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ARTICLE

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The Harm of Unreciprocated Labour

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Abstract
This article addresses two objections by Samuel Kahn to my argument for a living wage for life-sustaining workers. First, it refutes the charge that my position is patronising for asserting that low wages impede a worker's ability to thrive. Second, it responds to a challenge regarding the claim that individuals have a right to a monetary equivalent of their fair share of natural resources, and that this right can be used to determine the justice of a life-sustaining worker's situation in modern society.

Résumé
J'aborde deux objections de Samuel Kahn à mon argument en faveur d'un salaire décent pour les travailleurs dont l'activité est essentielle à la vie. Premièrement, je réfute l'accusation selon laquelle ma position est condescendante en affirmant que les bas salaires entravent la capacité d'un travailleur à s'épanouir. Deuxièmement, je réponds à sa contestation de l'affirmation selon laquelle les individus ont droit à un équivalent monétaire de leur juste part des ressources naturelles, et que ce droit peut être utilisé pour déterminer la justice de la situation d'un travailleur dont l'activité est essentielle à la vie dans la société moderne.

Keywords: fair play; freedom; reciprocity; fair wages; justice; exploitation

1. Introduction

Samuel Kahn's article "Cooperation, Fair Play, and the Non-Struggle Point" — published in this journal (Kahn, 2025) — offers several objections to my claims in defence of living wages for life-sustaining workers (LSWs). In my work (Maskivker, 2023), I argue that fair play intuitions justify decent wages for LSWs — essential workers — because their labour collectively secures significant freedom benefits for the rest of us. In particular, I suggest that by securing the conditions of our "basis-freedom" — our liberation from the toil in which we would have to engage to produce the goods and services that we need to consume in order to cover necessities — we are better equipped and have more

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effective opportunity to thrive in life, not just to live, all else equal. Because many LSWs still struggle to subsist despite being full contributors to society, they do not have the same access to the conditions of a flourishing life as those benefiting from the fruits of their work have, *ceteris paribus*. This is a failure of reciprocity because it is foul play. We play dirty, or exploit others, not only when we freeride on them by not contributing our share of effort to a common activity from which we benefit — call this the "parasite harm" — but also when we don't compensate them duly for their distinct contributions to our wellbeing — call this the "shortchange harm." My arguments focus on the latter.

Kahn divides his objections to my arguments into two themes, which I elaborate on in the article he criticises. The first objection pertains to my claims about the relationship between freedom and the capacity to thrive by being effectively able to engage in worthy pursuits and relationships. The second objection pertains to my claims that we are entitled to an initial equal share of natural resources as a matter of justice and that this right plays a part in explaining why individuals who are not paid decent wages would be better off if they withdrew from current society, bringing that share of resources with them.

2. The Patronising Sin

Let us start with Kahn's first objection. He takes issue with my argument that indecently low pay effectively undermines the conditions for individual flourishing by preventing LSWs to thrive according to life plans constituted by worthy pursuits and meaningful relationships, all potentially chosen according to their own criteria of the good, of course. His problem with my claim is that it is condescending because it assumes that the types of people who occupy the role of the LSW will not generally be able, because of their position in society, to develop any meaningful bonds with others or have any meaningful aspirations or plans to chase in life, beyond the mundane tasks of survival. Kahn resorts several times to examples of concentration camp prisoners to illustrate the possibility that those deprived of the most basic necessities required for existing in a dignified way are still fully capable of forming meaningful relationships and meaningful goals (presumably with other prisoners equally deprived). Now, with all the respect that is commanded by the horrifying experience of being a Holocaust survivor, it is not clear to me what type of meaningful goals, besides perhaps a few limited alternatives related to self-introspection and reflection, are available to concentration camp prisoners. It is clear to me that survivors of the Holocaust have formed meaningful relationships, but it is precisely the severe deprivation of freedom, bodily and mental health, that precluded them, while in captivity, to be able to pursue a wide range of meaningful goals. This is simply because they did not have the wherewithal to manage their time freely, or the bodily and material resources to put their powers and aspirations to work at the service of their goals. That some Holocaust survivors went on to produce achievements of great social value (as Kahn rightly tells us) is a clear testament to the fact that they regained their freedom, health, and human dignity and were able to thrive after being denied these fundamental goods. But besides these details, Kahn's use of the example of Holocaust survivors is not logically persuasive. Resorting to an extreme case of human misery and finding some punctual examples of how the human spirit overcame some aspects of its soul shattering power is not convincing. Similarly, we could say, "Well, we

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know that some people born into terrible circumstances still manage to be happy and find love, society should not spend resources to alleviate their pains, therefore, lest we offend them by suggesting that they are less capable than us, comfortable intellectuals and middle-class individuals, to know why life is worth living."

