

**Review of Axel Gosseries and Yannick Vanderborght's  
*Arguing about justice: essays for Philippe Van Parijs.*  
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What better way to pay tribute to a unique and innovative philosopher than by asking his dissenters, disciples, and colleagues to write about his contributions? This is the idea that Yannick Vanderborght and Axel Gosseries—Philippe Van Parijs's colleagues at the Hoover Chair in Economic and Social Ethics at the Université Catholique de Louvain—have carried out for Van Parijs's sixtieth birthday. As they explain in their foreword, "We thought Philippe would prefer a book to a cake. We also wanted to make sure he did not [already] have the book—not an easy task" (p. 35). Reading *Arguing about justice*, one wonders how Van Parijs must have felt reading a book that mentions his name two hundred times. His expression must have fluctuated a great deal—intermittently blushing, smiling, frowning and sighing. The fifty contributors all talk about Van Parijs with admiration, even when their praise paves the way to criticism. But the simple fact that so many writers were willing to participate in the volume and engage with Van Parijs's key ideas tells us much about both his contribution to the field and the personal esteem in which he is held. As a tribute the book is a self-evident success. It does justice to Van Parijs's eclectic oeuvre and testifies to the feelings of friendship he inspires in people.

The edited collection opens with a very helpful foreword by the editors. The forty-one short articles that follow are sorted alphabetically rather than thematically. As a result, locating papers on a single topic—say, universal basic income—requires leafing through papers on linguistic and territorial justice, education and health policy, the media, Marx, gender justice, family policy, the relevant time-unit for equality and freedom, and many more. The collection takes the reader from a discussion of the challenges the internet raises for journalism (Bruce Ackerman), to a paper on Van Parijs's analogy between jobs and marriages (Anne Alstott), to a reflection on the implications of the whole life view for designing distribution (Ian Carter), to a paper exploring

our tendency to blame and stigmatise survivors (Jean-Michel Chaumont). Many articles are particularly remarkable for their original approaches to their objects of study—such as the portrayal of a society in which Marx and Freud never lived (Jon Elster), a simulation involving turtles being allocated an unconditional basic sugar income (Paul-Marie Boulanger), and a discussion of cities as worthy objects of political philosophy (Daniel Weinstock).

Through this broad diversity of topics and methods, the articles paint a multi-faceted and rich picture of the eclectic philosopher to whom their essays are dedicated. Overall, the articles are refreshing, original, thought-provoking, and sometimes confounding to those who endorse Van Parijs's approach. The shortness of the contributions has an interesting incentivizing effect: one is more tempted to read articles one would otherwise ignore. This incentive is further reinforced by the fact that the abstracts printed above each article are in many different languages (including French, Dutch, Catalan, and Esperanto). This nod to Van Parijs's recent interest for linguistic justice also has the side effect of teasing the reader into examining the articles themselves in order to find out what they are about. This intrigue-inducing effect may lead readers to consider topics otherwise dismissed as uninteresting or irrelevant to their own intellectual pursuits.

Writing a review on such mosaic of papers is not an easy task. The main problem is to decide which approach to adopt—zooming in or out. While adopting a general standpoint risks overlooking precious nuggets contained in the articles, zooming in might lead the reviewer to misrepresent the big picture of the collection—including its general coherence and unifying features. For this reason, I have decided on a compromise. In the remainder of this review I will focus on the topic of universal basic income (UBI). I will mainly focus on four chapters epitomizing what I take to be the core theoretical and practical difficulties faced by the basic income movement: the limits of instrumental justifications (Christian Arnsperger and Warren A. Johnson); the tension between ideal and pragmatic approaches (Denis Clerc); the practicalities of implementation (Eduardo Matarazzo Suplicy); and the challenge of mobilising communities and building support (Bill Jordan).

Arnsperger and Johnson offer a defence of UBI “as an equal opportunity tool in the transition toward sustainability” (p. 61). They contend, ambitiously, that *true* equality of opportunity includes

the freedom to produce and live outside of capitalist markets. Since such equality of opportunity is a fundamental human right, we should feel discriminated against when it is denied to us. Endorsing a Marxist conception of human flourishing that regards our productive and creative nature as essential, they call for a basic income to enable non-capitalist experiments:

the real freedom—to freely choose not just some intra-capitalist life style (e.g., becoming a marketing agent rather than a bank director, or creating one’s own capitalist software company instead of working for Google) but to choose between an intra-capitalist way of life and an extra-capitalist one (e.g., moving to an ecovillage and exchanging goods and services within a network of user[s] of mutual-credit currency, instead of staying in the hyper-competitive agrochemicals company with whose salary one can consume all one’s fill) (p. 63).

