

Marx, Communism, and Basic Income*

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Abstract. Should Marxists support universal basic income (UBI), i.e., a regular cash income paid to all without a means test or work requirement? This paper considers one important argument that they should, namely that UBI would be instrumentally effective in helping to bring about communism. This essay puts that claim under the microscope. It argues that previous answers to this question have paid insufficient attention to a logically prior question: what is Marx's account of communism? The essay distinguishes two different accounts: a left-libertarian version that associates communism with the freedom to live and work how one wants, and a perfectionist version that associates communism with the overcoming of alienated labour and self-realisation in work. It argues that UBI would make steps towards the left-libertarian account but not the perfectionist account. Ultimately, then, the question "should Marxists support basic income?" is shown to partly depend on which account of communism Marxists want to bring about.

1. Introduction

Karl Marx famously suggests that the transition from capitalism to communism will involve two phases. In the "lower phase of communism" – which later writers called socialism – workers collectively own the means of production and distribution is calibrated to labour contribution. In Marx's view, the lower socialist phase, though defective, is necessary to prepare the ground for the higher phase of communism that will eventually replace it. As is well known, Marx suggests that the higher phase of communism will be characterised by the principle "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need!" (Marx 1875: 87)¹

While Marx's account of the higher phase of communism continues to be a source of inspiration, there are serious doubts about whether a traditional socialist programme – i.e., one involving collective ownership of the means of production and the abolition of the market – can successfully bring it about. Marx thought that the higher phase of communism would be characterised by material abundance, free productive activity, and distribution according to need. Yet actual socialist societies were blighted by economic inefficiency, bureaucracy, hierarchy, and despotism.² Far from delivering communism, they failed to provide an attractive alternative to capitalism.

It is in light of the disillusionment with traditional socialism that we can understand the considerable appeal of universal basic income (hereafter: UBI) to the left, defined

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¹ References to Marx's writings are to the *Marx-Engels Collected Works* (hereafter: *MECW*). Citations state the year the text was originally published or composed (if unpublished) followed by the page number.

² For an influential overview of the failure of actually existing socialism, see Nove 1983.

as “a regular cash income paid to all, on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement” (Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017: 1). For one recurring argument in favour of UBI is that it “would help realize the moral vision socialists ought to realize” (Calnitzky 2017), without requiring the sort of programme that socialists have traditionally endorsed. On this view, the failure of socialism should not be a cause of dismay, for the provision of a substantial UBI can bring us “closer to the equality and freedom from servitude that were at the core of Marx’s emancipatory vision” (Howard 2015). In other words, to borrow the title of a well-known paper, UBI provides a “capitalist road to communism” (Van der Veen and Philippe Van Parijs 1986).

In this essay I put this claim under the microscope. I ask: would the provision of UBI be instrumentally effective in helping us move towards Marx’s account of communism? While this question has been asked several times before,³ I believe that previous answers have not paid enough attention to a logically prior question: what is Marx’s account of communism? I distinguish two accounts of communism in Marx’s writings: what I call a left-libertarian account and a perfectionist account.⁴ The left-libertarian account centrally involves voluntary labour contribution and distribution according to need; it associates communism with the freedom to live and work how one wants. The perfectionist vision, by contrast, centrally involves the abolition of alienated labour; it associates communism with a specific view of the good life, one that involves self-realisation in work. I argue that UBI would make a significant step towards the left-libertarian account. However, I argue that it would not make a similar step towards the perfectionist account. Ultimately, then, the question, “should Marxists support basic income?”, depends upon which account of communism Marxists are seeking to bring about.

Before I continue, some clarifications are in order. First, while I ask, “should Marxists support basic income?”, notice that I only consider one argument that answers that question in the affirmative, namely that Marxists should support UBI because its implementation would help bring about communism. No doubt, there are other arguments for why Marxists should support UBI. For instance, one might argue that Marxists should support UBI on the grounds that it improves the condition of workers under capitalism, independent of whether it helps bring about communism. I shall not, however, consider such arguments here.