My argument is not about our inherent capacity to be free, but about the cost of freedom. Kahn's objection focuses on a symbolic idea of respect, as if the highest form of respect is to pretend that an exploitative situation is not an obstacle. But is it truly respectful to be so focused on avoiding the possibility of offence that we become blind to the substantive (harsh) realities of people's lives? Is it not worse to deny that a lack of time, basic health, and material support imposes a significant barrier to personal flourishing? To deny that constant toil, the necessity of working multiple jobs, and the lack of time and resources are severe impediments to this freedom is to deny reality. Consider the following imaginary cases to illustrate:

> *The aspiring musician*: An essential worker who has a passion for music might dream of joining a band, writing songs, and performing. But their schedule is a grueling combination of shifts, and after paying rent, there is no money left for music lessons, a quality instrument, or even the gas to get to a weekly jam session. Their talent and aspirations to be a musician are undiminished, but the cost of pursuing this goal is astronomical.

> *The involved parent*: A person with a demanding, low-wage essential job might long to be more present in their children's lives — to help with homework, attend school plays, or simply have the time and energy for meaningful conversations. But after working long hours, commuting, and taking care of household duties, they are often too exhausted to do more than the bare minimum. They are not a "bad" parent but a parent whose freedom to be present is being systematically eroded by economic pressures.

> *The engaged citizen*: True political freedom requires not just the right to vote, but the time and energy to stay informed, attend town halls, and engage in local activism. For a worker whose entire mental and physical energy is consumed by the daily grind, this form of civic engagement is a luxury they simply cannot afford, even if they genuinely would like to practise and enjoy the "virtues of the good citizen."

All these are not "problems" with the people; they are problems with the system. My argument is not that these individuals are "less than." My argument is that a just society should not force its essential workers to spend their lives heroically overcoming obstacles that we, the beneficiaries of their labour, generally do not face, all else equal (all else is not equal if you are not an essential worker who still faces considerable financial deprivation).

Kahn does address the question of cost, but it is not clear to me that he grasps the spirit of my argument about cost. He tells us that I may concede that "not all meaningful goals are created equal" (Kahn, 2025, Section 3.1), by which he means that some goals are monetarily more costly to realise, but he uses the reference to cost to discuss what egalitarians have called the "expensive taste objection." He says:

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> For example, for Jack Merridew, hunting and killing a pig is a meaningful goal [. . . .] [b]ut this goal requires very little in terms of material support. For Captain Ahab, by way of contrast, hunting and killing the white whale is a (and, it seems, the only) meaningful goal, and this requires having an entire whaling vessel at his disposal. (Kahn, 2025, Section 3.1)

Kahn later suggests that I may point to similar disparities in the material cost of preferences for meaningful aims and conclude that it is unfair that some goals are only available for those living above subsistence levels but that this move is unavailable to me eventually because

> Maskivker has not argued that society is obligated to ensure that everyone can pursue the most expensive goals, nor has she argued that society is obligated to ensure that everyone can pursue the same goals (or, perhaps, that everyone can pursue goals from a suite of equally expensive ones). So, it is unclear how this fact — that some meaningful goals are too expensive for some people to pursue — connects with Maskivker's argument. (Kahn, 2025, Section 3.1)

Kahn's difficulty understanding my arguments about cost is reflective of a deeper failure by (privileged) well-meaning academics to truly empathise with the exploited and downtrodden. Many times, our comfort, detached from the harsh reality of precarious labour, makes us blind to the fact that disparities in effective access to social opportunity are not only traceable to the independently expensive nature of a taste or preference (however meaningful). It is inherently cheaper to kill a pig than a whale, but this is not the type of cost to which my arguments allude. The type of cost I analyse has to be assessed holding the choice of goal constant. If it is cheaper for Jill to kill a pig because of her social position than it is for John, despite both of them being full contributors to society, then, this is an injustice. This is the injustice that LSWs face because they add to society's wealth and freedom with their labour but still find it far more costly to thrive than other full contributors (who are better paid).

