

KANT ON BEING A USEFUL MEMBER OF THE WORLD AND UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

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I argue that there are Kantian grounds to endorse a Universal Basic Income (UBI) and that Kant's practical philosophy can contribute to current debates about the ethics of UBI. I will make two points that mutually support each other. Firstly, there is a *pro tanto* argument for Kantians to work towards a UBI. A UBI, more so than conditional welfare schemes, enables agents to live up to their duty to be a useful member of the world. This should be conceptualized as an indirect duty to implement a UBI. Secondly, Kant's ethics suggests a way to tackle the most pressing ethical objection against a UBI, the unfairness or surfer objection. The requirement that agents be useful for others is ethical and thus cannot be enforced externally. Yet, there is rational pressure on agents to do their part. Kant and UBI advocates can learn a great deal from each other.

This paper is intended to initiate a conversation about Kant and Universal Basic Income (UBI) by drawing attention to one often neglected aspect of Kant's ethics: the duty to be useful. I will make two points that mutually support each other. Firstly, a UBI, more so than conditional welfare schemes, enables agents to fulfil their duty to be useful. Secondly, this duty affords resources to respond to the most pressing ethical objection against a UBI. Kant and UBI advocates can learn a great deal from each other, and the idea that there is a duty to be useful is relevant for Kantian as well as non-Kantian UBI advocates.

There are, I believe, a number of core Kantian ideas that can inspire or support arguments for a UBI. Kant holds that we ought to help others achieve the ends they themselves have adopted, which is a decisively anti-paternalist form of beneficence (e.g. VI: 452.13–454.28),¹ and he generally holds that paternalism

1. I cite Kant according to volume, page and line of Kant (1900ff.). English quotations, with occasional modifications, are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* edited by Guyer and Wood.

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is to be avoided on the part of individuals as well as governments (VI: 230.29–32, 318.4–14, VIII: 289.9–291.18, 297.2–299.21). Moreover, agents are to avoid servile behaviour (VI: 434.20–437.26) and making themselves mere means or tools for others (VI: 236.27–28), meaning they should not accept being dominated or exploited. Kant also mandates that agents' external freedom must be protected and facilitated (VI: 230.29–31). These ideas support various elements of a UBI as an anti-paternalistic proposal (Pinzani 2023), one that seeks to protect recipients against exploitation or domination (Pettit 2007; Widerquist 2013) or to provide real freedom meaning freedom and the basic means to pursue one's freely chosen ends (Van Parijs 1997). However, in what follows, I will focus my discussion on one specific ethical duty, namely, the duty to be useful. The argument I will be presenting is thus ethical and virtue-based. Ethical duties have received much less attention in the current UBI debate than justice-based considerations. Yet, the specific form of normativity of non-enforceable ethical duties is, I believe, of great relevance to the debate.

The duty to be useful can contribute to the debate for two reasons. Firstly, this duty has already made contributions to debates that are salient to our understanding of the prospects of a UBI, such as debates about enforced uselessness and exclusion, and it has emerged as a powerful tool to understand harms that might otherwise remain neglected. A closer look at these debates challenges our conception of what counts as socially useful work and of the ethical status of being useful. Secondly, this duty speaks to what is often considered the main normative challenge for UBI, namely, that it supposedly licenses free-riding. The duty is thus relevant both for a Kantian understanding of UBI as well as for a better normative appraisal of UBI. It is thus a suitable starting point for a debate on Kant and UBI that is relevant for both Kantians and UBI advocates. I do hope that, in the future, such a debate will also look at other Kantian duties and ideas. I therefore only present a *pro tanto* Kantian argument for a UBI. An all things considered argument would, admittedly, have to consider many other things.

I begin by explaining how a UBI differs from conditional welfare schemes (§1). I then briefly survey the Kant literature, showing that there is a lack of engagement with UBI on the part of Kantians. Moreover, when we look at Kant himself we can find passages that seem at odds with UBI as well as passages supporting some of its core ideas (§2). I then turn to the duty to be a useful member of the world (§3), and argue that Kantians should be in favour of a UBI, because it can facilitate agents' compliance with this duty (§4). Specifically, I argue, we should think of implementing or working towards a UBI as an indirect duty (§5). Finally, I explain how the *ethical* status of the duty to be useful can help UBI advocates respond to the challenge that they are unable to criticise free-riding (§§6–7).

In what follows, I will assume that a UBI is affordable. I will not argue for this, as the question of affordability touches upon intricate economic and

political questions.² However, let me point out that a UBI does not have to be financed through income tax, and thus paid for by (ordinary) workers. It could be financed through resource extraction, or taxes on wealth, inheritance, financial transactions, or on environmentally destructive behaviour or through combinations thereof. Some of these taxes would be good measures to achieve greater economic justice even without a UBI and some, such as an eco-tax, might be a potent tool in our fight against climate change. Moreover, extant conditional welfare schemes are themselves often very costly (Standing 2017: ch. 9), and distributing money with no strings attached saves on administrative costs. Finally, even if a UBI remained Utopian, the (hypothetical) strengths of this scheme can teach us a great deal about shortcomings of currently existing schemes and point to alternatives that might fall short of a UBI but nonetheless constitute improvements upon the status quo.

1. UBI

The distinguishing feature of a UBI is that it is *unconditional*: paid regardless of ability and willingness to work. UBI advocates often contrast this unconditionality with the conditional nature of many extant welfare schemes. According to them, a welfare scheme is, at best, an “ultimate safety net for people in need: it involves a means test, requires willingness to work” (Van Parijs & Vanderborght 2017: 69). Welfare recipients are supposed to seek and be willing to take up paid work, or they have to be certifiably unable to work. If they do not meet these conditions external pressure can be put on them, for instance, they can be penalized by cuts to their benefits. This model is often criticised as *workfare*: Forcing people into work, regardless of whether this work is useful for society or good for the workers themselves. In contrast to welfare schemes, UBI, if pitched at a subsistence level or higher, would, according to advocates, allow recipients to exit unattractive or pointless jobs (Widerquist 2013), provide basic economic security (Standing 2017) and the material security to choose and pursue their life plans freely (Van Parijs 1997). A UBI would thus free up people’s time and energy to pursue activities they themselves deem important or meaningful, because their life choices would no longer be constrained by the bare necessities of life.

