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Henry David Thoreau on Basic Income: Genius Grants for the Masses

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Abstract:

In this essay we examine the work of nineteenth-century American philosopher Henry David Thoreau to see how his thought relates to common arguments for and against Basic Income. We find that Thoreau would be unlikely to champion cash grants as an anti-poverty measure, but that he would endorse a Basic Income variant meant to support the development of human potential.

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Henry David Thoreau might not be the most obvious champion of a Basic Income (a government-guaranteed minimum income). After all, Thoreau is the outstanding cultural icon of Yankee thrift and self-reliance. This is the philosopher who built his own tiny house and moved into it on July 4, 1845, to celebrate his own personal independence. How could he possibly endorse handouts or dependence on government?

The concept of Basic Income did not exist in Thoreau's world, so he didn't speak to it directly. But we can make inferences. In this essay we step mindfully through Thoreau's writings, particularly *Walden*, and see how his ideas relate to the major topics and questions that supporters and opponents of Basic Income commonly raise. First, we dispose of the most obvious objections: Isn't Basic Income antithetical to Thoreauvian independence and self-reliance? And isn't Thoreau against taxes and governments? Both objections rest on misunderstandings of Thoreau's philosophy. One is an old misunderstanding that Thoreau himself struggled with; the other is more recent and superficial.

Next, we examine Thoreau's views on poverty, and we conclude that he would be unlikely to endorse cash grants as a means of alleviating poverty. But when we come to the heart of Thoreau's philosophy, his commitment to self-culture, self-improvement, and the cultivation of genius, we find indications that Thoreau would support public subsidies for that purpose. We take up questions and objections, including the perennial "can we afford it?" Thoreau says unequivocally that public money can and should be found to support education and culture. "Genius grants" (as we might call the Thoreauvian variant on Basic Income, democratically subverting the conventional notion of genius as an elite phenomenon) would certainly come under that heading. Finally, we examine Thoreau's thoughts on technology and work and leisure, and these help give the idea of Thoreauvian genius grants greater shape and focus.

From this investigation, we can conclude that Thoreau has something to offer the Basic Income discussion. The vision of artists and novelists and entrepreneurs able to fulfill their calling and develop their potential has always been an attraction of a conventional Basic Income. From Thoreau's philosophy we can infer an argument for a Basic Income variant where development of human potential takes center stage.

Independence and self-reliance

The apparent incongruity between Basic Income and Thoreau's philosophy of independence and self-reliance—exemplified by his experiment in living at Walden Pond—rests on a misunderstanding of the nature of the experiment. The same misunderstanding is also the source of the perennial "debunking" that Thoreau critics have engaged in since the 1850s. Critics have pointed out that Thoreau dined in town on a regular basis. His sister brought him pies. He allowed his mother to do his laundry (Lowell, 1865, p. 607; Schulz, 2015; on laundry see Solnit, 2013).

This criticism rests on an assumption that *self-sufficiency* was the goal of the experiment at Walden Pond. Thoreau encourages the misconception by including details of his nearly self-sufficient household economy in the narrative of *Walden* and by calling himself, with exaggeration, a "hermit." But self-sufficiency was not the true goal of the experiment.

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Thoreau was after moral independence: pursuit of inner-directed goals in disregard and even defiance of convention and public opinion. That is what his mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson described as Self-Reliance in the famous essay of that name: “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. ... Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. ... Insist on yourself; never imitate” (Emerson, 1971, pp. 28, 29, 47). In this quest Thoreau unquestionably succeeded.

The experiment could have taken any number of forms. That it took the form of quasi-self-sufficiency—building his own home on a shoestring—reflects Thoreau’s determination to demonstrate, almost as performance art, that there is no excuse to delay pursuing one’s dreams. A generous bankroll is not required, only imagination, stubborn determination, and elbow grease. “However mean your life is, meet it and live it” (Thoreau, 1971, p. 328). Thoreau was emphatic in stating that he did not think his own path—building a house by a pond to write in—was necessarily right for anyone else. Others need to find their own way of expressing their genius, their nonconformity, their individuality (Thoreau, 1971, p. 71).

Having cleared that up: Let us imagine that Thoreau had access to a Basic Income. Would that have spoiled the experiment in some way?

