



Universität Hamburg

DER FORSCHUNG | DER LEHRE | DER BILDUNG

FAKULTÄT

FÜR GEISTESWISSENSCHAFTEN

PROF. DR. MATTHEW BRAHAM

DO WE HAVE A MORAL OBLIGATION TO THE HOMELESS?



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THE MORAL DEMANDS OF THE HOMELESS: THE NORMATIVE CASE FOR UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME



OVERVIEW

- 1. The Nature of the Problem**
- 2. The Ethical Perspective**
- 3. The Political Perspective**
- 4. It's Not So Simple, Is It?**
- 5. Real Freedom for All: Universal Basic Income**
- 6. Summing Up**



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1

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

1. THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

- Personal obligations to others
 - **Ethics:** what I ought to do? (What claims do others have on me?)
- Public obligations to fellow citizens
 - **Political Philosophy:** what ought the state do? (What claims do we have on the state?)

1. THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

- What homelessness is all about:
 - A life below the social minimum.
- The moral problem
 - **Ethics:** Am I as an individual obliged as a matter of duty to help those below the social minimum?
 - **Political Philosophy:** Is the state, and its members, obliged as a matter of duty to help those below the social minimum?



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2

THE ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

2. THE ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

- The social minimum and the duty of beneficence
 - **David Hume:** Providing assistance to others is a feature of human nature, that is to be cultivated. But we have no special duties to provide for distant others. Such obligations belong to the state.
 - **Kant:** We have limited duties to assist others. That means we are obligated to some extent to sacrifice some part of our welfare to benefit others without recompense.

2. THE ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

- The social minimum and the duty of beneficence
 - **Utilitarianism:** Providing for those below the social minimum is a duty only insofar as it contributes to the greatest good. This requires a trade-off of the costs and benefits of such provision. We may or may not have such a duty.
 - **Libertarianism:** We have only negative duties towards others (avoiding harm to others). Beneficence is a positive duty and therefore is not obligated by Libertarians.



2. THE ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

- So, does ethics help us?
 - Yes.
 - No.
 - Perhaps.



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3

THE POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

3. THE POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

- The social minimum and political philosophy
 - If we believe that each individual deserves to live above the social minimum (have adequate housing) as a matter of social justice, or as a matter of human dignity, ethical theory will not give us the arguments we need to make sure that each person gets this minimum. We need to turn to political philosophy.
 - Such a belief is a belief that we have moral demands to a life above the social minimum in the form of a *right*.

3. THE POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

- Why we need the state
 - **Rights are correlated to duties:** If *A* has a right *x*, then there is a duty-holder *B* who against whom *A* has a claim against to bring about *x*. Rights without duties are meaningless.
 - That is, rights and duties require clearly identifiable agents who bear duties and hold rights. For example: Universal liberty rights impose duties on other individuals to not impinge on my freedom. Each has a duty to respect the freedom of others.

3. THE POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

- Why we need the state
 - But what do we do in the case of Universal rights to a life above the social minimum? Who is the addressee of this right? Who has the obligation to provide the goods and services required by the social minimum?
 - One answer: the State. Why? Because rights are demands on others, and the others cannot be each individual because to impose these obligations may mean breaking responsibility link (I am not responsible for your homelessness).

3. THE POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

- What kind of state?
 - Whether the State is an addressee of a moral demand and right to the social minimum depends on the kind of state we have. The Libertarian state, which is based on robust rights of self-ownership will not support such rights. The Utilitarian state not necessarily either. The Rawlsian liberal-egalitarian state will.

3. THE POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

- The liberal egalitarian state
 - **A social contract theory:** what principles of justice would rational and prudential agents choose in the “original position” behind a “veil of ignorance”?
 - They would choose to arrange social and economic inequalities so that they are both (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

3. THE POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

- The liberal egalitarian state
 - **The Difference Principle:** Inequality in goods like income and wealth (resources for the social minimum) is just if, and only if, as a result of the inequality, the social group that is worst-off in terms of these goods is better off than it would otherwise be.

3. THE POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

- The liberal egalitarian state
 - There are many problems with this theory, but it can be argued that Rawls' thought-experiment provides intuitive support for those who believe that social justice requires at least enactment of a social minimum (includes provision for the homeless). Prudent individuals would choose institutions that would guarantee them – they have “rights” – to the social minimum.
 - The liberal egalitarian state therefore is a structure that meets the moral demands of the homeless.



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4

IT'S NOT SO SIMPLE, IS IT?

