

A Fair Free Lunch?¹

Reconciling Freedom and Reciprocity in the Context of Universal Basic Income

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“A society that relies on generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society, for the same reason that money is more efficient than barter. Honest and trust lubricate the inevitable frictions of social life.”

-Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*

INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s, the Canadian federal government ran a large randomized experiment in giving citizens a basic income called “Mincome.” When Mincome participants were asked “Why wouldn’t you go on welfare, even if it would improve your income?” 37% responded that they would rather support themselves, giving explanations such as, “Welfare to me was accepting something for nothing,” or, “I feel more useful working.”² Similarly, in a survey of 121 working Germans, most participants rejected the provision of a basic income, because it was independent of level of need or contribution.³ In both the scholarly discussion of basic income and in public opinion surveys, the unconditional freedom granted by universal basic income (UBI) seems to directly contradict the social norm of reciprocity. Reciprocity, most generally, is the idea that those who enjoy a share of the benefits of social cooperation owe a corresponding contribution to that society in return, as long as they are able.⁴ This concept of reciprocity is central to the idea of the social contract itself: citizens owe

1 A play on Philippe Van Parijs’s book title, *What’s Wrong with a Free Lunch?*

2 David Calnitsky, “‘More Normal than Welfare’: The Mincome Experiment, Stigma, and Community Experience,” *Canadian Sociological Association* 53, no. 1 (February 2016): 54.

3 Stefan Liebig and Steffan Mau, “A Legitimate Guaranteed Minimum Income?” in *Promoting Income Security as a Right: Europe and North America*, ed. Guy Standing, 210-224. (London: Anthem, 2004), 210.

4 Catriona Mackenzie, *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, s.v. “Reciprocity,” Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

to each other some degree of cooperation in order to receive social benefits.

Is it possible to reconcile reciprocity and freedom in this context? If so, how? I argue that UBI succeeds in reconciling reciprocity and freedom by making its definition more inclusive, and by restricting our definition of freedom to a more morally defensible conception of republican freedom, all while endowing trust in participants. First, I briefly define basic income. Second, I explain the ethical conflict inherent between freedom and reciprocity as discussed by contemporary basic income scholars, primarily Stuart White and Philippe Van Parijs. Third, I argue that republican freedom deserves moral priority over real freedom in a non-ideal society. Fourth, I argue that a more egalitarian and inclusive conceptualization of reciprocity is required for justice in a non-ideal society. Finally, I compare UBI's efficacy in achieving this reconciliation to Anthony Atkinson's proposal of participation income.

DEFINING BASIC INCOME AND THIS PAPER'S NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

UBI generally has five definitional features: basic income is in cash, unconditional, universal, individual, and consistent. In this way, UBI is a significant departure from most welfare benefits in the United States. Existing benefits are almost all means tested and often in-kind (e.g., food stamps) rather than cash, given on a household basis (allowing for potential domination of one spouse over another), and conditional on the performance of paid work for a period of time—as is required by the Earned Income Tax Credit, Social Security, and Unemployment Insurance. There are also features of UBI that vary dramatically across proposals: the specific cash amount given, the frequency with which it is given, how it is funded, and the package of policies it entails. The exact features of basic income greatly affect the extent of the tension between freedom and reciprocity—for example, the larger the grant is, the greater the freedom of the individual, but also the smaller the impetus to reciprocate. For the sake of this paper, I will assume a UBI as a \$1,000 monthly grant, as is being tested by Y Combinator, a startup accelerator, and I will assume that UBI will be in an addition to existing welfare, save for the most redundant programs. I will limit this paper to considering UBI in the context of the United States.