I contend that a Basic Income would have made Thoreau’s experiment in independence and self-reliance marginally easier, but would not have fundamentally changed the equation. Thoreau already benefited from a wide range of resources and much social, cultural and ecological capital. He had, in addition to meals and laundry service, a friend and mentor who allowed him to squat on his woodlot, cut down his trees, and farm his land. He had family and friends who offered emotional support, lent him tools, and would have taken care of him if he had gotten sick or gotten into any trouble. (Indeed, they secured his release from the county jail when he was arrested for non-payment of the state poll tax.)

He had the security that comes from living in a landscape devoid of poisonous animals and non-human top predators, as well as the security of white male privilege (not trivial in the woods, as Evelyn C. White attests in her essay “Black Women and the Wilderness”). He had access to the best library in Concord (Emerson’s), and, when he imperiously demanded it, the best library in the nation (Harvard’s). He had the use of roads maintained by the town, a reliable postal service, and other public goods. He had use of the recently constructed railroad and its tracks, both as transportation and metaphor. He had an unpolluted lake and a nearby spring for drinking water. He lived in a time of peace.

He also faced costs associated with his particular location and life circumstances: The family pencil business placed demands on his time, as did Emerson’s requests for help around the house and garden. The ecology of the place determined that he would face stiff competition for foodstuffs. Rabbits would nibble the potatoes in his cellar, and woodchucks would harvest most of his cash crop of beans.

These lists could be continued indefinitely. Some of the advantages Thoreau enjoyed, and the costs he faced, are easily monetizable, and others are not. If Thoreau had had a modest Basic Income, that would simply have been one more advantage, one more resource that was simply more fungible than others. He would have been marginally more secure in the experiment, with one more degree of freedom. He could, perhaps, have purchased a woodstove at the beginning of the stay at Walden Pond and consumed less firewood. Or he could have purchased more wood and indulged in “roughing it” without the woodstove for a second winter. He could have foregone the beanfield experiment and had more time for writing—or he could have extended the beanfield experiment and harvested additional metaphors. Perhaps with a little extra monthly cash he could have secured a different landlord’s permission to build his house elsewhere—say, on nearby Flint’s Pond, which was the first location he contemplated (Walls, 2017, p. 183).

The bottom line of this extended “what if?” thought experiment is that a Basic Income allowance would not have fundamentally altered the premise of the Walden project, for the very reasons Thoreau’s critics have been quick to point out: He already enjoyed many other kinds of privileges and resources. A Basic Income allowance would simply have been one more resource. It would have made the experiment marginally easier, given him a few more options and a little more security.

This thought experiment does not show that Thoreau should have favored Basic Income; it only shows that Basic Income is not antithetical to Thoreau’s Walden experiment.

Taxes and government

Another stumbling block to reconciling Thoreau’s reputation with the idea of Basic Income is the issue of taxes. Many Basic Income schemes—though not all—are redistributive, financed by taxation. Thoreau famously refused to pay his poll tax and was jailed for it. The essay he wrote about this experience, commonly known as “Civil Disobedience” or “Resistance to Civil Government,” has inspired millions, including the nonviolent movements for social justice led by Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Recently, libertarians and other anti-government ideologues have also found inspiration in statements by Thoreau. “My thoughts are murder to state,” Thoreau wrote (“Slavery in Massachusetts” 108). That might sound like anti-tax activist Grover Norquist threatening to drown government in the bathtub, but the parallel is mostly superficial. Thoreau was inspired to rage and nonpayment of the poll tax by specific abhorrent laws that made him, as a Massachusetts citizen, complicit in the trafficking in human beings. He did not object to government as such. On the contrary: “To act collectively is according to the spirit of our institutions,” he writes in *Walden* (Thoreau, 1971, p. 110). He gladly pays other taxes (Thoreau, 2004, p. 84), and he endorses generous public spending on education and culture (Thoreau, 1971, p. 110). He is no small-government conservative. The village, he writes, ought not “stop short at a pedagogue, a parson, a sexton, a parish library, and three selectmen, because our Pilgrim forefathers got through a cold winter once on a bleak rock with these.” For: “If we live in the Nineteenth Century, why should we not enjoy the advantages which the Nineteenth Century offers?”

