

Julio Lucena de Andrés*

Is G.A. Cohen's Egalitarian Ethos Consistent with Unconditional Basic Income?

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Abstract: The egalitarian ethos, as formulated by G.A. Cohen, and the unconditional basic income are two proposals that a priori may seem incompatible. The reason is that Cohen's ethos – aimed at reducing inequality without sacrificing efficiency or freedom- requires that individuals work hard in socially useful occupations without asking for any inequality-generating incentives. On the contrary, the UBI, as conceived by Van Parijs and van der Veen, consists of an income paid by the government to every full member of society regardless of their willingness to contribute to society in the form of work. In short, the ethos includes a productive requirement while the UBI has an unconditional character. However, if we introduce an absolute level of affluence above what occupational autonomy takes precedence over efficiency and if we broaden the range of socially useful contributions beyond formal employment, the tension between the egalitarian ethos and UBI will be alleviated.

Keywords: egalitarian ethos; unconditional basic income; freedom from toil; occupational freedom; the contribution-beyond-employment solution

1 Introduction

Is G.A. Cohen's egalitarian ethos consistent with unconditional basic income? One may argue it is not. Van Parijs defends the moral right of the Malibu surfer that lives off basic income and Cohen argues that a perfectly fit young man should not live a life of idleness and self-indulgence but try to be an asset to society and contribute to satisfying social needs.

This paper is an attempt to solve the conflict between Cohen's and Van Parijs' proposals. It proceeds as follows. Section 1.1 examines the egalitarian ethos as originally formulated by G.A. Cohen to eradicate inequality without sacrificing efficiency or freedom. Cohen's ethos requires high-talented people to work hard in socially useful occupations without asking for higher monetary rewards. His ethical solution only permits differential treatment in case of a special labor burden. In response to criticism

***Corresponding author: Julio Lucena de Andrés**, Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain, E-mail: jlucende7@alumnes.ub.edu. <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2791-355X>

that the ethos was too stringent, Cohen introduces an agent-centered prerogative to ensure a certain degree of freedom for individuals in choosing their occupation. However, as we discuss later, Paula Casal consider Cohen's ethos – with the personal prerogative included-as excessively demanding and directive, so she proposes a different revision of it to make it compatible with occupational freedom for all.

Having clarified the content of the ethos, Section 1.2 describes the proposal for a UBI made by Van Parijs and van der Veen, who base it on the principle of “real freedom for all”. As they define it, *basic income* is a grant conferred by the government to all full members of society regardless of (i) their willingness to work, (ii) their income from other sources, (iii) their place of residence and (iv) their household situation. According to Van Parijs, UBI does not need to cover basic needs, but its level can be higher or fall short depending on the functioning of the economy.

Section 1.3 addresses the potential inconsistency between Cohen's ethos and the unconditional basic income as presented in the previous sections. The most obvious reason why these two proposals seem incompatible is that whilst Cohen's ethos incorporates a requirement according to which the high-skilled individuals must try to improve the lives of the worst-off by working hard in socially useful occupations without demanding higher wages, Van Parijs and van der Veen's defence of UBI, by contrast, stresses the right of Malibu surfers to live entirely unproductive lives, sustained by taxes on the labour of others and enjoying “real freedom from toil” their entire lives if they so wish.

Finally, in Section 1.4 we present five solutions to overcome this tension so that the two proposals are consistent with each other. The five solutions are as follows: (1) the Equality-Enhancing Solution, (2) the Occupational-Freedom-for-all Solution, (3) the Self-Realization-for-all Solution, (4) the Material-Autonomy-based Solution, and (5) the Contribution-Beyond-Employment Solution. We conclude by arguing that UBI and a revised broader ethos of contribution beyond formal employment are fully consistent with each other.

1.1 G.A. Cohen's Egalitarian Ethos and Casal's and Shiffrin's Revised Versions

G.A. Cohen appeals to an ethical solution to solve the trilemma formed by Pareto efficiency, equality, and freedom without sacrificing any of these three (Cohen 2008: 181–228). According to those who pose the trilemma as unsolvable, one could not achieve all three, but just two: that is, one could have Pareto efficiency and equality, sacrificing freedom (the Stalinist-style solution in Cohen's terms); equality and freedom by sacrificing Pareto efficiency; or finally, Pareto efficiency and freedom by foregoing equality. Cohen argues that the trilemma can be solved through the

widespread adoption of an *egalitarian ethos* in society that makes people act according to Rawls' difference principle in their private lives,¹ that is, rejecting any inequality which does not benefit the worst off.

Cohen devotes an entire chapter to the Freedom Objection, which claims that the ethos is so demanding that it does not really save all three values but jeopardizes freedom. Cohen deals with two versions of the trilemma: the first one formed by equality, Pareto efficiency, and freedom of *choice of occupation*, and the second where the latter is replaced by freedom as *self-realization* within an occupation.

The proponents of the first form of the trilemma understand that

- (1) equality as the absence of individuals who are *substantially* better off than others with respect to *both* income and job satisfaction on a scale that exceeds what a personal prerogative might justify (2008: 184)
- (2) efficiency as the acceptance options which are better for some and worse for none
- and (3) freedom (in terms of occupational freedom) cannot be all simultaneously realized.

Instead of abandoning equality to obtain both Pareto efficiency and freedom of occupational choice, Cohen appeals to the misconstruction of the trilemma because of a lack of clarity in the description of its freedom element (2008: 188). According to Cohen, morality merely *inspires* or *informs* – without constraining – the free action of a person, which can only be coerced by legal obligation.