There is one advantage of a UBI over many extant welfare schemes that, due to its somewhat technical nature, is often underappreciated, and that will become important for my argument. A UBI can avoid the *unemployment trap* (van der Veen & Van Parijs 1986: §7). Taking up some (or more) paid employment can

2. See Widerquist (2017) for an influential back-of-the-envelope calculation that suggests that a UBI (in the US) is much cheaper than commonly assumed.

be financially detrimental for welfare recipients, since welfare schemes are often set up such that additional income is effectively taxed at a high rate, sometimes at more than 100% (e.g. in the form of reductions to means-tested benefits). Taking up (more) paid work can also be risky for the under- and unemployed. A job might only be temporary and welfare recipients will have to reapply for benefits afterwards, but the application process is frequently opaque and error-ridden, and benefits may be denied upon reapplication or only paid with substantial delay. The way conditional welfare schemes are set up therefore often makes it economically rational for recipients to stay out of the workforce or work fewer hours, and welfare recipients are rarely in a position to be economically irrational and take a gamble on a job or on additional hours.

Since a UBI is paid unconditionally, workers will never lose this income. Anything they earn on top will make them better off.³ This is a significant advantage of a UBI. Moreover, it indicates that, despite widespread assumptions, a UBI could result in *more* people working, rather than fewer.

I should note that contrasting UBI and welfare schemes raises important conceptual questions. We should bear in mind that the nature and extent of welfare systems in democratic societies is up to its citizens. Citizens could, in principle, decide to improve them (raise the amount of money which those out of work have to subsist on as well as how much is paid in targeted support for those living with long-term illnesses and disabilities, improve and extend the services that state run institutions provide, etc.). Sometimes this might be tinkering around the edges but some improvements might be substantial, such as the introduction of a universal health service free at the point of use (the NHS) in the UK. In fact, even many extant welfare schemes, such as health care (in the UK and many European countries), have unconditional elements, as is acknowledged by UBI advocates (Van Parijs & Vanderborght 2017: 8). The philosophical UBI community is divided about whether UBI has to take the form of *income* or can also take the form of services provided unconditionally by the government.⁴ Depending on one's conception of UBI a very well set up welfare state and a UBI might therefore overlap substantially.⁵

3. However, this still does leave workers with some additional costs, e.g. for commuting or child-care (see Cholbi 2018: 1128). A UBI would put workers in a stronger position to negotiate higher wages, which could offset some of these expenses.

4. Many theorists (e.g. Standing 2017: 6; Bidanure 2019: 483–484) consider it essential that UBI takes the form of income, whereas Van Parijs (1997: ch. 2.4) is open to including necessary and unconditionally provided services. His argument is that services such as health care are worth money to citizens (they otherwise would have to pay for them) and they can be provided more efficiently by the government. See (De Wispelaere & Stirton 2004) for discussion.

5. Moreover, UBI advocates typically want to retain certain social safety net functions of the welfare state, such as targeted support for people with extra needs (see Standing 2017: 4, 52–55; Van Parijs 1997: 35–36).

If a reader of my paper does not like the term “UBI” they could therefore read the ensuing argument as a Kantian case for a much better (much less conditional, not workfare driven) welfare system. However, since we can distinguish a UBI from many extant, clearly conditional, schemes, I will continue to phrase my argument in terms of a contrast between UBI and extant welfare schemes. We should bear in mind, though, that in doing so I am contrasting an ideal with the reality of existing schemes and of potential incremental improvements thereof.

2. Kantians and Kant on a UBI

It is striking that the recent philosophical and public interest in UBI is not (yet) reflected in debates about Kant’s practical philosophy. UBI does not even figure as an option in discussions of Kant from the political Left, such as from the perspective of labour and intersectional feminism (Pascoe 2022), or social-democratic readings of Kant (e.g. Holtman 2019). According to Holtman’s recent *civic respect* account, the Kantian state is required to develop laws, institutions and policies that protect all citizens against poverty (2019: 61–62). Holtman explicitly warns against workfare (2019: 65–66). Kant is concerned with respect and independence and not all (paid or unpaid) work facilitates these goods. I think Holtman’s sceptical take on workfare is very Kantian in nature. However, many of the features that, according to the civic respect account, a Kantian welfare state should accomplish, a UBI could accomplish even better, because even more so than a generous (but conditional) welfare scheme, a UBI is set up to respect individuals’ end-setting.⁶

Whilst the history of UBI dates back potentially to figures such as Thomas More’s *Utopia*⁷, it only gained broad prominence relatively recently, which might explain its absence in the Kant literature. Moreover, the most frequently cited Kant passages concerning poverty relief and government provisions speak of *permissions* for the state to tax the rich in order to support the poor (VI:325.35, 326.8–28), not of *obligations* to do so. This makes all government provisions for the poor seem discretionary and contingent on “reasons of state” (VI:326.7). It thus seems that there cannot be strong grounds for a Kantian UBI as a policy.

6. Likewise, Wood (2008: 199–200) points out that, from a Kantian perspective, welfare could be seen as degrading, but he does not consider the possibility of a UBI. Hasan (2017: 923) mentions a right to a UBI as a potential element of a Kantian state without elaborating. O’Neill (1996: 170 fn.17) mentions basic income schemes as one candidate among others to secure basic economic security.

7. Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017: 264 fn.1) suggest that More could be considered a UBI advocate. According to Jäger & Zamora Vargas (2023: 25) the history of UBI in its narrow sense, “obligation-free, individual, and monetary,” only dates back to the 19th century. Figures such as More and Paine merely anticipated elements of a full UBI.

However, even if there is no obligation on the part of the state to provide poverty relief, there can still be better or worse support schemes once a state avails itself of the right to tax people for the purpose of poverty relief.⁸ Moreover, we should bear in mind that a UBI does not necessarily have to be financed via taxation (see above). It could, for instance, be financed via resource extraction, as is currently the case for the (below subsistence level) UBI paid out by the US state of Alaska to its residents (Widerquist & Howard 2012). Finally, and most significantly, I will argue below that there are Kantian grounds to accept a UBI that have little to do with poverty relief, and thus the optional nature of governmental poverty relief schemes is moot.

