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A Philosophical Inquiry

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THE FUTURE OF WORK

§Introduction: the ever-changing workplace

On leaving school in 1977 I went to work in the legal department of a large insurance company. I was a lowly clerk finalizing the papers for mortgage repayments and providing licences for commercial tenants to transfer their leases or to make small alterations to their shops or offices. In those pre-word processor days this is how I wrote my letters. On my desk was something that looked like a small green telephone, but was, in fact a dictating machine terminal. It had no recording device, but was connected by wire to the typing centre on the top floor of the building. I would pick up the handset, just like a telephone, press a button, and say 'A letter please typist, to ...' and then state the name and address, spelling out any unfamiliar or indistinct words. The open plan office resonated with legal clerks sounding out 'S-for-sugar' and 'F-for-Freddy'. What I said would be recorded on to a re-usable disk, the size and shape of a long-playing record, labelled by the supervisor, and put on a rack for typing. Given my status at the bottom of the hierarchy, and the fact that the typing pool took on work for the whole building, I was low priority, and it was often a couple of days before my letter arrived back to me, delivered by the internal messenger. Inevitably there would be errors, which I would correct by hand and return. When a satisfactory version finally arrived

I would show it to my supervisor, as I was not allowed to sign letters myself. Fairly often he would insist on further changes, and so it would be sent upstairs again. Eventually we would have an acceptable version which would be signed, put in an envelope, placed in the department out-tray and picked up by the messenger, who would take it to the post-room. There it would be franked, picked up by the Royal Mail, and processed through their elaborate mail system. Presumably it was hand-sorted in the local post office, dispatched by road, train, and road again, then sorted again on arrival and hand-delivered.

Virtually every stage in this process, and every accompanying job, has now disappeared. I stayed in the job for three years, during which time new electronic technologies for typing standard documents were being introduced. This was the beginning of process by which most of the jobs undertaken in my office were rationalized out of existence by changes in legal rules or in company practices, and most of my co-workers were made redundant. I knew this because I met one on the London Underground a few years later, who had retrained as a primary school teacher. For the small number of remaining tasks, word processing by the clerks soon removed the need for the typing pool, although a few, specialist typists remained for a few years, taking shorthand dictation from the most senior employees. But today, for any remaining task previously done by this office, communication would generally be by email, rather than letter, except when documents, such as leases or title deeds, were being sent out. A whole way of working is gone now. Every step, between the author of the communication, and its recipient, has disappeared.

In 1977 the company had computers the size of a room, which were operated with large spools of tape. Technicians would remove one tape and replace it with another, as necessary. Computer programmes were written in-house, and ways were already being found to automate many of the jobs that were done by people. For example, hundreds of people in the building worked in what was called 'Group Pensions'. Many of these people wrote letters to retired members of the company concerning routine and repetitive issues about their pension. These types of jobs were very easy to replace with computers. Soon floors of workers were unnecessary, and in fact the company gave up its grand headquarters and moved to smaller, more modern accommodation.

I tell this story because there is a suggestion that the economy today is in the process of going through a 'fourth industrial revolution' (e.g. Floridi 2014, see also Lee 2019) which may well, so it is suggested, lead to

unprecedented changes to the workplace. Self-driving cars are ~~the~~ probably the best-known example, which have been claimed to have the potential to end the jobs of many of the vast number of people who earn their living in jobs that involve driving. Online retail and banking has already drained business from the high street. Artificial intelligence systems will soon be able to replace call centres. Factories will be fully automated. And so on. We are on edge, so it seems, of turmoil, disruption, and most concerningly unemployment, on a grand scale.

How unprecedented you believe this prediction to be may well depend on how old you are, or how much history you have read. If we are going through a fourth industrial revolution, it is as well to remind ourselves of the other three. The first was primed by the invention and commercial use of the steam engine, for transport and industry; the second by electricity, and the third, depicted above in my mundane personal story, was the computer. The claimed fourth revolution could also simply be seen as a continuation of the third, although there is ever-growing belief that its effects will be so far-reaching that it should be counted separately.

We will look at this revolution in more detail shortly, but first, to have a sense of the earlier revolutions, consider the early days of Karl Marx. Marx was born in 1818 in Trier in Germany, and when he travelled between towns as a university student in his teens he went by river boat or horse and carriage. Just ten years after his university days, by the time he and Frederick Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto*, in 1848, five mainline train stations had opened in London, and England had a national rail network, with regular, routine, services. Steamships had just started to journey back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean on a regular timetable. Factories had been totally transformed by the steam engine, and productivity rocketed, though working conditions were appalling. Marx thought that the effects of the rapid development of technology were so profound he came to the conclusion that it was incompatible with a capitalist economic system and would herald in communism.

