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The Limits of Production: Justifying Guaranteed Basic Income

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1. Introduction

*“For what is government itself but the greatest
of all reflections on human nature?”*

James Madison

Surely a part of the reason it is so difficult for many to accept the idea of a guaranteed basic income has to do with prevailing assumptions regarding the nature of -- not just the liberal citizen and the necessary obligations and labour he is expected to perform -- but also of the very nature and purpose of the modern state. In this talk I shall argue that, in contrast to older conceptions, the modern nation state is implicitly based on a particular conception of labour: what I call the Lockean production model. It is in comparison with this model of labour, moreover, -- viewed as the paradigm of all free labour - that guaranteeing a basic income for all citizens of a society and irrespective of their own capacity for work, appears a perverse incentive for laziness and a foolish handout to the unworthy at best, or, at worst, such a basic income is viewed as outright theft, and the direct violation of the rightful, hard-earned property of others.

If we begin from a different paradigm of work, however, -- what I will call “reproductive labour” in an extended *ethical* sense -- many of the perceived difficulties in justifying basic income vanish. For, on this model of labouring activity the goal is not the production of things, but the maintenance and “reproduction” of human relationships. In the best case, in my analysis, the aim is relations of what Aristotle called *philia* or friendship - whether personal or civic. Thus such labour has, as part of its very nature, the end or goal of sharing with others and of helping them. Moreover, this model is hardly utopian; in deed it is still performed by at least half the population, namely women. Finally, if this is the case, than we are left with the question: why should this model of labour (and aspect of our human nature) not also be reflected in government and in our conception of the citizen and as a part of their necessary obligations to others? Universal Basic Income might be grounded in an alternative political vision of the

democratic state: one that furthers not simply the political values of freedom and equality, but the third value of a civic friendship as well.

2. The production model

Allow me first to delineate central characteristics of what I am calling the production model -- that model of labour, which ascends to prominence in the 17th century and with the rise of the modern market. It is best conceived, I believe, by recalling John Locke's famous metaphor of man in the state of nature who rightfully "owns" that with which he has "mixed his labour".¹ Central characteristics of this "mixing" or production model are as follows: i) labour is here conceived as essentially a technical mastery over the physical world (whether agricultural, artisan labour or even still working in a factory, say). More importantly, ii) all such labour is a form of what the Ancients called *poiesis* (also *techne*); they are all activities done primarily for the sake of a "product". That is, the activity is not performed for its own sake (what the Ancients called *praxis*) but for the end result -- in the modern period typically some form of exclusive private property (whether crop, money or wage, etc.) Further, iii) it becomes clear that at least from the 17th century onwards our conception of the liberal citizen becomes intimately tied with the performance of such free productive labour. That is, in addition to military service (a requirement since ancient times), the capacity for productive labour now becomes a criterion for independence and "full" or "active" citizenship. (In the ancient world, by contrast, such labour was performed primarily by slaves, illiterate craftsmen and foreigners - that is, precisely by non-citizens.)

Nowhere is the early modern concern with the production of actual physical objects more visible than in a passage by Kant where he attempts to distinguish between active and passive citizen. Kant goes so far as to attribute to the wig-maker (who produces an independent physical object, namely, the wig) full-fledged active citizenry, whereas he denies full citizenship to the barber who

¹ John Locke, Second Treatise of Government, para.27.

merely “serves” another and cuts his hair!² But it is hardly only the Germans who reveal this obsession with the production of objects (and later with “services”). Adam Smith also classifies all occupations which approach most closely to ethical reproductive activity -- occupations such as those of churchmen, physicians, men of letters, dancers and even opera singers -- together with that of the “menial servant” and the “buffoon” which Smith considers the lowest form of “unproductive labour”.³

Finally, even the state now comes to be viewed on this model. That is, whereas in the Ancient world the *polis* was viewed as the highest expression of man’s communal nature and of *praxis* - as an expression of the best of his relationships -- in the modern period the state becomes a means to other ends: to glory, acquisition, security, wealth, fame, etc. “For by Art (*poiesis*) is created that great Leviathan called a Common-wealth or state” writes Hobbes at the beginning of Leviathan. Not only is one of the state’s central functions now the protection of property and the regulation of productive competition, but its very nature is seen as the result of production as well; it becomes purely instrumental.

If the production model of labour indeed plays such a deep and powerful role in the modern period, it is hardly surprising that guaranteeing a basic income to all citizens -- independently of their role in production -- causes consternation. For on this model, the incentive for people to perform the holy mandate – the production of things and services - is private or monetary reward. Granting them such a reward (namely income) prior to any “mixing of their labour” puts the cart before the horse; it violates what appears to be a most self-evident and basic axiom of natural law.

² I. Kant, Metaphysic of Morals para. 46.

³ In all these cases, according to Adam Smith, the activity “perishes in the very instance of its performance” and seldom leaves any trace behind it. Wealth of Nations, ed.R.H.Campbell and A.S.Skinner (Indianapolis: Liberty, 1981), vol. 1, pp.330-31.