Secondly, there is a sense in which UBI is obviously inconsistent with communism. As Marx conceived it, communism is a classless society in which there is no private ownership of the means of production, no capitalists, no markets, no money, no wage labour, etc (Nove 1986). However, the question is not whether UBI is consistent with the institutional details of communism (for it is obviously not) but rather whether UBI is instrumentally effective in moving towards the values that Marx associated with communism, without an intermediary socialist stage. This question, we shall see, is not straightforward.

³ See, e.g., see the two special issues on Van der Veen and Van Parijs 1986, in *Theory and Society* 15(5), 1986, and *Basic Income Studies* 1(1), 2006.

⁴ For discussions of what I am calling the left-libertarian side of Marx’s vision of communism, see, e.g., Cohen 1990; Rawls 2000. For discussions of what I am calling the perfectionist side of Marx’s vision of communism, see, e.g., Brudney 1998; Leopold 2007; Sypnowich 2018; Kandiyali 2014, 2018, and 2020.

Thirdly, in the literature on UBI there is scepticism about whether a substantial UBI, i.e., one sufficient for meeting basic needs, is compatible with capitalism.⁵ The basic point is that the provision of a substantial UBI would enable workers to say no to wage labour. As such, it would surely be met with overwhelming resistance from capitalists. This is an important doubt, and I have sympathy with it. For the sake of argument, however, I shall put it to one side. Assuming that a substantial UBI would not elicit overwhelming capitalist resistance, I ask: would it help move us in the direction of communism?

The paper proceeds as follows. I begin (2) with some remarks about the concept of UBI. I then (3) introduce the left-libertarian account of communism and argue that the provision of UBI would help bring it about. Next, (4) I introduce the perfectionist account and argue that UBI would not help bring it about. I conclude (5) with some brief remarks on the merits and shortcomings of the two accounts of communism.

2. The Concept of Basic Income

Let us start, then, with the concept of UBI. As the details of this proposal have been discussed extensively, I will be brief.

As we have seen, UBI is defined “as a regular cash income paid to all, on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement” (Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017: 1). Let us unpack this. First, UBI is an income that is paid in cash, rather than in kind. This means that recipients get to decide how to spend their money. Secondly, UBI is paid on a regular (typically monthly) basis. It is not paid as a lump sum, as in the capital grant proposal, for example. Thirdly, UBI is paid to all, though this is usually qualified in some way, for example with regards to children or temporary residents. Fourthly, UBI is paid on an individual basis, i.e., irrespective of whether one lives alone or as part of a family.

The defining feature of UBI, however, is its unconditionality. As the definition above makes clear, UBI is unconditional in two ways. First, it is unconditional in that it is paid without a means test. Thus, UBI is paid irrespective of one’s level of wealth, to rich and poor alike. Secondly, it is unconditional in that it is paid without a work requirement. Thus, one receives the income irrespective of whether one works, or even whether one is willing to work. This differentiates UBI from existing schemes of unemployment benefit, which typically make the receipt of benefits conditional in various respects, for example on previous work history or willingness to work. It is fair to say that this feature of UBI has generated a great deal of controversy, with defenders arguing that the absence of work requirement makes UBI genuinely emancipatory, and critics insisting that, by giving people something for nothing, UBI violates widely held norms of justice and reciprocity.⁶

Notice that there is nothing in the definition of UBI that specifies the level at which it

⁵ For these doubts, see, e.g., Carens 1986; Wright 1986; Smith 2018; Gourevitch and Stanczyk 2018.

⁶ For this objection, see, e.g., Elster 1986; White 1997. For attempts to handle it, see, e.g., Van Parijs *Real* 1997; Mckinnon 2003.

should be set.⁷ For the purposes of this essay, however, I shall assume that the UBI is substantial, by which I mean sufficient to meet basic needs. This is because, for reasons that will become clear, the view that is UBI is instrumentally effective in moving towards communism is only plausible when the UBI provides enough to live on. As I have said, some critics find this assumption problematic, since they doubt that a UBI of this kind – which would liberate people from the necessity of having to work – could be implemented under capitalism. But, as I have said, I will assume for the sake of argument that a substantial UBI is possible. The question is: would this move us closer to communism in either its left-libertarian or perfectionist form?

3. The Left-Libertarian Account and UBI

Having laid out the concept of UBI, let us now turn to Marx's account of communism. In this section, I discuss the main features of the left-libertarian account, that is, the view that associates communism with the freedom to live and work how one wants, and then go on to explain how UBI would be instrumentally effective in bringing it about.