Nevertheless, Cohen faces another objection according to which freedom to choose between two things would not make sense if only one is morally permissible or, as Casal points out building upon Raz, if instead of choosing between two goods, the choice is between good and evil (Raz 1986, as cited in Casal 2013: 10). To this last objection, Cohen responds that “the value of freedom lies in the absence of coercion itself, not in the absence of legitimate moral demands that, being legitimate, cannot be absent” (2008: 195).

Cohen favors extending not only the liberty principle (to which Rawls gives lexical priority) beyond the sphere of the state but also the difference principle, so that the latter influences people's private lives in promoting the interests of the worst-off within the limits of a defensible personal prerogative.

Unlike Rawls, Cohen considers it necessary to include not only income but also the quality of work experience in the metric of justice. Thus, he favors compensation for *special labor burdens*, like those incurred in unusually arduous jobs (Casal 2013: 6).

About the second form of the trilemma, namely the one constituted by equality, Pareto efficiency, and freedom as self-realization, Cohen claims that the latter cannot

¹ For a more detailed reflection on why the difference principle also applies to the private lives of individuals, see Cohen (2008: 196–205).

be put in binary terms (unlike freedom of occupational choice), but rather comes “in different amounts” (2008: 206). Regarding this type of freedom, Cohen considers that we should not speak of “slavery of the talented” either. Instead, what an egalitarian Cohen-like society would demand of a talented person is not that they completely renounce their occupational preferences and opt for a working life of absolute devotion to the worst-off, but that they simply settle for a life that, being privileged, more closely resembles that of ordinary people.

In summary, the welfarist-egalitarian principle of distributive justice proposed by Cohen, synthesized in his *egalitarian ethos* complemented by an agent-centered prerogative,² seeks to guarantee the freedom of individuals (both in the sense of occupational choice and self-realization) while moving towards a more egalitarian society that does not sacrifice efficiency.

However, for Casal (2013), Cohen’s egalitarian ethos continues to be very restrictive and leaves no room for freedom of occupational choice. Thus, Casal proposes revising the latter so that it guarantees occupational choice³ for all without needing an agent-centered prerogative.

Casal’s revised ethos makes, according to herself, two differences from Cohen’s original formulation: “first, there is a difference between being asked to make a sacrifice concerning our occupation – whether it is in terms of salary, working hours, or tasks – so that others can have occupational autonomy, and being asked to make the same sacrifice so that others can consume more [...] The second difference is that Jill cannot now complain to have lost her occupational autonomy to others who preserved theirs, for the revised ethos protects the occupational autonomy of *all*, the more skilled and the less skilled, and so also protects jill’s” (2013: 15–16).

In an attempt by Casal (2017) to reconcile Rawls, Cohen, and Mill, once a society has reached a certain absolute level of advantage in the sense of development and material prosperity, occupational freedom will take priority over greater material gains. Therefore, in Casal’s less-directive restatement of the ethos, the requirement that people work as hard as they can in socially useful occupations is contingent on reaching an absolute level of affluence.

On the other hand, Casal (2013) emphasizes that there is, in fact, a sense in which the ethos actually goes beyond the Rawlsian requirement insofar as it does not

2 Samuel Scheffler (1982) conceptualizes the “agent-centered prerogative” to moderate the demands of act-consequentialism. The agent-centered prerogative, unlike pure consequentialism, permits agents to refrain from always attempting to produce the best over-all state of affairs. Scheffler defends a position that always *permits* an agent to try to produce the best over-all state of affairs, but does not always require the agent to do so (Scheffler 1982, as cited in Alexander 1987).

3 *Occupational autonomy* or *occupational choice* can be defined as the capacity to choose between different jobs that all meet minimum working conditions (remuneration, hours, etc.), since if one of the occupations did not do so, it would not be a real choice between comparable alternatives.

protect a merely formal or negative freedom but a real freedom as well (Van Parijs 1995, as cited in Casal 2013: 17). For this reason, she concludes that “for now nobody needs to have their occupational autonomy protected *from* the ethos because the ethos itself already protects occupational autonomy for all” (2013: 18). Moreover, since occupational autonomy is a *satisfiable* requirement, the importance of absolute levels of advantage is already built into the ethos (2013: 19).

To summarize: given that there is a difference between sacrificing occupational autonomy so that others can be entitled to it and so that they can consume more, given that from a certain level of material affluence onwards, occupational autonomy takes priority over greater material gains, and given that occupational choice is satiable, we can argue that the validity of an ethos⁴ *à la* Casal reinforces instead of undermines occupational autonomy for all.

It is precisely on the appeal to “real freedom for all” that Van Parijs (1995) intends to base his proposal for a universal basic income: “the real freedom we need to be concerned with is not just the real freedom to choose among the various bundles of goods one might wish to consume. *It is the real freedom to choose among the various lives one might wish to lead*” (1995: 33). The attempt to put in dialogue both approaches, namely the distinct revisions of the egalitarian ethos and UBI, is what we will cover in the third section. But before that, we will briefly delve into Van Parijs’ and van der Veen’s proposal for an unconditional basic income.