Poverty

Many Basic Income schemes are considered primarily anti-poverty programs, superior alternatives to traditional means-tested programs. What would Thoreau think of this?

Going against the grain of common wisdom (viz., “the poor will always be with you”), Thoreau was willing to consider poverty as eradicable (Thoreau, 1971, p. 32). Like Thomas Paine, who proposed one of the very first Basic-Income-like schemes a generation earlier, Thoreau noted the irony and manifest injustice that while civilization brings luxury to some, it reduces others to squalor unknown in the “savage” state (Thoreau, 1971, p. 34–35). (There is no evidence that Thoreau read Paine’s *Agrarian Justice*.)

Thoreau’s most famous (or notorious) statement on poverty comes in *Walden*, when he introduces the Fields, a poor Irish family living in the vicinity. The father of the family works as a “bogger,” a sharecropper tilling a local proprietor’s field. Thoreau criticizes the father’s business sense, the mother’s housekeeping, and the choices the family makes in managing its meager income—e. g. splurging on things like meat and coffee that would have been out of their reach in the Old World (Thoreau, 1971, p. 203ff). Elsewhere, Thoreau profiles other individuals who had maintained marginal existences in the Walden Pond district over the years, and concludes that what held these people back from forming a thriving community was, more than anything else, the vice of intemperance: alcohol (Thoreau, 1971, p. 264).

Thoreau does not counsel against providing material aid to the poor, but he is not very sanguine about the good it does. Consistent with the main thrust of his philosophy, he argues that aid on the moral plane is superior to material aid.

Be sure that you give the poor the aid they most need, though it be your example which leaves them far behind. If you give money, spend yourself with it, and do not merely abandon it to them. ... If you give him money, he will perhaps buy more rags with it. ... There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root (Thoreau, 1971, p. 75).

“Do not stay to be an overseer of the poor,” he admonishes, “but endeavor to become one of the worthies of the world” (Thoreau, 1971, p. 79). Nevertheless—again consistent with his philosophy, in ways that we will explore in more detail below—he will not prescribe for those who have a true calling: “If you have a genius for charity, persevere” (Thoreau, 1971, p. 73).

Lest Thoreau come across as heartless based on his published word, it should be noted that in private he did exercise charity in the conventional sense: for instance, obtaining a winter coat for another Irish family so their son could attend school in the wintertime (Walls, 2017, p. 328).

Thoreau’s sentiments would place him, in today’s terminology, among the ranks of “compassionate conservatives” who see poverty as a social and cultural problem best solved at the personal and family level by the intervention of local institutions (whether church, state, or secular nonprofit), and who would see Basic Income as unlikely to be more effective in the long term than any other type of financial assistance. When we are talking about households rendered dysfunctional by substance abuse, this perspective is undoubtedly compelling.

But ever the contrarian, Thoreau does not leave things at that. Given the nature of his experiment at Walden Pond, he positively celebrates poverty on some occasions. “Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage” (Thoreau, 1971, p. 328). Poverty restricts us to “the most significant and vital experiences. ... It is life near the bone where it is sweetest. ... Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul” (Thoreau, 1971, p. 329).

What makes Thoreau’s virtuous, sweet, salutary poverty different than the pernicious poverty of the Fields or of others living on Concord’s margins? It is, of course, the social and family resources backing him up, the social and cultural capital that he enjoys that they do not. The “moral elevation” that Thoreau prescribes to

marginal members of the community can be charitably interpreted as an imperative to enhance their social capital (by befriending them—something we know he did) and their cultural capital (as when Thoreau reads Homer's *Iliad* to Alex Therien, the uneducated Canadian woodchopper who turns out to be a highly appreciative audience).

Thoreau is also quick to turn the tables on the comfortably well off. "Most think they are above being supported by the town; but it oftener happens that they are not above supporting themselves by dishonest means, which should be more disreputable" (Thoreau, 1971, p. 328).

Genius

Given that Thoreau would probably be unmoved by anti-poverty arguments, would he reject Basic Income altogether?

I contend that Thoreau would—in fact, did—show sympathy for the notion of a Basic Income on other grounds. And these grounds stand right at the heart of his philosophical project.