Let us begin with the transition from capitalism to communism, for this will be helpful for understanding how Marx conceives of communism, which is not free from ambiguity. As stated in the introduction, Marx argues that the transition will involve two phases of communism: a lower and higher phase. For our purposes the key features of the lower phase include: 1) abolition of private ownership of the means of production; 2) abolition of all other sources of unearned income, such as income from rent and inheritance; 3) equal liability of all to work; and 4) the distribution of resources "*proportional to the labour they [i.e., future individuals] supply*" (Marx 1875: 86).⁸

In Marx's view, the lower phase is a definite improvement on capitalism, for exploitation is abolished: workers receive (after certain necessary deductions for repairs, insurance, administration, welfare, etc.) the full value of their labour contribution. Despite this major advance, however, Marx argues that the lower phase retains some problematic features of capitalism. Central to the lower phase is the idea that workers will be rewarded proportionate to their labour contribution. Marx makes two criticisms of this view. First, the lower phase unfairly rewards people's innate natural abilities. It no longer discriminates on the basis of one's class position. However, by calibrating pay to one's labour contribution, "it tacitly recognises the unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity of the workers as natural privileges" (Marx 1875: 86). Second, the lower phase ignores the fact that people have different needs: "one worker is married, another not; one has more children than another, and so on" (Marx 1875: 86). Thus, equal treatment in one respect will not yield equality in another more relevant sense: "given an equal amount of work done...one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another" (Marx 1875: 86).

Over time, however, Marx thinks that the lower phase of communist society will give rise to the higher phase, which he describes as follows:

⁷ Without such a specification, UBI is impossible to assess. As Brian Barry memorably puts it, "[a]sking about the pros and cons of basic income as such is rather like asking about the pros and cons of keeping a feline as a pet without distinguishing a tiger and a tabby" (Barry 2001:63).

⁸ In discussing the lower phase of communism, I also draw on *The Communist Manifesto*. See Marx and Engels 1848: 500.

“In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime need; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly— only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!” (Marx 1875: 87)

The famous slogan at the end of this passage is ambiguous between two interpretations, which have important implications for our question of whether UBI is instrumentally effective in bringing communism about.⁹ According to what we can call the *normative* interpretation, people should contribute according to their abilities, to receive according to their needs. On this interpretation, people receive according to their needs, but a productive contribution – appropriate to their abilities – is a pre-condition of their doing so. According to what we can call *descriptive* interpretation, by contrast, future individuals work according to their abilities, not because doing so is a pre-condition for getting something in return, but because that is what they want to do; and they receive according to their needs, not because they claim that as their due, but because the achievement of material abundance, and the transcendence of bourgeois attitudes about desert, means that people can just take what they need from the common stock of resources.

Now, I think it unlikely that Marx intended the communist slogan as a normative principle. As we have seen, Marx laments the fact that the lower phase of communism will, as a result of its recent emergence from capitalism, remain infected by bourgeois attitudes, such as the attitude that one deserves to be rewarded for one's superior productivity. The higher phase of communism is envisioned as enacting a radical break with such attitudes. Arguably, it will not do so if it stipulates that one must work according to one's abilities to receive anything in return. By contrast, on the descriptive reading, people receive according to their needs, irrespective of their labour contribution. This seems more in line with the radical break with bourgeois norms Marx has in mind. On this view, “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!” is not a norm to which people must (legally or morally) adhere, but a prediction of what life under communism will be like.

I hope it is now clear why this account of communism can be seen as a form of left-libertarianism. The account envisions distribution of resources according to needs. Yet, if the descriptive account is correct, as I have argued it is, this distribution is not achieved through the imposition of constraints on individual freedom. Rather, background conditions of material abundance ensure that needs are satisfied. This means that people can produce “just as they have a mind”, that is, without having to tailor their individual activity to others' needs. On this view, therefore, communism is characterised by an unprecedented level of individual freedom.

