



A Basic Income of Fear

Paul Crider

February 23, 2017

Defenses of a universal basic income (UBI) often focus on the efficiency gains of replacing leaky, ad hoc social safety nets with the simpler UBI; the labor market lubrication that goes with workers knowing they'll have an income if they choose to change jobs or start their own business; and how the program complements the "gig economy" by assuring that freelancers have a stable income along with their other less dependable income sources.

I don't deny any of these, but my own thinking about a UBI takes a darker form. We need a UBI to ward off evil.

The "Liberalism of Fear" takes as the fundamental purpose of liberal society avoiding some "supreme evil." Judith Shklar, who coined the phrase, suggested that evil "is cruelty and the fear it inspires, and the very fear of fear itself." Taking some liberty with what qualifies as a supreme evil, I believe a case can be made for a universal basic income—of fear.

A UBI obviously protects individuals against fear of deprivation, but standard welfare programs, whatever their inefficiencies, address this fear as well. A UBI by virtue of its universality addresses at least two social evils to which standard welfare programs are blunt or even counterproductive: oppressive relationships and the chaos caused by populist responses to economic dislocation.

Domestic Oppression

A person in an abusive domestic relationship often faces financial and psychological barriers to leaving that relationship, especially when there are children involved. If this person—let's call them Morgan—has foregone paid work to raise children, then they usually have depleted personal finances. Even with alimony and child support, Morgan has either stale or undeveloped marketable skills and will struggle to find more than meager pay for unskilled labor. Facing a life of poverty and drudgery adds to the other already weighty psychological barriers to making radical life changes. Many in Morgan's shoes will persuade themselves that their situation isn't as bad as it sometimes feels. Or perhaps in thrall to the just world bias, they may internalize their abuse and believe they deserve it.

With a UBI, even if Morgan's reserves have been frittered away by an abusive spouse, there's always cash around the corner. Once Morgan finally escapes, they have some minimum monthly income that is truly their own. Traditional means-tested welfare offers some assistance, but at a cost: Morgan must fill out the proper forms, prove their neediness or worth to social workers,

and police their conduct to make sure they abide by the paternalistic rules proscribing inappropriate purchases (cigarettes, steak) and mandating appropriate behaviors (looking for work).

Because it is universal, the stigma associated with living off the UBI during such times will be less than that of traditional welfare. To be sure, Morgan's neighbors may think Morgan isn't paying their fair share, but they will also know that Morgan didn't actively seek out assistance and is merely taking advantage of the same UBI to which they have also access.

The UBI thus facilitates Morgan's escape from an oppressive relationship.

Workplace Oppression

Consider Ashley, who for whatever reason is desperately clinging to a soul-crushing job. Perhaps there is only one major employer in a small town, or a major recession with steep unemployment has created an employer's market. Ashley's boss is abusive, though not in any legally actionable sense. The boss ridicules and demeans Ashley, uses abusive language just within the bounds of plausible deniability. Body language, tone, and countless difficult-to-describe aspects of the boss's behavior combine to create a psychologically taxing work environment. Ashley is routinely sidelined for promotions and other perquisites in favor of the boss's clear favorites.

Or perhaps Ashley is just another worker subject to the various indignities identified by the Crooked Timber philosophers Chris Bertram, Corey Robin, and Alex Gourevitch.

On pain of being fired, workers in most parts of the United States can be commanded to pee or forbidden to pee. They can be watched on camera by their boss while they pee. They can be forbidden to wear what they want, say what they want (and at what decibel), and associate with whom they want. They can be punished for doing or not doing any of these things—punished legally or illegally (as many as 1 in 17 workers who try to join a union is illegally fired or suspended). But what's remarkable is just how many of these punishments are legal, and even when they're illegal, how toothless the law can be. Outside the usual protections (against race and gender discrimination, for example), employees can be fired for good reasons, bad reasons, or no reason at all. They can be fired for donating a kidney to their boss (fired by the same boss, that is), refusing to have their person and effects searched, calling the boss a "cheapskate" in a personal letter, and more. They have few rights on the job—certainly none of the First, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Amendment liberties that constitute the bare minimum of a free society; thus, no free speech or assembly, no due process, no right to a fair hearing before a panel of their peers—and what rights they do have employers will fight tooth and nail to make sure aren't made known to them or will simply require them to waive as a condition of employment. Outside the prison or the military—which actually provide, at least on paper, some guarantee of due process—it's difficult to conceive of a less free institution for adults than the average workplace.

These indignities are not a regrettable but necessary feature of market society. They are petty tyranny pure and simple. With a UBI these sorts of degradations are much less likely to be suffered in silence, as the worker is able to subsist for a while on the UBI if the abuse is too

much. The UBI affords them the time to find another more respectful employer, even if that involves going back to school or saving up funds for a relocation.