There are a number of attitudes you can have to the prospect of the transformation of work through rapid technological change. When my colleagues and I, in the late 1970s, thought about the prospects of computing, three types of opinions were floated in our discussions, which, given the age, took place in the pub in our lunch hour. One, pessimistic, position was that computers would replace people, and there would be an end to the type of low-skilled office work we were doing, and consequent mass unemployment. A second, cynical, position was that the

computers would require so many people to make, programme, and service that they would create more jobs than they would displace. And a third, optimistic line, was that computers were creating a new era, and would facilitate the creation of new types of exciting employment opportunity that we could not even envisage yet. Today we are having the same debate about the impact of new technologies, but a fourth option is also canvassed, which is variation on the first. Demand for work will fall, but this can be translated not into mass unemployment, but a much shorter working week for all, with many more opportunities for leisure. For some reason, in the 1970s, I don't recall discussing this option.

Nevertheless, this last possibility had been floated, if not by workers then by intellectuals, for decades, and may indeed be one of the perpetual promises of technology and innovation. In 1930 the economist John Maynard Keynes published an essay in which he predicted that within a hundred years the working week would have fallen dramatically 'due to our discovery of means of economising the use of labour outrunning the pace at which we can find new uses for labour' (Keynes 1963 [1931], 364). We have ten years before Keynes' hundred years is up. Will we fulfil his prediction?

§Trends in employment: past, present, and near future

The history of work is a fascinating issue. It is a common refrain that pre-capitalist work was remarkably different to the patterns we have fallen into now. For much of human history the bulk of the population has been employed in agriculture and work patterns change by the season. When, for example, the harvest needs to be brought in, or when the lambs are being born, there is a period of frenetic activity with little sleep or recreation. At other times, tasks are more routine and mundane, and are compatible with taking a few feast days or festivals, or simply sleeping longer. But the factory and office has imposed a different discipline where the rhythm of seasons has disappeared and one day looks much like another.

The routine nature of work can produce a sense that within the workplace some people simply turn up and do little that contributes to production. Many rail against 'middle managers', who, so critics say, simply conjure up meaningless tasks for themselves and others. Engels, writing in 1845, wrote with a passion against something with a similar name, but quite different function, 'middlemen':

Consider through how many hands every product must go through before it reaches the actual consumer. Consider, gentlemen, how many speculating, swindling superfluous middlemen have now forced themselves in between the producer and the consumer! Let us take, for example, a bale of cotton produced in North America. The bale passes from the hands of the planter into those of the agent on some station or other on the Mississippi and travels down the river to New Orleans. Here it is sold – for a second time, for the agent has already bought it from the planter – sold, it might well be, to the speculator, who sells it once again, to the exporter. The bale now travels to Liverpool where, once again, a greedy speculator stretches out his hands towards it and grabs it. This man then trades it to a commission agent who, let us assume, is a buyer for a German house. So the bale travels to Rotterdam, up the Rhine, through another dozen hands of forwarding agents, being unloaded and loaded a dozen times, and only then does it arrive in the hands, not of the consumer, but of the manufacturer, who first makes it into an article of consumption, and who perhaps sells his yarn to a weaver, who disposes of what he has woven to the textile printer, who then does business with the wholesaler, who then deals with the retailer, who finally sells the commodity to the consumer. And all these millions of intermediary swindlers, speculators, agents, exporters, commission agents, forwarding agents, wholesalers and retailers, who actually contribute nothing to the commodity itself – they all want to live and make a profit – and they do make it too, on the average, otherwise they could not subsist. Gentlemen, is there no simpler, cheaper way of bringing a bale of cotton from America to Germany and of getting the product manufactured from it into the hands of the real consumer than this complicated business of ten times selling and a hundred times loading, unloading and transporting it from one warehouse to another?

(Engels (1974 [1845]), 11–12)

In addition to middlemen, Engels pointed out that the police and army, the clergy, and the vast number of people employed by the wealthy as domestic servants, all perform tasks that do not contribute to production. All of these, he conjectured, only existed to protect private property, or to reinforce class privilege, and all would disappear under communism.