Would the implementation of a substantial UBI be instrumentally effective in bringing about the left-libertarian account of communism? I think it would. To see this, I focus

⁹ For the normative interpretation, see Geras 1989, Carens 2003, and Gilabert 2015. For the descriptive interpretation, see Cohen 1990.

on the two aspects of the higher phase of communism: 1) production (“from each”) and 2) distribution (“to each”) and show how UBI would make a significant step towards both.

First, production (“from each”). In Marx’s view, workers under capitalism are forced to sell their labour-power. That is, since a capitalist society is one in which capitalists own the means of production, and workers own no productive force other than their labour power, workers in capitalist society have no reasonable alternative but to work in return for a wage. Thus, in Marx’s view, capitalism is a system of “forced labour — no matter how much it may seem to result from free contractual agreement” (Marx 1894: 807).¹⁰ What workers do for a living, and the amount of time they devote to it, is also massively constrained by the fear of losing their “means of livelihood” (Marx and Engels 1846: 47). In the higher phase of communism, by contrast, labour is not forced or constrained in this way. People produce “according to their abilities”, but (as I have argued) this is a prediction about how people will use their freedom, not a stipulation.

Now, it is not hard to see how the introduction of a substantial UBI would make a significant step towards this ideal.¹¹ For as a number of advocates of UBI have argued, with UBI in place, workers have a reasonable alternative to selling their labour-power: they can live off the basic income. Like Marx, advocates of UBI assume that most people will not exercise this option. After all, a UBI would be impossible if a significant number of citizens chose to surf off the coast of Malibu. Thus, the background assumption is that most people will continue to contribute. However, workers would not be compelled to do so by their lack of access to the means of production. As with communism, their labour contribution would be a free choice, not an unchosen circumstance.

Second, distribution (“to each”). In the lower phase of communist society, what people receive is proportionate to what they contribute. Thus, someone who contributes more labour gets more resources, whereas someone who contributes less gets less. Marx’s criticism of this distributive principle is that it is unfair for A to get more than B simply because A has been blessed with superior productive capacities, and irrespective of any consideration of A and B’s needs. His solution is to decouple contribution from reward altogether. In the higher phase of communism, what one receives has no relation to what one gives.

Again, it is not hard to see how UBI would make a significant step towards this aspect of the left-libertarian account. For, as we have seen, a defining feature of UBI is that it is unconditional on whether one works, or one is willing to work. And this fits beautifully with Marx’s view of distribution in the higher phase of communism. For while it is sometimes claimed that Marx holds that the receipt of an income is dependent on labour contribution, this, we have seen, is only true in the lower phase of communism.¹² In the higher phase, by contrast, a labour contribution is not a pre-

¹⁰ For further discussion of this point, see Cohen 1988.

¹¹ The following argument is central to many left arguments for UBI. See, e.g., Van der Veen and Van Parijs 1986; Howard 2005; Howard 2015; Calnitzky 2018.

¹² Thus, in my view, McKinnon misinterprets Marx when she writes that, “[f]rom a Marxist perspective, this [UBI] is a violation of the principles of distribution that govern both socialism (because BI is universal

condition for the receipt of an income: people receive according to their needs, irrespective of the labour they have (or have not) supplied. The unconditionality of UBI is, therefore, consistent with Marx's view of distribution in the higher phase of communism.

Of course, to say that UBI is instrumentally effective in moving towards the left-libertarian account of communist society is not to say that it realizes it in every detail. For one thing, while Marx argued for a complete severance of contribution and reward, UBI, by contrast, only offers a partial separation. That is, with UBI everyone gets an unconditional income, but people can still top-up their income in the labour market. Thus, more productive individuals will continue to receive more than others. Furthermore, when Marx spoke of distribution according to need he was thinking of a distribution that was calibrated 1) not just to basic needs but to non-basic social and cultural needs, and 2) to specific needs, so that, for example, someone who has greater needs (e.g., as a result of a disability) gets more resources than someone with fewer needs. By contrast, UBI makes no attempt to calibrate distribution to needs in either of these ways; it aims to satisfy basic needs, and it gives everyone the same amount of income, irrespective of their condition.

Nevertheless, while UBI may be said to fall short of the left-libertarian account in these two respects, it is fair to say that it makes a meaningful step in its direction, and so can be said to be instrumentally effective in moving towards it. For UBI liberates people from having to sell their labour-power and distributes a significant proportion of wealth according to needs. Indeed, it might be argued that UBI provides the closest approximation to communism that is possible under present conditions, where people remain under the sway of bourgeois norms and we remain some way off material abundance.