Kahn further generously suggests that I may be interpreted as arguing that the goals that LSWs end up pursuing may be eventually viewed as "non-chosen" given the high costs of achieving alternative plans (presumably preferred but less accessible because of their high price). But again, he finds fault with this argumentative route because 1) LSWs only provide the conditions for *basis-freedom*, not *unfettered choice* (so, presumably, we do not owe them unfettered choice as a matter of fair play), and 2) "[O]n any account of what it means for an end to be self-chosen [. . .] it is unlikely that those in the least advantaged group in current society have their choices constrained to such an extent that we justifiably could conclude that they do not have meaningful, self-chosen projects or relationships."

But my main qualm with the predicament of LSWs is not that their aims may not be self-chosen — you can surely choose authentically in the face of constrained alternatives as long as you are of sound mind. My qualm with the predicament of LSWs is that their choice sets are abridged, and unjustly so given that they fully contribute to society with their work. Granted, I am here presupposing a normative view of "free choice" that relies on the idea that having few options but retaining full

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internal capacity to decide authentically — i.e., unimpeded by cognitive dissonance, blind resignation, manipulation, etc. — is enough for free choice. Kahn could easily dispute this understanding of free choice and say that free choice requires both. Fine with me; we can reframe the issue in these terms: I am not worried about making sure that LSWs aims are self-chosen. I am just worried about making sure that we can conclude that their aims are not more difficult to achieve *because* of the job that they perform in society, even though they are full contributors. Plans can be self-chosen and still unduly difficult to pursue. Deciding to bear and raise a child in a society that does not provide basic support for parents in the form of maternity/paternity leave, affordable childcare, accessible pre- and post-partum medical and mental care, etc. is a perfect example of this possibility. Additionally, and regarding 1) above, my argument of fair play and basis-freedom is not for *unfettered choice,* but for *decently expanded choice.* I am not complaining that LSWs should have the type of seemingly unlimited choice that others (say, millionaire investment bankers) who are much more advantaged economically have. I am complaining about the fact that although both investment bankers and LSWs contribute to society in ways that the market and the public demand, it is now disproportionately more difficult for the latter to achieve the same meaningful aims as the former. True respect lies not in a polite silence about people's struggles, but in the collective action to create a society where *heroic* sacrifices are not necessary for a full life. By ensuring that essential workers are paid a living wage, we are not offering them charity; we are fulfilling our reciprocal obligation to provide them with the very freedom their labour gives us.

I believe that Kahn's objections against my supposed patronising reflect a common form of thinking in many corners of political and social philosophy today: the idea that status equality — sometimes referred to as "social" or "relational equality" — is a primordial moral good to protect. I'm now extending my response beyond what Kahn explicitly says in his commentary — but his thoughtful points inspired the following thoughts. What comes below is therefore not an attribution to him, but a development of an idea his critique of my work brought to mind.

As I said, today, many philosophers rightly focus on the concept of social equality — the idea that we should relate to one another as equals, free from assumptions of hierarchy and status. This effort is driven by the sound belief that being regarded as an equal is an intrinsically valuable good. We could say that it is good in itself to be able to look others in the eye without undue reverence or subservience, regardless of the consequences for welfare or income. It is true that a society of equals often provides more opportunities for welfare and self-development, but the value of social equality isn't just instrumental; it has an independent worth. This focus is important, but we must be careful about which forms of treatment *truly* create objectionable status inequalities. Some philosophers, such as Kahn, might argue that pointing out certain disparities — for instance, acknowledging that some people have fewer opportunities for a meaningful life — is offensive because it is disrespectful for being patronising. Kahn's argument suggests that admitting that some are better off than others regarding this possibility implies a form of inferiority inappropriate for a society of equals. My response to this point is that the real disparities that undermine social equality and create unjust hierarchies are not found in honest observations, but

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in the actual, effective inequalities in opportunities for welfare and thriving. The problem isn't speaking about these disparities; the problem is *their very existence*.

