

**Review:**

***What's Wrong With a Free Lunch?*, Philippe Van Parijs**

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**Pierre-Yves Néron, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières.**

In many affluent countries, inequalities between citizens are increasing and according to many social theorists, its time to talk more seriously about the distribution of wealth and resources. This is what Philippe Van Parijs does. In many important works, he argues for a Universal Basic Income (UBI), which he sees as a radical innovation in social policy<sup>1</sup>. The general idea is that a government (say U.S government) should pay a fixed monthly amount, the same for everyone, for every citizen aged sixteen (or older). And it is worth noting that everyone means *everyone*: doctors, carpenters, lazy students, sports fans and so on. Under this kind of social scheme, all adult citizens of a society, *unconditionally*, would receive a basic income fixed at the subsistence level.

The book here in review, *What's wrong with a free lunch?*, assesses the arguments for and against a UBI as a solution to poverty and others social ills like exclusion and domination of small groups on the others. The book tries to provide answers about two important questions: Is a UBI desirable? Is it feasible? First, in his contribution to this book, "A Basic Income for All", Philippe Van Parijs presents his rationales for the implementation of a UBI. Then, fifteen commentators, including Anne Alstott, Brian Barry, William Galston and Claus Offe, discuss the merits of this kind of proposal. Some respondents are supporters of a UBI and others find faults with this idea, but every essay raises important questions.

***Why a UBI?***

The first argument for a UBI offered by Van Parijs is about justice. More precisely, the normative foundations of a UBI lie on a particular conception of the justice of the fundamental institutions of a society. According to Van Parijs, the basic criteria for the justice

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995; *Refonder la solidarité*, Paris, Cerf, 1997; with Robert van der Veen, "A Capitalist Road to Communism", *Theory and Society*, 15, 1986, pp. 635-655.

of social institutions is that they should be designed to best secure *real freedom* for all. This is what Van Parijs calls a “real-libertarian” approach to social justice. It is worth noting that such a view, a “left-libertarian” view, has two important features: 1) citizens of a democratic society should be formally free (protected by a fair system of individual rights) and 2) what matters is not only a good system of rights, but also the effective realization of those rights. In short, what matters is an assurance in the real value of those rights. For any supporter of the ideal of individual liberties, this real-libertarianism should be attractive. As Van Parijs writes: “A cash grant to all, no question asked, no strings attached, at the highest sustainable level, can hardly fail to advance this ideal.” ( p. 14)

The second argument for a UBI is more political. We actually seem to face a dilemma. Thinking on social inequality, we seem to have the choice between a combination of limited poverty and high unemployment, the European model; and a combination of low unemployment and widespread poverty, the American model. According to Van Parijs, the UBI is the appropriate solution to dilemma. The common wisdom suggests that we should start speeding up the growth rate. But there are good environmental reasons to consider this alternative as not desirable. Van Parijs believes that his proposal represents a coherent solution to tackling unemployment without relying on faster growth.

The third argument offered by Van Parijs stresses a link between a UBI and feminist and environmental concerns. He argues for a UBI in terms of “its contribution to realizing the promise of the feminist and green movements” (p.19). According to him, the implementation of a UBI has much to offer from a feminist point of view and can do an immense amount of good to women who are often economically vulnerable. As Anne L. Alstott writes in his comment on Van Parijs proposal, “Good for Women”, the women of a society, like the US society, face two important economic risks. First, they still bear, in a disproportionately way, the responsibility for child care and adjust their professional lives to accommodate family needs (p.76). Second, the inequalities of income between men and women remain. Women earn about 75 percent of what man earn. The actual sexist division of labour is unjust and we ought to do something. For Van Parijs, it is clear that the traditional social programs have failed to addresses adequately the problem of womens’ economic insecurity and the UBI is an appropriate alternative. On the other hand, the link between green concerns and UBI is that the latter is an appropriate way for tackling the “productivist” society, a society moved by an obsessive pursuit of economic growth.

### ***Remarks and problems***

There are a lot of things to be said about UBI. Anne Alstott believes that a UBI is “good for women” and represents an attractive scheme of distribution of wealth to address adequately women’s distinctive situation. The Van Parijs’s “real-libertarian” approach to social justice is also very attractive. After all, the foundation of a UBI is about *real freedom*, as Claus Offe writes, the “freedom of individuals to say “no” to employers and state agencies (to say nothing about spouses) without being punished through material deprivation” (p.112). Furthermore, Gar Alperovitz observes that the idea of a secure basic income can provide a new foundation for liberty. For him, “the main concern is with providing the individual with structural support for what might be called “real opportunity of choice”(p. 108).