1.2 The Unconditional Basic Income (UBI) in Van Parijs and van der Veen

Van Parijs starts his reflection on UBI from a definition of *real freedom* according to which “one is really free, as opposed to just formally free, to the extent that one possesses the means, not just the right, to do whatever one might want to do” (Van

4 Another attempt to reformulate Cohen’s egalitarian ethos by making it less demanding in the sphere of individual behavior is the one carried out by Seana Shiffrin. Unlike Cohen’s requirement that citizens positively advance a particular end – namely the interest of the least well off, Shiffrin bases her argument on “the limitation on the reasons a citizen in a well-ordered society may act upon” to those morally non-arbitrary. According to Shiffrin, the possession of certain talents is an arbitrary matter, thus people should not benefit from them to claim a higher payment. Through this way of reasoning, “the connection to the position of the least well off is indirect” (Shiffrin 2010: 129). While Cohen’s canonical formulation is based on the direct application of the Difference Principle to individuals’ conduct, *the arbitrariness justification* elaborated by Shiffrin draws attention to the fact that “the acceptance of the justifications for the Difference Principle restricts what motives may drive individual action” and adds that the justification for the latter “is not that, morally, the least well off should be as well off as possible, but rather that talents are arbitrary from a moral point of view ...” (2010: 137).

Parijs 1995: 32–33). In more theoretical terms, Van Parijs applies a *leximin* criterion of freedom according to which “each person has the greatest possible opportunity to do whatever she might want to do” (1995: 25).

Building upon this conceptualization of *real freedom*, Van Parijs defines ‘basic income’ as “an income paid by the government to each full member of society (1) even if she is not willing to work, (2) irrespective of her being rich or poor, (3) whoever she lives with, and (4) no matter which part of the country she lives in” (1995: 35).

The fact that UBI as conceived by Van Parijs is granted to all full members of society means that people sometimes refer to it as “universal”. However, throughout this work, we will use the term “unconditional” to underline the four unconditional traits that define its guarantee.

Regarding the amount that UBI has to reach in order to fulfill its purpose, Van Parijs claims that “there is nothing in the definition of basic income, as it is here understood, to connect it to some notion of basic needs. A basic income, as defined, can fall short of or exceed what is regarded as necessary to a decent existence” (1995: 35). Instead, Van Parijs prefers to talk about the highest sustainable basic income for all consistent with security and self-ownership (1995: 33; 39).

Once we have made these terminological clarifications, we are in a position to delve into those trends that, according to van der Veen and Van Parijs (1986), concur to undermine the claim that work alone (or at least the willingness to work) entitles one to any part of the social product: the first trend has to do with the *reevaluation of unpaid work* that the women’s movement has led to. Basically, if one agrees that there are several activities that it is undesirable for them to become paid work – such as caregiving tasks – and if one insists that people can specialize in such tasks for part or for all their lives, then there is no reason that we continue to defend the principle according to which only those who carry out paid work or show intention to do so are entitled to an income of their own (van der Veen and Van Parijs 1986: 727).

The second trend is related to *technological progress*, which has attenuated the truth contained in the fact that what a worker produces is due entirely to his effort. When income level has so little to do with work performed, Van Parijs and van der Veen ask themselves, “how can one oppose the introduction of a universal grant on the ground that capitalists would then no longer be the only people capable of getting an income without working?” (van der Veen and Van Parijs 1986: 728).

The third trend has to do with the fact that *privatization and destruction* of the remaining commons by industrial society have left whoever does not get a monetary income with such meagre possibilities for subsisting independently. This would also justify, according to the authors, the introduction of a universal income (van der Veen and Van Parijs 1986: 728).

In a more recent book, Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017) focus again on technological progress and ask themselves:

Should a morality that stigmatizes access to an income without work and thereby tries to restrict material gratification to those willing to contribute to society's production not be abandoned when technological progress is leading to overabundant workers? [...] We have moved from a situation in which, say, 90 % of the population were required to satisfy everyone's basic needs in food, housing, and clothing, to one in which, say, 10 % suffice (Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017: 101).

In relation to this last point, we should reflect on the automation process that has been accelerated by the covid-19 pandemic and the debate on the future of work that it is sparking. According to OECD's 2023 Employment Outlook, jobs with the highest risk of being automated make up 27 % of the labour force on average in OECD countries. In addition, 60 % of workers are worried about losing their jobs to AI in the next ten years (OECD 2023). A seminal study published by Frey and Osborne ten years ago predicted from a technological capabilities point of view that 47 % of U.S. jobs are automatable. The authors were able to examine a total of 702 occupations, which in 2013 made up 97 % of the U.S. workforce.

Regardless of which figures are more accurate, in this paper we are interested in reflecting on the normative implications of a process that is unstoppable and that, therefore, forces us to rethink questions such as the relationship between participation in labour markets and the perception of an income, the amount of work that is socially necessary (inside and outside formal employment) to satisfy basic human needs, and the balance between economic short-term efficiency and medium- and long-term sustainability of our ways of life.

Among other trends, automation is fostering an increasingly dualized labor market – on one side, with highly specialized workers capable of retraining and in high value-added professions and, on the other, with increasingly expendable workers in rudimentary tasks that machines are able to perform better and cheaper and that cannot be absorbed and are mostly thrown into vulnerability. According to Van Parijs and Vanderborght, an unconditional basic income, without being a panacea but being more adequate than similar proposals such as the negative income tax or conditional minimum income schemes, would be a fundamental measure to alleviate these problems.