4. The Perfectionist Account of Communism and UBI

I now contrast the left-libertarian account of communism with a perfectionist account. The perfectionist account associates communism, not with the freedom to live and work how one wants, but rather with a specific vision of the good life, one that involves the abolition of alienation labour and self-realisation in work. I begin by detailing the key aspects of the perfectionist account, and then argue that UBI would not be instrumentally effective in bringing it about.

It is well known that in Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* develop an account of alienated labour.¹³ According to this account, workers under capitalism are alienated in four respects. First, they are alienated from the product of their labour. The product of their labour is not something that workers own or control but is rather something that dominates them. Second, they are alienated from their productive activity. Labour does not involve the exercise and development of the worker's powers and capacities but instead "mortifies his body and ruins his mind" (Marx 1844b: 274). Consequently, it is experienced as a torment and only performed out of the necessity

entitlement not conditional on labour contributions) and communism (because BI is received by each 'according to his needs' but is independent of any requirement that persons contribute to the social product 'according to their abilities'" (McKinnon 2006).

¹³ For this account, see Marx 1844b: 270-282.

of earning a wage. As such, it is really a form of “*forced labour*” (Marx 1844b: 274). Third, they are alienated from their species-being. Humans can work in free, conscious and creative ways, but they cannot actualise this part of their essence under capitalism. Fourth, they are alienated from each other. Another part of our species-essence involves producing with and for others, but under capitalism workers do not see each other as contributors to one other’s self-realisation but as rivals for jobs or mere means to the achievement of their egoistic ends.

Alongside this critique of alienated labour, Marx’s 1844 writings also contain an account of unalienated labour under communism.¹⁴ According to this account, unalienated labour has the following characteristics. First, if we produced in an unalienated manner, producers would find the activity of labour fulfilling, enjoying “an individual manifestation of my life during the activity”. Second, producers would experience the fulfilment of looking upon the product of their labour, which would objectify their “personality”. Third, producers would also gain fulfilment from the knowledge that their work satisfies the “essential human need” of another. Fourth, consumers would appreciate the fact that others have produced a product that satisfies their needs, and so feel grateful to producers for their product. Fifth producers would recognise that consumers feel grateful towards them and would thus know themselves to “be confirmed both in your thought and your love.” Thus, Marx concludes, in “the individual expression of my life I would have directly created your expression of your life, and therefore in my individual activity I would have directly *confirmed* and *realised* my true nature, my human nature, my communal nature”.

Let me draw attention to two differences between the left-libertarian and perfectionist accounts of communism, which can be easily overlooked. First, while both accounts emphasise that labour under communism will be fulfilling, they provide different explanations about why this is so. In the left-libertarian vision, labour is fulfilling because it is freely chosen and therefore coheres with one’s conception of the good. In the perfectionist vision, by contrast, labour is attractive because it involves the realisation of one’s own nature and because it provides others with the goods and services they need to realise their nature. The emphasis on the realisation of one’s nature and of satisfying others’ needs is absent from the left-libertarian account.

Second, as with the left-libertarian account, in the perfectionist account the products of human labour are also distributed to human needs. But whereas the left-libertarian account sees needs as being catered for by background conditions of abundance (conditions that allow individuals to produce “just as they have a mind”) the perfectionist account instead suggests that producers will take others’ needs into account when deciding what to produce. On this view, needs are met, not as a result of propitious background conditions, but as a result of individuals’ willingly tailoring their activity to others’ needs.

I hope it is now clear why I have called this the perfectionist account of communism. On this account, communism is desirable because, by abolishing alienated labour, it

¹⁴ This account is taken from Marx 1844a: 227-8. I provide a more detailed discussion of this passage in Kandiyali 2020.

enables individuals to lead the good life, which is understood to involve the performance of a specific activity – namely, work that realizes one’s essential nature through the satisfaction of others’ needs. What makes communism good, on this view, is not only that it grants people a wide area of freedom, but that it enables them to lead a specific type of life that is deemed pre-eminently valuable.¹⁵

Would UBI be instrumentally effective in moving towards the perfectionist account of communism? I doubt it. To see why, let us ask two questions: 1) would UBI help abolish alienated labour? And 2) would it enable individuals to lead the good life as Marx conceived it?