There are a few other elements of Kant's philosophy that can be read as grounds for scepticism towards a UBI. For instance, Kant emphasizes the importance of being self-sustaining, since those who are dependent on others supposedly lack civil personality and they are merely passive citizens who may not participate fully in public life (VI:314.17–315.22). A UBI might disincentivize (paid) work and thus, so to speak, "drag down" active citizens to the level of passive citizens if they lose (financial) independence grounded in their labour. However, as I have already pointed out, we should not simply assume that a UBI would lead to widespread laziness. Rather, UBI recipients may find themselves in a more secure economic position to take up (extra) work. Moreover, Kant believes that those depending on the state for their subsistence do have civil personality (VI:314.27–30). Kant here has in mind those *working* for the state, e.g. civil servants. Yet, this exception raises the possibility that everyone who relies on the state for their subsistence, even if they do not perform any (or a sufficient amount of) paid work, could gain their civil independence if they received a UBI.⁹ After all, if you were unconditionally provided with the means to satisfy your basic needs, then others would no longer be able to leverage your existential material needs against you in order to influence how you vote and thus undermine your capacity to participate fully in public life. If Kant's reason for denying certain workers and the unemployed (as well as all women who might be legally dependent on husbands or guardians) full citizenship is that those who depend on others for their subsistence could be dominated and swayed to vote in certain ways, then a UBI would address this concern. There might still be power differentials (people might earn more or

8. There are also Kantian attempts to establish that the state, in fact, does have a *duty* to support the poor, for instance, in order to establish universal full citizenship (Weinrib 2008).

9. I present this point in more detail in Sticker (2024). See also Weinrib (2008: 13) who argues persuasively that the distinction between passive and active citizenship is fundamentally concerned with whether someone is dependent on private citizens or "on the impartial state." Thus, it would not matter whether one *works* for the state or is otherwise financially supported by it so that one's independence from other citizens is secured. Pascoe (2022: ch. 2), by contrast, argues that the distinction between active and passive citizenship is grounded in different forms of labour.

less money, have more or less prestigious jobs and positions), but no one's bare subsistence would be at the mercy of another person.

There are also a number of Kant passages that support some of UBI's central ideas. Kant is aware that the poor are cared "for better and more economically" (VI:367.27–28) when they receive cash that they can spend at their discretion instead of services that impose constraints on them. The idea that it is more efficient and more respectful to provide cash that people can use as they see fit is one of UBI's driving forces. Indeed, Alessandro Pinzani (2023: 233), in the only in-depth discussion of Kant and UBI I am aware of, points out that the idea of securing agents' material existence without imposing a specific conception of how agents ought to live (for instance that they must seek paid employment) chimes well with the anti-paternalistic gist of Kant's political philosophy. One of the most intriguing upshots of Pinzani's discussion is that the duty of self-perfection can function as a Kantian rationale for a UBI, since a UBI would facilitate economic security and leisure allowing agents to develop their talents (234).¹⁰

Bringing duties to self into the debate about UBI is an intriguing proposal. However, I think a duty to self other than self-perfection is the most promising candidate for establishing Kantian grounds for a UBI, namely, the duty to be a *useful member of the world*. This duty, whilst it is a duty to self, ultimately asks agents to have an impact on others and on the world. It is thus plausible to assume that social, political and economic conditions impact how and when this duty can be fulfilled and even whether it is reasonable to expect agents to be useful. External conditions must allow agents to actually make a useful contribution and can facilitate (or undermine) this.

3. The Duty to be Useful

In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant maintains that "a human being has a duty to himself to be a useful member of the world, since this also belongs to the worth of humanity in his own person, which he ought not to degrade" (VI:446.1–3, see also IV:422.37–423.16, 433.26–33). Whilst Kant here does not give a direct rationale for this duty, it seems that a duty to be useful follows relatively straightforwardly from the duty of beneficence. If we are being beneficent to others, then, we, at least sometimes, will be means or useful for them, namely, when we aid or assist them in the pursuit of their ends. A requirement to be useful is thus

10. Pinzani (2023: 234) even notes that a UBI would allow agents to avoid "gruelling and mindless labour" that could undermine development of talents. However, he does not relate this point to considerations of usefulness as a duty or otherwise.

a correlate of the duty of beneficence.¹¹ What is surprising about this passage, however, is that Kant conceptualizes being useful as a duty to *self*.

Duties to self are a contentious category in current ethical theorizing, and a duty to self specifically to be useful to others smacks of the Protestant work ethic. It is therefore unsurprising that this duty has not received much attention yet.¹² However, Corinna Mieth and Garrath Williams (2023) have recently shown that the duty to be useful is significant for discussions of migration, as well as for understanding the mistreatment of the involuntarily unemployed (2021). They believe that even though being a useful member of the world is presented by Kant as a duty to self, under current conditions it puts constraints on *others*. Individuals, institutions, and the state can deny opportunities to be useful by implementing means of exclusion from societal functions, such as denying asylum seekers the right to undertake paid work. According to Mieth and Williams, the duty to be useful should not be understood as a means to place blame on individuals for supposed laziness, but rather as a tool to understand and analyse the wrongs of exclusion and marginalization.¹³

Moreover, not only does the duty to be useful put constraints on others (including the state), we should also not assume that this duty requires agents to take up *paid* work. There has recently been increased debate about the (lack of) usefulness of some paid work. David Graeber (2019: 9–10) famously argues that much of paid work is “so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence.” So-called “bullshit jobs” are often relatively cushy, well-paid, white-collar jobs. Graeber worries that the remuneration and status that come with these jobs incentivize people to take up these jobs rather than actually useful ones (e.g. as nurse or teacher).¹⁴ Furthermore, there is paid work that is worse than useless, as it actively harms others by miss-selling products, encouraging addictive behaviour, promoting gender stereotypes, and producing (environmental) externalities (Cholbi 2018: §2). The duty to be useful should not be understood as a duty to work for a living. In fact, a society committed to workfare might undermine the fulfilment of this duty,

11. Hence, Kant claims that in the kingdom of ends agents are to function as “ends and means” for each other (IV: 433.26–33). Being a means (on one’s own terms) can have a positive ethical status.

12. Even O’Connor’s (2018) thorough history of the notion of idleness in German philosophy beginning with Kant does not make reference to the duty to be useful as presented in the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

13. Understood along Mieth and Williams’ line the duty to be useful resonates with current discussions of “contributive justice” concerned with the distribution of opportunities to contribute to and participate in society (e.g., Timmermann 2018; Brownlee 2016).

14. According to Graeber (2019: 6), currently 37–40% of jobs qualify as bullshit. According to other studies, the figure is rather between 4.8% (Soffia, Wood, & Burchell 2021) and 8% (Dur & van Lent 2019: 13). Yet, “the share of workers perceiving their job to be socially useless is clearly not negligible” (2019: 13).

because people are pressured to take up any paid work regardless of how useless or harmful it is.