This philosophical project, as we have already seen, is easily misunderstood. Even close friends, Thoreau complained, dismissed what they considered "namby-pamby" and "stuff" in *Walden* and urged him to devote more space to teaching men how to live a simpler life. He responds in exasperation,

To what end do I lead a simple life at all, pray? That I may teach others to simplify their lives?—and so all our lives be *simplified* merely, like an algebraic formula? Or not, rather, that I may make use of the ground I have cleared, to live more worthily and profitably? (Thoreau, 1982, p. 87)

For Thoreau, simplicity and independence and self-reliance are not (or not only) ends in themselves. They are instruments for catching larger game: genius.

As a Transcendentalist, Thoreau believed the individual is the measure of all things. The highest calling of the individual is self-exploration and self-improvement. Explore your own higher latitudes, Thoreau urges (Thoreau, 1971, p. 321ff). "Let every one mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he was made" (Thoreau, 1971, p. 326). "I would have the flower and fruit of a man," he declares, not just the "stem and leaves" (Thoreau, 1971, p. 77). This striving may be described in terms that are more outward facing (developing a talent, finding and pursuing a calling, accomplishing a feat) or inward (cultivating character); it is, arguably, necessarily both. Every person has great potential waiting to be tapped. This is genius. A person who achieves superlatives by tapping into genius is unique, and yet also "representative" (to use Emerson's phrase) of human potentiality.

Only think, for a moment, of a man about his affairs! How we should respect him! How glorious he would appear! Not working for any corporation, its agent, or president, but fulfilling the end of his being! A man about *his business* would be the cynosure of all eyes (Thoreau, 1982, p. 83).

Some circumstances are more conducive to the flourishing of genius than others. The poor and the uneducated miss out on opportunities to discover and cultivate their talents. (One thinks of the young Irish boy who risked missing school for lack of a warm coat, and the Canadian woodchopper Therien, who had an appetite for classical literature but never acquired the skills to read it for himself.)

In the more comfortable classes, social and family and self-imposed pressure to achieve conventional milestone of success (wealth, property, honors) may still deflect many from a true calling. The sacrifices such individuals make—in debt and unwelcome responsibility, as well as roads not taken—is what Thoreau means when he says that most men lead lives of quiet desperation (Thoreau, 1971, p. 8). "Youth may build or plant or sail," he was to write in *Walden*, "only let him not be hindered from doing that which he tells me he would like to do" (Thoreau, 1971, p. 71). Thoreau's early correspondence reflects the trepidation young men felt about harnessing themselves to possibly ill-fitting and soul-crushing careers in law and business. "I must confess I am apt to consider the trades and professions so many traps which the Devil sets to catch men in—and good luck he has too, if one may judge" (Thoreau, 2014, p. 109, c.f. 99). "Do what you love," he advises a correspondent (Thoreau, 1982, p. 44). He shuddered on his own account at the thought of following too closely in his own father's footsteps in the pencil trade (Thoreau, 1980, p. 140). Though he had an aptitude, he knew that was not his calling. Nor was school teaching, and for that reason he considered it a failure (Thoreau, 1971, p. 69) despite the manifest objective success of the Concord Academy in terms of enrollment and, by all accounts, the quality of instruction, when it was maintained by the Thoreau brothers.

What was Thoreau's calling? In *Walden* he describes himself as "self-appointed inspector of snow storms and rain storms ... surveyor, if not of highways, then of forest paths and all across-lot routes, ... I have looked after

the wild stock of the town.” And “for a long time I was reporter to a journal, of no very wide circulation”—that is, his own private journal, the source of his lectures and essays (Thoreau, 1971, p. 18).

With wry humor, he expresses some surprise that his townsmen did not reward him for sauntering, botanizing, and keeping a journal. “It became more and more evident that my townsmen would not after all admit me into the list of town officers, nor make my place a sinecure with a moderate allowance” (Thoreau, 1971, p. 18). So, “finding that my fellow-citizens were not likely to offer me any room in the court house, or any curacy or living anywhere else” (Thoreau, 1971, p. 19), he repaired to the woods where he could live cheaply and pursue his calling without the town’s financial support.