3. Ethical reproduction

Locke's mixing metaphor, however, and its concomitant rights to private use and to exclusive private property, was not always viewed as self-evident. As mentioned above, in the ancient world, the majority of labour mixing was done by slaves - precisely those who own no property. But we needn't travel back so far in history to see the limits of this famous metaphor. Women, after all, have been "mixing their labour" for centuries -- with their children, their family, household, etc. -- but never with the goal of private property (until perhaps recently). On the contrary, what property they did possess was typically shared with their husband and children (under Blackstone's community of persons). Rather than dismissing (as has the tradition) such activity as non-labour in the first place -- for it is surely a production of use values as well as necessary - it appears we are dealing with a different model of labouring activity, characteristics of which I will next elaborate.

First, whereas the model of craft (farm or technological) labour involves a working subject confronting a given material object, the model of what I am calling "reproductive" labour (always in a non-biological sense) is one in which a subject essentially confronts another subject: the child (the aged, the lover, the other). Such labour is thus not merely indirectly social or other-directed, but directly so; its proper end is direct need satisfaction of the other, as well as the encouragement of their abilities. This is not to claim that women's traditional labour is necessarily any less greedy, self-seeking, etc.; my point here is structural not psychological. Unless the mother, or caretaker in deed looks after the child (the aged, etc.) the latter will not flourish. Moreover, at least in the case of the mother or of a good friend, such work is usually not pure self-sacrifice; the mother or friend often receives great personal satisfaction. This may be explained, I believe, by viewing the reward in such instances as the establishment (maintenance, furtherance) of a relationship. As Aristotle wrote, *philia* (a broad term covering the friendship between parents and children, siblings, lovers and even fellow citizens) is -- in its genuine form -- an end-in-itself. In the best case, reproductive activity emerges as a form of *praxis*, done for its own sake. (Of

course, where similar activity is performed for essentially other reasons - say the case of the day-care worker whose primary aim is her wage - I will continue to call such reproductive labour).

Finally, I wish to note various implications of this alternative model of activity for the question of ownership. Traditionally, woman's children have typically been considered "hers" in some sense, as have the household, its items, etc. Women's traditional labour and activity thus points to important aspects of shared, communal property maintained in the modern period. But so too, unlike the paradigm of property qua commodity (which may be acquired and disposed of at will) the children and home of women have traditionally been hers in an ascriptive and not an acquisitive sense; that is, they are primarily her responsibility. This form of "owning" emerges as fully consistent with the traditional, legal sense of "possession" whereby objects are considered highly "restricted objects of the will". Ownership emerges on this model of labour as a form of guardian or stewardship.

Now my question becomes: why should this form of activity -- labour as a form of taking care and encouragement, and ownership as a form of guardian or stewardship - not also be reflected in our notion of the modern nation state? Elsewhere I have argued that I believe it actually has been so reflected to some extent, not just in Plato and Aristotle or in the thought of Karl Marx, but even in Locke (where there are strict natural and civic limits on property acquisition, as well as the recognition of individual right) and certainly in John Rawls (with his famous difference principle whereby differences should work to better the disadvantaged). The problem (as I see it) is that this second model remains submerged, only vaguely intuited as well as under-theorized, whereas the paradigm of production and private property has clearly dominated.⁴ One author has recently noted that liberals - even the most progressive - have a hard time

⁴ See my discussion in "Locke's Two Conceptions of Property," Social Theory and Practice (1987); and "Rawls and Ownership; the Forgotten Category of Reproductive Labour" Canadian Journal of Philosophy (1986).

accepting the idea of a guaranteed basic income.⁵ I believe we can now see why; liberalism remains wedded to a production model of labour and to its various implications. Here I believe theorizing traditional women's labour --and realizing that half of us (at least) still perform such labour in the midst of advanced industrial capitalism --may help loosen up this four hundred year obsession.

4. The new state

I have argued that historically the modern liberal state is wedded to a production model of labour (as is also, by the way, the socialism of Karl Marx).⁶ But what would a state look like that gave, not exclusive, but let us say equal weight to reproductive *praxis* or at least to reproductive labour? And is such a state feasible? I believe one institutional change that such a transformation of the state would entail is the guarantee of a material baseline - some form of guaranteed basic income. Moreover, women entering the state *en masse* are poised to help bring this about. Why?

My argument here is not merely that reproductive labour is just as necessary and important as productive labour, which it clearly is; producing objects is presumably for the good of people and their relations not *vice versa*. Nor is my claim simply that women (and the nature of their traditional activities) deserve recognition in the public institutions of the democratic state. Again, I believe they do, but the persuasive force of why this has to be remains limited - at least for many. There is a further reason, however, why aspects of reproductive *praxis* should be reflected at the political state level. Here the argument I wish to make reaches back to Aristotle: relations of civic friendship between citizens are a necessary condition for genuine justice. How does this third argument go?

⁵ Amy Wax, "Something for Nothing: The Liberal Case Against Work Requirements" Paper presented 3/8/2002 BIG Conference.