Finally, Kant distinguishes between duties of different kinds of stringency, such as between duties of right and ethical duties.¹⁵ The duty to be useful is an *ethical* duty, since it is positive and prescribes an end to be promoted rather than certain types of actions we may never commit. There is also a great deal of latitude with regard to how and when we can be useful, and others do not have a right that we are being useful in any specific way, unless we have committed to perform certain tasks or otherwise incurred stricter obligations. I therefore take it that on any plausible account of the distinction between duties of right and ethical duties the duty to be useful is ethical.¹⁶ As an ethical duty usefulness cannot be externally coerced. Thus, any external pressure is an inappropriate means to enforce true adherence to this duty (as opposed to mere external compliance which lacks moral value). In the penultimate section of my paper, I will argue that the ethical nature of this duty constitutes an important resource for UBI advocates.

4. A (Pro Tanto) Kantian Case for a UBI

My first main claim in this paper is that Kantians should be in favour of a UBI, because it can facilitate compliance with the duty to be a useful member of the world. To establish this claim, I will focus on two conceptual points: a UBI protects useful workers against exploitation and a UBI affords resources to engage in useful but unpaid activity.

Firstly, if I am being useful to a person, I function as a means to their ends. Being a means comes with the ethical danger of being used *merely* as a means, which is strictly prohibited by the Formula of Humanity (IV:429.10–12).¹⁷ Agents who make themselves means for others by being useful for them must be protected against being degraded to mere means. In fact, Kant thinks that you even have a duty to “not make yourself a mere means for others” (VI:236.27–8). Presumably this duty only applies to a limited number of cases since those

15. Kant, in fact, distinguishes between perfect and imperfect duties (IV: 421.fn), juridical and ethical duties (VI: 218.11–221.3, 239.4–12), duties of strict and wide obligation (VI:390.1–91.25), and wide duties of love and respect (VI: 448.10–449.2). I cannot discuss these intricate distinctions here. See instead O'Neill (1975: ch. 4) and Denis (2001: ch. 2).

16. See *pars pro toto* O'Neill (1996: 184–185) for such accounts. That the duty to be useful is ethical also means that it is constrained by perfect duties and that it needs to be weighed against other imperfect duties such as self-perfection. Agents are not morally required to be maximally useful to others at the expense of their self-development. I will bracket the contentious issue of whether latitude makes room for agents' inclinations or only for other duties (see IV:421fn, VI:390.9–14).

17. See also O'Connor (2018: 53): “To gear our lives toward usefulness places us at the mercy of ends that are determined by others.”

treated as mere means often have no real choice in the matter. Moreover, since there is also a duty to be useful it cannot be the case that we have to minimize instances of being means for others so as to avoid being treated as mere means. Rather, being a means for others is sometimes morally good and (sometimes) required but it also renders agents vulnerable to instrumentalization and this vulnerability needs to be addressed either by the agent herself or otherwise.

One way to address the ethical danger of being a means is via legal protections for workers and support schemes for the unemployed. However, due to their conditionality, most if not all extant conditional welfare schemes still leave recipients vulnerable to exploitation. If you have your benefits cut unless you accept any job you are offered or you lose health insurance if your hours are reduced, you are in a very weak position to avoid and resist treatment as mere means.¹⁸ It is therefore essential that agents have the opportunity to be useful to others without threat of coercion and danger of being degraded to a mere means. A scheme that provides agents unconditionally with the means to afford the necessities of life gives them the opportunity to exit and avoid many exploitative relationships and to maintain their status as ends in themselves, whilst making themselves means for others on their own terms.¹⁹

Of course, there are sources of exploitation that UBI does not address or at least not directly, for instance, emotional blackmail, or certain forms of unpaid labour agents undertake due to internalized (gendered) role expectations. Yet, it is plausible to assume that a subsistence level UBI would enable agents to exit many forms of exploitative work (Widerquist 2013). This would also mean that the paid work that these agents still undertake is not forced upon them by the most pressing forms of economic necessity. Such work would usually not qualify as exploitative or treatment as mere means. In fact, a secure economic basis would put agents in a position in which it could be meaningfully required of them in the first place not to make themselves into mere means because they have the option to avoid this without facing economic deprivation.

Secondly, a UBI can result in more useful work. This is because much of necessary and useful work, such as child rearing and other care work, is currently

18. I take it that this point is not overly controversial at least with regard to many extant welfare schemes, even though there could be schemes that take special measures to protect recipients against exploitation. Interviews from participants in a Canadian basic income trial from the 1970s have revealed that less affluent recipients describe basic income as more dignified than conditional welfare schemes and that the attitude towards recipients was less moralistic and less laden with stigma than towards welfare recipients (Calnitsky 2016). A UBI therefore promises higher uptake among those most vulnerable to exploitation than conditional schemes that come with formal barriers as well as informal stigma. These barriers and stigma frequently result in some of those most in need of help missing out on support to which they are entitled.

19. My reasoning here is in line with Republican arguments for UBI, which stress how such a scheme would protect recipients against domination (Pettit 2007).

unpaid or underpaid (Pascoe 2022: chs. 5 & 7). A UBI puts agents in a position to perform work that they themselves deem important, necessary, or worthwhile, even if this work is unpaid or underpaid.²⁰ Some of this will be work that is socially useful.²¹ A conditional welfare scheme, even a generous one, by contrast, is typically supposed to induce people to take up paid work, regardless of the social value of this work.

That a UBI puts agents in a better position to be useful to others might run counter to assumptions about the rationality of the market. A free market, supposedly, distributes resources, including labour, with maximal efficiency, and this ensures that everyone who participates in it in the form of paid employment does their useful part. However, even those believing in the efficiency of the market would presumably not deny that some very useful functions are performed outside of the market, e.g., in the form of unpaid care and reproductive work. Opportunities to be useful to the world are not restricted to the market, not even to an efficient one. A UBI allows agents to take up these opportunities by financially supporting and enabling unpaid work without pressure to seek paid work.

Moreover, as the phenomenon of bullshit jobs shows, there are reasons to doubt that the market is, in fact, maximally efficient, and that market participation, in the form of paid employment, is always useful to others. Workfare might induce agents to be *less* useful to others rather than more and a UBI allows people to avoid useless jobs.

Of course, whether a UBI will in fact further the fulfilment of the duty to be useful is to some extent an empirical question. However, empirical data from past and ongoing UBI experiments and schemes is to be treated with some scepticism

20. See e.g. Torry (2015: 42). That a UBI allows agents to perform more socially useful unpaid work is, to some extent, a contentious feature of this scheme, since one might worry that this could reinforce a gendered division of paid and unpaid labour (Gheaus 2008). Yet, even Gheaus who originally raised this concern now accepts that UBI would be beneficial for the worst-off women, such as single mothers, and should therefore be supported by feminists (2020).