Suppose, to take up our thought experiment again, that not only his family and Mr. Emerson had recognized and encouraged Thoreau’s talents, but the town also? If he had had a “moderate allowance” from the town, how much more would he have accomplished? Of course, *Walden* might have turned out to be a very different book. But perhaps we are not even looking at the right case. Young Henry was stubborn and resourceful enough to pursue his calling even without encouragement. Think what good a Thoreau-style Basic Income (material support and encouragement for the cultivation of genius—call it a “genius grant”) might have done elsewhere in Thoreau’s Concord, among his neighbors on Main Street and by the pond. The marginalized might have gotten an education. The educated might have made more forays into entrepreneurship, service, and the arts. (Think of Thoreau’s own sister Sophia and her underutilized drawing talent.) The artists might have had more stability and been more productive. (Think of William Ellery Channing, Thoreau’s poet friend, who had great difficulty holding together his personal and domestic life. Think also of Bronson Alcott, who late in life finally got what Thoreau never did, a “living” from the town. As superintendent of the Concord School District, Alcott made good use of his too-often wasted talents and served the community with distinction (Walls, 2017, p. 461).)

The town already allocated money for residents, in the form of aid to the poor. That’s all well and good, says Thoreau, but: “Why shouldn’t philanthropy help us in our best state, when most worthy to be helped?” (Thoreau, 1971, p. 74) The concept of Basic Income was not in Thoreau’s vocabulary, but in *Walden* he advances what amounts to a human-flourishing argument for a Basic Income variant.

A host of questions and objections present themselves. Can we afford to subsidize the pursuit of genius? Is it for everyone, or only the evidently worthy / talented? Won’t it make recipients lazy?

If we question the affordability of supporting genius, we find Thoreau’s response in the chapter of *Walden* entitled “Reading,” where he talks about how provincial Concord is with respect to education and culture (a contrarian position, given Concord’s reputation as a hotbed of progressive innovation), and how cosmopolitan it could be:

In this country, the village should in some respects take the place of the nobleman of Europe. It should be the patron of the fine arts. It is rich enough. It wants only the magnanimity and refinement. It can spend money enough on such things as farmers and traders value, but it is thought Utopian to propose spending money for things which more intelligent men know to be of far more worth. ... As our circumstances are more flourishing, our means are greater than the nobleman’s (Thoreau, 1971, p. 110).

In other words: Of course we can afford education and culture (and genius grants would certainly come under this heading). We just need to make them priorities in our budgets. “If it is necessary, omit one bridge over the river, go round a little there, and throw one arch at least over the darker gulf of ignorance which surrounds us” (Thoreau, 1971, p. 110).

Would genius grants be wasted, would they make recipients lazy?

Thoreau takes a back seat to no one as a champion of the Protestant work ethic. “From exertion come wisdom and purity,” he writes in *Walden* (Thoreau, 1971, p. 220); “from sloth ignorance and sensuality.” “What exercise is to the body, employment is to the mind and morals” (Thoreau, 1982, p. 76). “If you would avoid uncleanness, work earnestly, though it be at cleaning a stable” (Thoreau, 1971, p. 221).

And this is no mere pose. Thoreau plied his calling indefatigably when he was not making pencils, surveying, or otherwise earning his keep. He wrote prodigiously, and his rambling researches took him out in every kind of weather. He complained bitterly of having so little time. As he wrote to his friend Harrison Blake (Thoreau, 1982, p. 54, 70, 83–84, 108), those who have found their calling in life—other than the lucky few whose callings are remunerative—must “carry on two farms at once,” one in the lowlands to earn their keep and the other in the uplands. (How similar was Thoreau to the farmer he describes with pity in *Walden* (Thoreau, 1971, p. 5), burdened on the road of life by the weight of a barn and a hundred acres! Only Thoreau was carrying two farms instead of one.)

To answer more directly a question posed earlier: There can be little doubt that if Thoreau had received additional marginal support in the form of a stipend from the town, he would have spent less time cultivating the “lowland” farm (manual labor, surveying, pencil-making) and invested more energy in the “upland” farm, and as a result he would have been more productive as a naturalist and a writer.

But granting that a “genius grant” would have been a good societal investment in Thoreau’s case, surely in many other cases it would not?

Actually, Thoreau would not permit us to conclude that. For the Transcendentalists it was axiomatic that every individual has a divine spark, the potential for greatness.