However, although the focus of this paper is on UBI and the ethos, this does not mean that there are no other alternatives and strategies aimed at ending workers' precariousness and increasing their bargaining power, such as workplace democracy (Gourevitch 2016; González-Ricoy 2014) or universal basic services (Coote and Percy 2020), which can complement a monetary cash income by defending the collective provision of certain strategic sectors, such as energy, transport, care or food. The analysis of the components of an "egalitarian policy package" (Offe and Van Parijs 2013; White 2015) and the trade-offs and relations between the UBI, UBS, unionism, an egalitarian non-productivist ethos ... deserves a separate article.

On the other hand, the phenomenon of the “Great Resignation” that has taken place in the United States⁵ because of the economic crisis derived from the pandemic can be interpreted as a symptom of a generalized discontent of many workers in this country with the monetary rewards and expectations of progress that the labor market currently offers. Although this phenomenon has reached extraordinary levels in the US, it is a shared trend in many Western capitalist economies where individuals have seriously reconsidered in recent years their work and life priorities.

In short: the labour market is undergoing profound transformations related to the processes of automation and digitalisation, but also to more complex dynamics that have to do with the demands for reduced working time, the disidentification of people with their jobs (due to increasing turnover, precariousness, etc.) and the balance between working time and time devoted to other activities such as care, leisure, etc. In these circumstances, UBI is a proposal that can function as a “buffer” to prevent these structural transformations from generating greater inequality as well as, individually, it increases occupational autonomy by allowing for less costly transitions from one job to another, temporary exit from the labour market to pursue other tasks, etc.

To close this section, we want to dust off a quote by Marx from the third volume of *Capital* that can shed light on the problems we address here:

The realm of freedom actually begins only where labor which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; [...] Beyond the realm of necessity begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working-day is its basic prerequisite (Marx and Engels 1967: 593).

Ultimately, the logic behind the working day’s reduction that Marx defended is similar to that which underlies the UBI or the 4-day working week: to broaden the sphere of freedom by minimizing the influence of forced wage labor on our lives. However, according to Van Parijs’ defense of UBI, the work-time reduction will be less preferable than UBI for two main reasons: first, because of economic efficiency and, second, because work-time reduction would be more prescriptive and favour a certain trade-off between working time and leisure, while UBI opens the range of possibilities among a wide combination of time uses, encouraging a pluralism of lifestyles and choices. A third reason to favour UBI instead of work-time reduction has to do with its political emancipatory potential: by decoupling income from labor

⁵ In the latest data, 4.4 million Americans voluntarily left their jobs in April alone. For a more detailed analysis of the Great Resignation, see Wells, C. and C. Ballentine (June 6 2022): “People Keep Quitting Their Jobs Even as Recession Fears Mount”. *Bloomberg, Europe Edition*. Retrieved June 22, 2022, from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-06/how-to-quit-my-job-employees-are-leaving-even-as-recession-threats-loom>.

performance, the labor force is partially decommoditized and the individual's dependence on market requirements is reduced, opening up possibilities for association outside of market logics.

1.3 Why Might G.A. Cohen's Egalitarian Ethos and the Unconditional Basic Income Be Inconsistent with Each Other?

In the present section, we will explore the apparent inconsistency between Cohen's egalitarian ethos and Van Parijs' proposal for an unconditional basic income grounded on the principle of "real freedom for all".

The first and most obvious reason why both proposals might be *a priori* incompatible is that Cohen's egalitarian ethos requires that individuals work hard and that they do so in socially useful occupations without receiving any inequality-generating incentives⁶ (Casal 2013: 5). On the contrary, Van Parijs' basic income is unconditional in relation to four dimensions: (i) people's willingness to work, (ii) their income from other sources, (iii) their place of residence, and (iv) their household situation. In short: while the ethos includes a "productive requirement", the UBI has an unconditional character.

If we pay closer attention to Cohen's conceptualization of the ethos, we notice that the first part of his solution – "the requirement to work hard at socially useful occupations" – poses a problem to argue in favor of UBI. The ethos implies a highly demanding "work requirement" with three additional specifications: (1) these occupations performed by highly capable people have to be socially useful, (2) individuals have to work hard in them and (3) without asking for differential economic rewards. The consequence, according to Casal, is that Cohen was forced to the *ad hoc* insertion of an agent-centered prerogative to carve out some breathing space for the autonomy of the more skilled (Casal 2013: 18). This agent-centred prerogative is justified to allow workers to discount the moral value of benefits to others compared with benefits to themselves (Scheffler 1982: 20).

On the other hand, a universal grant or basic income as understood by Van Parijs and van der Veen "cannot be justified by reference to solidarity (in favor of the "unlucky") or to any desert principle (nobody "deserves" it). It can only be justified in terms of *real freedom from toil for everyone*" (van der Veen and Van Parijs 1986: 727). Some might argue that while Cohen faces serious difficulties guaranteeing freedom (in particular, occupational freedom), Van Parijs and van der Veen base unconditional basic income precisely on that principle, that of "real freedom for all".

6 It only allows compensation for "special labour burden" (Cohen 2008: 106–107).

We can also observe the points of disagreement between both authors in light of the old Marxist principle of distributive justice that claims “From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs”: while Cohen argues that “to avoid unfair burden on the talented, or on anyone else for that matter, the first part of the slogan should, instead, be constrained by its second part ...” (Cohen 2008: 208–209), Van Parijs and van der Veen pursue a situation in which the social product is distributed entirely in the form of unconditional grants, possibly modulated in terms of such proxies of objective needs as age or disability (“to each according to his needs”), without anyone being coerced into performance (“from each according to his abilities”) (van der Veen and Van Parijs 1986: 723). In short, whilst Cohen defends a revised version of the classical Marxist principle, according to which the first part is constrained by the second, Van Parijs and van der Veen fully reject the first part and base the core of their proposal on the second. An open question that we will try to address in the last section has to do with the level of a UBI that is sustainable over and capable of satisfying everyone’s needs without generating negative incentives to work that prevent its financing.

