right and the political left. However, the former usually favour much lower amounts for the basic income and endorse much larger cutbacks on existing elements of the welfare state than the latter. It is therefore important to move beyond the rhetorical discussion of basic income — because as long as we talk in vague, general terms, there is a very high risk of being misled by incomplete analyses or by merely speculative thoughts.

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⁵ According to the calculation of Marc Davidson (2015).

Supporters of an unconditional basic income often argue that the main reason for introducing a basic income would be that it increases freedom. In order to assess whether this is true, we should start by distinguishing between three different concepts of freedom.

The first kind of freedom is ‘*negative freedom*’: no one is allowed to prevent me from doing what I want to do. It is the freedom not to be hindered by others from doing what you want to do. This form of freedom is mainly defended by classical liberals and libertarians, such as Friedrich von Hayek (2013) and Robert Nozick (1974). In some circles, this form of freedom is seen as the only form of freedom, but ‘freedom’ can also mean other things.

The second important concept of freedom is ‘*positive freedom*’: the freedom to be able to make (valuable) choices and to genuinely be able to act on those choices. Freedom is a situation in which people are not only not hindered from doing something but are also actually able to do (valuable) things. Some notions of positive freedom especially emphasise the capacities that a person needs to be able to make well-considered (autonomous) choices, while other notions of positive freedom especially emphasise that there must be a sufficient number of valuable options available to every person. In liberal — egalitarian political philosophy, ‘freedom’ is usually seen as positive freedom, for example in the work of John Rawls (1971), Amartya Sen (1985, 1990), and Martha Nussbaum (2011). These philosophers criticise the emphasis on negative freedom

because in many cases it is an empty freedom — it is a formal form of freedom that still tells us nothing about what one’s valuable options really are. Someone without money has the negative freedom to buy food: no one will stop them from walking into a store to buy food. However, they do not have the *real possibility* to buy food because they have no money. Thus, generally, people who are poor do not have less negative freedom than those who are not poor, but they do have much less positive freedom.

The third form of freedom is ‘*freedom as non-domination*’, the idea that freedom consists of being free from the pressure of others to subject yourself to what they want you to do. In the Netherlands in 2018, examples that spring to mind are employees who work under a tyrannical boss and therefore do not have the freedom to organise their work or have a say in their working conditions, or a woman who is not economically independent and who feels forced to go along with the wishes of her dominant husband because she feels dependent on him and fears the negative consequences if she no longer lets him have his own way.

How could an unconditional basic income increase freedom? A basic income is an unconditional income for all, but if a basic income is paid for by taxes on labour, consumption, wealth, or profit, this will inevitably mean that taxes will increase for some. Higher taxes are a contraction of negative freedom, because those who have to pay them become hindered from being able to own the money they now have to pay in taxes that they would have been able to retain

in an alternative scenario. Theoretically, a basic income can lead to an increase in positive freedom for those recipients whose net financial position improves. In addition, people will have more options, such as the option to work less, to start a business, to do unpaid care work instead of doing paid work, and so on.

However, empirically it is very uncertain whether a basic income scenario, compared to an alternative scenario that costs the same amount and in which certain public goods and provisions are guaranteed, leads to more or less positive freedom. Proponents always assume that a basic income increases the positive freedom of people, especially those at the bottom of the labour market in terms of pay and benefits. But this is almost impossible to conclude, because to do so you would have to compare an unconditional basic income with a situation in which the same amount of money that is taxed and invested in the welfare state is spent on *other positive-freedom-expanding measures*. So if we invested the extra tax revenue needed to generate a basic income in making the public sector better and building services for citizens with limited positive freedoms, would this be more or less freedom enhancing than introducing a universal basic income? This question would be especially relevant regarding investments in public services whose quality and accessibility are currently suboptimal in the Netherlands: primary and secondary education, special needs education, and health care (both somatic health care and mental health care), as well as adequate and affordable social housing. Access to the legal

system and the services provided by the police are also under great pressure. These public services, among other things, are needed to allow our internal skills and capabilities to develop as well as to protect them from erosion in adulthood. If there are still major improvements to be made in the quality or accessibility of these public goods, the first question is whether these investments would lead to a larger increase in positive freedom than an unconditional basic income. This is the question that supporters of positive freedom must ask, but hardly ever do (or it is assumed that these public services are not needed, which is highly debatable).

