

The One Minute Case for a Basic Income

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"What? You think the government should just give everybody money?! Regardless of whether they worked for it or not? Regardless of whether they even need it or not? Why do you think *that* would be a good idea?"

You are out in public. It just came up that you support a basic income guarantee, and someone just hit you with the above incredulous questions. Unless you are on a college campus or at an academic conference, you can probably expect your listeners' attention to last roughly one minute before they are either intrigued and ask more questions, or they tune you out completely. What do you say?

Well, obviously there are a lot of different reasons why people support a basic income, and so your answer will depend in part on why you personally support a basic income. And it will also depend in part on what you think your listeners' core beliefs are, and what may therefor persuade them. So there cannot be just one right answer.

With that in mind, I offer the following seventeen suggestions.

All of the following arguments are my own derivative summaries and reinterpretations of other people's ideas. The Keynesian and Georgist arguments are derived from the writings of their namesakes. The market utilitarian case is derived from the ideas of Milton Friedman, the right-libertarian case is derived from the ideas of Robert Nozick, and the independentarian case is derived from the ideas of Karl Widerquist. I am also particularly indebted to Widerquist for inspiring the fairness and pragmatic cases, to Widerquist and "Edward S" for inspiring the social contractarian case, and to Tammy Van Dun for inspiring the Christian case. The environmentalist case was inspired by Alyssa Battistoni. I got the idea of a basic income as a permanent strike fund from Erik Olin Wright. The only wholly original argument is the disability rights case. None of the other arguments are from my original ideas, only my articulation of them is original, but I have sadly forgotten the individuals from whom the ideas are borrowed.

So please feel free to use any or all of them as you see fit to promote the abolition of poverty. They can be used in person or in speeches, in blog posts or comments, in Congressional hearings or your Facebook status, or anywhere else you see fit. Also feel free to modify them as necessary.

And yes, I have timed myself speaking all of them, and I was able to speak each of them at a normal speaking pace in one minute or less.

The one minute fairness case for a basic income guarantee:

Property is a social construct legally enforced by the government. If all people are considered equal, then absent any other considerations, each person should have an equal amount of property. So material equality should be the default. In a free market economy with a basic income at or below the highest sustainable rate, those who choose to live off of the basic income are not living off of the work of others. Rather, they are living off of less than their "fair share" of property and allowing the extra to be used by those who choose to work.

The one minute market utilitarian case for a basic income:

The free market is the greatest generator of wealth ever devised. Money is the most effective means of socially producing utility, as it allows each individual to obtain whatever needs and wants they subjectively require. However, one dollar in the hands of a poorer person produces greater utility than a dollar in the hands of a richer person, because the richer person can fulfill more of their more important needs and wants with the rest of their money than the poorer person can. So the transfer of money from a richer person to a poorer person increases overall utility. The government is incompetent at running people's lives or regulating the economy, but the one thing it can do effectively is mail out checks. A basic income is most effective means of transferring money from the richer to the poorer with the least government interference and the least work disincentive. The natural limit on the amount of the basic income is the point where the work disincentive from the required taxes reduces wealth the point where the basic income would have to be reduced.

The one minute Keynesian case for a basic income:

Keynesian economics works when implemented correctly. But properly implementing Keynesian economics is politically very difficult. It requires politicians who are willing to spend a lot of money on stimulus when the government appears broke, and then turn around and become deficit hawks when the government is rolling in cash and everyone wants a piece of the pie. A basic income funded primarily from an income tax would become a massive institutionalized entitlement expected by the population whose cost would automatically increase and decrease in direct opposition to the economy. As unemployment rises, the number of net receivers goes up, and as unemployment falls, so will the number of net receivers. Keynes once famously said that the government should pay people to dig holes and fill them back up again. But why waste people's time? Anyone who sits on the couch and watches TV while living off of a basic income will contribute as much to society as the hole diggers. And anyone who does anything more productive will create a net good for society.

The one minute human rights case for a basic income:

Poverty is not a natural tragedy like cancer or earthquakes. Poverty is a human caused tragedy like slavery or government oppression. Slavery is caused by societal recognition of humans as property. Government oppression is caused by governments punishing people for their beliefs or characteristics, and without due process of law. Poverty is caused by property laws that deny some people access to necessities. These types of tragedies can be ended by recognizing that humans have the right not to be subjected to tortuous conditions imposed by other humans. Humans have a right not to live in slavery. Humans have a right to be free of government oppression. And humans have a right not to live in poverty. A basic income is not a strategy for dealing with poverty; it is the elimination of poverty. The campaign for a basic income is a campaign for the abolition of poverty. It is the abolitionist movement of the 21st century.