Engels' prediction has not fared well. But the general idea that there are forms of employment that would die, or at least wither, over time, is surely correct. In most wealthier countries agriculture employs a tiny

proportion of the numbers it did 100 years ago. In London where I live most of the buildings in my neighbourhood once housed printing works, harking back to the days, before radio, when all advertising and communication was on paper, and printing was a labour-intensive job. The demand for print fell dramatically with the invention of radio, TV, and then the computer, new technology has also made far fewer workers needed for the tasks that remain. Now residential use aside, the area is full of architects and high-end office furniture showrooms.

Just as farming and printing have declined as major sources of employment, so, in the UK, has coal mining and heavy industry. At a local level the effects can be devastating, as witness former colliery towns in the UK and in the USA. These were located close to coal-fields, but when the mine closes there can be little reason to have a centre of population in the particular area. It can be daunting to find alternative employment for those displaced, and often it is simply impossible in an economic fashion. Yet at an aggregate level the effects of these changes induced by technology and other factors are rather different. As the OECD point out in a report on the future of work 'renowned economists of the twentieth century repeatedly predicted that new technologies would directly replace labour, but these predictions proved erroneous or premature: in spite of structural sectoral and occupational shifts, aggregate employment kept growing' (Nedelkoska and Quintini 2018, 33). Yet there is also a growing anxiety of the nature of these new jobs; often temporary, irregular hours, with few benefits. Those in these positions are, for good reason, sometimes called 'the precariat' (Standing 2011).

Nevertheless, some analysts claim that our current rapid and very significant technical change could finally make these predictions true. After all, just because things didn't happen in the past, it does not follow they will not happen in the future. A much discussed report from 2013, authored by two academics at my own university, Oxford, calculated that 47% of all US jobs are at risk of automation, particularly the lower paid ones (Frey and Osborne 2013, 1). To be clear, this is not to say that these jobs will be automated, but rather that from current knowledge we can see a path by which these jobs could eventually be done by machine. The factors bringing about these changes include rapid decline in the real cost of computing, and with it the introduction of advanced machine learning, robotics, big data, digital sensing, hand-writing recognition, voice recognition, and cloud computing. Each one of these is leading to enormous changes. Together they have mind-boggling consequences.

What will change? Current analysis converges on a few points of agreement. The Oxford Report notes, 'In the present study, we will argue that legal writing and truck driving will soon be automated, while persuading, for instance, will not' (Frey and Osborne 2013, 4). By 'persuading' the authors mean such things as legal advocacy in court, op-ed writing, and similar tasks that require a type of sensitivity that we have not (yet) programmed into machines. But a lot of high-skilled work can be done by machine:

In health care, diagnostics tasks are already being computerised. Oncologists at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center are, for example, using IBM's Watson computer to provide chronic care and cancer treatment diagnostics. Knowledge from 600,000 medical evidence reports, 1.5 million patient records and clinical trials, and two million pages of text from medical journals, are used for benchmarking and pattern recognition purposes. This allows the computer to compare each patient's individual symptoms, genetics, family and medication history, etc., to diagnose and develop a treatment plan with the highest probability of success.

(Frey and Osborne 2013, 19)

Other manual areas under threat are said to be manufacturing, packing, construction, mining, maintenance, agriculture, food preparation, health care, commercial cleaning, and elderly care, as well as financial trading, software writing, debugging, translating, and technical writing. It has also been claimed that the risk of automation is the highest among teenage jobs (Nedelkoska and Quintini 2018, 8).

The areas that are said to be most resistant to automation are those that take place in complex environments, that cannot easily be mapped and reduced to a set of rules, those that need imaginative recovery from mistakes, and those that involve creativity and social intelligence, such as those in management, arts, and media. It is interesting to think of the profession of teaching against this background. Many have thought that the internet would make many forms of teaching obsolete, just as, no doubt, people must have thought that the invention of the book, the audio cassette tape, and the video player would have done. In practice although the rise of high-quality free Internet courses has been spectacular, and has benefited many, they do not seem to have dented demand for traditional forms.

§The moral questions

In 1828, Jeremy Bentham recommended the mass introduction of the printing press in Tripoli and Greece. At the time it was common practice for scribes there to copy by hand, and the introduction of the press could have devastating effects for these workers. Despite his utilitarianism, which is often criticized for looking only at aggregate welfare and not the fate of individuals, Bentham urged that

care should be taken that the employment given to [the printing press] should not be such as to throw out of employment any of the existing scribes, except in so far as other employment not less advantageous is found for them .