If a basic income is not paid by the community in which it is distributed, it is of course a different story: it is then money that is injected into that community and economy from the outside. In that case, it is quite logical that we can expect an increase in positive freedom, a decrease in poverty, and all kinds of other positive effects, because we are talking about a net financial injection. This was the case in almost all basic income experiments that had positive effects on recipients: in Alaska, basic income is financed by the oil that is pumped out of the ground, so the money comes from a natural resource that happens to be there; and in Otjivero (Namibia), a basic income was financed by a coalition of foreign churches, trade unions, and private donors. As Bas van der Klaauw (2015) points out, those experiments would be similar to a scenario in which Germany started funding a basic income for the Netherlands. Of course, that would significantly increase our positive freedoms, just

as it did in most basic income experiments. But that is not what would happen if we started financing a basic income in the Netherlands from our own financial resources. There is a big difference between a community receiving a basic income that is funded by that same community (such as a country) and a basic income that is funded by outside money. Moreover, many experiments take place in areas where there is no social infrastructure comparable to the Dutch welfare state. In my view, Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017) and the team at the Centre for Social Policy (Boone et al. 2018) are therefore right when they argue that we should be very careful about what we think we can learn from existing basic income experiments. We cannot infer from those experiments that a basic income that would be introduced in the Netherlands and financed by the Netherlands itself would lead to greater positive freedom than existing or possible alternatives. This could only be concluded by working out a very concrete and detailed proposal, which would have to make it clear how the basic income would be funded and would need to include the relevant behavioural effects (e.g. whether people would work more or less if a basic income was introduced).

Proponents of a basic income also argue that it would strengthen freedom as non-domination. If a basic income is sufficiently high, this seems to me to be a valid conclusion: it strengthens the bargaining position of workers if they want to say no to an employer. They can make a credible threat not to accept a job or to leave a job if the working conditions are not sufficiently attractive,

or if the working conditions are deteriorating, because they have a basic income to fall back on.

A basic income also reduces (or eliminates) the dominance of those who impose the conditional financial arrangements of the welfare state on the people who need them. This involves examining and judging whether someone is really disabled (which is often stigmatising), whether the unemployed person is really trying hard to apply for jobs, and so on. This is experienced by many beneficiaries of these schemes as stressful, stigmatising, or humiliating — and at present the Dutch situation is that a person is dependent on the local welfare team member or municipal officer who will determine how needy they really are. These forms of control and assessment cease to exist with a basic income, so the freedom as non-domination of its recipients is increased. However, if a basic income is not high enough (i.e. lower than the amounts citizens need to stay out of poverty — which, for people with a disability, is higher than current welfare payment levels because of their specific care needs), citizens with particular needs will still need additional income support. In other words, if a basic income is lower than what a person with a disability currently receives by way of welfare payments, that person will still be subject to these forms of control and assessment. This also illustrates two points made in section 2: it is crucial to include human diversity in the analysis, and the details of the level of a basic income as well as the other components of the ‘total package’ matter before one can make a judgement about the desirability of a basic income.

There is a trilemma between three possible goals of basic income: unconditionality, eliminating poverty, and affordability.

An important set of values in the evaluation of public institutions and policies are about the extent to which they can protect the population from poverty and can provide some assurance that there will always be a safety net for everyone in case of illness, disability, or other forms of misfortune. These values, which are very closely linked, explain the enormous support for the development of the welfare state in the second half of the twentieth century. The welfare state has two functions: forming solidarity between people with different potential and opportunities, and insurance against risks that in principle could affect everyone. Examples of risks against which the welfare state insures citizens are unemployment, poverty in retirement age, and the consequences of illness or being unable to work. Everyone knows that by making a contribution through the system of social security and taxes, they can always be sure that a minimum level of prosperity will be guaranteed for all citizens and that this is therefore a sensible and fair way to share social risks among large numbers of people. If this insurance was offered by private insurers, they would have a strong incentive to ‘cream off’ the best of the market and refuse to insure the people with the highest risks. In European welfare states, nobody is excluded because this task falls to governments and not to private insurers, and all citizens enjoy a minimum level of social security and protection against precariousness. This is ultimately better for everyone (Heath 2006).

