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In search of philosophical foundations for the universal grant

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Preamble. This is the outline of a paper which is to serve as background reading for a postgraduate seminar on *Les fondements philosophiques de l'allocation universelle* to be held at the Université Catholique de Louvain in February-March 1989, itself meant as preparation for the international conference on "Liberty, Equality, Ecology. Around the philosophical foundations of the universal grant", scheduled to take place in Louvain-la-Neuve on 1-2 September 1989. In this outline, I limit myself to mentioning five major ethical perspectives from which a universal grant might be justified (and from which I thought at some point that it could) and to sketching, in each case, the nature of the argument. But first a couple of words on why we should bother with such arguments.

Why philosophy matters. The sort of philosophizing that is required by a serious discussion of the universal grant proposal is glaringly different from, and significantly less comfortable than, vague spiritualistic day-dreaming. What is needed is tough, ruthless, systematic thinking which enables us to deal adequately with the most indignant objections to the desirability of a universal grant, such as "Why the hell should I pay taxes out of my hard won earnings in order to enable a crowd of able-bodied lieabouts to spend their lives in self-indulgence and idleness?" or "Why on Earth should one get more doing nothing in Brussels than working oneself into the grave in Calcutta?" In order to successfully campaign for the universal grant (not just vote for it or cash it in), one needs to be able to say more than just "I'm for it, because I shall, or at least may, gain from it". One needs to be able to defensibly say "We must be for it, because it is fair." This is where ethics comes in. Among conceptions of a just society currently defended and discussed, is there any one which offers serious prospects of justifying a universal grant?

1. Utilitarianism and the conservationist argument. A universal grant would be justified, on utilitarian grounds, if it could be expected to maximize the average level of welfare. There are well-known utilitarian arguments in favour of income redistribution - based, for example, on the diminishing marginal utility of income, on the disutility of envy (for those experiencing it), or on the disutility of abject poverty (for those witnessing it). But why should a utilitarian require this redistribution to take the form of an unconditional income (in particular, without any willingness-to-work condition)? One answer some have suggested (e.g. Johnson 1973: 181; Stoleru 1974: 306-308; Cook 1979: 6; etc.) is that welfare considerations make it desirable to reduce the growth of production. To reduce the pressure towards more growth, it is essential to loosen the connection between contribution to production and share in the product - to "uncouple work and income" -, which is exactly what a universal grant achieves.

2. Libertarianism and the common ownership of the earth. A just distribution of income, from a libertarian standpoint, is one which is the outcome of a history of legitimate acquisitions and voluntary transfers of entitlements. How could anything as "patterned" as a universal grant be justified on such grounds?

If there is any chance, it must be in connection with rights over natural resources, i.e. over things which were once no human being's property. Some libertarians consider that such resources are not just up for grabs, but that appropriating them is subject to compensating anyone rendered worse off as a result of no longer being able to use them (Nozick 1974, inspired by Locke 1690 and Fourier 1836), or subject to giving everyone else a fair share in the fruits of such appropriation (Brody 1983), or again, most radically, subject to giving everyone an equal share of the "raw" value of all appropriated natural resources (Steiner 1977, inspired by Paine 1796 and George 1879). Should not such compensations, being the fulfilment of some right, take the form of a universal grant?

3. Marxism and the capitalist road to communism. If Marxist ethics basically consists in condemning the exploitation of workers by non-workers and in justifying socialism on this ground, there is no way in which it could provide foundations for a universal grant. Things are very different, however, if instead socialism is not defended on grounds of justice, but viewed as a sheer instrument for achieving the true goal of full communism. Under full communism, the product is no longer distributed to any extent according to (labour) contribution, but entirely according to (objective) need (see Marx 1875). In other words, full communism simply consists in the whole social income taking the form of universal grants. The introduction of a universal grant and its gradual increase as a proportion of average income can therefore be viewed, even in a capitalist context, as a route to the Marxist ideal, thus characterized (van der Veen & Van Parijs 1986).

4. Rawlsian liberalism and the maximin of primary goods. John Rawls' (1971) theory of justice requires that social and economic advantages be distributed in such a way that those allotted to the most disadvantaged be as substantial as possible, subject to the constraint that neither basic liberties nor chances (with given talents) be unequally distributed. At first sight, this would only seem to justify the introduction of something like a (conditional) minimum income at the highest feasible level. However, Rawls spells out the social and economic advantages he has in mind: income and wealth, power and prerogatives, and the social bases of self respect. A close look at this list provides a strong case for being able to invoke Rawls's theory in order to justify giving the minimum income the specific form of a universal grant, especially if one bears in mind that it provides no further criterion for determining what constitutes a fair distribution of burdens and advantages of social cooperation (Van Parijs 1988).

5. Dworkinian liberalism and equality of resources. In two rightly famous articles, Ronald Dworkin (1981a,b) argues that a defensible version of egalitarianism must defend the equalization of resources (rather than of welfare or income), i.e. of whatever is given to a person by means of which (s)he can pursue her ends, whatever they are. As far as the external resources left by the previous generation are concerned, this could arguably justify a universal grant at the highest possible level that can be financed exclusively out of taxes on bequest and gift. On the other hand, Dworkin insists that internal resources (talents) should also be drawn into the picture. And the transfer system called forth by the objective of equalizing such resources is bound to look very different from a universal grant system, as it must aim to compensate the less talented for their lack of resources at the expense of the more talented. Outside the "Walrasian" world of textbook economics, however, there is a major third type of resource which must be taken into account: the holding of a job. The equalization (or "maximinning") of all three types of resources taken jointly, arguably provides a case for a universal grant at the highest sustainable level.

Thesis for discussion. The view I currently hold is that none of these approaches provides an adequate justification for a universal grant at a decent level, either because the principle of justice it puts forward is open to fatal objections, or because it does not really entail the legitimacy of a universal grant, or both - except (possibly) the last one.

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