(Bentham 1990 [1828], 38)

Bentham's concern for those who will be made unemployed by technical change is our own concern today. But technical change is not the only threat to jobs. David Graeber, in his provocative book *Bullshit Jobs* (Graeber 2018) to which I will return, quotes President Obama concerning health care reform in the US and its threat to millions of jobs:

Everybody who supports single-payer health care says, "Look at all this money we would be saving from insurance and paperwork." That represents one million, two million, three million jobs [filled by] people who are working at Blue Cross Blue Shield or Kaiser or other places. What are we doing with them? Where are we employing them?

(Graeber 2018, 157)

In other words, health-care reform could remove a vast tier of administration, and with it the jobs for the administrators. In a private health system an enormous amount of effort goes into raising payments, assessing claims, and calculating (and disputing) who actually owes what to whom. In a single-payer system a lot of this disappears, and that was, in fact, one of the main reasons why the British National Health System was proposed (Beveridge 1942). President Obama seems to suggest that other jobs cannot easily be found for the people displaced, and so it is better not to displace them, and pay the extra costs via health insurance.

When a service or industry is so directly under the control or influence of government, then these types of calculations are possible. But

contemporary technical change is not like that, for its introduction is mostly under the control of private companies. It would be unthinkable now for a government to ban private companies from introducing a new technology on the grounds that it would lead to unemployment. This is especially so in a global economy, where other countries adopting the technology would have a competitive advantage.

Hence when I said that Bentham's problem is our problem, it appears to us in a different guise. Halting the introduction of the equivalent of the printing press is not an option for us now. What we need to do is to understand the effects of new technologies, to consider who will be harmed, to understand what could be done to mitigate or compensate for that harm, and also to consider where the duties to act fall, if anywhere. If for example, the only people who will lose out are the super-rich, who will see their fortunes decline a little, then this looks very different to a situation where the people who will be affected are already struggling to get by, and will be made still worse off.

I believe that when we think about changes that are generally beneficial to society, but have winners and losers, we implicitly find ourselves guided by what can be called a 'minimal equity principle' which states that: 'If a change generates a surplus, those who are already towards the bottom of the distribution should not lose further' (cf Wolff 1996). This is in some respects similar to Rawls's Difference Principle (Rawls 1999 [1971]) in that it gives special attention to the worst off, but it is modified in three ways. First, it operates with a much broader notion of the worst off, being concerned with a range of people toward the bottom, rather than a single worst-off group. Second, it operates as a limit, rather than a complete theory of justice, and simply insists that the badly off should not be made worst off still, rather than made as well off as possible. And finally, at least as I intend it, it operates over a time period, accepting that short-term losses are acceptable, as long as they do not do irreversible damage, and are made up for in some way shortly after. Furthermore, the minimal equity axiom alone does not rule out uncompensated losses to those who are doing better, although, naturally, other principles, such as prohibition against theft and arson, will prohibit some ways of damaging their wealth. Bentham, I believe, was implicitly appealing to something like the minimal equity axiom when he made his comments about the printing press in Tripoli and Greece.

The minimal equity principle can also be seen as a ~~type of~~ protection against the type of moral hazard that was discussed in the chapter on

risky new technologies; indeed the parallels are fairly clear. In the current case, entrepreneurial businesses introduce new technologies to advance their own interests, as well as advance the general interest, if all goes well. But, very often, these will have adverse effects for those who are currently employed. We have, therefore, a classic case that can be analyzed in terms of the 'risk triangle'. One group takes a decision for their own benefit, but the costs can fall elsewhere. The equity principle suggests that it is unfair if those already towards the bottom lose out even more, and that some form of compensation is owed. This is exactly Bentham's argument.

From the point of view of the equity axiom, therefore, the threat of technical change is troubling, given that the jobs that will be lost will include lower paid manual work, and will disproportionately affect those at the beginning and at the end of their working lives who will be especially vulnerable. But is it true that enormous job loss threatens? When introducing the example of the automation of the routine jobs performed in the office in which I once worked I mentioned that we discussed among ourselves a range of options. The broad possibilities were: pessimistic – job loss would be significant; cynical – the new technology would create as many opportunities as it displaced; optimistic – a new world of work will open up, or we will redistribute remaining tasks to allow much more leisure.