How does a basic income score according to these values? That is an empirical question. If a basic income is at the level of the poverty line and is not taxed, then in principle it should be able to lift all people out of poverty — because it does not have the problems of ‘non-uptake’ that conditional provisions have⁶ (Boone et al. 2018: 70–77). But can a basic income eliminate poverty? It can only do so if there is societal support for increasing the tax burden, that is, a willingness to pay (significantly) more taxes. The reason is that there is a trilemma between three possible goals of basic income: unconditionality, eliminating poverty, and affordability, understood as not increasing the effective tax burden or as not increasing it significantly (Martinelli 2017). A basic income can be tax neutral but not high enough to eliminate poverty; or it can be tax neutral and able to eliminate poverty but then it would not be universal, because it could only be granted to a limited group, for example people who are poor or at high risk of poverty. This not only has implications for the support base but also would turn basic income into yet another *conditional* provision that has to exclude people and for which control mechanisms therefore have to be set up or maintained. In other words, it would no longer be an *unconditional and universal* basic income.

If we make the basic income sufficiently high that it automatically keeps all recipients out of poverty, the big question is whether such a basic income is affordable. One can answer this question in a utopian way — by stating that in another, theoretically possible world, a basic

⁶ ‘Non-take-up’ is the percentage of those who are entitled to a social benefit or provision actually do not receive it because they do not apply for the benefit or provision.

income would be affordable. This states the issue about ‘affordability’ in terms of logical possibilities. Or one could push the question of affordability aside, claiming it doesn’t matter, because one might argue that we need to think outside the box or that we must simply come to understand that affordability is a purely ideological issue. But with those argumentative moves, we leave the field of normative analysis and move to the field of rhetoric. Those who wish to argue for or against a basic income in a scientifically sound manner must demonstrate that it is (not) affordable within the fiscal parameters that are (now or in the long run) feasible, taking into account individual behavioural effects and political power relations. Alternatively, the proponent of a basic income may decide that a full basic income is not feasible in the short term and turn their attention to thinking through reasons why some (or all) should be willing to pay more taxes. Once the willingness to pay more taxes significantly increases, the trilemma in which basic income is currently trapped will weaken, and poverty reduction will become a value that can also be addressed with a basic income.

The study carried out by researchers from the Center for Social Policy (Boone et al. 2018: ch. 8) can help us to empirically fill in these theoretical considerations — and this leads to a sobering literature for proponents of a basic income. The previously published microsimulations, as well as the microsimulations of the researchers from the Center for Social Policy, do not justify any optimism. In all scenarios that were simulated, the risk of poverty increased; moreover, the percentage of the population that is not poor under a current system but becomes poor when a basic income is introduced is, in all scenarios, *larger* than the percentage that is poor today but would escape poverty because of the introduction of a basic income. As economists have often concluded, in a country like the Netherlands, which has extensive protection for low-income families, a basic income is not an effective measure for reducing poverty. In countries that currently have no welfare state, or only a very weak welfare state, that conclusion may be different, because in those cases the comparison is made with a different initial situation.

Proponents of a basic income are failing to appreciate the possible effects of the introduction of a basic income in a social setting.

Another argument that is often made in favour of a basic income is that a better life is made possible if we understand quality of life in a different way. The focus then shifts from looking at participation in the labour market and taking our purchasing power as a proxy for well-being towards understanding quality of life in terms of happiness and a meaningful life.

In philosophy, a distinction is made between ‘welfare’ and ‘quality of life’. *Welfare* is about the material side of a person’s life, and disposable income (and wealth) could be a good indicator of this. *Quality of life* itself, however, also includes elements that are non-economic and non-material, such as public health, social relationships, the support of others that a person can count on, the absence of excessive forms of stress, having leisure time, having the genuine ability to care for family members, friends, the neighbourhood, and the natural environment, having access to (and good-quality) natural areas near to where we reside (forests, national parks, etc.) or which we use, being able to participate in politics and in cooperative initiatives in the community (local, national, or international), and so on. This idea of quality of life has its roots in Aristotle’s notion of human flourishing, but in recent times it has been mostly elaborated in the capability approach developed by Amartya Sen (1985, 1990). The basic insight is simple: how much money someone has, or how many material things and consumer goods someone can afford, does not tell us everything we need to know about

how high the quality of life of that person is. Many other factors, such as the quality of the rule of law, the specific set of social institutions that exist in that particular society, social norms, the material environment, and so on, determine what the quality of life of a population is.

Another common argument in support of a basic income is that it will improve quality of life because it will make people healthier, allow them to work fewer hours, and allow them to choose to do unpaid care work rather than paid work. It will also allow people to choose what they really care about rather than feeling compelled to take whatever job they can get because they have to make a living (this is the point where positive freedoms and quality of life meet and overlap).