Could society pick winners, subsidizing only those judged to have most potential? As a practical matter, it could try. This is how scholarship funds were allocated in Thoreau’s day and often still are. But it goes against the spirit of the Transcendentalist axiom. And the example of Thoreau shows just how hard it is to pick winners. Among his college classmates, no one would have picked out Henry as the one most likely to achieve lasting fame. Among his siblings even, his charismatic older brother John, Jr. would easily have been tapped as “most likely to succeed.” Henry’s output as a young writer was so rough-edged that even *The Dial*, the Transcendentalists’ house organ, had to reject much of it. It took Thoreau years to discover his vocation as a naturalist; early on he would have identified primarily as a poet, and it is a mercy to posterity he mostly gave that up.

For an individual to discover a calling or develop a talent will take time, and progress may not be uniform. “It is not important that he should mature as soon as an apple-tree or an oak” (Thoreau 1971, p. 326). “Know your own bone; gnaw at it, bury it, unearth it, and gnaw it still,” he advises (Thoreau, 1982, p. 44).

Can we at least judge if recipients are using the support well or poorly? Again, the example of Thoreau shows just how difficult that could be. As we have already seen, Thoreau had an intense drive. But in the eyes of many of his neighbors, he was the epitome of laziness with his reading, boating, fishing, and sauntering around farm and field. Emerson called Thoreau “the only man of leisure in town” (Harding, 1989, p. 21) on account of the sedulousness with which he safeguarded the generous margin his calling, his true work, required.

Arguably, Thoreau didn’t really hit his stride as a writer until he moved to Walden Pond in his late 20s, and it was not until his late 30s that he began to receive due recognition. If he had lived more than a few years into his 40s, completion and publication of his ecological researches might have earned him a scientific reputation to eclipse even his literary reputation. So: no, you can’t put talent on a timetable, and you can never tell for sure a sleeper from a dud. And the dud, of course, may merely be a virtuoso in search of the right calling.

Certainly, basic income funds might be used by some recipients in ways that are transparently bad—e. g. criminal or self-destructive. There is, for example, the substance abuse that ruined the lives of some of the Walden Pond district’s former inhabitants. These are arguably cases where conventional material aid of any kind—against poverty, or in support of human development—is likely to be ineffective unless preceded or accompanied by other kinds of intervention.

At this point we can sum up what Thoreau’s philosophy would require in a genius grant, and some ways in which it differs from Basic Income schemes typically discussed today.

1. The justification would not be poverty reduction, but development of human potential.
2. The genius grant could take the form of cash, but that is not a strict requirement. At least in part it could also include (say) space and supplies, access to resources, reimbursement of travel and tuition, etc. What is important is that it be material support that enables someone wishing to explore and pursue a vocation to do so.
3. There is no minimum quantity, but a “full” genius grant might be considered the amount necessary to sustain an individual who is willing to live very modestly (e.g., as Thoreau lived at Walden Pond).
4. Participation would be voluntary, but in the spirit of the Transcendentalist axiom, the opportunity should be available to all.

Technology, work, leisure

Thoreau has gained something of the reputation of a Luddite, an enemy of technological change. He is the philosopher who would rather walk than take the rail (Thoreau, 1971, p. 53), who derides the magnetic telegraph by doubting that Maine and Texas, once connected, will have anything worth saying to each other (Thoreau 1971, p. 52), who supposes the Transatlantic cable will be put to no better use than alerting us that Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough (Thoreau, 1971, p. 52).

But Thoreau was not reflexively an enemy of technology. He was fascinated by machines and was a tinkerer himself, having invented a hand-operated machine to separate out the finest graphite particles, helping to make “J. Thoreau & Son” pencils the best in the country. On his travels he stopped to tour factories and take notes. His harangues against the railroad are balanced by poetic encomiums, and despite his famous preference for walking he made good use of the railroad when it suited him. “It is certainly better to accept the advantages, though so dearly bought, which the invention and industry of mankind offer,” he wrote, and in this way “make

our civilization a blessing" (Thoreau, 1971, p. 40). He praises innovations that more than satisfy our animal needs and allow us to "[save] a little time for the fine arts" (Thoreau, 1971, p. 253–54). Advances in technology and hence productivity make his argument for the affordability of generous spending on education and culture compelling, and even more compelling today than when he uttered them.