As this is a primarily conceptual paper, I will not construct my argument from a specific full-bodied normative framework, such as republican or libertarian political theory. Rather, I will rely on the normative framework of an egalitarian policymaker interested in the principles of justice required for a non-ideal society, and I will hold that a nonideal society is one without institutions that fully correct

for unequal access to the means of production and inequalities of natural ability.⁵ The United States, of course, is one such nonideal society. As such, I write from a framework that (1) recognizes the inability of current institutions to meet the basic requirements of a social contract that requires all citizens, regardless of race, gender, or class, to be treated equally, and (2) strives to evaluate policies by their success in treating all citizens as moral equals while still protecting citizens' basic freedoms.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN FREEDOM AND RECIPROCITY

While UBI offers a radical but simple proposition to provide a basic level of economic security for all regardless of one's history of paid work, it also appears to contradict the social norm of reciprocity: the idea that those who enjoy a share of the benefits of social cooperation owe a corresponding contribution to that society in return, as long as they are able. The idea of reciprocity is often incorporated as a central tenet in theories of justice, such as in John Rawls's theory of justice as fairness, as well as in economic theory, as in Adam Smith's theory that reciprocity serves as a social invisible hand that allows the free market to function. On a societal level, one might say that citizens internalize the idea of reciprocity by performing paid work, paying taxes, and performing civic duties, while receiving government benefits in the form of public services, protection, and the insurance of government transfers in times of need.

Stuart White, in his book *The Civic Minimum*, provides a useful account of justice as fair reciprocity. In society's nonideal form where institutions are incapable of correcting for inequalities of natural ability, society must only meet the "threshold of basic fairness"—meaning that class inequality is minimized to the extent possible and that all citizens have access to jobs with above-poverty wages, opportunities for self-realization, and security against abuse and vulnerability. In a society that has met this threshold, citizens are required to reciprocate either in the form of paid labor or specific kinds of care work. One reason that White finds fair reciprocity to be essential is that it is both a product and stimulus of a society of democratic mutual regard, in which "individuals seek to justify their preferred political and economic institutions to others by appealing to shared basic interests, and to related principles that express a willingness to cooperate with their fellow citizens as equals."⁶ As such, White finds this form of reciprocity necessary to the social cooperation inherent in a functioning social contract.

5 Stuart White, *The Civic Minimum: On the Rights and Obligations of Economic Citizenship*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 17.

6 White, *The Civic Minimum*, 17.

Justice as inextricably connected to reciprocity seems to be critically at odds with the unconditional freedom granted by UBI. It is most at odds with Philippe Van Parijs's account in "Why Surfers Should be Fed," in which Van Parijs argues that the most central tenet of justice is not reciprocity, but rather "real freedom."⁷ Under this conception of justice, society ought to maximize individuals' ability to pursue their own conception of the good life, including what they might want to do in the future. This would imply that even able-bodied individuals who decide to spend all their time surfing (i.e., not concretely contributing to society) deserve a basic income just as much as those who spend time working in various ways to contribute to society and the funding of basic income. His argument centers on the following provocative thought exercise:

Consider Crazy and Lazy, two identically talented but rather differently disposed characters. Crazy is keen to earn a high income and works a lot... Lazy is far less excited by the prospect of a high income and has decided to take it easy. With the Basic Income at the highest feasible level... Crazy is rather miserable because her net income falls far short of the income she would like to have. Lazy however is blissful.⁸

Our traditional understanding of reciprocity would say that Crazy is being exploited by Lazy, whom we might see as free-riding off of the hard work of Crazy. Van Parijs turns this argument on its head with his Job Assets Argument, in which he asserts that jobs are an asset essential to real freedom, and that in our arguably non-Walrasian world, there will remain "morally arbitrary inequality in opportunity" between those lucky enough to be employed, and the involuntarily unemployed.⁹ Thus, it might be Crazy, not Lazy, who has unsustainable preferences, and perhaps individuals like Lazy deserve to live off of their share of capital rents that have been monopolized by individuals like Crazy.