21. Some, qualitative, empirical evidence that agents have a desire to perform socially valuable work are the numerous testimonies we find in Graeber (2019: 119–123) from those working so-called “bullshit jobs,” jobs they themselves acknowledge do not add anything of value to society. Workers in bullshit jobs self-report negative impacts on their mental, and sometimes physical, health, including phenomena such as depression. Bullshit jobs are often white-collar jobs and relatively well paid and even come with at least a modicum of social esteem. What seems to be depressing for workers is the lack of contribution they are making compared to those working non-bullshit jobs. See also Jütten (2017: 266) for a brief overview of the sociological literature on the importance of individuals’ contribution to shared goals for these individuals themselves. Jütten argues that making socially useful contributions is important for agents due to the recognition they receive from others for their contribution to social goods. It is important to bear in mind that a desire to be useful need not be an intrinsic element of human nature (e.g. it could be socially constructed via our practices of recognition), in order for it to play an important role in our theorizing about good work.

as these schemes are either time limited and selective (e.g., in an ongoing Welsh scheme only young adults who spend time in the care system, such as foster care or children's homes, are eligible and only for two years) or below subsistence level (e.g. the ongoing and long running payments from Alaska's Permanent Fund). Thus, they do not show how society or individuals would be transformed if everyone was provided unconditionally with the means to meet their basic needs in perpetuity.²² Moreover, UBI experiments typically focus on factors such as individual well-being and participation in the job market, not on the less tangible notion of usefulness.

Nonetheless, a recent US study of attitudes towards UBI and work provides at least some indication that the tension between UBI and *paid* work is overstated:

[f]ar from seeing the GAI [Guaranteed Annual Income] as a disincentive to work, the respondents in our survey indicate, on the whole, that they would not reduce their work hours if they received a GAI. At the same time, less than half of the sample believe that GAI would have a depressing effect on others' desire to work. These responses may well be tied to the belief, also indicated in our survey, that income is only one important motivation to work. (Richards & Steiger 2021: 16)

This finding suggests that a UBI would not lead to less paid work since there can be other reasons to work than pay (see also Herzog & Gheaus 2016). For instance, the work one performs can be considered intrinsically worthwhile by workers. Moreover, Tijs Laenen (2023: 205) highlights an intriguing disparity Richards and Steiger's study reveals: "while 48% believe that the introduction of basic income will increase the overall level of unemployment, only 21% indicate that they would reduce their own working hours." People tend to be more pessimistic about *others'* willingness to work, and presumably to contribute to society more generally, than about their own. This suggests that one should be suspicious of any hunch one might have that others (but not oneself) are only working for the money and would stop working if everyone received a UBI, believing that oneself would gladly contribute to society, while suspecting others would not.²³

22. See also Noguera & De Wispelaere (2006) for critical discussion of the scope, validity and robustness of standard experimental UBI research as well as of the problem of political manipulation of the results.

23. Moreover, in a recent Finish experiment, 2000 unemployed individuals received an unconditional income transfer of €560 per month for two years. This resulted in "a positive and significant association between basic income (treatment) and employment" (Ylikännö & Kangas 2021: 62). However, Ylikännö and Kangas also emphasize that there are limitations to this finding, such as the time-limited nature of the scheme. Once more, the study only measures paid employment, not useful activity.

Admittedly, my argument assumes that agents, if they enjoy the freedom that a UBI affords, will not strive to avoid any useful work. I do not find this a very controversial claim, since at least some socially useful work, such as raising children and taking care of loved ones, is considered intrinsically rewarding and worthwhile. There is reason to believe that many agents, once they are free of the most basic material insecurities, would do *more* of such work rather than less. I will discuss an objection to this in the last section.

The argument I have presented so far is *pro tanto* because I have bracketed a number of important questions, some of which are empirical, and others which arise from the fact that the duty to be useful is only one of several normative requirements. There are other duties compliance with which a UBI or other schemes could facilitate (or make more difficult), and it is a significant question which scheme is most suitable to secure agents' external freedom (VI:230.29–31). Moreover, resources for a UBI could instead be allocated to large one-off capital grants²⁴, or a generous welfare system with targeted support specifically (and only) for those in need, unconditional provision of services (healthcare, education) or vouchers for certain key areas, such as energy. I do not mean to claim that the duty to be useful renders all these considerations secondary or even moot. Rather, I hope to have shown that, if we look at the duty to be useful, we obtain Kantian reasons for being sympathetic to a UBI. Moreover, I think that these reasons are also of broader relevance for the systematic debate about the desirability of a UBI.

5. An Indirect Duty to a UBI

Given that my argument is virtue-based, focused on the ethical duty to be useful, but a UBI is a policy, one may object that we cannot argue for a policy based on it being conducive to fulfilling an ethical duty. The ethical duty to be useful is a matter for individuals' choices of maxims and ends. Having ethical duties influence political decisions would conflate the ethical and the juridical.²⁵ Political decision and positive law are about externally enforceable actions and thus miss the point of ethical duties entirely.

Addressing this objection requires that we first dispel an important misunderstanding about the role of government for ethical duties. Kant maintains that

24. Large one-off capital grants (e.g. Ackerman, Alstott 1999) might count as a form of UBI on some conceptions as they can be converted into quasi UBIs if the grant is invested. It is thus not clear that this proposal really is an alternative to a UBI. The same might be true for certain unconditional services (see §1 above).

25. There is heated debate about how Kant intends these spheres to relate. See Wood (1998), Guyer (2016), and Hirsch (2017). If the juridical sphere could be derived from the ethical, or if there were a common principle underlying both spheres, then this might dissolve or at least alleviate the objection I am addressing here. However, I will not help myself to such contentious assumptions.

ethical duties cannot be externally coerced because they are duties to adopt and act on maxims, not duties to perform or omit specific external actions (VI:219.17–30). However, governments can do many things other than coerce: They can incentivise behaviour (via taxation), facilitate activities (when they create certain institutions such as marriage), encourage and reward certain forms of behaviour (by giving out medals and honours), etc. Thus, even if governments cannot coerce people to make being useful their end, they can, in principle, incentivise, facilitate, and encourage this.²⁶

Moreover, Kant is fully aware that external circumstances have at least an indirect impact on duties in general, specifically on how difficult it is to live up to them. For instance, he argues that “lack of contentment with one’s condition, in the trouble of many worries and amidst unsatisfied needs, could easily become a great *temptation to transgress one’s duty*” (IV:399.4–7). Having certain external goods, namely those required to satisfy one’s needs, can make moral actions easier, and lack thereof can make them harder. We thus have an *indirect* duty to procure these goods (IV:399.3–7, VI:388.26–30). It is plausible that such external goods can, in principle, be provided or secured by others, including the state.

