

# *Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines!*



**Issue #13, 1 (September 2018)**  
**Compiled & Edited by *Philosophy Without Borders***

Starting in August 2018, *Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines!* is being delivered in weekly installments.

Every installment contains (1) a recent article, (2) some follow-up thoughts for further reflection or discussion, and (3) a link for supplementary reading.

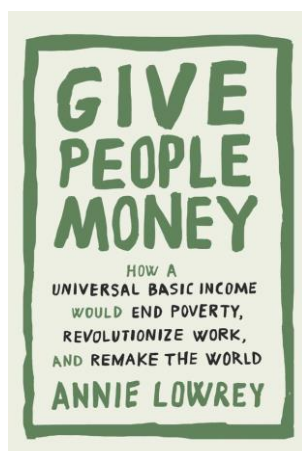
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## “Money For Nothing”

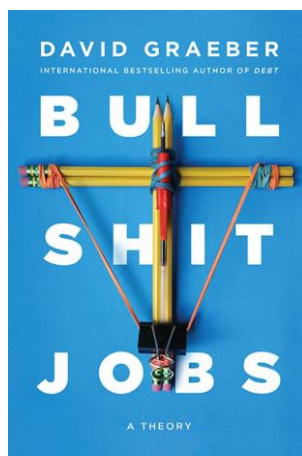
By Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

*The New Republic*, 29 AUGUST 2018

URL = <https://newrepublic.com/article/150506/universal-basic-income-future-of-pointless-work>



GIVE PEOPLE MONEY: HOW A UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME WOULD END POVERTY, REVOLUTIONIZE WORK, AND REMAKE THE WORLD by Annie Lowrey



BULLSHIT JOBS: A THEORY by David Graeber

Some years ago, I had a colleague who would frequently complain that he didn't have enough to do. He'd mention how much free time he had to our team, ask for more tasks from our boss, and bring it up at after-work drinks. He was right, of course, about the situation: Although we were hardly idle, even the most productive among us couldn't claim to be toiling for eight (or even five, sometimes three) full hours a day. My colleague, who'd come out of a difficult bout of unemployment, simply could not believe that this justified his salary. It took him a long time to start playing along: checking Twitter, posting on Facebook, reading the paper, and texting friends while fulfilling his professional obligations to the fullest of his abilities.

The idea of being paid to do nothing is difficult to adjust to in a society that places a high value on work. Yet this idea has lately [gained serious attention](#) amid projections that the progress of globalization and technology will lead to a "jobless" future. The underlying worry goes something like this: If machines do the work for us, wage labor will disappear, so workers won't have money to buy things. If people can't or don't buy things, no one will be able to sell things, either, which means less commerce, a withering private sector, and even fewer jobs. Our value system based on the sanctity of toil will be exposed as hollow; we won't be able to speak about workers as a class at all, let alone discuss "the labor market" as we now know it. This will require not just economic adjustments but moral and political ones, too.

One obvious solution would be to separate income from labor altogether, a possibility that two recent books tackle from radically different angles. [Give People Money](#), by journalist Annie Lowrey, offers a measured, centrist endorsement of Universal Basic Income—the idea that governments should give everyone a certain amount of cash each month, no questions asked. The anthropologist David Graeber posits that the link between salaried positions and real work has long been tenuous in any case, since many highly paid jobs serve little purpose at all. In [Bullshit Jobs](#), he tries to make sense of the peculiar yet all-too-common situations in which people are hired, after much fanfare, to do a job, then find themselves not doing much—or worse, performing a task so utterly pointless that they might as well not be doing it.

In the absence of a truly useful job, most people, Graeber considers, would be better off living on "free" money. Lowrey views UBI less as a way to eliminate useless work than a way to compensate invisible forms of labor, such as caring for a relative or doing housework, or to bolster underpaid workers. Cash transfers, she proposes, could also stimulate entrepreneurship and creativity. Either way, the idea of paying people just for being alive is now one that both a radical scholar and a reasonable Beltway journalist can take seriously—though neither author fully reckons with the social reordering that would arise from a world organized around love and leisure, not labor.

Graeber's book expands on his [viral 2013 essay](#) "On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs," in which he took aim at "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." Eric, who worked as an "interface administrator" at a design firm, found himself in such a job. His responsibility was to make sure the company's intranet system worked properly, which sounded useful enough. But, it turned out, he was set up to fail. None of the employees used the system because they were all convinced it was monitoring them. It had been designed with the worst, buggiest software. A

confluence of office politics and poor management had led the company to hire Eric, who had no experience working with computers. He was to oversee a system that was never supposed to work in the first place.