The one minute Georgist case for a basic income:

Property is a product of creation, not of mere use. "I made this." confers property rights, "Tag! It's mine!" does not. Things that exist as a product of your labor must be yours, and for anyone else to appropriate them is to make you their slave. Land and natural resources, however, are not the products of people, but of nature or God. They are gifts to all of humanity. Individual property in land and natural resources may be practical or useful, but it is still theft. Utility might justify this theft, but compensation is still required. As the appropriation was done without consent, the compensation must be in the form that offers the greatest choice of use to the victims. That form is cash. The most efficient

arrangement for payment is for the takers to pay the full rental or use value to a single entity which can then divide the proceeds equally among the population. Taxes are the tribute I pay to you for displacing you from land, the basic income is your dividend.

The one minute transhumanist case for a basic income:

Two hundred thousand years ago humans lived in hunter-gather societies. About 10 thousand years ago, humans began to live in agricultural societies, and then about 300 years ago, humans began to live in industrial societies. Since 30 to 50 years ago, we have lived in a service society. Theoretically, the last economic stage of society is a leisure society, where most people either work in the artistic or scientific fields, or do not work at all. So far, each phase has lasted only a small fraction of the time of the previous phase. If that pattern holds, service societies should last less than two generations, a time period nearing its end. Right now, worker productivity is advancing faster than the need for workers, robots are taking manufacturing jobs from the Chinese, and Google cars are about to make professional drivers obsolete. It is time to prepare for a society in which we simply do not need everyone to work. A basic income will be needed to provide a living for people, and to provide customers for business.

The one minute conservative case for a basic income:

The welfare state may not be the society we would have created, but it has been here for 4 generations, people have come to expect and rely on it, and it would be extremely disruptive to society to get rid of it. But while we may not be able to get rid of the welfare state, we can reform it. The current welfare state necessitates an immense and expensive bureaucracy, it is prohibitively complicated for some of its intended beneficiaries to navigate, it puts bureaucrats in charge of the lives of the poor, it creates perverse incentives for people to avoid work and to remain poor, and it arbitrarily allows some people to fall through the cracks. A basic income would correct all of these problems. A basic income is simple to administer, treats all people equally, retains all rewards for hard work, savings, and entrepreneurship, and trusts the poor to make their own decisions about what to do with their money, taking these decisions out of the hands of paternalistic elitist politicians.

The one minute feminist case for a basic income:

Patriarchy has put the world's wealth in the hands of men, prevented women from being professionals and entrepreneurs, forced poor women into dead-end second-class labor jobs, and forced all women to become unpaid domestic servants and caretakers of the young, elderly, and disabled of their families. Women have been forced to be financially dependent on fathers or husbands who are often abusive. A basic income would change all of this. A basic income would be a massive transfer of wealth from men to women. Women would be free of financial dependence on any man, and the young, elderly, and disabled would all be fully supported. Women could afford to leave abusive husbands, those who chose to be caretakers would be fully compensated, and no woman would be forced into a dead-end job, and would instead be able to pursue her own financial goals as she saw fit.

The one minute (right) libertarian case for a basic income:

While it may have been theoretically possible to acquire property in a just manner soon after humans evolved, none was. Every square inch of inhabited land on earth can trace its title back to someone who acquired the land by force. All land titles on Earth are soaked in blood. And not just land titles. Thanks to past government spending, targeted tax breaks, intellectual property, corporate charters, slavery, and meddling regulations, no property or wealth can be said to have been justly acquired. If we assume that those who have the least are greatest net victims, a basic income would provide the best possible

rectification with the least government control, producing the least unjust system of property distribution possible in the real world.

The one minute liberal case for a basic income:

A basic income would correct or ameliorate many inequities and inefficiencies inherent in market capitalism. The wages of unskilled and semi-skilled workers would rise as those who enjoy and are good at such work will no longer have to compete against those who are forced to seek such work out of financial necessity. The wages of highly skilled workers will fall as more people are able to take the time necessary to gain the skills to compete for those jobs, lowering the cost of legal, financial, and health care services. A guaranteed income will soften the blow to workers displaced by advancing technology and the creative destruction of the market. Job seekers will be able to take the time necessary to find work that is the best fit for them, increasing efficiency in the distribution of labor. And entrepreneurship will flourish as those wanting to start their own businesses will have an income to survive on during the long lean times that typically come when building a new enterprise.

The one minute independentarian case for a basic income:

Property rights are not natural, they are a social convention. But they give each individual freedom, as the essence of property is the right to exclude others, to have a place where no one else has dominion over you. The first rule should be that each individual has inalienable ownership over her own body and mind. But carving up all of nature outside of bodies leaves some people unnaturally without the means to obtain the necessities of life. Therefore each person must also have an inalienable property right to these necessities. Society owes you a living, because society is preventing you from foraging the land to obtain the necessities of life on your own. Society could rectify this problem by letting individuals forage for necessities wherever they wish, or by giving them the land they need to survive on their own, or by providing these necessities directly. But in modern societies, the most efficient way to provide for these necessities is with direct cash payments, a basic income.