Whether or not one believes Van Parijs's Job Assets argument, Lazy is still exploiting Crazy by free-riding off of the work of Crazy, thereby violating the norm of reciprocity. Van Parijs does not try to imply that Lazy is not exploiting Crazy; rather he argues that Crazy has also exploited Lazy in an equal if not more severe way. Crazy's exploitation of Lazy, however, is an issue that White finds to be based in the structural inequalities of society that cannot be directly solved by basic income. Regardless of whose understanding of asset distribution one believes, the debate between White and Van Parijs demonstrates that there is a clear and serious tension between reciprocity, as it has been traditionally defined, and real freedom.

7 Philippe Van Parijs, "Why Surfers Should Be Fed: The Liberal Case for an Unconditional Basic Income," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20, no. 2 (1991): 103.

8 Van Parijs, "Why Surfers Should Be Fed," 105.

9 White, *The Civic Minimum*, 156.

Real freedom, by definition, places the individual's ability to realize their own potential above all else, including reciprocal obligations. Thus, a basic income that prioritized individuals' real freedom could make no promise that recipients would make specific contributions in return if these contributions conflicted with the recipients' ability to realize their real freedom. To resolve this tension, it is necessary to critically examine what definitions of reciprocity and freedom are those most necessitated by the pragmatic justice of an egalitarian policymaker.

A REPUBLICAN RE-CONCEPTION OF FREEDOM

In this section, I assert that real freedom is the inappropriate freedom to be juxtaposed with reciprocity, both because real freedom is nearly impossible to measure and because republican freedom deserves moral priority over real freedom in a nonideal society. Republican freedom is defined as freedom from nondomination and independence from arbitrary power. Real freedom, as defined by Van Parijs, necessitates not only the negative freedom required by republican freedom, but also the resources and capacities to carry out one's will.¹⁰

First, it seems nearly impossible to measure whether or not real freedom is being maximized in a society, unless one makes the assumption that income can be translated to real freedom on a one-to-one basis. How is it possible to measure the achievement of individuals being as free as possible to do what they might want to do? While there are some ways to estimate achievement of republican freedom, such as the number of workers with basic protections or changing poverty rates, it seems impossible to measure real freedom without assuming that income and real freedom share a monotonic relationship.¹¹ Though we cannot expect an exact measurement of whether or not a society is meeting the goal set by a theory of justice, such as equality, it does seem important to be able to at least approximate the extent to which we are meeting that goal in order to reassess and reevaluate policies. For real freedom, this process of approximation seems impossible.

Second, republican freedom deserves moral priority over real freedom even under the most base egalitarian framework. Philip Petit defines republican freedom as nondomination, or the absence of unreasoned control.¹² Under a republican conception of freedom, the protection of individuals' negative liberty (e.g., the freedom from exploitation and violation) is prioritized over the protection of individuals' positive liberty—like the freedom to choose to spend one's day surfing. Elizabeth Anderson critiques Van Parijs for not considering the fact that cer-

10 Van Parijs, "Why Surfers Should Be Fed," 104.

11 Brian Barry, "UBI and the Work Ethic," *The Boston Review*, October, 2000, <http://bostonreview.net/archives/BR25.5/barry.html>.

12 Philip Petit, "A Republican Right to Basic Income?" *Basic Income Studies* 2, no. 2 (2007): 4.

tain freedoms might deserve to be considered more worthy of defense than others. In explaining what freedoms are worth defending, Anderson says:

What we owe [to each other] are not the means to generic freedom but the social conditions of the particular, concrete freedoms that are instrumental to life in relations of equality with others. We owe each other the rights, institutions, social norms [and] public goods ... to exercise the capabilities necessary for functioning as equals in a democratic state.¹³

In stating this, Anderson asserts that in the context of UBI, republican freedom is more morally defensible than real freedom.

To an extent this seems to be true. An argument for real freedom could easily be co-opted by the wealthy asserting that any form of taxation is an affront to their real freedom, which may consist of purchasing multimillion-dollar yachts. Cases such as this would seem to erode the foundation for a social contract grounded in some idea of reciprocity, as any level of tax or contribution necessary to fund the freedom of the disadvantaged could be seen as an undeserved attack on the real freedom of the advantaged. It would seem more morally desirable to an egalitarian policymaker to first protect individuals from base levels of oppression—such as a woman who can leave an abusive relationship or an immigrant who can leave an exploitative job due to UBI—before protecting an unmeasurable freedom to do that which one might want to do.