Along with the above incompatibilities, we must bear in mind that Van Parijs justifies the introduction of UBI on the basis of “real libertarianism”, according to which all full members of society have the right to live like the Malibu surfer and receive an income from the government. That is, Van Parijs defends a conception of real individual freedom not subject to any kind of limitation, neither by the government nor by the rest of society. On the contrary, Cohen’s egalitarian ethos requires a contribution in the form of work so that citizens are ultimately assets to society without them sacrificing their occupational freedom. It is thus evident that both authors depart from theoretical coordinates distant from each other.

1.4 Five Possible Solutions to the Incompatibility Between Cohen’s Egalitarian Ethos and UBI

Having briefly analyzed those points where Cohen’s egalitarian ethos conflicts with the unconditional basic income developed by Van Parijs and van der Veen, it is time to try to bridge this apparent incompatibility. For this purpose, we will describe below a series of distinct solutions that try to escape the former-described tension.

First, we will examine what we have called “the Equality-Enhancing Solution” based on the assumption of UBI as a tool capable of drastically reducing inequality. Second, we will briefly explain “the Occupational-Freedom-for-all Solution”, according to which the introduction of both a UBI and the revised ethos would increase the range of employment opportunities for individuals, thus expanding their occupational freedom. Third, we will outline “the Self-Realization-for-all

Solution”, whose main idea is that the implementation of UBI makes it possible to choose those jobs that allow us to develop our personal skills and tastes. Fourth, we will present “the Material-Autonomy-based Solution” proposed from republican-socialist positions, according to which the introduction of UBI takes precedence over the requirement that individuals display a contributory ethos in their daily routine. Fifth, and finally, we will address “the Contribution-Beyond-Employment Solution”, which argues that there are many socially useful non-remunerated activities beyond formal employment that the introduction of a UBI can foster.

1.4.1 The Equality-Enhancing Solution

As a first potential solution, some might argue that UBI is consistent with the egalitarian ethos because the former contributes to enhancing equality. By granting an unconditional basic income to each full member of society, the most disadvantaged would experience a considerable improvement in their material situation, while for the already well-off, although also entitled to UBI, it would not mean a “turning point” in their lives as in the case of the former. Therefore, the outcome would be an advance concerning equality by reducing the gap between the most privileged (those who have sufficient means to carry out their life plan) and the most disadvantaged (those who lack such means) in society.

Both Van Parijs and Casal agree on the fact that neither UBI nor the revised egalitarian ethos is capable of fully ending inequality. On the contrary, both proposals merely intend to expand what Van Parijs calls real occupational choice, whether understood as freedom from toil, occupational freedom, or opportunity for self-realization. These three concepts are similar to each other, although we consider it necessary to clarify the nuances that exist between them. By *freedom from toil* we refer to the freedom not to have to work hard (or as hard as possible); by *occupational freedom* we mean the opportunity to choose between different activities to which we can dedicate ourselves that all meet minimum working conditions; and finally, when we speak of *opportunity for self-realization* we emphasize the satisfaction that comes from carrying out a certain activity with which we identify. The freedom of not having to toil to guarantee our material existence and the freedom to choose between activities are two necessary – but certainly not sufficient – conditions for self-realization.

Furthermore, and in response to the collision between the pursuit for greater equality or guaranteeing occupational freedom that might derive from Cohen's stand, Casal concludes that under certain circumstances “jeopardizing occupational autonomy would be too high a price to pay for the additional reduction in inequality” (Casal 2013: 19).

Another possible objection to an exclusively Equality-Enhancing Solution could run as follows: although the implementation of both UBI and the ethos can represent an improvement in terms of equality (without fully achieving it), the latter cannot be “an end in itself” within the framework of a democracy that guarantees pluralism and fundamental rights (it can be one in a Stalinist-type regime). On the other hand, a real and not merely formal kind of freedom that permits us to develop our potentialities, our identity, our intellectual skills ... is indeed one. For this reason, this kind of solution for the UBI-ethos inconsistency, though useful, is shown to be incomplete.

1.4.2 The Occupational-Freedom-for-All Solution

A second way to solve this tension consists in appealing to UBI as necessary for all people to achieve a considerable degree of occupational autonomy, which Cohen's egalitarian ethos is supposed to guarantee.

To this respect, Williams underlines that proposals for an unconditional basic income “are all animated by the common aim of enhancing individuals' occupational freedom and diminishing the extent to which alienating external rewards motivates its exercise, by reducing the degree to which income depends upon paid employment” (Williams 2006: 2). In other words, the objective of UBI is leveling up, not down, which implies severing the link between the *duty* to contribute through work and the *right* to sufficient economic compensation.

Delving into this i.e. Williams refers to Van Parijs' and van der Veen's claim that “such a reform would be likely to increase diversity in the range of occupations available, especially in the case of the least skilled” (2006: 4). Not only will UBI make a series of low-paid jobs economically viable by guaranteeing financial autonomy to the people that carry out them. It will as well increase the bargaining power of workers with respect to employers, so that the former will not be forced to accept what anthropologist David Graeber calls “bullshit jobs” (Graeber 2018), thus significantly improving their occupational freedom.