Refreshingly, Ronald Dore suggests that a UBI is a good way to assure each person to have self-respect and dignity (p.82-83). In this sense, the implementation of a UBI could represent a solution to what we can call the “dignity-deprivation problem”, the fact that the actual distribution of wealth in many affluent countries undermines the self-respect and dignity of many citizens. I think this an important idea. The moral significance of self-respect could represent a normative ground for a UBI. An important motive for the egalitarian social thought has been concern about debilitating effects of material deprivation, not only on liberty or self-direction, but also on self-respect and dignity<sup>2</sup>. I think that we can argue the case for a UBI on terms of liberty but also on terms of the moral and existential significance of self-respect.

I must admit that I find the idea of a UBI relevant and very attractive, especially in a context of a “welfare-state crisis”. However, I must also admit that there are some philosophical problems with the Van Parijs proposition. In this book, some commentators reject the idea of a UBI on many different grounds. First, there are some problems with the feasibility of a UBI (see the Peter Eldelmen’s contribution). For example, a frequent objection is that a UBI would be too costly. William Galston reports a “suspicion” about the costs of a UBI. However, many studies show that a UBI scheme is feasible at an acceptable cost. There is many ways to reduce the cost of such a distributive scheme. For example, Van Parijs notes that a wide range of existing benefits can be abolished or reduced once a UBI is in place (p.22)<sup>3</sup>. Another objection is the “incentive problem”. The general idea is that the introduction of UBI would have perverse effects on labour supply and on workers

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<sup>2</sup> See Charles Beitz, “Does Global Inequality Matter”, *Metaphilosophy*, 32, 2002, p. 105.

<sup>3</sup> See François Blais, *Un revenu garanti pour tous : introduction aux principes de l'allocation universelle*, Montréal, Boréal, 2001. pp.112-148.

motivations. The response offers by Van Parijs is simple: “So What?”. He writes: “Boosting the labour supply is not an aim in itself. No one can reasonably want an overworked, hyperactive society. Give people of all classes an opportunity to reduces their working time or even take a complete break from work in order to look after their children or elderly relatives. You will not only save on prison and hospitals. You will also improve the human capital of the next generation. A modest UBI is a simple and effective instrument in the service of keeping a socially and economically sound balance between the supply of paid labour and the rest of our lives.” (p. 23-24). This is an important affirmation. It addresses the question of the kind of society we want to live in. And it suggests that we must rule out the “work fetishism” and break the link between a meaningful life and a success on the job market.

Another objection to a UBI is the problem of reciprocity, or the so-called “Malibu surfer problem”, raised in this book by William Galston, Brian Barry and Robert E. Goodin. The question is clearly raised by Gaston: *What about reciprocity?* Those who reject UBI can argue that it conflicts with the value of reciprocity. Why should we give a monthly amount to a young man who surfs all day long? This is, I believe, the main objection to the desirability of a UBI scheme. For example, Galston finds faults with the idea of a basic income on Rawlsian grounds. We know that Rawls presents his conception of a political community as a system of mutual cooperation. Galston believes that this point of departure is preferable and that the idea of a society as a mutual cooperation scheme shows the moral significance of the norm of reciprocity. Taking without doing anything is repugnant and it violates the norm of reciprocity. And Opponents to a UBI believe that this feeling is widely shared in common sense morality. In response, we can say that it is difficult to fix what would be an acceptable contribution to the cooperative project of a community<sup>4</sup>. After all, the surfer “contributes” when he is buying food, shelter and materials for his leisure. The surfer is not an atom. He is, like any others citizens, deeply affected by fundamental social institutions. Moreover, another question can be raised: Is a national community really a mutual cooperation scheme? On the another hand, Van Parijs says that, facing the “Malibu surfer problem”, we have to ask how many people can be consider *clearly* as a “freerider”, compared with countless people who spend most of their time doing socially useful but unpaid work.

In brief, *What’s Wrong with a Free Lunch?* is a great book. This is an exploration of fundamental social issues with great clarity, simplicity and intellectual honesty. This is a

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<sup>4</sup> See Blais (2001).

philosophical exploration on how we want to live, on what is a meaningful life and on what kind of society is desirable. Van Parijs and his respondents debate seriously about fundamental questions about the justice of our social arrangements. It is an important and useful book for those who are interested in moral, practical and philosophical questions concerning social policy.