Arnsperger and Johnson argue that ‘marginal’ people who explore frugal modes of living are currently unfairly stigmatised. On the contrary, they should be encouraged as pioneers since they experiment with the humanly and environmentally sustainable lifestyles that societies need to transition to. The authors’ version of the UBI—the Economic Transition Income (ETI)—is meant to promote such alternative experiments.

While the first line of Arnsperger and Johnson’s argument is a radical but fair interpretation of the requirements of Van Parijs’s real libertarianism, the second line of their argument seems to depart from it. On real libertarianism, UBI should be truly unconditional and not aimed at supporting certain kinds of behaviours that make us all better off. The authors’ view that “the will to experiment needs to be triggered” (p. 68) thus seems to conflict with the very extensive notion of freedom they defend, and also, surely, with Van Parijs’s conception of ‘real freedom’ as the freedom to do whatever one might want to do.

One could argue that this is merely a theoretical problem: in the political struggle to implement UBI, a variety of non-necessarily consistent arguments might point in the same direction. The persistent problem, however, is that the two theoretical underpinnings can lead to very different forms of basic income being put into practice. While we may welcome the implementation of a basic income for those who experiment with sustainable economic alternatives, we lose out a great deal if *only* such activities are considered as deserving a UBI. In other

words, if Arnsperger and Johnson really believe in UBI, they must be careful that their proposal provides *additional* reasons to support UBI instead of threatening its foundations.

Clerc shares an interest in the ideal of UBI with Arnsperger and Johnson, but he expresses strong doubts about the capacity of such a “big idea” to change society. Such radical and utopian projects, he argues, risk exerting little to no impact on societies because they seem inaccessible and because no politicians will want to take such risks. He explains:

In the face of resistance and criticism, Philippe Van Parijs (and Yannick Vanderborght) have bravely defended BI, but they did so by increasing the depth and refinement of their project, rather than by making it more accessible in debate with their critics, and thus condemned themselves forever to sow on stony ground (p. 169).

Clerc raises interesting and fundamental questions about the role of ideal principles. He argues that supporters of UBI should only fight to bring about a less unjust world. To achieve this modest goal one should support incremental reforms that pave the way to a better tomorrow, rather than big ideas. To illustrate his point, Clerc presents the French welfare reform Revenu de Solidarité Active (RSA) as an improvement over the former guaranteed minimum income, and as an example of the type of reforms defenders of UBI should fight for. He concedes that RSA is far from the UBI ideal, but argues that “we are getting closer” (p. 171).

I disagree with Clerc’s analysis of RSA as an improvement in the direction of UBI, and I think his own example shows why we do need big ideas. The former French guaranteed income support scheme (RMI) was a means-tested allowance of less than 500 Euros provided to persons without other sources of income. The RSA, on the other hand, comprises two allocations. The first is similar to RMI, but includes sanctions on those who do not fulfil their obligations or reject two ‘suitable’ job offers. The second is an allowance that tops up the income of those in work to help them reach a more decent monthly income. As a result, there is a clear incentive to work since recipients of RSA are always better off when they work, which was not the case with RMI.

Perhaps Clerc means to suggest that RSA is an improvement because it supports poor workers and therefore breaks the traditional divide between in work welfare-producers and out of work welfare-recipients. However, on many other criteria, RSA does not seem to be an

improvement. The new emphasis on sanctions for those who refuse to accept jobs is a backwards step on the path to UBI. Not only does RSA emphasize the duty of citizens to take on a job, even if it is precarious and demeaning, it also perpetuates the view that society should only support those who deserve it. Moreover, desert is defined solely in terms of paid employment. RSA is also based on the view that unemployment is a problem of individual commitment, even when society simply does not provide enough employment opportunities. Lastly, it accommodates rather than condemns the unacceptable fact that some full-time jobs are so inadequately paid that they do not allow one to make a living. As a result, vulnerable individuals are induced to accept demeaning and exploitative positions. As insufficient and unsatisfactory as the RMI was, it seems that this reform has not moved France closer to the real freedom of UBI.

For these reasons, RSA does not seem a suitable example for the point that Clerc is trying to make, and this also suggests problems in his conception of what UBI's proponents should fight for. Van Parijs and Vanderborght do welcome advances towards UBI, but they do so while still promoting the ideal of a *truly* universal basic income. It is only by reference to the ideal that one can identify whether a given reform really is an improvement. Does the income support reform empower citizens—as Karl Widerquist (p. 387) would rightly ask—by making them freer to say no to oppressive, coercive, and undignified forms of employment? Will it enable them to flourish, without stigmatization or resentment? UBI is a radical reform that could potentially transform the lives of the most stigmatized and vulnerable. Only reforms that really aim at bringing us closer to this goal deserve to be fought for.