Indirect duties are an intriguing, yet puzzling, normative category. They are not *sui generis* duties, as is apparent from Kant’s claim that humans do not have duties to non-human animals. They merely have indirect duties with regard to them (VI:443.23–25). Indirect duties thus cannot be a class of duties. They single out morally significant factors or circumstances. They are prescriptions to put in place and secure the conditions to satisfy one’s direct duties or, at least, not to undermine one’s capacity to live up to the commands of duty.²⁷ I suggest that indirect duties constitute a model for understanding the kind of normative pressure that is upon states to implement a UBI and upon citizens to work towards it, for instance in the form of petitioning elected officials, starting grass roots campaigns, informing other members of the public about the advantages of the scheme, etc. There is no direct duty (on the part of the state or citizens) to do so, but there are strong reasons to implement a UBI, due to the instrumental function that a UBI can play for the duty to be useful.

There are, at least, three critical replies one could make to my proposal. Discussing these will help me clarify and refine it.

Firstly, one might raise the exegetical worry that for Kant indirect duties are supposed to protect *one’s own character* (VI:443.23–25) and preserve *one’s own*

26. Some Kantian approaches are congenial to my approach. O’Neill (1996) acknowledges that a state might implement welfare-oriented policies in order to assist citizens in fulfilling duties of virtue, such as beneficence, when these duties are difficult to address successfully through individual efforts alone. Most recently, Pinzani (2023) stressed the importance of the political even for matters of ethical or imperfect duty.

27. My reading of indirect duty follows Timmermann (2006: 297–298).

ability to live up to duty (IV:399.3–7, VI:388.26–30), not the character and ability of others. Suggesting that there could be something like an indirect duty to facilitate others' pursuit of an ethical duty might overextend the notion of indirect duty.

I think we need to distinguish here between two functions of indirect duty. The first is indeed solely concerned with warding off damage to one's own character. The prime example for this is avoiding cruel or destructive treatment of non-rational animals and nature (VI:443.1–25). This function could not be performed by someone else for me. The second function is concerned with the impact of external goods (or lack thereof) on agents' readiness to do their duty (IV:399.3–7, VI:388.26–30). It is possible for external goods to be provided or secured by others, including the state, and this would, presumably, fulfil the same instrumental functions as providing or securing it for oneself if the provision is equally or more reliable and adequate. UBI does indeed provide agents with external means, money or financial security. Insofar as it is conducive to certain duties to enjoy material goods and what follows from them, e.g., free time and material security, a UBI can perform an important function instrumental to many duties. Yet, it is still each agent's individual responsibility to shape their character and protect their moral sensibilities.

At this point it becomes particularly apparent that I am focusing on only one aspect of a broader argument. Obviously, the security and free time a UBI provides can also impact and facilitate the pursuit of other duties, such as beneficence, and self-perfection. It might be the case that there are other grounds for a Kantian UBI due to its instrumental function for various other duties, but I will have to bracket this discussion here.

Secondly, one could question whether a UBI is indeed the *most effective* scheme to facilitate conditions under which agents can be useful to the world. It may turn out that, once everyone is unconditionally provided with sufficient income to meet subsistence needs, people would drastically reduce useful work, and that people would be more useful if they were subjected to the discipline of conditional welfare.

I am open to the possibility that a well set up welfare scheme, or a scheme that is neither a standard welfare scheme nor a full-fledged UBI²⁸, facilitates useful activities even better than a UBI. I suspect, but cannot defend this claim here, that these schemes would be less conditional than extant schemes and thus to some extent resemble a UBI. If there were a more effective scheme than a UBI,

28. An example could be a *participation* income, which is paid only to those who make a contribution to society via paid or other socially useful work such as volunteering (see Atkinson 1996). Such a scheme would encourage people to do useful unpaid work, but it would also encourage useless paid work. Moreover, the definition of useful unpaid work could be overly narrow and not all agents actually performing this work might qualify.

then there would be Kantian grounds to support this scheme rather than a UBI, at least insofar as the duty to be useful is concerned. However, as the unemployment trap and the existence of bullshit jobs demonstrates, it is an open question whether welfare schemes really *are* as suitable an incentive to useful work as commonly assumed. Moreover, merely encouraging and enabling agents to be useful still leaves them at the danger of being treated as a mere means. A UBI is much better than conditional schemes at enabling agents to be means on their own terms. Finally, we should bear in mind that ethical duties cannot be externally coerced. Thus, a scheme that is very effective at *forcing* agents to be useful by leveraging their basic needs against them would only facilitate external compliance with a duty, not genuinely ethical behavior. I take it that, at least from a Kantian perspective, ideally agents are in principle free to be useless but also have the means and opportunity to be useful and freely opt for the latter.²⁹

Thirdly, a related worry is that even if a UBI were the most effective scheme (that we know of) to facilitate voluntary usefulness, it is not clear that the state has to implement the *most* effective scheme. On Kant's framework, individuals do not have to maximize others' happiness or maximally develop their talents (see e.g. Formosa & Sticker 2019: 633). Likewise, it is presumably not the case that it is immoral or irrational on the part of the state if it implements a sufficiently good but less than optimal policy (or if individuals prefer and work towards such a policy).

However, I take it that if a UBI is indeed the most promising scheme to facilitate usefulness as well as to protect those making themselves means for others, then a UBI would at least be a very serious policy contender. If one instead preferred a different policy then one would at least need to justify this. Of course, it is possible that a justification can be had, e.g. if a UBI turned out to be too costly. However, I take it that the burden of proof would be upon the critic.

6. Kantian Surfers

As I am sure the perceptive reader will have noticed, my argument assumes that people reliably free of the most basic material needs would want to be useful and contribute to society. But this is contentious.³⁰ Indeed, the most significant

29. How persuasive this point ultimately is depends on how we think about the role of motivation from duty. It is possible that we can be coerced into something, but at the same time do this from duty because we acknowledge that this is the right thing to do. Yet, I take it that, at the very least, compelling agents to do the right thing makes it more difficult for them to do it voluntarily and for the right reasons because ulterior motives are introduced.