This is certainly not an implausible hypothesis, but I think it is extremely difficult to say with any certainty what the effects of the introduction of a basic income would be on people’s quality of life. Again, it is important to allow for details and complexity in our analyses and to take into account the heterogeneity in the population. Let me illustrate this with two points.

First, in relation to *unpaid care work*, a basic income would allow people (in practice, they are usually women) to engage in unpaid care work rather than feeling compelled to take a paid job due to financial necessity. However, this is only the beginning of the analysis, as indicated in section 2. We know from the social scientific and philosophical analyses of care that it should not simply be seen as an activity that contributes to the quality of life of the people who provide it.

Providing too much care, especially informal care for sick, disabled, or people who are frail and dependent at old age, can be experienced as burdensome and can lead to a lower quality of life for the informal carer. A large part of the feminist struggle has always consisted precisely in arguing that women should be enabled to care less, allowing them to develop themselves more in the public sphere, and that men should provide more care (Robeyns 2011). However, the empirical expectation is that the introduction of a basic income will lead to an *increase in the gap* between how much men care and women care (Boone et al. 2018; Robeyns 2001).

Many supporters of a basic income do not find this problematic: they assume that if someone chooses something and that choice is not guided by monetary incentives, then that choice is the optimal choice for that person (for example, Van Parijs 2001). However, this libertarian attitude denies what we know from the social sciences, namely that human choices are also guided by a whole set of ‘social forces’ — social norms, patterns of expectation, traditions, existing power relations, and so on. This means that such proponents of a basic income are failing to appreciate the possible effects of the introduction of a basic income in a social setting where these social forces are present; it can have consequences for both the positive freedoms and the quality of life of the groups that are becoming relatively disadvantaged by those social forces. In the Netherlands, this problem occurs particularly in relation to the traditional division of roles between men and women.

The second additional complexity when discussing the expected effects of a basic income on quality of life is the question of what role *paid employment* plays in people’s quality of life. Proponents of a basic income often have a negative attitude towards much of the work that currently takes place in the labour market. But work also has positive aspects for many people, such as giving structure to their day, allowing them to form social contacts, helping them to avoid loneliness, boosting their self-esteem, etc. This is also one of the reasons why Kleinknecht et al. (2016) argue for guaranteed basic jobs rather than an unconditional basic income.

There are two different issues at stake when considering the different effects on the quality of life of two different institutional proposals: working towards high participation in high-quality jobs, versus a basic income. The first issue is the legitimacy of paternalism. The question is whether people always choose what is in their own best interest. We often make decisions without being able to foresee the long-term effects, even if there are such effects, and social scientific research can tell us something about those effects. For example, a complete withdrawal from the labour market around the birth of a child has a lifelong negative effect on women’s income, which does hinder their economic independence and increases the risk of poverty after divorce. So for most women (there are always exceptions and special circumstances) it is better not to cut ties with the labour market completely if they do not want to compromise their opportunities or their quality of life in the long run. All sorts of

other policies also acknowledge that if we were completely free, many of us (almost all, perhaps), would make choices in a number of areas that may not serve our own long-term interests or would make choices whereby we make a poor assessment of risks. This is why in several EU countries citizens are (more or less) coerced into having health care insurance and pension insurance, and this undoubtedly improves their quality of life. However, proponents of a basic income are usually very averse to paternalism. They often acknowledge that while people can make decisions that may harm their own well-being in the long run, each individual person should know what is good for them, even if that involves a risk of people potentially harming their own long-term quality of life. This again touches on the point of social forces, which can also influence our choices, and the question of whether we should take them into account in the design of policies and socio-economic institutions.

Another, and perhaps more ethically problematic, point is that if the choice were between guaranteed employment or a basic income, a lot of people on a basic income wouldn't be able to get a job anyway, because nobody would offer them one. Economic reasoning assumes that the price incentive is the main incentive people respond to, so if the price of labour (that is, the wage) people want to work for is low enough, people will always find jobs. But for many of the more vulnerable members of society, this is not true: there are hardly any jobs for them,

except for those created by social entrepreneurs or by the government. The developments that have occurred in the Netherlands since the introduction of the participation law and the closure of many social workplaces have proven this to be true: employers in the labour market have skimmed off the most productive among the disabled people, and the citizens that are most vulnerable on the labour market are stuck at home without any prospect of employment, without any structure to their day, with a decline in their social contacts and network, and possibly also with negative consequences for their well-being. And in the labour market in the Netherlands, where low-skilled work is less available and the work pace has increased enormously, it is questionable how much work the market will create for people who can only work slowly, need a lot of guidance and support, and are therefore less productive. But how easy is it to identify people with these characteristics and needs? It is not always as simple as being about people who are disabled and the disability being easy to determine; in the domain of mental ill health/psychiatric conditions especially, there is a very grey area between being deemed 'healthy' and being understood as 'disabled'. (I will return to this group in the next section, when we look at the value of 'social justice'.)