Let us start with 1). Some commentators have argued that UBI would overcome alienated labour. They make three arguments. First, the introduction of UBI will “push up the wage for unattractive, unrewarding work” (Van der Veen and Van Parijs 1986: 646). Since no one is forced to accept a job to survive, capitalists will have to pay more money to get people to perform them. Secondly, UBI eliminates the coercion to work, thereby removing the “core aspect of alienation” (Howard 2005: 625). Thirdly, UBI would lead to a widespread revaluation of labour. In contemporary society many forms of work, though worthwhile, indeed necessary, are undervalued. An example is the unpaid labour that has traditionally been performed by women, such as housework and care work. By providing income to all, UBI decouples income from jobs. In doing so, it provides a form of recognition to unpaid work (Baker 2008; McKay 2001; Mulligan 2013).¹⁶

Consider the first argument: that UBI would push up the wage for alienated labour. Some commentators (e.g., Carens 1986) have questioned whether UBI would have this consequence, but assume, for the sake of argument, that it would. Now, if one is going to perform alienated labour, it is obviously better that it is compensated with a decent wage. However, the complaint about alienated labour is distinct from the complaint about low pay, and it is important not to conflate them. Although the workers Marx wrote about typically suffered both ills, it is entirely possible that one could suffer one but not the other: that is, one could be well-paid but alienated (e.g., a rich but alienated stockbroker) and one could be underpaid but unalienated (e.g., a poor but fulfilled teacher). Merely paying more money to workers performing alienated labour would not therefore help bring alienated labour to an end. As Marx himself put it, commenting on Proudhon’s proposal for an “increase of wages”, this “would be nothing but better *payment for the slave*, and would not win either for the worker or for labour their human status and dignity” (Marx 1844b: 280).¹⁷

The second argument is more promising, for Marx held that coercion (unlike pay) was

¹⁵ It is worth emphasising that the perfectionist account of communism also contains a commitment to freedom. The vision is emphatically not one of people being forced to perform unalienated labour, but of people freely choosing to deploy their powers in ways that contribute to the satisfaction of others’ needs.

¹⁶ This argument should be distinguished from the argument that UBI would provide the social basis for everyone to make an esteemed labour contribution (without changing what counts as an esteemed labour contribution). For such an argument, see De Wispelaere and Laitinen 2020.

¹⁷ This is not to say that Marx was opposed to an increase in workers’ wages. On the contrary, he consistently supported, and indeed fought for, such increases, and criticised others in the socialist movement who failed to do so. However, he was unequivocal that the ultimate goal of the socialist movement should not be an increase in wages but the “abolition of the wages system!” (Marx 1865: 150).

part of the wrong of alienated labour. As we have already seen, he describes alienated labour as not free 'but coerced... *forced labour*' (Marx 1844b: 274). If coercion was overcome, then, this would reduce alienation. It would not eliminate it, however, for coercion is a necessary but far from sufficient condition of alienated labour. That is, alienated labour is labour that alienates workers from the product of their labour (which dominates them), from their productive activity (which they loath and only perform because they lack reasonable alternatives) from their species-being (which they cannot realise), and from other individuals (who they enjoy no community with). Eliminating the coercion would partially address the alienation from our productive activity, but it would leave these other aspects intact.

What about the third argument? It is true that Marx thought that labour is undervalued in capitalist society. Under capitalism people view labour as a mere means to the end of making money. They do not value their own, or each other's, labour contributions. They are, of course, aware that the objects they use involve human labour, but they do not see labour as an "open book of human essential powers" and they do not appreciate others for providing them with the goods and services they need (Marx 1844b: 302). In a communist society, by contrast, we will esteem our own and each other's labour contributions and appreciate others for satisfying our needs.