None of these can be dismissed as foolish. Considering the last possibility, for example, since my discussions in the 1970s the range of jobs available in the economy has shifted in ways no one could have predicted. It is still hard for me to believe that some people make a very substantial living as 'YouTubers'. A vast number of jobs dependent on the latest technology could not possibly have been predicted in the 1970s. But that is only to mention the most obvious changes. Beyond that, in 1977 only the rich paid to have their nails painted, but now there are nail bars in every town in the UK. Personal trainers, yoga instructors, and other forms of personal fitness, health, and service industry proliferate. We have no idea what will happen next. Some worry that these are not 'real' jobs as they do not produce anything tangible. To my mind this is a prejudice based on the assumption that the only way of being productive is to take raw materials and transform them into something physical. But why do we want these physical objects? Ultimately because they satisfy our desires. But if we have desires that can be satisfied without the transformation of physical stuff, what's the difference? In many ways, these new service jobs

are much better for the environment than manufacturing, and are more closely tailored to individual preferences.

It seems likely we will continue to invent new, currently unpredicted, ways of working. The main question, though, is whether this will keep pace with the unemployment created by technological change. If there is enough employment for everyone who wants it, whether the new jobs are there just to service the tech, or are in new areas, then the moral concern about the future of work largely disappears. The primary concern will be how to prepare people for new jobs, who should organize training, and where the costs should fall. Any responsible government will need to have a series of flexible policies to make this possible. As the World Economic Forum report puts it:

Our analysis finds that increased demand for new roles will offset the decreasing demand for others. However, these net gains are not a foregone conclusion. They entail difficult transitions for millions of workers and the need for proactive investment in developing a new surge of agile learners and skilled talent globally.

(WEF (World Economic Forum) 2018, v)

But still, this does not introduce any novel questions, as governments always have had the issue of preparing the workforce for the next stage of technological development.

It seems, then, only if the pessimistic option comes to pass, and the demand for labour drops considerably, do we have a new moral question to deal with: how to cope with potential mass unemployment. Remember Keynes predicted that the demand for labour would fall to such a degree that we could radically cut the working day for everyone. The fear is that the natural development of the economy is that, rather than sharing work out equally, it will divide into the employed, on what is now a standard working week, and the unemployed. And if Keynes is right, more than half the workforce would be unemployed on this basis.

Now, one suspicion against this argument is that were Keynes' right about the falling need for labour, it is something that ought to be happening over time, rather than in a single change, and hence we should be seeing some significant changes already. This would mean either a general growth in unemployment or a cut in the working day. And it is true that in some countries, such as Greece, France, Italy, and Spain, there has been a significant rise especially in youth unemployment

since the 2008 crisis (Statista 2019). But it does not seem that there is a general trend in the direction of unemployment, rather than normal economic fluctuation, together with some pockets that have been severely affected. Another hypothesis is that, in fact the demand for labour has fallen but we have made up for it in other ways. David Graeber suggests that a very large number of jobs in the workplace simply do not need to be done. They are, he says, 'bullshit' jobs, defined as

a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case.

(Graeber 2018, 9)

And, he claims, based on survey results, only 50% of people in the UK are convinced their jobs make a meaningful contribution and 37% are sure they do not (Graeber 2018, 5). Graeber argues that there are several different types of meaningless jobs, such as 'box tickers' who conduct pointless checks that everyone ignores in any case, and 'flunkies', who are people employed essentially to make their bosses feel more powerful through the number of people they employ. Many will feel that Graeber has exaggerated the extent of this useless activity, but it is hard to deny that he is on to something. We will all have our own examples either of bullshit jobs, or bullshit parts of jobs that are otherwise worthwhile.

Another factor, which I believe is under-discussed, is the degree to which people build their social life into their working day. In recent decades the rise of technology has made it feasible for more people to work at home, saving commuting time which is often a hated part of the day. Yet it appears it has not taken off to the degree it might have done. On the whole many people don't like to work at home for extended periods, even if the occasional day is a treat. One reason for this is that people crave the social contact they get in a working environment. Stopping for chats, ostensibly about work, but often extending beyond, becomes perhaps the most enjoyable part of the working day. True, this is more possible for those who work in offices than on the production line, but still, it does mean that it is wrong to equate the number of hours spent at work with the number of hours spent working. (This of course, can be misleading in both directions, as many people work evenings and weekends at home in addition to the working day.) But the upshot of the

'bullshit jobs' and the 'social-life at work' arguments is that it may be that the demand for labour is already falling but other factors are hiding it from view. And it may also be that these counter-acting factors will run their course, leading to ever growing unemployment, unless other steps are taken.