Many proponents of a unconditional basic income argue that it would achieve more social and distributive justice because a basic income would provide us with a less unequal or a fairer society.

Many philosophical discussions of distributive justice are too technical or specialised to be discussed here (see, for example, Lamont and Favor 2017 or Olsaretti 2018). For this Ethical Annotation, the following insights from the literature on distributive justice may suffice. First, theories of distributive justice largely agree on a number of moral principles, such as the principles that everyone should have equal opportunities and that people should not be discriminated against because of morally irrelevant factors. In addition, with the exception of libertarian theories, theories also agree on the moral undesirability of inequalities becoming too large, and on the principle that no one should fall below a certain minimum level of standard of living.

What does this mean for the basic income debate? You can only judge a basic income if you know the normative grounds on which you are advocating it. If justice is your main reason for advocating a basic income, it should probably meet the following goals: it should reduce unfair inequalities, it should reduce (involuntary) poverty, it should improve the prospects (opportunities, expected quality of life) of the least well-off (Rawls 1971), and it should not worsen injustices linked to social identities (e.g. due to racial discrimination).⁷

If we look at the effects of a basic income on the opportunities of the least well-off, we must first know which group would be regarded as the least well-off. There is no uncontested or simple answer to this question, but in my view three groups are likely candidates.⁸ Firstly, *children* who grow up in poverty. Because of their age and their developmental stage, they are very vulnerable and often suffer lifelong negative effects from the consequences of poverty. So how does a basic income affect them? The first thing to note is that it is striking that most discussions about a basic income pay little attention to the question of how high a basic income for children should be. Given their very high level of vulnerability and the fact that they also have great needs, especially for care, when we are developing concrete basic income proposals we should consider making basic incomes high for children — perhaps as high as for adults. This does not happen in the microsimulations that have been conducted, perhaps because providing even a low basic income for children would require a huge financial effort.

The second group that could be considered the most vulnerable and disadvantaged are people with a disability, who have limited possibilities on the regular labour market; I include in this group people with long-term illnesses, people with physical impairments that limit their capabilities and increase their need for support, and people with mental health and psychiatric care needs. Compared with many current proposals about how to change the labour market to better suit

⁷ There are much more sophisticated theories of justice, such as the various forms of luck egalitarianism; these will be discussed in section 8, when I analyse role of reciprocity in the basic income debate.

⁸ Another possible group that could be 'the most deprived' are refugees (documented or undocumented) and migrants. However, a basic income is usually only granted to permanent residents, because otherwise it would have too strong a pull-effect. If migrants were paid a basic income, they would later be able to 'earn back' an amount equivalent to the basic income through an income tax deduction, for example.

people with disabilities, a basic income at the level of poverty-level welfare support, or at a higher level, would certainly be an improvement. Yet these current proposals are already often unjustified from a justice perspective, because people with disabilities usually have significantly fewer opportunities than people without disabilities. However, we need to compare a basic income proposal with other possible proposals with the same budgetary magnitude. Economists have often said that a basic income is an expensive and ineffective measure because if you zoom in on only the groups that truly have great needs and wants, you can achieve much more with the same money. The high levels of ‘non-take-up’ remain a problem; and another question remains regarding the extent to which this group of people with disabilities themselves would prefer a basic job instead of a basic income (in the Netherlands this would require, among other things, restoring the sheltered workplaces which were closed after the drastic changes in the welfare state that were made in 2015).

The third group are *people who are homeless*. Their situation is generally even more precarious than the one described above (although there are overlaps). If no impossible hurdles are constructed that prevent this group from receiving a basic income (such as needing to have a registered place of residence, which cannot be a homeless shelter), such an income would seem to be a great help for getting their lives back on track. However, it is often argued that the first thing to do for this group is to ensure that

they have a home — which again highlights the tension between a basic income and offering basic services, in this case social housing.