Furthermore, while social equality is an intrinsically valuable good, it is valuable primarily as a *constitutive* element of human flourishing. We know that a life in which we are recognised as social equals is a better life for us as this recognition reflects the dignity and worth that justifies our claims to the conditions for a *good, thriving life*, not just a *bearable* one. Ultimately, human thriving accounts for part of the value of social equality, then. However, when we sacrifice important elements of thriving to protect trivial or insignificant sources of equality, we commit a serious moral mistake: we fetishise equality. By focusing on minor differences in status, we risk believing that achieving a particular type of parity is the ultimate goal rather than constitutive of a larger aim. This reification turns certain forms of "acknowledgement" into idols to be worshipped for their own sake, rather than recognising their true value in constituting a thriving life. We must not let the tree block the forest. If admitting that some have fewer opportunities for a thriving life is seen as admitting to a hierarchy, then we misunderstand that the goal of society is to ensure equal access to human thriving, not some kind of strict, superficial equality. If achieving "equality" means standing by in the face of substantive injustices that hinder people from living a good life, then that notion of equality is not worth defending.

3. Natural Resources and the Struggle for Subsistence

It is now time to turn to Kahn's second main critique against my views. In what follows, I address Kahn's scepticism about my thought experiment involving withdrawal from society with the monetary value of one's share of the earth's resources. I use this thought experiment to evaluate whether the current distribution of resources is fair in society. I argue that if LSWs were to avoid struggle for subsistence when withdrawing from current society with the monetary value equivalent of their share of unowned natural resources, this would mean that current society is unjust, assuming that LSWs are full contributors to it but are still unable to avoid that struggle.

Kahn thoughtfully divides his broad objection against my thought experiment into three sub-objections: 1) The value of natural resources is notoriously difficult to quantify, 2) Dividing money is not an appropriate alternative given the fact that its value fluctuates depending on context, and 3) It is doubtful that anyone would be better off living in autarky *vis-à-vis* current society (even if badly paid and exploited in the latter). I will address these three sub-objections in order.

Regarding sub-objection 1, In response to Kahn's critique that natural resources cannot be quantified, it's important to note that a significant body of left-libertarian scholarship — which I cite in my work as the inspiration for the idea Kahn criticises — offers a direct reply to his concerns. This tradition, exemplified by thinkers like Hillel Steiner and Peter Vallentyne, among others, draws its inspiration from John Locke's egalitarian intuitions. Specifically, it builds on Locke's idea — expressed in Chapter Five of his *Second Treatise of Government* (Locke, 1980) — that our right to appropriate natural resources comes with a duty to leave "enough and as good" for others, given our initial equal claims to the earth's bounty. Of course, left

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libertarians diverge from Locke's own views on how the introduction of money affects this "enough and as good" proviso, but that distinction is beyond the scope of this brief reply.

I will now focus on one of the most emblematic accounts that is inspired by this Lockean principle because this approach answers Kahn's doubts. Steiner's "Global Fund" is a mechanism for a global application of left-libertarian principles of distributive justice (Steiner, 2011). It proposes a system where every person on Earth has an equal claim to the value of all natural resources, and it entails assessing the market value of these resources. Steiner believes this is possible. The Global Fund would be a mechanism for a global tax on the value of natural resources, particularly land but also what's contained in it in terms of minerals and other natural commodities. The value of this tax would be based on the "unimproved" value of the resource — that is, its worth as it exists in its natural state, without any human labour or development. By "natural resources," Steiner means: "at its broadest, portions of physical space. This compendiously includes all global surface areas and the supra- and sub-terranean spaces contiguous to them, as well as the natural objects [minerals, etc.] they contain. Owners of these locations [including national states] owe, to the *Global Fund*, the full competitive rental value of these locations. That is, each person on the globe is entitled to an equal portion of each such location's value" (Steiner, 2011, pp. 330–331). The technical details on the tax rate and the delimitation of what a locale is are of course an important matter, but I lack space here to engage in that discussion. What my allusion to Steiner's work shows is that one way to quantify the value of our share of natural resources is via the mechanism of the market — in particular, the mechanism of an auction. For Steiner, the value of that share amounts to "an equal share of the maximum amount that would be bid for rights to the exclusive use of that location" (Steiner, 2011, p. 331). Kahn is right that the usefulness of resources and our conception of what is a valuable natural asset changes with new technology and in different contexts, but all these worries should be appeased by the fact that the mechanism determining monetary value is the market. In 1800, whale oil was extremely valuable as a natural commodity necessary for lighting and lubrication. Today, the market would not pay proportionally the same for this resource. It would pay nothing, and that is how we know what the value of whale oil is *today*.