Thus, Marx did think that alienated labour partly involves a cognitive failing, a fundamental misunderstanding of the place of labour in human life.¹⁸ And he did think that overcoming alienated labour requires a revaluation of the value of labour. By "labour", Marx may have had material production in mind, i.e., jobs that centrally involve the transformation of the external world to satisfy human needs. However, there is no reason for us to stick to such a view. After all, there are important jobs that do not transform the external world (e.g., teaching, nursing), and there are equally important forms of labour that often take place outside the paid labour market (e.g., childcare, eldercare). A twenty-first century Marxism view should not be tied to jobs in material production (Brudney 2018).

So, I think Marx and Marxists should welcome a proposal that leads to a widespread revaluation of labour, shifting recognition away from what the market rewards towards what is humanly valuable. However, it is not clear that UBI would provide such a revaluation. The claim that it would do so relies on the hypothesis that, since UBI gives income to those engaged in previously unpaid or poorly paid labour, it will thereby provide increased visibility and recognition of that labour. But that is not obvious.¹⁹ After all, UBI is, by definition, paid to everyone. That is, UBI is paid to people who do socially worthwhile labour (whether paid or unpaid), but it is also paid to people who do not labour (e.g., a Malibu surfer) and indeed to people whose labour contribution is positively harmful (e.g., the CEO of a pay-day loans company). Since basic income is paid to everyone, it is not clear whether it would signal the value of worthwhile labour.

Thus, while UBI might plausibly improve the condition of workers, ensuring that they are paid more and have the option to say no to undesirable forms of employment, I doubt that it would help bring about the end of alienated labour.

¹⁸ For excellent discussion of this cognitive failing, see Brudney 1998: chapters 4, 5, and 6.

¹⁹ For related scepticism, see, e.g., Robeyns 2010 and Smith forthcoming.

Let us turn to our second question: would UBI be instrumentally effective in helping bring about the good life as Marx conceived it, that is, a life involving self-realisation in work? Here, a more positive assessment seems possible. Suppose someone has a strong preference for unalienated labour, that is, individually fulfilling labour that satisfies another's needs. But now suppose that, under current conditions, the wage for such a job is low, or requires a lengthy period of unpaid retraining, such that one could not accept it. Under these conditions, one lacks the freedom to pursue unalienated labour. With a UBI, however, this option becomes economically viable: with one's needs already met, one can accept a lower paid but more meaningful job or afford the cost of retraining. Therefore, a UBI provides workers with real freedom to perform unalienated labour.

There are, however, three ways in which this argument might seem to fall short of establishing its conclusion. First, the argument states that with UBI people will be able to accept unalienated forms of work that would otherwise be unavailable to them. Notice, however, that this argument relies on the premise that unalienated jobs are available under capitalism; the problem is that people cannot afford to take them. Marx would be sceptical. For him the problem is not that people cannot afford the drop in wages to perform unalienated labour. It is rather that, by gearing production towards the maximization of profit, capitalism systematically excludes the possibility of unalienated labour. If Marx's analysis is right, then an unconditional income will be insufficient to remedy the problem; we need instead to change the economic structure.

Second, the argument suggests that UBI will enable people to exit an alienating labour market, moving away from meaningless toil to more fulfilling forms of unpaid labour. But even if we assume (as I have been) that the UBI is sufficient to meet basic needs, then notice that people who exercise this option would face a significant drop in their standard of living. With the UBI, their basic needs will be met, but their ability to satisfy their less basic social and cultural needs could be quite limited: people will be able to live, but they may not be able to live well. So, if one wants to satisfy one's less basic social and cultural needs – if one wants to, say, travel, go out to dinner or to the theatre, or buy birthday presents for one's children – one will still most likely have to enter the labour market. And here it is worth emphasising that Marx and the socialist tradition have generally seen human flourishing as requiring the satisfaction of an expansive set of needs.²⁰

Third, the argument states that UBI will enable people to perform forms of unalienated labour that are impossible under present conditions. Notice, however, that UBI would not only enable people to choose unalienated labour; it would also enable them to choose lives that are the opposite of those Marx prized, such as lives of alienated labour and passive consumption. For UBI effectively opens the door to a wide range of possibilities: some good, some neutral, some harmful. Therefore, while a UBI is not *incompatible* with the perfectionist account of the good life – it does not preclude it and may enable people who have a preference for unalienated labour to engage in it – it does nothing to forestall alienation, either.²¹ By contrast, Marx's call for an abolition of wage-labour, while not forcing people into nonalienation, would

²⁰ For accounts of expansive conception of need and flourishing that figures in the early Marx, see Leopold 2007: ch.4. For discussion of the socialist tradition more generally, see Sypnowich 2017.