If the primary aim of a basic income is to create a society with more social/distributive justice, and we follow philosophers such as John Rawls (1971), who argues that we should especially try to improve the situation of the least advantaged, then we have to ask ourselves whether these groups would benefit most from a basic income or from another set of measures. There is no easy answer to this question. As argued above, it depends on the details of the total package of government measures and their effects, of which a basic income is only one element. But it is important to underline that we should look at the question of the desirability of a basic income from the perspectives of these vulnerable groups.

The argument about collective inheritance

Values are the subject of much discussion in philosophy — concerning how to conceptualise (specify) a general value and also how to weigh values against each other. In addition to the values discussed in the previous sections, there are two important principles that play a pivotal role in the basic income debate. The first is the principle of the collective legacy of previous generations, which can provide a foundation for a basic income. I will discuss that principle in this section. The other principle is the reciprocity principle, which forms the basis of the main argument against a basic income and will be discussed in section 8.

The principle of collective inheritance states that a significant part of the wealth produced by the current generation is built on achievements attributable to (the efforts and investments of) previous generations. An important explanatory factor for the welfare that citizens can enjoy in a country is the quality of political and economic institutions as well as the general level of human capital in a country (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Those born in a rich, post-industrialised country are therefore simply extremely lucky — but they do not owe the enabling context in which they can earn their income (through work or entrepreneurship) to themselves: on the contrary, it was built up by previous generations. Moreover, successful innovations are based on the past efforts at innovation of our ancestors: this is a cultural — evolutionary process in which failures also play a crucial role (Heath 2014: 84–85). Thus,

a significant proportion of the innovation on which the current generation can build is due to innovations created by scientists and researchers who funded their discoveries and innovations with public funds; the moral ownership of that base on which to build therefore lies with everyone who is part of that political community.

The collective inheritance argument holds that this collective inheritance is a very important factor in determining the individual wealth that individuals can accumulate, and that therefore part of the wealth created on the basis of this collective inheritance should be distributed among all. Note that the collective inheritance argument does not say that the wealth created should be distributed *equally*. One argument for allowing inequalities is that compensation is needed for the effort required to generate that new wealth; this is a fairness argument (Van der Veen 2011). Another argument, which at first glance may look the same, is an efficiency argument: if we want this total wealth base to be large (or even as large as possible), incentives will be needed to motivate people to use their talents in those places where they can make a significant contribution to this total wealth.

This way of looking at the collective ownership of a society's wealth leads to a completely different way of thinking from the prevailing ideology in which we primarily attribute the successes of people, but also their failures, to *individual* factors. But that is an illusion. It is based on a social ontology that is totally at odds with what we know from the social sciences.

Those who appreciate that major causal factors of our successes are based on society and especially on the wealth created by previous generations can easily take the step of justifying a basic income on the basis of this collective ownership. According to the economist Herbert Simon (2000), 90% of people's incomes could be redistributed on such moral grounds. Even if this figure were to be decreased to 70%, Simon argues, it would still be possible in the United States to maintain all the amenities of the welfare state and still pay everyone an annual basic income of about 8,000 dollars (at the price level of the year 2000). This quick calculation is therefore much more optimistic than the calculations derived from the existing microsimulation models. So perhaps the big, and very first, question in the basic income debate should be: how strong is this argument about the collective legacy of previous generations, and how convincing is it?

Note that the collective inheritance argument does not necessarily have to be used to argue for a *unconditional basic income*; one can also use it to argue for a substantial investment in *basic services*, and for the public sector in general (Vandenbroucke 2017). Suppose it is possible to raise taxes on higher incomes, or on wealth, or on corporate profits in the Netherlands. Should our priority then be to make houses available for people who are homeless, to give the vocational schools a quality boost, and to reinstate the sheltered workplaces? Or should we give every person, regardless of their needs, a few hundred euros a month? The argument about collective

inheritance gives us a reason to redistribute wealth much more widely, but it does not give us an explanation for why this should be done via an unconditional basic income instead of a broader set of provisions for those who need them.

Suppose it is possible to raise taxes on higher incomes, or on wealth, or on corporate profits in the Netherlands. Should our priority then be to make houses available for people who are homeless, to give the vocational schools a quality boost, and to reinstate the sheltered workplaces? Or should we give every person, regardless of their needs, a few hundred euros a month?