Suppose, then, that the predictions finally come true. Automation replaces labour at a far greater degree than it creates new opportunities, and other aspects no longer cushion the fall. Every affected government then has a potential crisis to deal with. This, in fact, is the plot of Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Player Piano*, published as long ago as 1952, in which automation has replaced the vast majority of routine jobs. In Vonnegut's story, the government creates a form of crude make-work, or bullshit jobs, for those who are thrown out of work. This keeps rebellion at bay but leads to hardship and dissatisfaction for the masses (Vonnegut 2006 [1952]). But it is a fictionalized account of a possible policy response, which is to make the government the employer of last resort. The difficulty in this approach, as Vonnegut illustrates, is to make such work meaningful. Of course, there have been times when these policies have worked very well, such as Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps (Paul ND) after the great depression, but where it been a matter of routine, such as in the Soviet Union, it has been treated with great cynicism: 'we pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us' is the standard joke (Nove 1991). The government can employ people on major infrastructure projects, or community schemes, but there is a limit to what it can afford. The government as employer of last resort is an option that would need to be kept in mind, but is it the only, or the best, policy?

§ Unemployment and basic income

Graeber is one of many theorists who have considered the idea of unconditional basic income (UBI) as a better policy response to falling demand for labour (see also Stern 2016). UBI is an idea that has been discussed for several decades, and in the philosophical literature has become particularly associated with the Belgian philosopher Philippe Van Parijs, who has written a major new account of the approach with fellow Belgian political scientist Yannick Vanderborght (Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017). The key notion of UBI is very radical, and has never been attempted on a national scale, although there have been more local experiments. As Van Parijs and Vanderborght explain it, it is

a regular income paid in cash to every individual member of a society irrespective of income from other sources and with no strings attached (Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017, 4). They emphasize that it is given to every individual rather than household (with perhaps a smaller sum for children, given to a parent) universal, and obligation free, by which they mean it is not based on past work or present willingness to work, unlike many other benefits. The authors stress that it can come in many variations. For example, it could vary with age. Their preferred version would see everyone receiving a basic income set at 25% of GDP per capita, on a country by country basis (Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017, 11). It is intended to supplement, rather than, replace all services, such as health insurance, education, and the existence of public spaces (Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017, 13), although others have argued for the concentration of all government subsidies into a single basic income. The most novel, and counter-intuitive, aspect of UBI is that it is genuinely universal, going to billionaires as well as the poorest. Of course, though, taxes would have to rise to fund UBI, and we can broadly split up society into three groups: those who would benefit, those who would neither lose or benefit, because their UBI payment would only fund the additional tax they would have to pay, and those who would lose because their tax would be higher than the benefit. As, broadly, it would be those on low incomes who benefit and those on high incomes who would lose, we can see that UBI is a strongly egalitarian policy, even though, superficially, it looks otherwise because of payments to the rich.

UBI has been proposed for many reasons. Van Parijs and Vanderborght see it as an antidote to 'crazy growth', which has led to environmental threats, growing inequality, and 'lousy jobs' (Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017, 1). But equally they understand it as a possible response to the concerns regarding automation. In fact, UBI has been proposed as a way of tackling two problems. The first is what has been nagging away over the last section; unemployment. The second is the consequence of unemployment, which is typically severely reduced income, and in turn, reduced purchasing power of those people who become unemployed. The problem here is that if machines replace people in the production of goods, who is going to have the income to purchase those manufactured goods? There could be a crash in demand, and therefore in sales and profit. This can lead, ultimately, to failure of companies, perhaps of the economy as a whole. Somehow, so it is thought, money has to be put in the pockets

of the ordinary citizen so that they can continue to keep the capitalist economy rolling.

How serious is this second concern? If the doomsday scenario is correct, and the economy will fail, unless radical steps are taken, then it will affect everyone, including those already suffering unemployment. This type of crisis obviously needs to be avoided if it is at all possible. Perhaps, though, the effects will be more modest. The economy will keep going but at reduced profits. If that is all, then the idea that we need to institute basic income in order to keep demand for goods high looks more like a self-serving argument by those in business and already wealthy than something of very serious moral concern that could, for example, be justified by the minimal equity principle outlined earlier, which suggests that if a change generates a surplus then those already towards the bottom of the distribution (such as the ordinary worker) should not be made even worse off by the change. Making sure that the wealthy do not lose is quite a different matter.

