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## Why Labor is Important— A Commentary on Steinvorth

*Abstract:* Steinvorth has changed his view from arguing for a right to work to arguing for a basic income. This change of mind is consistent with his idea of the ‘Promethean venture’. It is, however, only convincing if one accepts his premise that labor is in general a burden. In this commentary, it is shown that this premise should be rejected. Since labor is an important source of recognition and therefore a prerequisite of a decent life, a basic income should be regarded as being only a second best solution as compared to a right to employment.

Ulrich Steinvorth has changed his view: In former publications (Steinvorth 1996; 1999) he had argued for a right to work, which nowadays he rejects; instead, as an important part of a so-called “right to develop one’s capabilities”, he favors a basic income.

This change of mind is entirely consistent, as Steinvorth’s ‘Promethean’<sup>1</sup> venture doesn’t directly lead to a right to work (in the sense of labor): It is possible to participate in the shaping of the world in many ways, quite a few of which are outside of the labor sphere.<sup>2</sup> Steinvorth didn’t recognize this in his earlier publications mentioned above.<sup>3</sup>

I think that his (new) conclusion appears convincing *if* you accept the central premise that labor is in general a burden which people would prefer to be freed from<sup>4</sup>: If that is indeed the case, *then* it is quite obvious that a generous basic income is the best one could get, since it allows one to participate in the shaping of the world in any way one likes (cf. section 10). And provided that the premise is true, I would agree that people should get such a basic income so as to guarantee

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly called: ‘demiurgisch’.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. section 10: “[...] without labor I’m excluded from that part of the Promethean venture that is performed in economy. Yet this [...] provokes the [...] question: why should I insist on participating in this special part? [...] there are other spheres of activities in which I might participate.” In section 2, Steinvorth mentions politics, science, and arts as examples.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. my critical remarks on Steinvorth 1996 in Schlothfeldt 1998, 104f..

<sup>4</sup> “But labor is nothing we like to do if it was not for the money earned by labor [...]” (section 1)

that no one is excluded from the process of shaping the environment they live in.

In my commentary I will therefore not criticize Steinvorth's overall argument, which is interesting and includes illuminating details. Instead, I want to attack the above-mentioned premise: I think it is simply not true that people would in general prefer to opt out of labor if they had the financial resources to do so. And their preference for participating in the labor process is also not just a result of a more or less pathological habit which might (easily?) be changed. Therefore, I believe that a basic income is only a second best option compared to a right to employment.

As stated above, in my view the main problem with Steinvorth's approach is that it doesn't do justice to the importance labor has for the worker. This is quite a common feature of philosophical (and other) theories of work (cf. Schlothfeldt 2000, 379ff.)—they either underestimate its importance by claiming that labor is just a burden (as Steinvorth does nowadays), or they overestimate it by claiming that work is a source of self-realization (as Steinvorth did formerly<sup>5</sup>), and sometimes they do both. The real problem of being unemployed is thus crushed between a skeptical and a utopian view about labor. Namely, this picture ignores an essential function of labor: the recognition linked to employment, already expressed in remuneration, which is entirely lacking in the case of a basic income.<sup>6</sup> Even if labor is unpleasant und burdensome, it is therefore a prerequisite of a decent life.<sup>7</sup> This fact is overlooked by almost the entire liberal tradition—and (hence) especially in economic theory.

To be fair: Steinvorth doesn't ignore recognition entirely. However, he conceives of it in a decentralized manner: Each sphere of activity has its own mode of recognition<sup>8</sup>, and recognition in the economic sphere (probably by remuneration) is just one kind of recognition of many. Is this a plausible view? Of course it's true that different kinds of recognition exist. But the question is: Does recognition in the non-economic sphere suffice?

Empirically, that doesn't appear to be the case: Surveys show that many people would prefer to be employed even if they didn't need the money—and that seems true even if they hate their job.<sup>9</sup> Everyday experience confirms this; just think of the difficulties after retirement, of the problems of housewives, of

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<sup>5</sup> And still does ("only by the work of adapting nature [...] to human capabilities can human beings become what they are" [section 1])—but here work doesn't have to be labor or employment.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Kambartel 1993; Krebs 1999 and Schlothfeldt 1998, 40ff.. Actually, Steinvorth himself emphasized the strong connection between labor and recognition in a former contribution to *Analyse & Kritik* (Steinvorth 2000)!