In Stuart White's ideal world, in which all citizens already possess egalitarian social rights and in which institutions have the capacity to correct for inequalities of ability, there seems to be a reason for thoughtful debate on the relative moral priority deserved by real freedom and republican freedom. Increasing equality in individuals' sense of real freedom constitutes a necessary later step in treating all citizens as moral equals. However, in the nonideal society of the United States, republican freedom is both the freedom most deserving of moral prioritization for anyone concerned with egalitarian values and the freedom that is most compatible with reciprocity. As demonstrated by the yacht example, real freedom will often create conflict with even the broadest definition of reciprocity. However, republican freedom will rarely create this same conflict. In fact, one might even argue that protecting people from base levels of oppression and domination empowers people to better reciprocate, rather than removing the impetus to do so. Once society moves closer to White's ideal society, it will be appropriate to reconsider the

13 Elizabeth Anderson, "Forum Response: A Basic Income for All," *The Boston Review*, October, 2000, <http://bostonreview.net/forum/basic-income-all/elizabeth-anderson-optional-freedoms>.

prioritization of real freedom. Until then, there is a hierarchical order of priority in which, to meet Stuart White's "threshold of basic fairness," republican freedom ought to be prioritized over real freedom.

AN EGALITARIAN RE-CONCEPTION OF RECIPROCITY

Although prioritizing republican freedom over real freedom has brought us closer to reconciling freedom and reciprocity, there remains the issue of what precisely we ought to mean by reciprocity. Reciprocity, most generally, is the idea that those who enjoy a share of the benefits of social cooperation owe a corresponding contribution to that society in return, as long as they are able.¹⁴ If we take the existing structures of welfare benefits in the US as a model of what it means to reciprocate in our society, then reciprocation largely means to have paid work, to have recently had paid work, or to actively be in search of paid work. Paid work, as valued by the current structure of policies, is elevated as the most—if not the only—legitimate form of reciprocity.

This constitutes an unacceptably exclusive form of reciprocity for a theory of justice concerned with treating all individuals as moral equals. Large parts of society are excluded from a narrow definition of reciprocity that focuses on the economic contributions made through paid labor in the form of taxes. The most excluded cohort is the severely disabled, who are mostly unable to obtain paying jobs to economically contribute to society. According to Eva Kittay, to assume (as does John Rawls) that individuals are "normal" and cooperating members of society and that justice for disabled individuals can be determined at a later point is to fail to meet a standard of justice in which principles apply equally to citizens capable of fully cooperating and those unable to cooperate.¹⁵ That standard of justice is one which treats all citizens as moral equals.

A second cohort that is excluded by a narrowly-focused definition of economic reciprocity is those who perform unpaid labor in the home, primarily women. This exclusion has been noted by feminist proponents of basic income who lament the androcentric basis of the current social safety net.¹⁶ The US welfare system is almost entirely built on such androcentric norms; a number of benefits are conditioned on whether the recipient engages in paid work outside the home, including the Earned Income Tax Credit, Unemployment Insurance, the Child Tax Credit, and to an extent, Social Security. Single mothers are particularly penalized by the system's current structure. These women are often forced to choose between

14 Mackenzie, *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, 1.

15 Mackenzie, *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, 7.

16 Almaz Zelleke, "Institutionalizing the Universal Caretaker Through a Basic Income?" *Basic Income Studies* 3, no. 3 (2008): 2.

taking care of their child and not having enough to live off, or working enough to pay for child care, not seeing their child enough, and still barely having enough to live off. Unsurprisingly, the poverty rate for single-mother families in 2016 was 35.6%, or five times the rate for married-couple families.¹⁷

