

Philippe VAN PARIJS and Yannick VANDERBORGHT. *Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. 384 pp.

During a talk at the Stanford University Center for Ethics in Society, Van Parijs stated that his new book, *Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy*, was an attempt to create a “toolkit for the people advocating Basic Income around the world, but also for people criticizing it.” Indeed, this book is a perfect toolkit, and each page shows the reader how to argue for Basic Income working with every possible political and philosophical position. Furthermore, the book provides a vast and comprehensive discussion of Basic Income, from its history and the origins of the idea, to a contemporary discussion, including all of the potential problems that Basic Income raises. Additionally, the book provides over one hundred pages of footnotes, which contain an invaluable resource for anyone interested in Basic Income. In the last couple of years, Basic Income has had a resurgence of interest, accompanied by endless publications. Mostly online, the majority of these publications misunderstand Basic Income and present the idea in a misleading or one-sided way. Often, these publications focus on a fear that ‘the robots are coming’ and neglect a more in depth analysis. During the Center for Ethics talk, Van Parijs observed that Basic Income is “[...] an idea that has attracted a lot of attention, a lot of discussion and therefore a lot of misunderstanding, a lot of confusion, a lot of misinformation.” It was for this reason that he and Vanderborght undertook the task of writing a book that shares knowledge from over thirty years of research and dedication. Therefore, this book is a must-read for anyone seriously interested in Basic Income today.

The book provides an exemplary history of the concept of Basic Income, illustrating how it compares to other types of social assistance and support. In addition, the book analyses several important issues in the contemporary Basic Income debate, such as the role of Basic Income experiments, ideas for funding, political strategies – to use when advocating for Basic Income and other issues related to this global era. I will not cover the book’s entire contents, but I will illustrate how it provides a *toolkit* for discussing Basic Income with people of diverse backgrounds and political or philosophical positions. I will illustrate this using the ethical argument presented in chapter 5 of the book. In addition, I will argue that the book fails to provide an attractive narrative that can be used to justify Basic Income, something which may be needed to go above and beyond the simplistic view of ‘the robots are coming’, in order to appeal to a larger portion of the populous.

Chapter 5 is entitled: “Ethically Justifiable? Free Riding Versus Fair Shares.” In this chapter, Van Parijs and Vanderborgh present what they consider to be the most significant ethical objection to the introduction of a Basic Income. The objection they evaluate, also known as ‘free riding’, is the argument that Basic Income will allow some to live off of the work of others. Often, this reasoning is used to promote social programmes that include some kind of work condition or work requirement, but Basic Income’s goal is to be an unconditional, non-means tested, social floor that is paid in cash to all. How then,

can we answer the free riding objection? According to the authors, there are multiple strategies to respond to this opposition. Firstly, the authors suggest that we ‘relativize the accusation’ by pointing out ways in which Basic Income promotes ‘more fairness’. Then, we can shift to a theoretical realm and explain how a Basic Income can provide for a more just society by distributing the basic good of ‘freedom’ in a way that is fairer. In addition, the authors consider other theoretical and ethical justifications, such as the left-libertarian idea that there is an initial common ownership of the Earth.

In order to ‘relativize the accusation’ of free riding, we can say three things to those who worry about free riding: (i) If it is not acceptable that some live off the work of others for the poor, then it is not acceptable for the rich either; (ii) In a prosperous society where production no longer needs ‘all hands on board’, then work becomes a privilege rather than a necessity; and (iii) The number of ‘real lazies’ produced by Basic Income would be a small minority, as most of the people that could be expected to retreat from paid labour would typically do so to engage in unpaid work, such as child-care, housework or civic work. Regarding how conditional assistance creates less fairness, we can say: (i) It is difficult to distinguish between those who do not want to work and those who suffer from a mental illness – these conditional schemes may create more unfairness by forcing sick people to work; (ii) There is a large group of people, usually women, who perform work without pay, which often occurs in situations of unfairness that would be mitigated by a Basic Income; and (iii) People could refuse irksome jobs that are often the lowest paid; where workers are subject to complete vulnerability, Basic Income is thereby eliminating a great structuralized injustice.

Moving on from the examples that mitigate the accusation, Van Parijs and Vanderborght develop a theoretical answer to the ‘free riding’ objection. Basically, the ‘free riding’ objection works only with an idea of ‘cooperative justice’ in mind, cooperative justice being defined as a “[...] fair allocation of benefits and burdens of cooperation between participants in some cooperative venture” (103). That is, if we see social assistance as a pure cooperative agreement between participants, it makes sense to create the conditions of such cooperation and to say that all people should have a fair share of the burdens and the benefits. However, the authors suggest that Basic Income schemes can be understood using another conception of justice, *distributive justice*, defined as ‘entitlements to resources among the members of a society’. Distributive justice must precede cooperative justice because it is only upon the background of distributive justice that cooperative justice is possible. What this means is that if the resources at the starting point of a cooperative justice agreement are distributed in a situation that is mostly unfair (think extreme inequalities of wealth), then a genuine cooperative agreement is not possible. Building on these ideas, the authors argue that freedom is an essential good that should be fairly distributed before cooperation can take place. For genuine cooperation to occur the authors argue that we must have freedom ‘not just for the few, but for all’, what the authors call ‘real freedom’, not simply ‘formal freedom’. A Basic Income, paid at the highest sustainable level, would distribute freedom in a way that creates the possibility of true cooperative justice. Van Parijs and Vanderborght go on to discuss this idea and the objections to it.