30. Kant himself warns that laziness is a natural human predisposition (XXV:1421). For recent discussions of laziness in Kant and its problematic racialized nature see Pascoe (2022: ch. 5) and Lu-Adler (2022).

normative objection against a UBI is inspired by the suspicion that some agents might not be useful if they enjoy a UBI. Not only would others have to pick up their slack, but these others would also be subsidizing the slackers' idleness by paying taxes that would be funnelled into a UBI.³¹ This would clash with "a widely accepted notion of justice: it is unfair for able bodied people to live off the labour of others" (Elster 1986: 719).³² Whilst UBI advocates see the unconditionality of the scheme as a crucial advantage over conditional welfare schemes, this unconditionality also leaves them in a difficult position to reply to the unfairness or, as it is sometimes labelled, "surfer"³³ objection, as a UBI would make contribution to society optional in the sense that agents can no longer be coerced into it.

The standard response to the surfer problem is as follows: Imagine two people receiving a UBI: Lazy, the surfer who does not contribute to society, even though he could³⁴, and Crazy who works hard. Crazy's taxes contribute to a UBI, which makes it financially possible for Lazy to surf all day. However, Crazy is not in a position to reasonably complain about this arrangement. If he finds Lazy's lifestyle more appealing than his own, then he could give up hard work as well and start surfing all day. A UBI affords him this freedom. If Crazy does not give up his job, then he has freely chosen the life of hard work and high income (and taxes that finance a UBI). Both Lazy and Crazy live the life of their choosing and the UBI seems to be working well for both of them.

The force of this response partly depends on whether there would still be enough people to perform socially necessary work if Crazy opted out of work. If vital social systems would collapse or if the UBI became impossible to finance because productivity or tax income would plummet, then it seems that Crazy is not really afforded the freedom to opt out. Moreover, Crazy might have chosen his lifestyle out of a sense of solidarity with his fellow citizens or because he believes that he has a duty to perform certain vital functions for others, not because he finds his lifestyle inherently more appealing than Lazy's.³⁵

31. I here grant, for the sake of the argument, the very common assumption that a UBI would be financed through (income) tax. The objection might have less bite if that is not the case.

32. White (2006: 2) calls this "probably the most basic ethical challenge" facing a UBI. Recently, Sticker (2023) has argued that the challenge becomes even more pressing if we factor in already existing trans-national exploitation in a scenario where citizens of some but not all countries receive a UBI. Of course, lack of reciprocity is not merely a challenge for UBI but potentially for other unconditional schemes, e.g., unconditional services, as well.

33. The objection is inspired by Rawls' (in)famous claim that the Malibu surfer who could contribute to society but instead spends all of his time surfing is not entitled to public funds. Rawls' idea is that extra leisure enjoyed by surfers "would be stipulated as equivalent to the index of primary goods of the least advantaged." Surfers thus "must find a way to support themselves and would not be entitled to public funds" (Rawls 1988: 257 fn7).

34. The case is usually stipulated such that Lazy neither performs useful paid work nor useful volunteering, unpaid care work, etc.

35. These possibilities are discussed by Birnbaum (2011: §5).

In response, UBI advocates often draw on optimistic assumptions about human nature: sharing and cooperating comes more natural to human beings than selfishness and competition, and people, if provided with the basic necessities of life, will want to perform at least some socially useful work (Van Parijs & Vanderboght 2017: 101–102; Graeber 2019: 236–239). I think we should not dismiss such optimism. After all, assuming that agents are mainly or entirely selfish is equally a contentious assumption. Yet, I think that in response to the surfer problem, UBI advocates should not rely on assumptions about human nature alone. They should also seek inspiration from Kant.

My second main claim in this paper is that it is a false dichotomy to assume that there is either external coercion to contribute to society, e.g. in the form of threats to cut benefits, or no normative pressure whatsoever, and that free-riding thus is sanctioned by a UBI. Kant's notion of ethical duties shows that there can be *rational*, non-externally enforceable—but very real—pressure on agents. There can be rational pressure on Lazy to contribute, because Lazy has an ethical duty to be useful. His conception of ethical duties allows Kant to accommodate the wide-spread intuition, which underlies the surfer objection, that it is wrong if people who could contribute to society do not, especially if society provides certain goods to everyone and agents have the leisure and security to give back.

Introducing an ethical duty to contribute to society ultimately strengthens the case for a UBI. It allows UBI advocates to acknowledge the challenge that the surfer poses and it provides conceptual tools to explain on what grounds the surfer can be criticised. Yet, as an ethical duty, the duty to be useful cannot and should not be externally enforced. Someone who fails to live up to it should not have their UBI reduced or discontinued as this would be external enforcement, something that is inappropriate for ethical duties. Thus, Kantians are in a position to explain why there should be an unconditional basic income for everyone, including the surfer, whilst also being able to provide ethical reasons for the surfer to spend some of their time and capacities as a means for others.

UBI advocates tend to be sympathetic to the lifestyle of Lazy/the surfer and to explain away the intuition that there is anything wrong with it. They do indeed make a number of persuasive points, such as that it is illiberal to impose a work requirement, that currently asset owners such as landlords are not expected to work for a living, and that without a UBI there is a much more pressing exploitation concern with regard to workers who are left with the choice to work or starve (see e.g. Widerquist 1999). Yet, I do think that it would benefit their argument if they had something to offer to those who stick to their guns and maintain that the surfer's lifestyle is criticisable.

In turn, a duty to be useful to the world will become more plausible if everyone is, unconditionally, provided with the basics, so that they can freely determine the contribution they want to make. The reason why this duty may strike

us as moralistic is because currently many agents, even in wealthy societies, struggle for basic material security. Being in a position to decide whether or not to take up a function that is useful for others is, under current conditions, already to some extent a privilege. Normative constraints to be useful are moot for those who must work any job they can find to meet basic needs. However, this need not and should not be so, and if, one day, it is not, then a duty to be useful will become very significant.³⁶

7. Closing Thoughts

One might reply to my proposal that UBI advocates should avail themselves of the ethical duty to be useful that the problem the surfer raises is not lack of usefulness *per se*. Rather, the objection draws on intuitions about fairness, justice and reciprocity. One way of phrasing the objection is that Lazy might be exploiting Crazy because he lives off Crazy's labor.³⁷ This sounds as if the worry is that some agents are treated as mere means. Corresponding duties to contribute to society should thus be *perfect* and potentially duties of right, since protecting agents against being used as mere means falls within the domain of right.

