Impossible Dream  
Negative Case by "Coach Vance" Trefethen



As Robert Kennedy said, it's great to dream about things that never were and ask "why not?"[[1]](#footnote-1)

But sometimes there's a really good answer to the "why not." The Universal Basic Income sounds cool in theory but it's an impossible dream. It contains too many internal contradictions and failures of incentive and financing that it can't possibly work.

Impossible Dream

As Robert Kennedy said, it's great to dream about things that never were and ask "why not?" But sometimes there's a really good answer to the "why not." If something has been studied and found to be unworkable or impossible, then the faster we abandon it and try something else that actually could work, the happier society will be. That's why we should deny that the United States ought to provide a universal basic income. Let's first turn to my…

# Definition

Investopedia defines our resolution when it says QUOTE:

"Basic income is a system similar to Social Security, in which all citizens of a country receive a set amount of money on a regular basis. This money is typically provided by the government or a similar public organization. This income, provided unconditionally, is given in addition to any income for which a person works. "[[2]](#footnote-2)

Next, consider my…

# Value: Utilitarianism

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines Utilitarianism as QUOTE:

"Utilitarianism is one of the most powerful and persuasive approaches to normative ethics in the history of philosophy. Though not fully articulated until the 19th century, proto-utilitarian positions can be discerned throughout the history of ethical theory. Though there are many varieties of the view discussed, utilitarianism is generally held to be the view that the morally right action is the action that produces the most good. There are many ways to spell out this general claim. One thing to note is that the theory is a form of consequentialism: the right action is understood entirely in terms of consequences produced. What distinguishes utilitarianism from egoism has to do with the scope of the relevant consequences. On the utilitarian view one ought to maximize the overall good — that is, consider the good of others as well as one's own good. The Classical Utilitarians, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, identified the good with pleasure, so, like Epicurus, were hedonists about value. They also held that we ought to maximize the good, that is, bring about ‘the greatest amount of good for the greatest number’."[[3]](#footnote-3)

Here’s why it’s an appropriate value.

## Reason to Prefer: Human Equality

Stanford Encyclopedia goes on to point out QUOTE: "Utilitarianism is also distinguished by impartiality and agent-neutrality. Everyone's happiness counts the same." END QUOTE. As we analyze the Affirmative position, we'll find that while UBI may benefit some people, it only does so at the expense of others and at a negative impact on society in the aggregate. Treating everyone's happiness as equal is necessary for upholding human dignity and equality.

With that in mind, we need a method to achieve the value. To provide a workable method, I offer you a…

## Criterion: Function

Function is defined as the ability to work properly. In today’s context, we’ll be looking at whether UBI functions successfully to produce a net increase in the well-being of society.

# Contention: Universal Basic Income fails the functionality test

First, the math doesn't work. You cannot mathematically replace the existing welfare state, which focuses spending only on the poor, with a UBI big enough to do any good that would be given to everyone. Oren Cass explains in 2016 QUOTE:

"UBI advocates observe that the existing safety net in the United States or any other developed nation spends on each person roughly what a livable basic income would cost. But it does this for only a small subset of the population, for whom benefits phase out quickly as their incomes rise. A UBI limited to the budget of the existing safety net could therefore offer either a small benefit to everyone or a large benefit that phases out quickly, but not both, and a UBI that offers a large benefit to everyone would require a massive budget increase."[[4]](#footnote-4)

END QUOTE. So when you do the math, you either have to offer everyone a tiny benefit, which wouldn't be enough to solve poverty, or else blow up the budget trying to offer everyone a benefit big enough to help, but only a small percentage actually need. Either way, UBI is not a functional replacement for the existing welfare state. If we bankrupt the country, everyone loses. If we replace existing solutions for the poor with an inadequate UBI, the poor are worse off and the taxpayers are no better off. Either way, we have all losers and no winners, so we fail the Utilitarian test.

Second, it doesn't solve the personal root causes of poverty. While it may seem that poverty is simply a case of "not having enough money," just handing everyone free money isn't the solution because the underlying assumption is flawed. There are other issues involved, as Isabel Sawhill explains in 2016 QUOTE:

"Liberals have been less willing to openly acknowledge that a little paternalism in social policy may not be such a bad thing. In fact, progressives and libertarians alike are loath to admit that many of the poor and jobless are lacking more than just cash. They may be addicted to drugs or alcohol, suffer from mental health issues, have criminal records, or have difficulty functioning in a complex society. Money may be needed but money by itself does not cure such ills. A humane and wealthy society should provide the disadvantaged with adequate services and support. But there is nothing wrong with making assistance conditional on individuals fulfilling some obligation whether it is work, training, getting treatment, or living in a supportive but supervised environment. In the end, the biggest problem with a universal basic income may not be its costs or its distributive implications, but the flawed assumption that money cures all ills."[[5]](#footnote-5)

END QUOTE. So giving the poor who are mentally ill or drug addicted a stack of money and canceling all other social support isn't going to help.