²¹ For related concerns, see Arneson 1996.

decisively take alienated labour off the table.

It is worth emphasising that this objection is different from the common criticism that UBI enables people to shirk work. The issue here is not, as in the common criticism, that UBI enables a system of exploitation, i.e., a system where some people unjustly live off others' labour contributions. It is rather that it enables, or at least does not forestall, a system of alienation, i.e., a system where people do not realise their human essence. For the early Marx, Malibu surfers may not be wronging others, but they are not leading the good life.²²

5. Conclusion

Let us take stock. Would the introduction of UBI be instrumentally effective in moving towards Marx's vision of communism? I have argued that to answer this question we must draw a distinction between two visions of communism. The central distinction is between a left-libertarian vision of communism, which associates communism with the freedom to live and work how one wants, and a perfectionist vision, which associates communism with a particular vision of the good life that involves self-realisation in work. I have argued that UBI would be instrumentally effective in moving towards the left-libertarian vision. However, I have argued that it would not be similarly effective in moving towards the perfectionist vision. In making these arguments, my aim has not been to criticise UBI, but to consider the claim that its introduction would help bring about Marx's account of communism. As I have argued throughout, this depends on the prior question of what Marx's account of communism is taken to involve.

The foregoing argument raises another question. I have argued that there are two visions of communism in Marx's writings. Which vision should Marxists look to bring about?

Now, both visions of communism have their merits. In terms of accessibility, that is, the issue of how we could get there from here, the left-libertarian vision may have the advantage.²³ This vision emphasises that communism will provide people with the freedom to live and work how they want. Arguably, this freedom is something people already prize. As such, I suspect that the left-libertarian vision could gain traction with existing social actors. By contrast, the perfectionist vision associates communism with unalienated labour. It would be wrong to say that a concern with unalienated labour is absent in contemporary society, for meaningful work is important to many people. Nevertheless, the perfectionist vision of communism requires a significant shift in values. For it requires people to find their fulfilment through helping others – maybe distant, unknown others – satisfy their needs. And this might be quite hard to do. As such, the perfectionist vision seems more remote.

But the perfectionist vision is appealing. Its central idea is the idea that a communist

²² This point is contestable. Surfing is a complex activity that calls on the development and integration of human powers. It is also an activity that spectators enjoy. And surfers might engage in other forms of socially worthwhile work, such as caring for their children or elderly relatives. If so, the early Marx might think that surfers are living the good life. However, I take it that the Malibu surfers are surfing entirely for themselves. If so, Marx would deny that their activity counts as unalienated labour. I thank Tony Smith for helpful conversations on this topic.

²³ For discussion of the issue of accessibility, see Wright 2010: 20-25.

society will be one in which individuals realise themselves *through* others – by helping them satisfy their needs. At the heart of this view is the idea that our neediness and dependence on others is not some regrettable fact that we would be better off without, but a positive feature of human existence. Indeed, it is the basis for the good life. In this essay, I have given some reasons to doubt whether UBI would help bring about this vision of communism. Yet it is fair to say that Marx gave us few clues about how it could be achieved either, and the failure of actual socialist societies – a failure that provoked much left-wing interest in UBI – has cast doubt on the viability of the traditional road to communism. For those attracted to the perfectionist account of communism, then, the task lies not only in revising it for the twenty-first century,²⁴ or in responding to various objections,²⁵ but also in thinking about how we can get there from here.²⁶

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²⁴ For such an attempt, see Brudney 2018.

²⁵ A key objection is that the vision of communism relies on inappropriately comprehensive conception of the good life, one that centrally involves nonalienated work. But what about people who do not value such work? Are they not treated unfairly by a society that abolishes alienated labour and strives to bring about self-realisation in work for all? For criticisms along these lines, see, e.g., Kymlicka 1990: 186-192; and Arneson 1987. I respond to this objection in Kandiyali 2020.

²⁶ For helpful discussion of issues of transition, see Gilabert 2015 and Gomberg 2016.

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