Just as a matter of more information, Steiner's Global Fund is directly connected to the concept of a basic income because the fund's payout to every individual (the value of their claim to an initial share of unowned world resources) would function as a form of basic income. This is important to address sub-objection 3, as we will see shortly.

Sub-objection 2 is almost automatically dismissed by the fact that I am not arguing that a fair distribution of resources is achieved via the division of money in society (as Kahn suggests, this could materialise by adding all money contained in bank accounts and similar financial instruments and dividing that total by the number of individuals entitled to a share). I agree with Kahn that money has no inherent value: a hamburger costs more at an airport than it does at a regular MacDonald's. This is not a problem for me; I do not believe that the value of our fair claim to an initial share of the earth's bounty is reflected in an equal division of monetary accounts in society.

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Sub-objection 3 is more significant. Kahn is worried that LSWs, as exploited as they may be in current society, would not have a better life if they retired to live in autarky with the monetary equivalent of their fair share of initial resources. But is it true that, if LSWs retired with the (calculated) lump sum value of a hypothetical basic income from age 18 to the average life expectancy, they would still not be better off? In the article that Kahn criticises, I argue that they would be because, as harsh as this life may be, labour would pay off and it would enable LSWs to avoid struggle for subsistence, which they do not manage to avoid in our current society. This fact, I argue, means that current society does not reflect a setup in which distributive justice is respected. Kahn is right to imply that my argument is speculative. This is so because it is empirical: whether people would prefer to live in current society, even if exploited to the degree that economic subsistence is difficult to secure, or in safer autarky, depends on how much they would miss some of the widely available "luxuries" of modern society, from public transportation and medical care, to hot showers and free Wi-Fi at Starbucks. But my argument is that LSWs could retreat in unison, not completely alone. This would surely entail missing Starbucks and other more morally significant sources of wellbeing (like medical care), which even exploited people today enjoy (although that is debatable in societies like the United States), but it would also mean not worrying about putting food on the table tomorrow. *Comfort lovers* will choose to stay; risk averse individuals who value knowing whether they will be able to put food on the table tomorrow — the *worriers* — will leave. People collectively can build new societies from scratch after leaving theirs. Despite Kahn's allusion to failed attempts at forming new communities of settlers in the United States, the fact that the United States postcolonialism (still) exists as such shows that the business of society starting can work.[1]

But whether starting new societies in (semi) autarky with others will be preferable in practice is immaterial. If we can think of a form of collective life in which individual LSWs would not struggle to subsist specifically because of what their legitimate claims to the world's common stock would provide for them, even if this hypothetical society would be less convenient in many respects than our current exploitative society, then, the possibility of avoiding struggle to subsist is enough reason to change current society.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, let me recapitulate my responses to Kahn. First, noting that lack of effective control over our time and little access to material resources necessary to realise meaningful plans restricts our freedom to thrive in life is not patronising; it is, if anything, realistic. Equality of respect is important, but not all sources of "offence" are morally relevant — or even real. Second, natural resources can be quantified following Lockean left-libertarian intuitions and our moral claim to an initial share of natural resources can be implemented via a basic income or similar policy instrument (capital accounts are an alternative in the literature). Third, although it is true that modern

[1] It can do so, though, at the expense of the valid claims of native occupants of the territory, which was the case for extensive parts of the United States.

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society offers many advantages, even to the exploited, it is not clear that they would *never* want to abandon it. Moreover, and centrally, the point of abandoning current society is normative: if there is a better alternative than current society *specifically* regarding *subsistence* for *all* full contributors, then, current society is unjust.

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