How to make civilization a blessing? For Thoreau, the cardinal rule is to be technology's master, not its slave. "Men have become the tools of their tools," he laments (Thoreau, 1971, p. 37). And "we do not ride the railroad, it rides us" (Thoreau, 1971, p. 92). The railroad literally consumed the lives of the Irish laborers who built it; Thoreau compared them to the wooden sleepers supporting the rails (Thoreau, 1971, p. 92). And it ruled over other lives too. It instilled punctuality, inexorably changing the pace of village life (Thoreau, 1971, p. 118). It opened up the village to global markets, transforming crops into commodities. "Husbandry was once a sacred art; but it is pursued with irreverent haste and heedlessness by us. ... The landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives" (Thoreau, 1971, p. 165).

In principle, by providing efficiency, technology holds the promise of leisure. But we so rarely claim leisure from it. Rather, we fixate on efficiency itself, and make an idol of that. "Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? ... Men say that a stitch in time saves nine, and so they take a thousand stitches to-day to save nine to-morrow" (Thoreau, 1971, p. 93). Thoreau would have us reclaim our time for higher purposes. "When he has obtained those things that are necessary to life, there is another alternative than to gain the superfluities; and that is, to adventure on life now, his vacation from humbler toil having commenced" (Thoreau, 1971, p. 15).

For this reason Thoreau declares that he prefers best the occupation of day laborer (Thoreau, 1971, p. 70). Unlike the farmer and the merchant who need to worry about weather and commodity prices and interest rates, the laborer can—if his income is adequate to his needs—set work well out of his mind at the end of the day and consecrate evening hours to education, culture, and genius: he can "recreate his intellectual man" (Thoreau, 1971, p. 222).

The laborer's day ends with the going down of the sun, and he is then free to devote himself to his chosen pursuit, independent of his labor; but his employer, who speculates from month to month, has no respite from one end of the year to the other. ... The laborer, looking into [the hearth fire] at evening, purifies his thoughts of the dross and earthiness which they have accumulated during the day (Thoreau, 1971, p. 70, 254).

But in other moods Thoreau considers even these few hours snatched at the end of the day to be far from adequate. "The laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to maintain the manliest relations to men. ... He has no time to be anything but a machine" (Thoreau, 1971, p. 6). He quotes the Chinese sage Mencius:

The evil which one does in the interval of a day prevents the germs of virtue which began to spring up again from developing themselves and destroys them. After the germs of virtue have thus been prevented many times from developing themselves, even the beneficent breath of evening does not suffice to preserve them (Thoreau, 1971, p. 315).

The solution would be to provide the working man with more leisure, leisure that technological progress and his own increased productivity would amply allow.

We should feed and clothe him gratuitously sometimes, and recruit him with our cordials, before we judge of him. The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom of fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly (Thoreau, 1971, p. 6).

To "feed and clothe him gratuitously sometimes" is to make the worker—any worker, Everyman and Everywoman—the occasional recipient of a Thoreauvian genius grant. Seen from this perspective, the genius grant is not (like a standard Basic Income) essentially a grant of money or a guarantee of a standard of living. And it is not even, essentially, to use Thoreau's own words, a grant of food and clothes. It is a grant of leisure: for leisure is what we need in order to cultivate our finest qualities.

The increased productivity that technology makes possible makes the grant of leisure eminently affordable. Only two things are required. We need the collective will to parlay some of our efficiency into leisure rather than even more work. And we need a mechanism (a tax and dedicated fund, or something else) to ensure that some of the surplus value created by technological gains in efficiency is captured in a way that can fund the grant of leisure.

In 1843, Thoreau wrote his only review of a contemporary book: *The Paradise within the Reach of all Men, without Labor, by Powers of Nature and Machinery*, by one J.A. Etzler. Etzler predicted a technological utopia. Many

aspects of Etzler's alternative future seem entertainingly daft to us. He projects a sort of a steampunk world—but really more “tidepunk,” as this advanced technological civilization is built on the basis of renewable energy from sun, wind, and wave. Etzler gets an awful lot incongruously right in his vision of the future: giant floating islands with all the amenities of land (cruise ships), superhighways, high-speed transport, terraforming. The capstone of the vision is that once the power of wind and wave is harnessed, mankind will enjoy perfect leisure. “Everything desirable for human life may be had by every man in superabundance, without labor, and without pay” (Thoreau, 2004, p. 19). Any amenity or delicacy may be called up instantly “by a short turn of some crank” (Thoreau, 2004, p. 37).