Eric ended up doing little. He kept irregular hours and explained to the odd employee how to upload a file or find an email address. He started drinking one, then two, beers at lunch; reading novels at his desk; learning French; and taking trips for nonexistent “business meetings.” If this sounds idyllic—a salary with no work and boozy lunches!—Eric didn’t experience it that way. Instead, he acutely felt “how profoundly upsetting it was to live in a state of utter purposelessness.” Graeber suggest two reasons for Eric’s despondency. One concerns social class: The first person in his family to go to college, Eric wasn’t expecting the white-collar world to be such, well, bullshit. Another reason is existential: When faced with it, “there was simply no way he could construe his job as serving any sort of purpose.”

By Graeber’s metric, my old gig wasn’t quite bullshit, mainly because I rather enjoyed it and found it meaningful. The term is subjective: If someone thinks a job is pointless, it probably is. There are also many repetitive, grueling, or boring jobs that do not qualify as bullshit because they meet an essential need: If a cleaner or bus driver doesn’t report for work, it hurts other people. (These Graeber terms “shit” jobs.) His method for identifying bullshit is, by his own account, unscientific. He draws from a pool of anecdotes to produce an anatomy of bullshit workers, who fall into five categories: “flunkies,” “goons,” “duct-tapers,” “box tickers,” and “taskmasters.”

“Flunkies” are the modern equivalent of feudal minions who make bosses feel big, important, and strong. Whereas they were once doormen and concierges, they now tend to be receptionists who do little besides answer cold calls and refill the candy bowl, or personal assistants who drop off their boss’s dry cleaning and smile when he walks through the door. “Goons” essentially bully people into buying things they don’t need: Marketing managers and PR specialists do this, as do telemarketers. “Duct-tapers” are employed to fix things that aren’t or shouldn’t be broken or do tasks that could easily be automated—data entry, copying and pasting, photocopying, and so on. “Box tickers” help companies comply with regulation (or offload responsibility for complying), and finally “taskmasters,” or middle managers, spread more BS by assigning it to others.

“The creation of a BS job,” one manager tells Graeber, “often involves creating a whole universe of BS narrative that documents the purpose and functions of the position as well as the qualifications required to successfully perform the job, while corresponding to the [prescribed] format and special bureaucratese.” She explains that her organization’s bureaucracy created odd incentives to retain employees whose work was inadequate. It was easier for her to hire someone in a new position than to fire and replace the incompetent employee. This, she notes, helped BS jobs proliferate.

Graeber attempts to quantify just how much—and after some back-of-the envelope calculations, he wagers that 37 to 40 percent of all office jobs are “bullshit.” He further contends that about 50 percent of the work done in a nonpointless workplace is also bullshit, since even useful jobs contain elements of nonsense: the pretending to be busy, the arbitrary hours, the not being able to

leave before five. “Bullshitization” is even infecting the most nonbullshit professions, with teachers overloaded with administrative duties that didn’t use to exist and doctors forced to deal with paperwork and insurance firms that probably should be abolished.

There’s no sure way to verify Graeber’s estimates, but for white-collar workers, they seem basically right. Work backward: How much activity on social media takes place during work hours? How many doctor’s appointments, errands, and online purchases occur between nine and five? In other words, how many of us could stand to work half as much as we currently do without any significant consequences? And yet we insist over and over that we are terribly, endlessly busy.

This state of affairs seems to defy not just human reason, but also basic capitalist logic: Wouldn’t a profit-seeking organization tend to cull unnecessary compensated labor rather than encourage it? Graeber proposes that there is an explicitly irrational reason why such jobs exist—a system he calls “managerial feudalism,” wherein employers keep adding layers and layers of management so that everyone can feel their job is important or at least justified. (They’re “mentoring” young people. They’re helping others develop careers!) The bigger the staff, the more important the company and its leaders feel, regardless of purpose or productivity.

There might be something refreshing about the fact that capitalism has not yet gained full control over its means and ends, and that there are millions of people sitting around getting paid to do nothing all day. Graeber doesn’t buy it. On the contrary: He considers bullshit jobs to be a profound form of psychological violence, a scourge that’s fueling resentment, anomie, depression, and apathy. Patrick, an employee of a student union convenience store, mostly agrees with this judgment. He didn’t mind the work itself; what he resented was being assigned inane busywork, like rearranging things, after he’d finished his tasks six times over. “The very, very worst thing about the job was that it gave you so much time to think,” he tells Graeber in an email:

So I just thought so much about how bullshit my job was, how it could be done by a machine, how much I couldn’t wait for full communism, and just endlessly theorized the alternatives to a system where millions of human beings have to do that kind of work for their whole lives in order to survive.