⁶ I argue this is in Chap.5 of my On Civic Friendship (forthcoming).

According to Aristotle, friendship whether personal or civic has three necessary ingredients. Friends must reciprocally i) be aware of each other as some form of moral equal, ii) they must wish each other well for the other's sake (and not their own), and iii) they must practically do things for one another other (Nicomachean Ethics, Bk.VIII). On the civic or political level such moral awareness, wishing well and doing (as John Cooper has argued) works via the Constitution, the public laws as well as the customs and habits of the citizenry; citizens may be educated to each others situations, know what they can expect, and consider it their obligation to help (whether through taxes, civic service, in times of disaster, etc.). Surely, a guaranteeing of material basics to all citizens would be an expression of, and insofar as genuine friendship necessitates a practical doing, even a requirement for a civic friendship. But it is still not clear why such a civic friendship and its practical expression is a necessary requirement for justice? Why would GBI not just be charity or simple generosity?

Aristotle writes “for when men are friends they have no need of justice, while when they are just they need friendship as well, and the truest form of justice is thought to be a friendly quality” (NE.1155a22-28). Aristotle's point here is that in a general atmosphere of distrust, ill will or indifference, true justice remains impossible. On my reading, the reason is because citizens in this case could still – and often will -- perceive themselves to be unjustly treated even if some narrow notion of justice is strictly being adhered to. Again, justice by means of force (a fair distribution imposed on parties unwillingly) is an inferior sort of justice to an arrangement willingly acknowledged (the former breeds resentment in turn, is less stable, etc.) Thus, given our natural and often unreasonable propensities to favour ourselves, true justice can only result if a flexible give and take and friendly background (quality) exists to make us yield. Citizens must be able to recognize and to accept in practice the burdens of justice in any particular case.

It is for this reason, I believe, that Aristotle considers the cultivation by the legislator of a civic friendship in a population even more important than justice itself (NE. 1155a, p. 22); it is a necessary precondition. Without a reciprocal moral awareness, good will and practical doing expressed in the background

social institutions and system of rules, justice is revealed as nothing more than the imposition of the will of the stronger.

I personally do not think a guaranteed basic income is enough for genuine justice, even as it is not sufficient for a genuine civic friendship. That is, the cultivation of good will among the citizenry and the disposition to help one another must come through education, laws, custom and habit as well - in short through numerous social and political “reproductive” institutions. But although not sufficient, I have argued guaranteeing a basic material security is necessary, and perhaps a first step, for without this minimal practical doing, justice remains a sham.

So, what might this new state -- which theorizes and acknowledges the model of reproductive activity equally with production -- look like? First, it would still have the duty of protection, regulation of commerce, etc. but such functions would now take up a smaller portion of the revenues it draws and the obligations it has, for now the market -- and the role of production -- would be far smaller. Emphasis on the production and consumption of things and services could recede and the rewards or satisfaction of human relationships (the life of the mind, art, education, play, etc.) emphasized, at least to the extent that they are “reproductive” of flourishing relations. And such a conception of the state implicated in civic relations would clearly affect the state’s international affairs as well; a bloated military could give way to foreign aid and international programmes.

But perhaps the central difference would be that a necessary and weighty part of government’s function would now include reproductive or affirmative obligations: particularly a concern with the satisfaction of basic need, but also with the quality of civic relations. Guaranteed basic income (or in the form of guaranteed medical care, housing, food and education) I believe is superior to past welfare programmes, for it is superior according to all the three criteria of civic friendship noted above. A moral awareness of equality is expressed, in that benefits are universally granted with no grovelling or bureaucratic nightmare for the poorer segments. So too, the income is unconditional, an expression of

minimal political friendship, for the sake of the other without thought of return; just as one would help a friend if one could, and without thinking. In fact, a hypothetical test for the duties of this new government might now be formulated thus: would you allow this to happen to a friend? If not, then government shouldn't politically allow it either.

Finally, regarding the criteria of "reciprocity", and whether citizens should "labour" in return for a guaranteed income. We all know a one-way friendship is impossible, but friendship likewise ends when a strict "tit-for-tat" results. That is, one of the distinguishing attributes of a true friendship is its flexibility and emphasis on quality over quantity. Thus a universal obligation to make a productive contribution to the collective enterprise cannot stand as a fundamental precept of the new state and its guaranteeing of basic income. I myself see nothing wrong in expecting or even requiring all citizens to perform x amount of time in civil service (which is not production); but this is not the same as saying that GBI should be conditional on such service. A civil service can be justified on other – actually on ethical reproductive -- grounds.

Of course, Aristotle's basic argument will not appeal to those who remain enamoured of the production model. Moreover, I am sure to hear someone object somewhere: this is all well and good, but Aristotle's ideal life of leisure and *praxis* rested on the institution of slavery! At this late date I can only respond: yes, indeed. But your grand life of production and value creation has likewise rested on the unpaid reproductive labour of others - primarily women. It is time we find an entirely new solution.