Third, Universal Basic Income doesn't solve any of the work-incentive problems of the current welfare system. UBI doesn't eliminate the loss of work incentive, as many claim, it just moves it around. Nathan Keeble explains in 2017 QUOTE:

"First, UBI does not eliminate the disincentives to work that are inherent in welfare programs; it simply moves them around. This program must be financed after all, and any welfare system, including the UBI, is necessarily a wealth redistribution scheme. Wealth must be forced from those who have it to those who do not. This means that at some point on the income ladder, people must go from being net receivers of benefits to being net payers of benefits."[[6]](#footnote-6)

UBI also subsidizes non-productive behavior that diminishes the output of the economy as a whole and harms everyone. People who are guaranteed a free check every month may choose to produce artwork no one wants to buy or sing songs on the sidewalk no one wants to listen to – rather than getting a productive job that would have produced things people actually could have used. Keeble goes on to explain in 2017 why this is bad:

"The universal basic income shares another problem with traditional welfare systems. Far from promoting the unemployed from searching for work the market rewards, it actually subsidizes non-productive activities. The struggling entrepreneurs and artists mentioned earlier are struggling for a reason. For whatever reason, the market has deemed the goods they are providing to be insufficiently valuable. Their work simply isn’t productive according to those who would potentially consume the goods or services in question. In a functioning marketplace, producers of goods the consumers don't want would quickly have to abandon such endeavors and focus their efforts into productive areas of the economy. The universal basic income, however, allows them to continue their less-valued endeavors with the money of those who have actually produced value, which gets to the ultimate problem of all government welfare programs."

Fourth and finally, UBI makes society worse off by masking the structural root causes of poverty in our economy. This is different from the drug addicted and mentally ill, because they will be poor no matter what. But hard-working people face poverty because of economic and industrial changes in our generation, and are seeing their livelihoods disappear and living standards decline. A UBI will mask these problems with handouts rather than focusing our national goals on fixing them. David Freedman explains in 2016 QUOTE:

"Proponents say a basic income is a way to liberate those who have struggled to find acceptable work: currently 7.4 million people are unemployed in the United States, another six million want full-time work but can only find part-time jobs, millions more have given up looking, and perhaps tens of millions have settled for jobs with low wages, skimpy benefits, or poor working conditions. But it can also be argued that the idea is a way of buying these people off, making it easier to avoid developing the education and training programs that would actually help alleviate income inequality and reverse wage stagnation."[[7]](#footnote-7)

END QUOTE. Because Universal Basic Income makes society worse off, not better, please vote Negative.

Affirmative Strategies

1. Sharp Affirmatives are likely to research evidence that the current welfare system is failing. That shouldn't be hard to find. They will force Negatives to defend it and prove that the current system upholds whatever values Neg is claiming.
2. Affirmative may run an alternative form of UBI that involves UBI "in addition to" status quo welfare programs. This would totally blow up the federal budget, but maybe they can find a way to pay for it somehow. Watch carefully how they claim a UBI could be implemented and go after the consequences of what they would cut or how high taxes would have to be raised to pay for it.

1. “There are those that look at things the way they are, and ask why? I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?”<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7047-there-are-those-that-look-at-things-the-way-they> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/basic-income.asp> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2009 "The History of Utilitarianism" <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Oren Cass 2016 (senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, where he focuses on energy, the environment, and antipoverty policy. He was domestic policy director of Mitt Romney's presidential campaign in 2011–12 ) " Why a Universal Basic Income Is a Terrible Idea" 15 June 2016 NATIONAL REVIEW <https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/06/universal-basic-income-ubi-terrible-idea/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Isabel V. Sawhill 2016 (Senior Fellow in Economic Studies, Center on Children and Families, Brookings Institution) 15 June 2016 "Money for nothing: Why a universal basic income is a step too far" <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2016/06/15/money-for-nothing-why-a-universal-basic-income-is-a-step-too-far/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Nathan Keeble 2017 (Mises University Graduate and helped found the Campaign to End Civil Asset Forfeiture in Tennessee ) "The Dangers of a "Universal Basic Income" 16 Jan 2017 https://mises.org/blog/dangers-universal-basic-income* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. David H. Freedman 2016 (journalist specializing in business and technology. He is a senior editor at Forbes ASAP) "Basic Income: A Sellout of the American Dream" 13 June 20176 TECHNOLOGY REVIEW <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/601499/basic-income-a-sellout-of-the-american-dream/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)