Suplicy's paper also touches upon the fundamental challenges of implementing UBI. The author paints an optimistic picture of how basic income can serve as an instrument of development in his analysis of the progress achieved by Brazil's *Bolsa Família* program: "The proportion of poor families [...] decreased from 39.4% in 2003 to 25.3%, in 2008 [...] The 20% poorest families had an income per capita increase 47% faster than the income of the richest 20%" (p. 339).

Suplicy shows convincingly that the modest *Bolsa Família* program has significantly reduced poverty. He also demonstrates that the country is engaged in a real process to bring about a citizen's basic income. Suplicy acknowledges that Brazil is still one of the most unequal countries in the world, but shows that the UBI project is slowly

contributing to making the country less unjust.

Jordan's paper addresses the key challenge of building political support for basic income. Written from a British perspective, his article summons up the history of the campaign for a basic income in the 1970s in a small industrial town in Southwest England. He describes the mixture of very different groups fighting for UBI at the time: workers who had been made redundant, Trotskyist trade unionists, the long-term unemployed, single parents, and disabled persons. The main strength of Jordan's paper is that it persuasively demonstrates that advocates of basic income should work to build support for the policy among the most disadvantaged. He appeals to Guy Standing's concept of the 'precariat' to explain why and how UBI defenders should turn to the excluded. He makes a very interesting point by tying the struggle for a UBI to the difficulties faced by young people, and argues for entrusting them with this fight.

The elderly, the unemployed, the former activists, the carers, the 'marginals', and the environmentalists—as Arnsperger and Johnson suggested—should all rally behind the struggle for a universal basic income. The various papers I have discussed all suggest that UBI would benefit a broad variety of individuals and that these groups should be approached more actively. Yet many will be opposed to UBI, and this is precisely where those who argue about justice have a role to play: by providing the arguments and the empirical evidence to support the cause. This is the answer that many authors seem to offer to John Baker's question "If you're an egalitarian, why are you devoting your life to arguing?" (p. 81).

It is fundamentally important to understand why so many people who would benefit from UBI still oppose the idea, and to win them over. The ideological opposition to UBI—such as the dogmas of individual responsibility and market-wages as moral desert (Bidadanure 2012)—needs to be theoretically undermined. In general, the articles in this collection offer a very strong interpretation of what *arguing about justice* means: contributing to the theoretical and practical struggle for change. As John Roemer, for example, puts it, "the most important problem for the social science of inequality is understanding how electorates have come to *acquiesce* to policies which increase inequality, and to try and reverse this acquiescence" (p. 301).

Universal basic income, I would argue, is a truly radical and yet realistic idea. It appeals to the power of utopia and the strength of

pragmatism, and is thus at once inspiring and convincing. UBI is certainly a compromise, but does it surrender to capitalism, as the philosopher Slavoj Žižek claims (2009)? Žižek argues, against Van Parijs, that, as nice as it sounds, UBI is not a solution because it only sweetens capitalism instead of threatening its foundations. Žižek illustrates his view by quoting Oscar Wilde who, in *The soul of man under socialism* (1891), composes the following portrait of charity:

[T]his is not a solution: it is an aggravation of the difficulty. The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible. And the altruistic virtues have really prevented the carrying out of this aim. Just as the worst slave-owners were those who were kind to their slaves, and so prevented the horror of the system being realised by those who suffered from it, and understood by those who contemplated it (Wilde 1891; quoted in Žižek 2009).

I think that Žižek is mistaken. Endorsing UBI does not amount to surrendering to capitalism. Far from maintaining people in situations of poverty and alienation, a universal basic income empowers individuals: freeing them from dependence on those who own the means of production, and bringing opportunities for emancipation and self-determination.

Can we then go so far as considering UBI “the capitalist road to communism”, as Van Parijs once did? UBI can surely take us to a more democratic and equal society. It is far more ambitious to claim that UBI alone will take us to a non-capitalist future, let alone to a communist society. However, anti-capitalists should not see this as a weakness of UBI. The struggle for basic income is fundamentally a struggle over and for time: the time to refuse exploitative options and seek alternative occupations; the time to flourish and care for others; the time to be outraged by injustices and participate in the political struggles of our times. As a result, it is very likely that a truly universal basic income can take us a long way in the struggle against capitalism. In fact, if one understands capitalism as both creating and relying upon a state of mind of perpetual insecurity in the vast majority of the world’s population, then it seems that UBI could strongly contribute to overthrowing first, the state of mind on which capitalism depends, and then, by a domino effect, the entire econo-political edifice. If communism is likewise understood in terms of a state of mind of

freedom and emancipation, then perhaps, rather than the capitalist road to communism, UBI may be seen as a communist road out of capitalism.

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