Of course, some people can escape by focusing on creative pursuits during the hours they are idle. And it helps if everyone in said job acknowledges, if tacitly, that they serve no purpose by being there. But that’s hard, too, Graeber argues, because of the structure and nature of the modern workplace: the rules, the conventions, “the ritual of humiliation that allows the supervisor to show who’s boss in the most literal sense.”

The existence of bullshit jobs has, further, led to the devaluation of vital occupations. Workers in essential, nonbullshit jobs are constantly told by moralizing politicians that their work is noble and that they ought to be grateful for the often low pay they receive. Even though the middle managers and box tickers of the world can console themselves with the thought that they are “generating wealth” and “adding jobs” by virtue of their “economic output,” they secretly envy the real, human sense of purpose that useful workers—teachers, garbage collectors, care

workers—share, Graeber writes, and end up vilifying them out of “moral envy.” This impulse plays out politically: Nurses, teachers, and bus drivers, for example, are constantly portrayed as “greedy” when they bargain for better union contracts, or they’re said to be “stealing” from the state when they make overtime wages. When voters in bullshit jobs hear these words over a campaign season, it can swing legislative bodies to the right.

Would it be better if those workers stuck in bullshit jobs could simply walk away? Graeber isn’t one for policy recommendations, but he does float UBI as a potential salve to our sad professional predicaments. A UBI would “unlatch work from livelihood entirely”: If, guaranteed enough money to live on, people could choose between bullshit or nothing, he wagers that they’d choose nothing and do something more useful and interesting with their time instead.

In *Give People Money*, Annie Lowrey is less concerned with dissatisfied professionals than with some of the world’s poorest (including those in the United States), who in addition to already being overworked and underpaid—if they are employed at all—will likely face the harshest economic consequences if or when menial tasks are automated. These workers are already up against weakened unions, corporations dead set on extracting maximum value from their workforces by scaling back benefits and slashing wages, the rising costs of education and health care, and other trends that wind up concentrating wealth at the very top. When the robots come, as Lowrey believes they will, there’s little that governments, companies, or other organizations can do to make them go away. The best shot for these people, she comes to believe, is unconditional money.

Lowrey makes a convincing moral argument for UBI, insisting that “every person is deserving of participation in the economy, freedom of choice, and a life without deprivation—and that our government can and should choose to provide these things.” She also points out to great effect the destructive moralizing that Americans, at least, attach to money. “We believe there is a moral difference between taking a home mortgage interest deduction and receiving a Section 8 voucher,” she writes, in a refreshing moment of indignation. “We judge, marginalize, and shame the poor for their poverty.” Gaining support for UBI would mean persuading people to reject those assumptions; convincing a majority to see, as Graeber and Lowrey both urge, that commanding a high salary doesn’t automatically make you a good person.

A further challenge for advocates of UBI today is the lack of definitive, long-term surveys “proving” the mechanism’s efficacy: There have been no truly *universal* cash transfers within one country for an extended period of time, and there are thus no narratives to follow or macroeconomic conclusions to draw. Thanks to increased interest in the phenomenon, though, there are more and more smaller-scale studies, and Lowrey [visits](#) one of them in Kenya with GiveDirectly, a charity that essentially hands out cash through mobile payments in poor places. There she meets a man named Fredrick Omondi Auma, who “had been in rough shape when GiveDirectly knocked on his door: impoverished, drinking, living in a mud hut with a thatched roof. His wife had left him,” she writes. “But with the manna-from-heaven money, he had patched up his life and, as an economist might put it, made the jump from labor to capital.”

More money, Lowrey reports, turns the villagers into good capitalists who invest their savings in education and supplies, start businesses, and help grow the local economy. Her observations

recall the breathless and somewhat naïve boosterism that [surrounded microcredit programs](#) in the late 1990s and early 2000s. She even meets three sister-wives who plan to pool their funds and create a small bank to lend to women. In the United States, too, she finds clear-cut potential for success. In separate chapters, she illustrates the promise of cash transfers for the American poor with more clarity and purpose, visiting a family with disabled children and speaking to women whose jobs just don't pay enough for them to get by. Simple cash could help teenagers finish school instead of working to support their families; it could adequately compensate women who stay home to care for sick loved ones; it could spare the elderly or disabled from the bureaucratic hell of waiting in line to plead for meager welfare benefits.