The key issue, we have seen, is that new technology could lead to unemployment ~~on a vast scale~~. Even if the government does become employer of last resort, it is unlikely to be able to offer satisfying, useful, employment on a mass scale over the long term. Hence some other way of dealing with a fall in the demand for labour is needed. The reason why UBI is interesting in this respect is that it offers the possibility of a very flexible approach to work. At the moment most societies operate with a sharp demarcation between the employed and unemployed, and unemployment benefit is distinct from a series of in-work benefits for those on low income. Those who are unemployed are subject to strict checks, and benefit systems sometimes work in ways that disincentivize part-time work. In the worst cases, people who take a job can lose more in benefit than they gain in pay. If we face a future with lower demand for work, we need to consider whether to retain these systems, which in effect produce a binary divide between the unemployed, who often face stigma and sometimes humiliation, and the 'virtuous' working population. If we keep on as we are, then the negative effects of lessened demand for work fall squarely on the unemployed, and no one in work gains much advantage in terms of reduced working day. But if we can devise an arrangement where people can move in and out of work, or take on part-time or periodic work without losing their Basic Income, everyone can benefit from the fall in the need for labour.

Hence UBI isn't simply one method among others of getting money to the unemployed. If it works, it will begin to erase the stigmatising boundary between the employed and the unemployed. And the boundary is more than a matter of stigma. Although many people say that they would prefer not to work, when they are faced with the choice, it seems the great majority of people want to do something they regard as useful and would prefer to work (whether or not it is paid). Hence Paul Gomberg has devised the idea of 'contributive justice' (Gomberg 2007). He argues that the fact that some people are excluded from the workplace because they are unemployed is one of the greatest injustices in society today. They are not given the opportunity to contribute to the lives of others, which is one of the things that makes us human. This goes some way to explaining why people who are unemployed often lose energy and motivation, unless they can find some other useful way of spending their time.

UBI, to some degree, overcomes this divide between the unemployed and the employed. Some, no doubt will choose not to work at all, and subsist on their Basic Income, but would always have the possibility of taking on work for a period if it becomes available and appealing. Others may well work as they do now, going to work for a full working week. Others will do something in the middle, and this way the economy will regulate itself around supply and demand for work. There could be some very interesting effects. For example, very few people would be forced to work just for the money, if the UBI level was high enough, ~~and so~~ many of the worst jobs in the economy, such as those that are physically very hard, in unpleasant conditions, may either disappear through automation, or, if that is not possible, be paid at a high rate. Others that are more pleasant could see a falling pay rate, leading perhaps to what will be perceived by many as a fairer economy, with high pay for horrible jobs – enough to pay for regular long vacations, perhaps – and low wages for interesting and rewarding work.

The policy and moral debates around basic income in recent years have focused on a number of separate issues. One is the accusation that UBI will encourage, or at least permit 'free riding'; some people taking unfair, or exploitative, advantage of other people's efforts. Many people believe that there is something morally wrong about granting people money if they are not prepared to work, which is why many welfare systems have a willingness to work condition, with claimants having to show that they are actively seeking work. Indeed, this was the logic of one of the earliest

forms of government-supported welfare: the workhouse. Of course, contemporary proposals can be more enlightened, with required work perhaps on infrastructure or community projects. But whatever the general merits of this objection that UBI disconnects work and reward, it seems out of place in the present context. After all, we are here considering UBI as a policy response to a radical fall in the demand for workers. A willingness to work condition when the opportunities to work are diminishing rapidly seems perverse. So I will set this aside here, but without comment on whether it is a more serious objection to UBI in other contexts.

A second complaint continues to develop the argument that by paying people whether or not they work, a large number of people will choose not to work. This could be a secondary adverse consequence, independently of its effects on the economy, for it is said, it will discourage people from developing themselves and their talents in fulfilling ways, and lead to depression and a loss of self-worth. Again, there is a lot to discuss here. If we agree with Gomberg, Graeber, and many others, human beings prefer to work than not, and so most people would choose work in one form or another, unless the work is so hard or soul-destroying that it is unbearable. How people respond to receiving UBI at a rate high enough to abandon work is an empirical issue, for which there are few examples to study. It is entirely possible that people will find other ways of fulfilling themselves outside of the formal economy.

Third, there are obvious economic questions. Can any society really afford UBI at 25% of GDP per capita? At the moment, in the US GDP per capita is around \$60,000, in Germany \$45,000 and in the UK \$40,000 (IMF (International Monetary Fund) 2018). Remember this is per individual rather than family, and so a couple with no children would receive \$30,000 per year in the US, \$22,500 in Germany, and \$20,000 in the UK. This is not a fortune, but it is above the poverty line, as we will see in the next chapter. It would be a very welcome improvement for many people. But obviously it would mean greatly increasing tax rates on higher earners, which those on lower incomes may regard as entirely fair and reasonable. But, at least for a transitional period, it could have very difficult effects. Many people, even those on above average incomes, finely tune their expenditure to their income, taking out a mortgage, for example, or car payments, at the edge of what they can afford. If tax rose significantly for these people, they could suffer great financial difficulties at least in the shorter term, getting into serious debt, and if there is also

a fall in house prices, as there could well be, there may not be a way out of the debt even by selling up. As for any major change, it would have to be handled very carefully. And this is not even to raise the question of how it would be possible to get democratic support for such a change. It may be that UBI is only politically feasible if it is accompanied by a significant write-down of existing debt for the middle classes, which opens up a whole new discussion about affordability.