Nonetheless, Birnbaum and De Wispelaere (2016) challenge the argument that a UBI will increase the least skilled or precarious workers bargaining power. The authors argue that there is a gap between skilled workers and precarious workers that a UBI may widen: while the former are valued by the company and have real exit power precisely because they can easily find another job, the exit threat of precarious workers leaving their jobs does not have the same credibility. If a UBI is introduced and faced with the real threat of skilled workers leaving the company, managers will be forced to improve their conditions at the expense of precarious workers, if necessary by having to lay them off.

Returning to Williams', the first aspect the author points out, namely that these proposals seek to enhance individuals' occupational freedom, is ultimately in line

with Casal's moderate-revised version of the egalitarian ethos, "designed to secure *occupational autonomy for all*" (Casal 2013: 15–16). Although Casal clarifies that the revised ethos will still ask individuals to make sacrifices for others, it would not be so directive as to leave them no (morally permissible) choice (2013: 16).

On the other hand, one particular social group whose occupational freedom would be greatly enhanced by the introduction of a revised ethos is women. As Casal notes building upon Mill's reflections on this topic, "the proposed ethos could contribute to further increases in female occupational autonomy *directly* and could also make possible and effective various basic structural reforms, such as shared parental leave schemes and the harmonization of office and school timetables" (2013: 17).

Precisely one of the reasons deployed to justify the introduction of UBI is related to the capacity of empowering women, among other marginalized groups, with greater occupational autonomy and bargaining power than they currently have. Therefore, we intuitively acknowledge how Casal's revised ethos and UBI come together in expanding women's occupational freedom among other marginalized groups, such as migrants, young workers, unemployed ...

To sum up: the difference between occupational freedom *for a few* – the high-skilled – and occupational freedom *for all* – both the high and low-skilled-, as it appears in Casal's revision of the egalitarian ethos, considerably resonates with that between "formal" freedom and "real" freedom as defended the latter by Van Parijs and van der Veen. "Real freedom from toil for all" (van der Veen & Van Parijs) and "real freedom of occupation for everyone" (Casal) share a lowest common denominator, namely *real freedom for all*.

However, the fact that the ethos and UBI have common goals (guaranteeing "real freedom for all") and shared effects (reducing inequality, increasing occupational and self-realization freedom ...) does not mean that are fully compatible regarding how to achieve those objectives. While UBI defends the right to receive an income without any contribution to society, the ethos requires citizens to behave in their private lives in such a way that benefits the worse off. In short, the Occupational-Freedom-for-all Solution does not end up resolving the tension that exists between both proposals.

1.4.3 The Self-Realization-for-All Solution

A third way of dealing with the apparent inconsistency between UBI and Cohen's ethos is to argue that the former is required for individuals to achieve self-realization in the performance of their work.

Some may argue that this type of freedom has deeper implications than the one of merely choosing between one occupation or another. To put it in Cohen's terms,

what is at stake, in this case, is the choice in the sense of the option, not the choice in the sense of the choosing (Cohen 2008: 205–206).

For his part, Williams also attaches great relevance to occupational freedom based on the latter's connection with a number of other morally relevant concerns, such as our interests in the pursuit of a determinate conception of the good, and in social status and self-respect (Williams 2006: 3).

We can all agree that freedom in choosing an occupation that will require many hours of dedication per week is a dimension that plays a key role in our broader life project. Thus, it seems evident that the former, as Casal states, should not be guaranteed only through a Cohen-style personal prerogative nor trade-off for the benefit of material improvements (2013: 12–13).

Bearing these facts in mind, how can UBI strengthen “real freedom” understood as *self-realization-for-all*? As we have already claimed in the previous subsection, UBI ensures the viability of jobs that are poorly paid or completely unpaid because of their inefficiency in terms of market logic. Thus, people who wish to dedicate themselves to writing poetry, gardening, or any other job that might be difficult to monetize would not have to worry about their material sustenance, placing them in a more favorable position to achieve freedom as self-realization in the performance of their occupation.

Regarding the consistency of the Self-Realization-for-all Solution, a potential objection to it runs the same way as in the case of the former solution (simply because occupational freedom is a requisite for self-realization): both UBI and the ethos help individuals to fulfill their desires, develop their skills ... Disagreement between the two has to do with the different strategies to achieve it. Therefore, the present solution is solely a partial one.

1.4.4 The Material-Autonomy-Based Solution

A fourth possibility to escape from this inconsistency is based on the claim that the material independence granted by UBI is necessary so that an egalitarian ethos can be demanded from individuals.

From a republican perspective, and in response to White's criticism that basic income could violate the “principle of reciprocity” (White 2003), Casassas asks himself regarding the relationship between the egalitarian ethos and UBI whether individuals can be required to display a certain type of *egalitarian* or *contributory* ethos without previously guaranteeing them relevant degrees of material independence and, with them, effective freedom of choice⁷ (Casassas 2008: 147). A pertinent

7 There is no available English translation of Casassas' paper, so the quotations that we reproduce in this work are the author's own translations.

answer to this question would be, according to Casassas, negative, which would justify the introduction of a UBI as a primordial and priority element to build that material sphere that guarantees an autonomous existence to all individuals (2008: 147).

We should consider that Casassas' solution only works if UBI satisfies basic or fundamental needs, not if it goes much further or if it falls short, as Van Parijs seems to suggest (1995).