However, it is odd to cast Crazy as being treated as a mere means. After all, a UBI does give everyone the opportunity to opt out of (paid) work. Even if Lazy benefits from Crazy's work, Crazy is free to exit this relationship, thanks to a UBI. In fact, workers receiving a UBI would be in a much stronger position than they currently are to exit work they deem exploitative. Thus, if Crazy does not opt out of paid work, then his work can be assumed to be consensual and consent is a sign that someone is not being treated as a mere means.³⁸ Moreover, if someone uses their UBI to live a life of laziness this person has not deceived anyone (they receive their UBI regardless of what they profess about their future industriousness) nor coerced anyone to stay in the workforce, nor agreed to accept a UBI under the condition or assumption that they would do their part. They are simply paid a set amount of money unconditionally, even if they explicitly stated that they would do nothing but surf. It is difficult to see

36. See also a somewhat parallel argument by Cholbi (2018) regarding a potentially enforceable duty to others to work. Cholbi argues that due to the useless and potentially harmful nature of much of current employment and bad working conditions and inadequate remuneration, very few people actually have this duty. However, such a duty might become more relevant and applicable in different socio-political circumstances.

37. Sticker (2023: §2) phrases the objection in terms of exploitation, but ultimately denies Lazy exploits Crazy.

38. Kant affirms the principle "*volenti non fit iniuria*" (VI:313.34, 422.21). See Korsgaard (1996: 139), Wood (1999: 153), and Kleingeld (2020) for various versions of consent readings of the idea that persons are to be treated as ends in themselves and never merely as means.

how a UBI would create or impose duties of right on people. The surfer problem does not seem to be one of direct exploitation but rather of not doing one's part when one is in a good position to do something for others.

Most significantly, the duty to be useful, is, as I have stated (§3), highly unspecified and allows for latitude at least with regard to its implementation. The surfer could do useful paid work, he could do the shopping for members of the community with limited mobility, he could occasionally teach others how to surf (if this is something they are interested in), etc., but no one specific person would have a right to any of these activities simply because the surfer receives a UBI. Due to the highly unspecified nature of the duty, being useful is not something that can or should be externally enforced in the form of a duty of right.³⁹

Finally, it should be noted that Kant is of course not the only thinker who presents a distinction between ethical prescriptions beyond the scope of positive law and duties that correspond to rights of others and that can be externally enforced. Yet, Kant is a particularly useful resource for at least two reasons.

Firstly, he discusses and grounds this distinction in great depth and spells it out in detail. He, in fact, structures his last major work, the *Metaphysics of Morals*, around the distinction between enforceable duties of right, discussed in the work's first part, the *Doctrine of Right*, and unenforceable ethical duties, discussed in the second part, the *Doctrine of Virtue*. Matters of right are centred on questions of external freedom (VI:230.29–231.21). By contrast, matters of virtue are centred on self-legislation and questions of motivation, the structure, moral-psychology and metaphysics of which Kant explains in detail in central parts of his oeuvre (e.g., V:71–89). I obviously do not suggest that UBI advocates simply accept Kant's moral psychology, let alone his metaphysics. Rather, I think that Kant's pluralism of duties and specifically his conception of ethical duties can be a source of inspiration. Moreover, engaging, critically or otherwise, with Kant can help gain a deeper understanding of the sources of legal and ethical duties and of their relations as well as of the implications of such a divide.

Secondly, Kant acknowledges that being useful is an ethical duty, thus locating the notion of usefulness within his normative framework. It should have become clear from my discussion that this duty requires making oneself a means for others, albeit on one's own terms. Thus, important ethical questions arise such as how useful agents can be protected against being treated as a mere means.

39. Kant himself stresses that it constitutes "*culpability*" or "*vice*" if an agent makes "it his principle not to comply with" any duty including imperfect ones (VI:390.18–29). There is broad agreement within Kant scholarship that the requirement to at least minimally comply with imperfect duties or to at least "adopt a moral end is itself a strict one" (Pinheiro Walla 2015: 734; see also O'Neill 1996: ch. 7). If we think of being useful as a correlate to beneficence then complete lack of any useful activity would be equivalent to complete, and presumably principled, non-compliance with the ethical duty of beneficence. This would be, according to Kant, strictly prohibited, albeit there is still no duty of right to be minimally beneficent or useful.

Moreover, this duty requires that external circumstances are such that agents can make a useful contribution to society. With his division between duties of right and virtue, his Formula of Humanity that mandates that agents are not to be used as mere means and the duty to be useful, Kant presents a subtle and rich analysis of agents' precarious but necessary status as means for others. This, as I hope to have shown, directly speaks to some of the reasons why a UBI is appealing, as well as addresses some of its potential drawbacks.

Of course, other theorists, for instance virtue ethicists, could in principle also avail themselves of the idea that being useful is morally required in a non-enforceable sense or that it is virtuous. However, virtue ethical accounts typically lack emphasis on matters of external enforceability and they thus might not have the conceptual tools to carve out a realm of ethical normativity that is clearly distinct from positive law or strict duties of justice.⁴⁰ An approach that analyses ethical questions in terms of virtue alone might even come down too harshly on the surfer if his behaviour is found to lack in virtue. If virtue and vice are the pivotal concepts then conceptual resources might be lacking to explain why, nonetheless, the surfer still should enjoy a UBI.⁴¹ This is not to say that virtue ethics is deficient as an ethical theory, but merely that there is, at least, one appealing idea, which is particularly apparent in Kant's practical philosophy, and which deserves the attention of UBI advocates. There might be plenty of other fruitful ideas to be found in other historical and contemporary ethical and political theories that can enrich the debate.⁴²

As I have already indicated, my Kantian case for a UBI is limited, as it specifically focuses on the duty to be useful. I do think that this duty is very significant, as it can help us understand (some of) what individuals owe the world, as well as how the (social) world would have to be to allow individuals to make a contribution. UBI can facilitate agents' functioning as means for others, and on their own terms—without being degraded to mere means. UBI advocates who feel the draw of the surfer objection should accept that there is a duty to be useful—a way to both explain the surfer objection's pull while also justifying UBI. I also think that there is plenty of further material in Kant that has a bearing on the ethical and political advantages and also potential drawbacks of a UBI. Further debate on Kant and UBI will be fruitful for both our understanding of Kant and of UBI.

40. This is essentially the argument that Kant is appealing because he combines in a principled manner a dimension of justice with a dimension of virtue (O'Neill 1996).

41. There might be a parallel problem for standard Act-Consequentialist conceptions if their only command is to maximize (or promote) the good. On such a conception the surfer either does or does not maximise (or promote sufficiently) the good and it is not easy to see how a theorist could distinguish between different realms of normativity for public policy and individual lifestyle. However, Rule-Consequentialists might be in a position to do so.

42. Other deontological or liberal theorists, e.g. O'Neill (1996: 136–141), who stresses the significance of obligations that do not correspond to rights, could of course avail themselves of a conception of ethical duties too, but Kant might well have been their original source.

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