There are many further questions that could be asked about the potential financial realism of UBI, and yet it seems that there are good reasons to give UBI qualified support. Its unconditional nature obliterates the need for means testing, or for people to prove their willingness to work. The prospect that it would also mean that pay rates for unpleasant jobs would have to go up, while those for pleasant jobs would go down, will strike many as much fairer than the current situation, where the reverse seems to happen. And the reduced administrative cost is a further great advantage. More deeply, it reflects a philosophical idea that the world belongs to everyone, and not just those who, perhaps through accidents of birth, have been able to accumulate vast assets. But nevertheless there are serious underlying anxieties. It is important to remember that many of the things that make our lives worthwhile are not bought and sold on the market, as I discussed in a previous chapter. The birds in the trees in the park bring joy, as does walking by the river, or spending time on the beach. Clean streets and public museums and libraries make everyone's life go better, to say nothing of free health care, education, and subsidised public transport. These collectively provided goods make a huge difference. Van Parijs and Vanderborght propose UBI not as a replacement for such goods, but as a supplement. This is very welcome. But it is reasonable to question whether this is plausible. For these public goods are expensive and are paid for out of the same financial pool as UBI. If we find museums and libraries closing, and some health conditions no longer covered on the government funded programmes, for example, because sacrifices have to be made in order to pay for UBI, then we will have to ask whether we have made the right choices.

§ Conclusion: lessons for philosophy

The issue of the future of work is a bold step into philosophical speculation, and it is no surprise that it has been a stimulus for utopian theories and science fiction writers. What seems clear is that technology is rapidly moving in a direction that will make many traditional jobs obsolete, just as

it has in the past. What will happen to overall employment as a result? At best we can make educated guesses. This is not unusual for philosophers. Most of the areas we discuss are not capable of strict proof, or even the standards of evidence that are available in the sciences. We are used to deciding what we think is best supported by the available reasons, and trying to defend that position against competitors, finding or inventing reasons and arguments to support our favoured view and to dismiss those of our opponents.

Defending your view against all opposition is the lifeblood of philosophy. Yet in policy, it can be deeply irresponsible. In this particular case we are trying to understand whether new technology will create mass unemployment. My own view is similar to the WEF report, where it is argued that new technology will create a range of direct employment opportunities, and also, indirectly, enable a rich variety of new forms of work, even if some of them will be precarious in nature. Some of these new jobs will build on those new technologies and others will have little to do with them, but will emerge through human imagination and the availability of free time and money. My guess is that, over time, these jobs will replace those lost, as has happened so many times before, although we do need strong government policies in place to help train some people, and to take care of those who lose their jobs and cannot find new employment. But as I mentioned before, these are not new issues.

Armed with this view, what should I do? Philosophical methodology would suggest that I should do everything I can to find evidence and arguments for my view, and against others, such as those who say that demand for labour will fall off a cliff. But responsible policy making tells me to do the opposite. As long as I cannot rule out the opposing view as impossible, at least for practical purposes, we need, in the words of the Boy Scouts, to 'be prepared'. This is especially when the risks, even if small, would be very serious, as we explored in the chapter on risky new technologies. It would be the height of unthinking dogmatism to act as if your own prediction was the only one that has any reasonable chance of coming true. Rather, we need to scan all possibilities and see what we can do now to prepare for a variety of possible futures. Of course, there are limits to what can be expected. We should not put vast resources into preparing for contingencies that are very unlikely to happen. But preparing our thinking is much cheaper, so that we are ready to act if necessary, should less expected outcomes begin to rise in probability. This is the spirit in which I have discussed UBI as a solution to the problem of

a severe fall in demand for labour. As I have said, I am not convinced that there will be such a fall. But my convictions are not the point. Rather, how best can any of us contribute to the debate about planning for a range of possibilities, so that we, as a society, can respond in a morally appropriate way to shifts and changes that, at the moment, we cannot rule out? Thinking about UBI, its variants, feasibility, and alternatives is one such way.

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