Unlike Casassas, who gives priority to the satisfaction of basic material needs through the introduction of a UBI to subsequently display an egalitarian ethos, we wonder if the relationship between both developments is not a *one-way* relation but rather a *mutual-reinforcing* one according to which, to succeed in the implementation of UBI, it becomes necessary a "parallel-rather-than-previous" set of shared values of solidarity, equality ... articulated in a coherent non-directive ethos.

From our perspective, the egalitarian ethos is not (only) a point of arrival that we can reach once material needs are covered (by a UBI, in this case), but the extension of this ethos can generate the conditions of possibility so that the implementation of UBI is not a remote utopia. A society where individuals have internalized the duty to contribute to the common good through socially useful activities (or *work* understood in a broad sense), is a society where, probably, a collective and social conception of wealth will be more widespread, as well as the duty for all people to have their material existence guaranteed. On the contrary, in a society where people have not internalized this duty to contribute through many socially useful activities, an individualistic view of wealth will prevail, according to which a person's wealth can be attributed directly to their (more or less) proportional contribution. In short, the ethos of contribution is not intended to be a mechanism that reinforces the individual claims of some subjects with respect to others, but rather encourages cooperation for the achievement of socially necessary tasks for the (re)production of a society in compliance with the principles of justice.

A similar idea can be inferred from Casal's claim that "an ethos can also change society indirectly by making possible basic structural changes that will otherwise be infeasible or ineffective; for example, an ethos of concern for universal occupational autonomy may allow job-sharing schemes and substantial reductions in the working week" (Casal 2013: 16). In this way, Casal opens the door for an interpretation of the ethos as "indirectly" contributing to advance – following the same logic as job-sharing schemes and reduction in the working week-a proposal such as the UBI. To put it in other words, the implementation of a shared non-directive ethos contributes to anticipating some of the features that a more just and equally distributed society could have.

In an opposite sense to that underlined by Casal but strengthening our argument that UBI and the ethos complement each other, Van Parijs and van der Veen affirm

that universal grants “cannot be justified as expressing solidarity (an issue quite different from whether they encourage behavior motivated by solidarity) ...” (van der Veen and Van Parijs 1986: 725). From the sentence in brackets, we can conclude that, according to Van Parijs and van der Veen, UBI encourages behavior motivated by values of shared commitment and solidarity, thus advancing the egalitarian ethos.

To wrap up: progress in the introduction of UBI can only be made while taking steps in the implementation of a non-directive egalitarian ethos. There is no lexical priority nor inconsistency between the two, but rather they follow mutually reinforcing paths: the shared values of commitment and solidarity included in the ethos are necessary for people to accept UBI, while the material autonomy guaranteed by the latter is necessary as well to demand that citizens comply with the former.

1.4.5 A Contribution-Beyond-Employment Solution

In this fifth subsection, we depart from Birnbaum’s version of the ethos of contribution in order to explore the consistency between the former and UBI.

Birnbaum’s *broad* ethos of contribution recognizes both paid work and socially useful non-remunerated activities such as care tasks, community-building activities, contributions that have positive ecological impacts, etc. It tries to reconcile neutrality, universality and feasibility. Unlike Van Parijs’, his proposal is not an instrumental ethos but a principle-based one.

Van Parijs advocates in *Real Freedom For All* (1995) for a “solidaristic patriotism” based “on a strong commitment to the underlying solidaristic conception of justice on the part of those who are enabled by their skills and other assets to be net contributors” (1995: 230). In a latter writing, Van Parijs defends “an ethos of solidarity, of work, indeed of patriotism [...] because of its crucial instrumental value in the service of boosting the lifelong prospects of the incumbents of society’s worst position” (Van Parijs 2003, as cited in Birnbaum 2012: 151).

On the contrary, Birnbaum (2012) argues for a broad ethos of contribution that attempts to reconcile both universality (so the proposal reaches everyone), neutrality (between lifestyles and different conceptions of the good) and feasibility (so its financing and sustainability are guaranteed throughout time).

Birnbaum (2012) argues for a universal UBI as opposed to mean-tested transfers because the latter violate people’s dignity, intruding into their private lives and forcing them to prove at all times that they are deserving of the benefit.

In order to guarantee neutrality between different conceptions of the good, Birnbaum (2012) decouples the work ethos from productivism: “we may broaden the ethos so that relevantly contributive activities need not be exclusively performed within the formal sector of economy” (2012: 155). A true “real-libertarian” or simply

“liberal” conception of justice cannot involve any form of perfectionism of a Crazy-like style (work-centric, consumerist ...)

Thirdly, in order to prevent the ethos from being “exploitative”, Birnbaum (2012) conceives the contributions as “duties” and not as “virtues” (2012: 154), therefore opting not to relax the importance to contribute in any socially useful form. A relaxed form of ethos would not only result in the exploitation of those willing to toil by free riders (2012: 160), but would generate the very conditions that would make a UBI an unsustainable measure from the point of view of its financing.

Birnbaum (2012) himself admits that “the feasible basic income scheme operating within the constraints I identify would not be as high as under the strict ethos that was considered” (2012: 170), the latter being the one advocated by G.A. Cohen, which has been examined in Section 1.1. As we have mentioned before, these constraints are related, first, with a broad ethos of contribution that includes non-remunerated socially useful activities such as care, voluntary activities ... and, second, with a non-relaxed form of ethos of contribution that prevents “selfish individuals to systematically exploit self-sacrificing choices and adaptive preferences” (2012: 160). Therefore, Cohen’s trilemma formed by equality, freedom and efficiency continues to appear partly unsolvable, at least if it is posed as the highest level of each of the three values.