The main argument against an unconditional basic income, in terms of moral principles, is that it allows people to benefit from the hard work of others and that this is unfair. An unconditional basic income is given to everyone, including those who could contribute to society but do not want to. Assuming that a basic income is (at least partly) financed by taxes on labour or other forms of income, this means that others have to work to finance it; the principle of reciprocity then requires that whoever can contribute should contribute. Anyone who does not do so is a free-rider.

To discuss this critique based on the reciprocity principle, it is helpful to distinguish between the reciprocity principle as an abstract principle in an ideal world (or in a model) and the reciprocity principle in the world as we know it.

When we think about *ideal* principles of justice, the reciprocity principle seems to be an important principle of justice. Everyone who benefits from the fruits of the efforts of others must be willing to make a similar amount of effort. Only those who are unable to make those efforts are exempt from this reciprocity obligation. In an ideal world, a basic income would therefore *either* have to be financed from a financial source that does not result from the efforts of others *or* it would have to be accompanied by the moral (or political) obligation to make an effort. This contribution can take various forms and need not be paid work: it can also be informal care, voluntary work, political participation, work for the community, etc.

In such general terms, the reciprocity principle is not controversial; many philosophers studying justice embrace the principle as an ideal. But the question concerns what this principle means in practice in Western Europe around 2018. Would the introduction of an unconditional basic income also imply that the same injustice would be caused by the violation of the reciprocity principle as occurs in the abstract world in which the ideal is studied? There are several reasons to doubt this.

First, a basic income could lead to increased labour participation, as people who are currently ‘trapped’ in welfare regulations are strongly discouraged for financial reasons to engage in paid work, given the very high marginal taxes on their income from labour. A basic income could therefore counteract the ‘inactivity trap’ and thus lead to greater reciprocity (White 2006; Vanderborght and Van Parijs 2017: 102).

Second, most political philosophers (as well as many economists and scholars working in other social sciences) believe that the current distribution of income and wealth is unjust. If a basic income would lead to certain people not doing (or no longer doing) paid work, these are probably the same people who, according to inequality researchers, are currently in an unjust economically vulnerable situation. *If* the introduction of a basic income would reduce income and wealth inequalities without significantly reducing per capita wealth, one could then argue that the injustice created by citizens not contributing would be outweighed by the much greater reduction of injustice due to a narrowing of the inequalities in income

and wealth. However, proponents of a basic income generally assume that a basic income would reduce financial inequality, but it is an empirical question whether this is actually the case. It depends, among other things, on the ‘total package’, of which a basic income is only one part.

Third, the reciprocity principle implies that those who can make efforts that contribute to the overall welfare of the community should do so; those who are unable to make such efforts, or who can only make a minimal productive contribution, are exempt from that reciprocity obligation. However, it is not always clear to an independent evaluator (or other third party) who falls into the category of being someone who is ‘not willing’ versus someone who is in the ‘not able’ category. Many problems in the field of mental health and psychiatry are seen by a layperson as a matter of ‘not being willing’, whereas those who know about the disorders or the psychiatric conditions are very aware that it is often the case of ‘not being able’. A basic income frees us from the need to make these kinds of judgements, which in the Netherlands is currently playing a role in the new Participation Act, in which the labour market potential of everyone with a disability and those with a psychiatric condition has to be assessed and determined by a governmental employment officer. Yannick Vanderborght and Philippe Van Parijs (2017: 102) therefore conclude that a basic income may be the least bad measure to avoid unfairly punishing vulnerable people by wrongly assuming that they are lazy and unwilling rather than concluding that they have a mental health/

physical illness or a psychological (or other) vulnerability that is not something they have chosen or can be held responsible for.

So what follows from this for the ethical evaluation of a basic income?

To some extent, there are arguments in favour of the reciprocity principle *as an abstract principle*.⁹ But in practice, because it is not always clear who can and cannot contribute, and because of large levels of existing inequalities that cannot be justified, the reciprocity principle is not an ethically strong reason against providing a basic income. One could still argue, as an ideal, that everyone has a duty to contribute to the ‘social product’ (the total, aggregate wealth), partly because this wealth is needed to support those who are vulnerable, who cannot look after themselves. This could be seen as an abstractly formulated ‘civic duty’ which forms part of the social contract (Robeyns 2011: 47–49). But because of the practical obstacles, this would only be a moral ideal, not an enforceable political principle.