Ending poverty around the world ought to be a priority, and Lowrey makes a strong case that unconditional cash transfers can help do that. But in the wrong hands, a UBI can do more harm than good. It can serve as a pretext to further decimate social programs and put more blame still on the individual for any mishaps or shortcomings. As Lowrey notes, libertarians love the idea that UBI could replace the welfare state, shrinking big government—a move that could render the whole program ineffective, since it's hard to imagine a UBI stretching to cover market-rate housing and exorbitant private health care. Meanwhile, cash payments can also reinforce social and racial divisions by throwing money at a problem without addressing its causes. Giving the individual residents of an over-policed neighborhood cash transfers won't, for instance, make them any less susceptible to unreasonable searches or violence.

That's why it matters who supports UBI and, more significantly, whose policies it gets attached to. Many of the people funding UBI research or [advocating](#) for cash transfers—Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes and Y Combinator's Sam Altman, to name just two—are in fact among those who do best from the current distribution of wealth. A UBI would, after all, benefit corporations: For any company that depends on people having money to buy their products—whether groceries, prescription drugs, or driverless cars—the idea of a jobless, incomeless population presents a threat to its bottom line. Free money lets consumers stay consumers; it maintains the current system. And that's without getting into the possibility that unemployment and poverty might add up to riots, class war, and mass unrest. In that situation, the CEOs would be the first to go.

Both Graeber and Lowrey struggle with the fact that—for all work's miseries and for all the promise of UBI—work is deeply ingrained in American society. While many of us might hate our individual jobs, most of us love the idea of *a* job. Our world is constructed around the idea that a job is not just a paycheck: It's a status symbol and a form of social inclusion. This, of course, supports the creation of bullshit jobs, which prop up the socioeconomic status quo. Now that a jobless (or less job-full) future may be within reach, the question is how to reimagine our relationship with work.

Lowrey appreciates the extent to which people identify with their work—even if it's bullshit or shit (in her parlance, “crummy”) work. Having reported extensively on the psychological toll that unemployment can take, she insists that the culture (or is it cult?) of work is most likely here to stay. It might not be the healthiest approach—she dislikes moralizing around the virtue of work almost as much as Graeber does—but she realizes it's something we have to build in to our short- and medium-term expectations because “the American faith in hard work and the

American cult of self-reliance exist and persist, seen in our veneration of everyone from Franklin to Frederick Douglass to Oprah Winfrey.”

For his part, Graeber insists that there’s no value in working for the sake of just working. That often gives the impression that anyone who *does* want to work for work’s sake must be a bit of a sucker and that the compulsion to work is a manifestation of false consciousness or, worse, stupidity. He thus glosses over the strongly felt benefits, be they professional, social, or psychological, that many people get from their jobs. If Graeber’s unscientific assertions about bullshit jobs feel vital, urgent, and intuitively true, his dismissals of work’s inherent value—not moral, but social—feel incomplete.

With a compulsion to work so deep-rooted, UBI is a solution that will only go so far, even if implemented in a way that truly does alter lives for the better. Giving people money will not make us less moralistic about labor: People used to working will not necessarily know what to do with themselves or with their time. (I certainly wouldn’t.) Such measures represent only a fraction of the socioeconomic overhaul that will be needed to deal—if not now, then for future generations—with this twin utopia-dystopia: a world with less work and less money.

A solution that neither Lowrey nor Graeber spends much time dwelling on is perhaps the obvious: to split the difference. In a 1932 essay titled “In Praise of Idleness,” the philosopher Bertrand Russell [noted](#) that he had come to think of work not as something morally necessary, but as a means to enhance pleasures in the rest of life (after all, would you want to attend a dinner party you could never leave?). While acknowledging that he is a product of a Protestant work ethic and thus a compulsive worker, Russell suggests halving the workday to four hours, which would be enough for a person to secure “the necessities and elementary comforts of life,” leaving the rest of his time to do whatever he wanted.

“There will be happiness and joy of life, instead of frayed nerves, weariness, and dyspepsia,” Russell [goes on](#). “The work exacted will be enough to make leisure delightful, but not enough to produce exhaustion.”

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## **Some Follow-Up Thoughts For Further Reflection and Discussion:**

Is the following argument sound? If so, why? If not, why not?

1. Many contemporary jobs are *useless, unproductive, and meaningless, even if well-paid* (bullshit jobs).
2. Of all the remaining jobs, many are simply *bad and oppressive* in some important way(s) or another: alienating, back-breaking, boring, commodifying, demeaning, dangerous, low paid, etc., etc. (shit jobs).