However, if instead of efficiency in a productivist sense we introduce a conception of *sustainability* that includes two dimensions (understood, on the one hand, from the temporal point of view as the ability to endure over time and, on the other, from the ecological side), we see how the pairing formed by an expanded ethos of contribution and UBI are the pre-distributive institutional design that best satisfies basic human needs in the long term while guaranteeing freedom and equality between individuals.

2 Conclusions

In this paper, we have tried to demonstrate why the egalitarian ethos and unconditional basic income can be consistent with each other. In the first place, we have briefly presented G.A. Cohen’s formulation of the ethos, aimed at eradicating inequality without loss of efficiency or freedom. Cohen’s original ethos demands that individuals work hard at socially useful occupations without asking for differential economic rewards (Cohen only contemplates them in the cases of “special labor burden”). Faced with criticism that the ethos is too restrictive and leaves no room for freedom (*the Liberty Objection*), Cohen responds by introducing an agent-centered prerogative so that “each person has a right to be something other than an engine for the welfare of other people” (Cohen 2008, as cited in Casal 2013: 10).

However, for Casal, the latter is not enough to guarantee occupational freedom. Therefore, she defends a revised version of the ethos, according to which occupational freedom is not sacrificed for greater material consumption, as well as incorporates an absolute level of affluence from which said occupational freedom acquires priority over greater Pareto efficiency. In this way, according to Casal, there is no room for an agent-centered prerogative since the ethos itself guarantees occupational freedom for all.

On the other hand, Birnbaum's revised version of the ethos consists not in introducing an absolute level of affluence above which occupational autonomy gains priority over efficiency, but broadening the range of socially useful contributions to society beyond those related to formal employment. Through this *expanded-but-non-relaxed ethos*, two objections would be avoided according to Birnbaum: the one based on exploitation and the one that has to do with feasibility.

After delving into Cohen's ethos as well as into Casal's and Birnbaum's revisions, we have briefly analyzed in Section 1.2 the proposal for an unconditional basic income made by Van Parijs and van der Veen. Justified on the basis of its power to guarantee real freedom from toil for all, UBI consists of an income granted by the government to every full member of society regardless of their willingness to work, their income from other sources, their place of residence, and their household situation. According to Van Parijs, UBI does not have to cover basic needs, but the amount granted by it can be higher or lower depending on how the economy works.

Subsequently, we have described the social and economic trends (namely, the *reevaluation of unpaid work*, *technological progress* and *privatization and destruction of remaining commons*) that, according to Van Parijs and van der Veen, undermine the idea that only the willingness to contribute through work entitles someone to a share of the social product.

In Section 1.3 we have addressed some of the reasons why some might argue that Cohen's ethos and unconditional basic income are incompatible proposals. The most obvious one is that while Cohen's ethos requires highly skilled people to engage in socially useful occupations and work hard at them without demanding higher payments, UBI is granted to every full member of society in an unconditional way.

However, what *a priori* seems like an insurmountable inconsistency is not in fact one, as we have tried to argue in Section 1.4.

First, we have proposed an *Equality-Enhancing Solution* based on the power of UBI to reduce inequality between the well-off and the worst-off in society. Second, we have addressed the *Occupational-Freedom-for-all Solution*, according to which both UBI and Casal's revised ethos advance "real freedom for all": the first guarantees freedom from toil while the second does the same with occupational freedom. Third, we have delved into the *Self-Realization-for-all Solution* – the idea behind the latter is that UBI would allow us to dedicate ourselves to those activities that develop our personal preferences

and skills. Fourth, we have analyzed the *Material-Autonomy-based Solution*, according to which UBI enables a free and materially-independent existence. The introduction of UBI has, according to the proponents of this solution, priority over the demand that individuals display a contributory ethos in their daily lives.

Lastly, and after acknowledging that the previous four solutions only partially resolve the tension between the ethos and UBI, we have proposed a fifth potential solution: the *Contribution-Beyond-Employment Solution*. Birnbaum's extended ethos of contribution that goes beyond formal employment and encompasses other socially useful non-remunerated activities (such as care work, community volunteer work, etc.) appears to be more compatible with UBI than Cohen's, which is more demanding in requiring individuals to choose professions where they can improve the life prospects of the less advantaged in society.

However, once we have identified that a broad non-relaxed ethos is in a better position to be compatible with UBI, why not favour a "green participation income"? Mainly for reasons of feasibility and not so much principle-based: this type of socially useful non-remunerated activities, such as care, voluntary work for the community, etc. do not admit a logic of inspection and control, as they would lose their *raison d'être* and end up being perverted. How many hours and at what pace would an elderly person have to be cared for to receive the income? What characteristics would this person have to meet: does an elderly person count the same as a child? And a person with mobility problems, functional diversity? We can see that these tasks cannot be subject to inspection as requirements for obtaining the monetary income.

In short: while Cohen's ethos does not seem compatible with UBI, a revised, less demanding ethos of contribution that introduces an absolute level of affluence at which occupational autonomy would take priority over greater efficiency (Casal) and that recognizes contributions in the form of socially useful activities beyond formal employment (Birnbaum) is likely to be consistent with UBI. We do not need to question the moral obligation of individuals to contribute to society through different forms of work beyond formal employment to assert the right to a UBI guaranteed by the government to all full members of society. The paper contributes toward resolving the conflict between both proposals, even if it does not eliminate all tensions between them.

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