A narrow definition of reciprocity that excludes the disabled, women performing unpaid labor, and others such as children and the elderly, is unacceptable under an egalitarian framework in which humans are to be treated as moral equals. To solely focus on reciprocity as an economic activity is to neglect the fact that such economic participation would be impossible without the unpaid and socially necessary caregiving work within homes. In fact, one could argue that such a narrow-minded definition of reciprocity performs the precise injustice that reciprocity seeks to avoid: exploitation, in which those performing unpaid and socially unrecognized contributions to society are exploited by those who are performing paid contributions enabled by unpaid, unrecognized care givers. Lastly, the number of people excluded from a narrow definition of reciprocity as purely economic will only grow to be more unsustainable in a future scenario in which available employment decreases and more are employed involuntarily or part time.

Basic income, by definition, does not depend on a form of reciprocity that only recognizes monetary contributions. Instead, basic income recognizes a more inclusive form of reciprocity in which recipients can reciprocate in a number of ways: child care, volunteering, civic participation, accepting lower paying jobs, and more. In this way, basic income not only acknowledges that there are multiple ways to contribute to society, but also is forward-looking in recognition of the fact that access to dependable, well-paying wage employment may decrease in future scenarios of technological unemployment.

PARTICIPATION INCOME VS. UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME: A MATTER OF TRUST

We have now clarified the moral priority of republican freedom over real freedom under the framework of a pragmatic, egalitarian policymaker, as well as the need for a more inclusive definition of reciprocity. A policy that prioritizes republican freedom over real freedom would presumably first focus on offering a basic level of income (i.e., an amount sufficient to offer citizens the ability to “say no” to oppressive environments and situations, but perhaps not enough to do all that which they might want to). A policy that rejects the current exclusive definition of reciprocity would either explicitly expand reciprocity beyond financial contributions to include specific forms of participation or be entirely value neutral in allowing for a variety of interpretations of reciprocity.

¹⁷ Kayla Patrick, “National Snapshot: Poverty Among Women & Families, 2016,” National Women’s Law Center: Washington, D.C., 2017.

At first glance, Anthony Atkinson's participation income appears to be the version of UBI which most directly addresses the tension between freedom and reciprocity inherent in basic income. Participation income is basic, like in UBI, but is conditional on "participation," which includes a broad range of activities ranging from employment or self-employment to education, training, care-taking, or volunteer work. The condition necessitates "neither payment nor work," and thus greatly expands what is meant by social contribution, despite not quite being value neutral.¹⁸ Conceptually, participation income succeeds at addressing the serious concern regarding basic income's threat to reciprocity by making reciprocity a condition of UBI. Furthermore, Atkinson's broad definition of participation mitigates most concerns about the groups that are arbitrarily excluded from current interpretations of reciprocity. Of course, practically enforcing the conditions of participation income would be a public administration nightmare. It would be impossible for a government to measure whether or not a citizen made their "quota" of contribution hours for a month without enacting an immense surveillance state that would deprive from citizens the very freedom that basic income is supposed to expand. Nevertheless, participation income succeeds in providing a useful framing mechanism by which UBI proponents can assuage public concerns regarding the effect of basic income on traditional reciprocity.

However, there is also a normative trade-off for this improved political framing. By making income conditional on immeasurable outcomes, rather than trusting citizens' own sense of justice to constructively contribute to society, participation income fails to endow citizens with trust. This notion is both unreasonable and undesirable. It is unreasonable to think that citizens will wholly stop constructively contributing to society if the cash amount is in fact "basic"; one would only be able to live an extremely simple life off of \$12,000 per year (it should be noted that the federal poverty level income for a family of four is \$24,600, or about \$12,300 per adult). It is undesirable because participation income continues to rely on the norm of distrust that is a foundation for today's conditional welfare system. If UBI is to constitute the beginnings of a new, more just social contract, that contract cannot be created without the development of trust.