Another justification for Basic Income, presented by the authors and defended by left-wing libertarians, is the idea that there is a common ownership of the earth. In this view, land and natural resources were originally owned in equal shares. Since it is not feasible to redistribute land and resources in this way, we can tax their use and redistribute the generated wealth to all. From a libertarian leftist point of view, we can defend the funding of a Basic Income as a form of distributive justice if we choose taxes related to common resources of the earth as sources of funding. As noted in the book, “Funding an unconditional Basic Income in this way does not amount to extorting from workers and other economic agents part of what they legitimately possess. Nor does it involve any charity or solidarity on the part of the rich for the benefit of the poor. It rather consists on taking a fee from those who take advantage of natural resources and transferring it to the co-owners if those resources” (120).

This justification has the advantage of not requiring an appeal through distributive freedom, as the latter may be problematic and hard to grasp by the general public. But does this type of redistributive justice validate taxation only from common resources and not taxation of work, as Van Parijs and Vanderborght seem to imply? Not if we expand the idea of common ownership of the earth to common ownership of the technological, cultural and intellectual inheritance of humanity. This idea has been defended by people like Guy Standing, Yanis Varoufakis and even by Van Parijs himself. If we include common ownership of *inherited* intellectual, technological and cultural traditions, we can tax higher incomes that are possible only because of these traditions. This view is not prone to the accusation of ‘free riding’ since it allows only for the taxation of higher incomes that benefit from the common cultural, technological and intellectual inheritance of humankind. It is not the result of pure ‘work’ that is being redistributed, but the part of work that does not depend on individual merit and dedication that is being redistributed.

To illustrate the importance of this strategy, consider a 1970s Nixon campaign ad that ran in opposition to the McGovern Welfare Reform proposal. In this ad, the Nixon campaign showed a construction worker taking his lunch break while in the background the narrator says that the McGovern welfare proposal would put 47% of people on welfare. Nixon then asks: “And who is going to pay for this? Well, if you are not the one out of two people on welfare, you do.” The method to support Basic Income based on the redistribution of freedom will do little to face this type of campaign against Basic Income. Even Van Parijs’ original ‘jobs as assets’ argument (*Real Freedom for All*, 1995) would not fare much better in the eyes of Nixon’s construction worker. According to that argument, the worker would be willing to pay others because, with a scarcity of jobs, when others do not accept a job they allow him to work. But the construction worker can claim several things: he can deny scarcity of jobs in his field of work, saying that there is enough work for everyone in construction and that he is not willing to pay for people outside of his professional group if there is such a scarcity in other areas. If we are going to ask workers to participate in financing Basic Income, it seems that taxing only those with higher incomes who can convincingly be seen as benefiting from a common inheritance of humanity’s achievements is a better way to proceed. This

technique is much more intuitive than the idea of distributive freedom. However, ultimately, Van Parijs and Vanderborght demonstrate in their book that there are numerous ways to argue for Basic Income, and one does not necessarily exclude the other. We can thus combine arguments about maximizing freedom with arguments about the earth as common inheritance of humanity. The most important aspect of *Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy* is that it provides a blueprint on how to discuss the idea of Basic Income with people from different backgrounds, political affiliations and philosophical positions using different perspectives and several types of arguments. The book shows that Basic Income can be defended in multiple ways, from multiple viewpoints, and that the narrative of ‘the robots are coming’ is not the only Basic Income narrative around.

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Catherine WILSON. *Metaethics from a First Person Standpoint: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy*. Cambridge: Open Book, 2016. 122 pp.

In the introduction to *Metaethics from a First Person Standpoint*, Catherine Wilson states that her aim is “[...] to address the central questions of metaethics and to give serious answers to them” (1). Since she does not want to discuss explicitly the many “isms” of moral theory”, however, she prefers “a freer sort of enquiry” (1). This is why she opts for a model of presentation that is original in moral philosophy: the Cartesian model of hyperbolic doubt. Like Descartes in his *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, she writes from a first-person standpoint, and starts with “a radical scepticism” (2).

There are three differences between her Cartesian method and the original employed by Descartes. The first person pronoun ‘I’ in her book does not refer to herself explicitly, or to each reader, but to an investigator she introduces as ‘my Enquirer’. Secondly, the hyperbolic doubt of the Enquirer is less radical or general than Descartes’ methodical scepticism in his first *Meditation*. The Enquirer does not doubt the existence of the material world, or the truth of simple mathematical statements. What the Enquirer doubts methodically is merely that there is “[...] moral understanding or moral knowledge” (2). Finally, the ultimate purpose of Wilson’s restricted method of hyperbolic doubt is not to find first principles of ethics that are absolutely certain. As she stresses, “[...]moral confidence, rather than moral certainty, is the epistemological aim” (3).

Given these differences between Descartes’ and Wilson’s methods of systematic doubt, one may wonder whether Wilson’s adoption of this method is epistemologically adequate, as she pretends, or merely a stylistic device. I am inclined to suspect the latter, because Cartesian radical doubt is an appropriate method of investigation only if absolute certainty is the aim. A Euclid-inspired axiomatic model of the sciences, according to which scientific knowledge had to be based upon first principles that are known with certainty, has long been abandoned and Descartes’ method of doubt is no longer used in the sciences or in the philosophy of science. Why, then, should we use it in (meta-)