4. IT'S NOT SO SIMPLE, IS IT?

- The liberal egalitarian ethos
 - How could one honestly commit oneself to the demands of living in a society that did not guarantee you (everyone) the social minimum?
 - The ethos is a way of creating a commitment to the state. So even if you did know your position, choosing other principles would place strains of commitment on the less well-off.

4. IT'S NOT SO SIMPLE, IS IT?

- The problem of luck
 - The principles do not solve all the problems. They ensure that we do not suffer the effects of the natural lottery of life. But what if your homelessness is a result of your own preferences?
 - This problem is fundamental: *we are* and *we are not* responsible for our preferences and choices. And even if we are, should not a liberal egalitarian system be preference-respecting?

4. IT'S NOT SO SIMPLE, IS IT?

- The Malibu surfer
 - Suppose you become destitute and homeless because you chose to spend all your days surfing in Malibu and did not make it as a professional surfer and have no other marketable skill. You return home to Hamburg. Do you have a legitimate moral demand to the social minimum (housing) under the Rawlsian system?
 - Rawls says that homeless surfers have no such moral claim because they have not made a reciprocal contribution to society.

4. IT'S NOT SO SIMPLE, IS IT?

- The Malibu surfer and the UKE doctor
 - But, what about the UKE doctor who fails to make the grade and as a result ends up on the streets (as a result of a depression created by non-achievement – she actually wanted to be a Malibu surfer).
 - Rawls would say the failed UKE doctor is entitled to the social minimum.

4. IT'S NOT SO SIMPLE, IS IT?

- The Malibu surfer and the UKE doctor
 - But why should liberal egalitarianism favour someone who decides to study medicine at the UKE against someone who wants to be a Malibu surfer?
 - Why should the (failed) doctor be guaranteed a social minimum and not the surfer?
 - Both the Malibu surfer and the UKE doctor were attempting to realize their self-chosen life plans.

4. IT'S NOT SO SIMPLE, IS IT?

- The Malibu surfer and the UKE doctor
 - Not supporting the surfer would be to violate the demands of moral equality and the respect for autonomy.
 - This moral inequality is entrenched in such a system: the basic minimum (including housing) is made conditional on a context-dependent value structure. This value system restricts our “real freedom”.
 - Real freedom is the freedom to experiment with our lives.

4. IT'S NOT SO SIMPLE, IS IT?

- So What is needed?
 - A state (or city-state?) that offer's freedom-sensitive choice architecture.
 - That is, a system that provides for an open, diverse, and inclusive democratic society that is supportive of experimental and innovative social and economic forms of living.



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5

REAL FREEDOM FOR ALL: UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

5. REAL FREEDOM FOR ALL

- A Universal Basic Income (UBI)
 - We need a liberal-egalitarian system that offers (a) access to a social minimum and (b) a choice sensitive architecture that respects the dignity and autonomy of individuals.
 - Universal Basic Income meets these two normative demands.

5. REAL FREEDOM FOR ALL

- Hamburg Offen für Alle – Aber Wie?
 - **An answer:** A Hamburg UBI experiment for the homeless.
 - We need to know more how UBI gets people out of poverty.
 - We need to know more about how a UBI restores dignity and autonomy and provides the basis for inclusion and participation.
 - Such an experiment would make Hamburg a progressive centre for for “experiments in living”.

4. IS IT SO SIMPLE? NO!

- Hamburg Offen für Alle – Aber Wie?
 - **Why not?** The arguments against UBI are generally ideological (related to outdated ideas of a “Protestant Work Ethic and a Spirit of Capitalism”), and they are motivated by emotional reactions of envy (why should others get something for nothing when I have worked so hard?).
 - The economic arguments are inconclusive.



4. IS IT SO SIMPLE? NO!

- Hamburg Offen für Alle – Aber Wie?
 - **The Next Step:** Establish a Deliberative UBI Council to define and implement the Hamburg Basic Income Project.



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6

SUMMING UP



6. SUMMING UP

- What are the moral demands of the Homeless?
 - **Answer:** A recognition of their dignity and autonomy.
 - **Action:** A universal Basic Income as a means of implementing this dignity and autonomy respect.



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RECOMMENDED READING



- Rawls, J. (1971) *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford University Press.
- van Parijs, P. (1995), *Real Freedom for All: What (If Anything) Can Justify Capitalism*, Oxford University Press.
- van Parijs, P. and Vanderborght, Y. (2017), *Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy*, Harvard University Press.