3. In the near future, a great many jobs of all kinds will simply disappear via automation.
4. Virtually all people would choose to do something with their lives that they themselves regarded as *creative, meaningful, and satisfying*, if freed from financial worries.
5. Let's call every so-regarded creative, meaningful, and satisfying life-project, of any kind, no matter how humble, provided that it sufficiently respects the human dignity of others, *lifework*.
6. Poverty is a very bad thing and the existence of poverty in a society that is capable of abolishing poverty is a violation of sufficient respect for human dignity.
7. If a *Truly Generous Universal Basic Income*, aka TGUBI (say, at least \$25,000.00 USD per year) were made available to everyone 21 years of age or over, tax-free, to be reduced incrementally by 50 cents for every non-TGUBI dollar earned by that individual, down to 0 at the \$25,000.00 non-TGUBI income level, then everyone over the age of 21 would have a yearly income of at least \$25,000.00 USD, and poverty would be ended.
8. Furthermore, if a system of *Universal Basic Jobs*, aka UBJs, were created that were, by definition and design, *useful and productive*, that paid a flat rate of \$25,000.00 per year, were also tax-free, and involved working no more than 15 hours per week, and could ALSO be held along with a full TGUBI, were made available to anyone with a high-school education, 18 years of age or over, and minimally capable of doing the job, then anyone 21 or over who wanted to do something useful and productive AND ALSO wanted to have enough time left over to pursue lifework for the rest of their lives, could do so, on the basis of a yearly tax-free income of \$50,000.
9. If TGUBI and UBJs were jointly implemented, then *not only* would poverty be ended, and *not only* would no one 18 years of age or over have to take a bullshit job or shit ever again for purely financial reasons, *but also* anyone 21 years of age or over who wanted to have a useful, productive job *and/or* pursue lifework for the rest of their lives, could do so.
10. A society in which TGUBI and UBJs were jointly implemented (along with universal free public healthcare and universal free public education including higher education) would be almost infinitely better than the contemporary USA, and significantly better than almost every other country in the world, in virtually every respect.

11. Moreover, in comparatively wealthy countries, the dual system of TGUBI and UBJs (along with universal free public healthcare and universal free public education including higher education) *really can* be implemented by highly progressive taxation, and, in the USA and other heavily-militarized wealthy countries, by massive reductions in military spending.
12. Therefore, the dual system of TGUBI and UBJs (along with universal free public healthcare and universal free public education including higher education) ought to be implemented by every country in the world that is economically capable of doing so, *especially the USA*.

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## **A Link For Supplementary Reading:**

**D. Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory***

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## **BACK ISSUES**

**ISSUE #12, 3 (AUGUST 2018):**

- **THE TRUTH ABOUT INCOME INEQUALITY, IN SIX AMAZING CHARTS**

**HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue12-3 aug18](#)**

**ISSUE #12, 2 (AUGUST 2018):**

- **EPISTOCRACY, NOT DEMOCRACY?**

**HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue12-2 aug18](#)**

**ISSUE #12, 1 (AUGUST 2018):**

- **THE QUANTIFIED HEART**

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- **RESISTING IMMIGRATION & CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (ICE), AUTHENTICITY, RECIPROCITY VS. TOLERANCE, HOMELESSNESS-&-US, & FREE SPEECH VS. JUST ACCESS**

**HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue11 july18](#)**

**ISSUE #10, June 2018:**

- **JOBS-&-HAPPINESS, UBI IN FINLAND, THE SOCIAL VALUE OF ENVY, THE EDUCATED ELITE'S STRANGE FAILURE, & ARE WE JUST OUR BRAINS?**

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**ISSUE #9, May 2018:**

- **DEFENDING LECTURING, CITIZENS OF THE WORLD, HYPER-LIBERALISM, NEO-ROMANTICISM, & PHYSICS-WITHOUT-TIME?**

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- **BAKERS, BUDDHISTS, PLANT MINDS, & TOTAL WORK**

**HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue5 jan18](#)**

**ISSUE #4, DECEMBER 2017:**

- **US POLITICS, ANIMAL MINDS, & REFUGEES**

**HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue4 dec17](#)**

**ISSUE #3, NOVEMBER 2017:**

- **GUN VIOLENCE**

**HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue3 nov17](#)**

**ISSUE #2, OCTOBER 2017:**

- **FREE SPEECH WARS**

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**ISSUE #1, SEPTEMBER 2017:**

- **BORDERS AND IMMIGRATION, CRIME AND PUNISHMENT, & CULTURAL CONFLICT**

**HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue1 sept17](#)**

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