However, the fact that there are (in my view strong) ethical arguments for allowing the reciprocity principle to play only a moral role and not actually counting and monitoring people regarding whether they meet the principle (in other words not introducing it as a legal or political principle) does not imply that there is social support for abandoning the reciprocity principle in practice. Given the increased extent to which more and more welfare state provisions have been made more conditional on participation and on proof that one is making an effort, it

⁹ There is a debate among philosophers and economists as to whether the reciprocity principle can be defended normatively or not. See, among others, Groot (2002), van Donselaar (2004), and White (2006).

seems very likely that a large proportion of the population also believes that people should not receive any form of benefit if they are not prepared to render a service to society in return. There seems to be a strong sentiment that one has to *earn* one's benefits; can this be reconciled with a basic income?

If social support for the principle of reciprocity is very strong, is a basic income doomed to be impossible to implement? This is not necessarily the case. One could opt for the variant of the basic income proposed by Anthony Atkinson (1996, 2015), a *participation income*. In this case, the fully unconditional characteristic of the basic income is somewhat weakened, and its recipients are required to actively participate in society by caring, doing paid work, or volunteering.

The disadvantage of a participation income is obvious: it requires the re-institution of a layer of control to check whether everyone meets the participation requirement. But one could, according to good Dutch practice, make the participation requirement law but *tolerate* any non-compliance. An alternative form of the participation requirement would be to randomly check whether people meet the participation requirement. This means that citizens can still hold each other to account if someone continues to contribute nothing at all to public goods and to societal welfare. The principle of reciprocity would therefore remain intact as a *moral ideal*, but by not having a fine-grained or general system of control, it would not make the implementation of a basic income more expensive.

For those who want to make society more caring, better, more innovative, or less hurried, a basic income is often a sympathetic idea. But those who take their task as citizens in the public debate seriously have to get to grips with the details and the alternatives before we can answer the question of whether we are in favour of a basic income.

This Ethical Annotation did not set out to list all the possible arguments that proponents and opponents of a basic income have put forward — that would require a whole book. Some of the arguments that appear in the public debate, such as the criticism that it would be a neoliberal measure that will ultimately be used to reduce the degree of social insurance and redistribution within the welfare state, and the question of whether it is desirable for citizens to be dependent on the government and the instabilities of the electoral process for their income provision, have not been discussed. For each of these concerns, one could consider ways in which one might address that concern without giving up on the idea of an unconditional basic income. For example, one could make a basic income financially sustainable by design by making the amount of the basic income in a given year dependent on the amount of total tax revenue in the previous year. In this way, everyone would have an explicit interest in a lot of taxes being collected, which would, for example, reduce the tolerance of moonlighting. The disadvantage, however, would be that the amount of the basic income is not guaranteed, and therefore it would not be a robust measure against poverty.

In other words, before we turn to the conclusions, it is important to emphasise that this Ethical Annotation has not attempted to be complete. But that does not alter the fact that we can draw several conclusions from the analyses and arguments that have been presented.

First, we need to know why we would want a basic income (or not want one): what are the values at stake? What are the problems we are trying to solve? The desirability of a basic income depends on how the different values are weighed against each other, how convincing we find the argument that our welfare is mainly due to what

previous generations have given us, and how strongly we subscribe to the analysis that the principle of reciprocity is not a convincing ethical argument against a basic income in practice.

Second, it is difficult to draw clear conclusions because many ethical arguments contain empirical premises, and we do not always know which are correct and which are not. As long as we do not know what the effects of a basic income will be, it is difficult to present a fully elaborate normative argument, and such reasoning is vulnerable to mistakes being made regarding the estimated empirical effects.

Third, we should avoid making statements about a basic income in general, because we can only make statements about the total package — the level (or amount) of the basic income, how it will be financed, and which other parts of the existing welfare state will survive or perish.

Finally, a considered judgement on basic income requires us to know what the alternative options are and to make a comparative judgement. It may well be, for example, that an unconditional basic income increases positive freedom but that another institutional proposal on the table does much better, or can achieve the same increase in freedom for less money and therefore would require a lower tax burden.

For those who want to make society more caring, better, more innovative, or less hurried, a basic income is often a sympathetic idea. But those who take their task as citizens in the public debate seriously have to get to grips with the details and the alternatives before we can answer the question of whether we are in favour of a basic income. Given the turbulent economic times we are facing and the great additional challenges we can expect in the near future, the basic income proposal deserves a fair chance as an alternative to the current social security system. But that requires that the debate be thorough and carefully conducted.

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