In the mythos of unreconstructed libertarians and conservatives, employees and employers meet each other on a level playing field and negotiate terms to mutual advantage. Either party can quit the relationship at any time if they become dissatisfied. In the real world, however, workers have families to feed, mortgages to pay, ailing parents to tend to, etc. For low skill workers who may be easily replaced, there is a gross disparity in power between the two parties as they face drastically different slates of viable options. While the boss's threats are very real, the employee's threats to leave lack any teeth.

A UBI puts steel in the worker's resolve to work with dignity as a social equal to their employer. And it does this without the complicated coordination problems of collective bargaining and without union politics that employees may find distasteful or oppressive in a different way. Facing credible threats, even when they remain unuttered, employers will very likely back off their petty tyrannies for the same reason highly skilled and well-remunerated workers already don't face similar treatment.

Social and Political Chaos

A friend of mine confided to me that she supports a UBI because she “doesn't want bricks thrown through her window. Eventually, folks are going to realize it's not the foreigners who are the villains. It's me.”

My friend works in automation and understands very well that more economic dislocation has been caused by technological improvement than from global trade and increased immigration. These are the folks on the “destruction” side of “creative destruction.” I try to resist reducing voters I disagree with down to singular explanations, but at the margins voters who face uncertain and scary economic (lack of) prospects because of the relentless march of capitalist efficiency and innovation may be spurred to political activism that is ultimately dangerous, even to their own interests, broadly understood.

Voters who are jobless, suffering, and can't easily move to where the new jobs are or who are too strapped by circumstances to retool their skills sets are unsurprisingly dissatisfied with “the system,” whether this is understood to be snobby coastal elitists, the bosses, holier-than-thou Hollywood progressives, or political correctness enforcers who insist that decent, struggling folks are really the “privileged” ones. This wing of the electorate is vulnerable, and they are justified in their dissatisfaction with their lot in the system, and the nameless, nebulous forces pushing them around, even if they're not at all justified in their proposed solutions (far from it!). When in difficult times politicians ignore or dismiss these sentiments, or when only candidates who symbolize the “Establishment” are on offer to the voters, then the angry and disenchanting may opt for a chaos candidate.

I have frequently heard Donald Trump likened to a bull in a china shop. The problem is some of the fine china are the very norms and institutions of liberal democracy, whether this takes the form of assaulting the independence of the judiciary, attacking the legitimacy of the free press, discrediting the state's treaty commitments in the international community, casting doubt on the

fairness and validity of the democratic process, or the countless little violations of precedent norms that Trump keeps racking up (e.g., refusing to fully divest from his personal economic interests, threatening and ridiculing his political opponents, failing to disclose his tax returns, etc). The danger to American liberal democracy is clear and present.

The liberal order has provided the fertile soil for unprecedented gains in human well-being, understood as health, wealth, and real opportunities for individuals to explore and create their authentic selves. It must not be taken for granted. It is more fragile than we often realize and can be corroded or smashed by tribal authoritarian impulses abetted by social and economic discontents.

The losers from the necessarily always evolving economy—without dynamic change there can be little innovation and growth—must not be allowed a vandal’s veto. But the real hardships from topsy-turvy economic and social change warrant acknowledgment and assistance.

Panaceas are not on offer and a UBI is no exception. The losers from economic change must still adapt, but a UBI facilitates this without the paternalism, malformed incentives, or gaps of traditional welfare. Once again, the universality of the UBI makes an important difference in social perceptions. A UBI is not a handout and it’s not charity. There is no pity involved that can add to the sense of social marginalization that economically and culturally displaced citizens may feel. These citizens received their UBI by virtue of their membership in the polity when times were heady and their careers seemed secure. They remain entitled to the same UBI as the winds of change turn tornadic.

A UBI respects individuals as citizens even when they’re on hard times, and it ensures that “the system” never abandons them. This gives voters of all backgrounds a sense of political buy-in and lessens the appeal of chaos candidates.

The Deafness of Basic Income

If Lady Justice is blind, then the Basic Income is deaf. In an important sense, we don’t want to hear the particular plights of the poor and the displaced and the oppressed when we don’t have to. When we hear rival complaints from domestic disputants, or mutually antagonistic employers and employees, or hinterlanders and urbanites, we are forced to adjudicate between them. Our disagreements risk further polarizing an already dangerously polarized political discourse.

The poor will always be with us. And oppression will always plague us as a species prone to pecking orders. But a UBI of fear offers a chance of removing the circumstances of oppression and exploitation from a wide section of human interactions by simply handing out cash without listening to anyone’s reasons why they deserve it and their neighbor doesn’t.

And, just perhaps, a UBI may even diminish the sporadic spasms of burn-the-system-to-the-ground political nihilism. That is a chance worth taking.