<sup>7</sup> One might ask whether it is a duty of justice to guarantee preconditions of a decent life. I think it is (cf. Schlothfeldt 1998; 2000)—and even Steinvorth admits this indirectly since he realizes that a lack of recognition might hinder people from being active members of their society, which in his view is a question of justice (cf. section 11, end).

<sup>8</sup> The aim he states is that "[...] activities are rewarded by their sphere-specific form of gratification and individuals learn to value such gratification. For the artist and scientist, reward by money is less important than the recognition by those they esteem" (section 11, end).

<sup>9</sup> This picture is drawn from the qualitative research by Terkel 1974.

the frustrations of people holding honorary offices, or of scientists who want to become professors even when they are financially provided for.

Steinvorth admits that this is a problem.<sup>10</sup> However, he dismisses it (with reference to Hannah Arendt) by implying that such an attitude is somewhat pathological: People focus too much on employment, they haven't been trained to esteem other kinds of activities and the recognition involved in them, but this could in principle (be) change(d) (cf. the quotation in footnote 8)—with a basic income as a precondition, perhaps accompanied by the use of further (financial) resources and an adequate education.<sup>11</sup>

Again: is this position plausible? The expected social change is certainly not inconceivable; however, as experiments with a basic income indicate, it's not at all clear that it would reduce the demand for employment, as Steinvorth believes<sup>12</sup>—even though this hope has actually been a main argument for the introduction of a basic income (cf. Schneider 1995).

One could of course reply that the problem with the experiments might have been that people were interested in getting more money (as Steinvorth indicates in section 11); maybe the basic income was just too low. Or perhaps people were simply not 'enlightened' enough about their other options, that in any case might not have existed at all. Obviously, the empirical results are not unequivocal. One would have to conduct more (and better) experiments to find out whether Steinvorth's or my prognosis is right.

However, we can certainly carry out a counterfactual thought: Imagine an almost ideal situation including a basic income which is rather high, the availability of enough options to exclude boredom, an adequate education about possible activities outside the sphere of employment, and a lot of sphere-specific recognition which makes it clear that the activities are not in vain. Do you really believe this would suffice for solving the above-mentioned problem of unemployment?

I don't think so. Activities outside of the labor sphere are in general reduced to a close environment, and one's influence within the chosen field is much less than that of employees (compare a hobby philosopher with a professional one!). This fact, which Steinvorth overlooks, leaves the unemployed with a deficit in recognition and influence—a problem well-known to housewives and the other groups mentioned above.

Admittedly, this is not a proof that things couldn't (and wouldn't) change in the long run. But that's an uncertain promise the people concerned can't wait for. Above all, we would ignore their articulated wishes. And how can that be reconciled with Steinvorth's general liberal position?

My critique doesn't rule out a basic income per se. I'm even in favour of it—though I don't share Steinvorth's optimism that it would as a side effect solve the problem of unemployment (cf. the quotation in footnote 12). We could

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<sup>10</sup> Basic income "[...] is certainly not sufficient for the redetection of the meaning of activities that are not labor [...]" (section 12).

<sup>11</sup> Steinvorth isn't very clear on the details—cf. section 12.

<sup>12</sup> His basic income should "[...] allow everyone the choice between a frugal life without employment and an employment that offers more money. Such a conversion would make unemployment attractive for a number of people and give a corresponding number among the unemployed a chance to find employment." (section 10)

of course speak up for both—a right to both employment and basic income, as Krebs (1999) suggests. On the other hand, we also have to face the possibility that we cannot have both; there might be a real conflict since each option costs resources, and together they could reduce productivity too much. If that is the case, we have to decide between the two. In my view, a right to employment<sup>13</sup> is preferable over a basic income which is only a second best option.

Admittedly, I haven't talked about possible side effects of a right to (participate in) labor which might reverse this preference order—and I am not in the position to competently do so. But nor is Steinvorth with respect to a basic income.<sup>14</sup> We will have to leave this question to economists.

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<sup>13</sup> This right has to be specified. What I have in mind is a claim to participation in the labor process, which doesn't imply that there has to be (full) employment for everyone all the time. For further details, see Schlothfeldt 1998; 2000.

<sup>14</sup> He only comes up with rather vague assessments.