The one minute Christian case for a basic income:

God does not force people into poverty in order to give you a chance to show your charity. God loves the poor as much as he loves you, and does not use them as tools in your salvation. The word that Jesus uses in his commandments to us that Christians translate as “charity” is usually translated by Jewish scholars as “justice”. Jesus commands us to feed and clothe the poor for the same reason he commands us to nurse the beaten, so that we may provide justice where others imposed injustice. Early Christians fed and clothed the poor to right the wrongs committed by the powerful who created a society that imposed poverty on some. In a democracy, the voters create society. A society without a basic income is a society where someone, somewhere, lives in poverty. Christ will hold responsible those who vote to create a society where some people live in poverty.

The one minute pragmatic case for a basic income:

All government attempts to run the economy have been dramatic failures. It is impossible for any one to have all the information necessary to produce everything people demand. But the free market leaves those with the least ability to starvation and homelessness, forces those with the greatest ability into prince or pauper gambles in order to innovate, and enslaves the vast middle with the fear of poverty. The welfare and regulatory state mitigates the worst of the free market, but it also stifles growth and innovation while mismanaging the lives of the poor and allowing many to fall through the cracks. Social experiments and the Alaskan oil dividend have shown unconditional cash payments to be

effective at reducing poverty. Theoretically, a basic income will free the poor from the government, the workers from the capitalists, and the capitalists from regulators. Pragmatically, every other economic system has failed, and a basic income is the last idea we have not tried.

The one minute social contractarian case for a basic income:

All individuals have the right to pursue their own goals free from interference from other individuals. But anarchy allows the strong to impose their will on the weak, and the rule of law imposes its will on everybody. The best rule of law should obtain the broadest possible consent of the governed, have the smallest possible reach into the lives of the governed, and provide the greatest possible prosperity to both those who consent and those who dissent to allow them to pursue their goals. Dissidents to the social contract are entitled to at least all of the same benefits of the social contract as willing participants because they are unwillingly forced to abide by it. “The broadest possible consent” implies democracy, and “the smallest possible reach” implies property-ownership and markets. A universal basic income is a dividend for all willing participants in the social contract paid from the prosperity generated by the rule of law, and a payment to all dissidents for having the rule of law imposed upon them.

The one minute environmentalist case for a basic income:

The global economy is dependent on industries and consumption that erode natural habitats and pollute the environment. The poor are dependent upon jobs in these industries for their very survival. Middle class consumption is needed to produce the demand that fuels these industries, and the middle class buys into the system out of fear of becoming poor. The rich are able to clean up their own environment, even if that means stopping wind turbines that might be an eyesore on their private beaches, while the powerless live next to literal dumps. The changes necessary to significantly clean the environment will produce massive disruptions laying off millions and raising prices of life necessities. The poor and middle classes will never accept this to clean the planet for the rich, nor should they. We cannot begin the work of healing Earth until we divorce survival from work and compensate everyone for the costs of the cleanup. A basic income will not by itself fix the environment, but it is necessary to begin the work.

The one minute labor rights case for a basic income:

The early labor movement joined with the slavery abolitionist movement when labor realized they could not compete against forced labor. Slavery is gone, but we still do not have free labor. When you negotiate with your boss over wages and working conditions, you are negotiating under the threat of starvation if you do not come to an agreement, and you are competing against other workers negotiating under the same threat. Management wants you to believe that welfare recipients are a burden on workers. The truth is that welfare recipients are not bringing down your wages by competing against you for work. In any negotiation, a person who can walk away from a deal can always exploit a person who cannot. Capitalists can always walk away from labor, because they can just live off of the capital they would otherwise invest. It will never be fair until labor can just walk away. A basic income is the ultimate permanent strike fund.

The one minute disability rights case for a basic income:

The process of applying for disability benefits is arduous, arbitrary, and demoralizing. We think we can easily tell who **really** needs our help, when the truth is that many – but certainly not all – people with

obvious disabilities like blindness or deafness lead easier and more fulfilling lives than many people with invisible disabilities like depression, fibromyalgia, or chronic fatigue. We force people who cannot work to convince skeptical judges about how pitiful their lives are and then we label them as being either lazy frauds or useless burdens. You really cannot know what another person's life is like. To make someone prove they cannot work is to make them convince themselves they have no hope. Health insurance should include paying for specific items that are needed for a specific disability. But we all deserve our basic living expenses equally, and no one should be forced to prove it.