In his essay "How can we trust our fellow citizens?" Claus Offe defines trust as "the belief that others, through their action or inaction, will contribute to my/our well-being and refrain from inflicting damage upon me/us."¹⁹ Offe notes that trust is often self-stabilizing; in other words, being trusted creates within us moral obligations that make us act in a trustworthy fashion in return. There

18 Anthony Atkinson, "The Case for a Participation Income," *The Political Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (January 1996): 69

19 Claus Offe, "How Can We Trust Our Fellow Citizens?" in *Democracy and Trust*, ed. Mark Warren (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 47.

is already some degree of empirical evidence that unconditional income creates self-stabilizing trust. For example, in a World Bank report reviewing 19 global experiments in unconditional cash income, only one study showed a statistically significant increase in the purchase of temptation goods such as alcohol and tobacco. Many studies actually showed statistically significant decreases in consumption of alcohol and tobacco. This result seems to further suggest that when people are trusted, they often act according to the moral obligations that receiving that trust creates.²⁰ Furthermore, in the Canadian Mincome experiment, participants stated they felt greater trust in their government and in themselves, with one respondent saying that “[basic income] trusts the Canadian people and leaves a man or woman, their pride.”²¹

Alaska’s Permanent Dividend program offers insights similar to those of the Canadian Mincome experiment. Due to abundant oil production and revenue, the Alaskan government has, since the 1980s, paid out an annual dividend of around \$1,000 to all eligible Alaskan residents. The majority of residents in Alaska now say that that they would prefer higher taxes as opposed to ending the Alaska Permanent Dividend,²² indicating a new trust in government and fellow citizens. Economic research has recently showed that the Alaska Permanent Dividend has had no effect on full-time employment, and has actually increased part-time work by 17%.²³ The experiments in Canada and Alaska not only show that basic income has the potential to increase trust in others and the government, but also that there is little evidence of unconditional basic income negatively affecting economic reciprocity.

As early experiments in basic income are beginning to show, the statement of trust made by unconditional income may reinforce the very reciprocity that many are concerned the unconditionality in basic income will destruct. Thus, while participation income provides useful political framing that connects basic income to reciprocity and boldly expands our definition of reciprocity, it fails to constitute either a practicable policy solution or an ideal toward which we ought to strive as a society. If we truly desire to create a fairer, more inclusive social contract, it must begin with trusting our fellow citizens. UBI is precisely the policy

20 David Evans and Anna Popova, “Cash Transfers and Temptation Goods: A Review of Global Evidence,” World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 6886, The World Bank Africa Region, Office of the Chief Economist, Washington, D.C., 2014: 23.

21 David Calnitsky, “‘More Normal than Welfare’: The Mincome Experiment, Stigma, and Community Experience,” *Canadian Sociological Association* 53, no. 1 (February 2016): 61.

22 Michael Coren, “Alaska Shows Even People in the Most Conservative States Prefer a Basic Income to Lower Taxes,” *Quartz*, June 30, 2017.

23 Damon Jones and Ioana Marinescu, “The Labor Market Impacts of Universal and Permanent Cash Transfers: Evidence from the Alaska Permanent Fund,” NBER Working Paper No. 24312, The National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, 2018.

with which to create that new standard of trust. As experiments demonstrate, that trust will likely pay off.

CONCLUSION

I have shown that, for a theory of justice striving to treat individuals as moral equals, a republican conception of freedom is more appropriate than a conception of real freedom. I have also shown that current definitions of reciprocity are inadequate in treating all individuals as moral equals. I have compared the capacity of unconditional basic income and participation income to respond to this tension, and have asserted that only unconditional basic income succeeds in rectifying an exclusionary social contract by endowing all participants with trust.

As the social contract currently exists, UBI may not be the most efficient way to reduce inequality. However, only UBI provides the groundwork for a new social contract in which not only freedom and reciprocity are reconcilable, but citizens are also trusted to meaningfully contribute to society. If current experiments in basic income continue and do not significantly diverge from the findings of ones previously conducted in Africa, Alaska, and Canada, this normative conclusion will continue to be furnished with empirical evidence about the self-stabilizing nature of trust endowed by UBI.

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