Etzler's vision poses a challenge for Thoreau's concept of virtuous leisure, and seen through Thoreau's eyes it poses a challenge for standard twenty-first-century arguments for Basic Income as well.

Today's Basic Income debate is driven in large part by concern that technological advance (automation) will eliminate jobs. Thoreau's concern was the opposite: that technology tends to trap people in unnecessary work. Which is the more valid concern?

The trouble with the modern argument that technology will cut the demand for human labor is that we've heard it before, many times, and it has not come to pass. The same argument was made during the guaranteed income debates of the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S. and Canada, supported by formal economic analysis, and despite the continual advance of technology since then, unemployment has stayed within normal bounds and workweeks have effectively expanded rather than shrunk. And these projections came on the heels of many other visions of utopian leisure, including that of Etzler. At a distance of nearly 200 years, Etzler holds our own world up to us in a funhouse mirror. The technological marvels have come to pass—even the ability to have any article of commerce delivered to your doorstep with a virtual “turn of the crank” (hey Alexa ...)—but the anticipated leisure is nowhere found. When technology liberated us from toiling in the fields, we migrated to factories. As technology and trade have liberated us from manufacturing, we have invented entire industries in the service sector (e.g., advertising, marketing, insurance, real estate brokerage) to absorb that surplus labor. These industries, and others like law and finance, could either be omitted entirely or could fulfill their social function with a fraction of the personnel currently employed. The advent of self-driving cars and robotic retail distribution centers and massive online lecture courses in the coming decade may be extremely disruptive, even unprecedentedly disruptive, but history warns us not to underestimate the ingenuity of society in willfully inventing new forms of work (what anthropologist David Graeber (2018) calls “bullshit jobs”) to fill the breach. Thoreau tells the story of the teamster carting a heavy load past his window early one morning, seemingly so industrious, a productive member of society. It turned out that he had been toting an ornamental rock to adorn the yard of a would-be gentleman. Was it for such trivial and unedifying occupations that we were liberated from tilling the soil? “Most men would feel insulted if it were proposed to employ them in throwing stones over a wall, and then throwing them back, merely that they might earn their wages. But many are no more worthily employed now” (Thoreau, 2004, p. 157–58). “If thousands are thrown out of employment,” he argues, “it suggests that they were not well employed [to begin with]. Why don't they take the hint? It is not enough to be industrious” (Thoreau, 1982, p. 100). In our own day, there may be no lack of demand for new teamsters to haul new boulders to foppish gardens. Thoreau's formula might be the more accurate one: the real task, now as then, may be not to reconcile ourselves to involuntary unemployment, but rather to rescue ourselves from unnecessary employment.

The challenge Etzler poses to Thoreau's own vision is that their conceptions of leisure seem at first glance uncomfortably similar. Thoreau thinks more leisure is required. Etzler offers a formula for more leisure. But Thoreau cannot endorse the scheme. Why?

For Etzler, leisure is an end in itself. It is well-being. For Thoreau leisure is a starting point, a means to greater ends, an opportunity to engage in the *real* work of self-cultivation.

This points to a final requirement for the Thoreauvian genius grant. The leisure it provides must be not ordinary leisure, but leisure *consecrated* to a higher purpose. Thus a mere shorter workweek, for example (a typical proposal to share the benefits of increased productivity), will not do. The leisure provided by the genius grant should be entered into with intention. As noted above, administrators cannot be expected to judge whether grants are being used well or poorly, but the program should be set up in a way that involves self-reflection, perhaps with formal self-reporting of goals (which may evolve over time) and progress toward them.

In requiring recipients to formally *undertake* something in order to qualify, the Thoreauvian genius grant would be similar to another Basic Income variant, the “participation income” proposed by A.B. Atkinson (1996). A participation income is awarded to one who participates in the labor market or performs other activities sanctioned by society (e. g. studying, performing care work, volunteering). The Thoreauvian genius grant has a different motivation (development of human potential) but offers the prospect of similar outcomes (simultaneously rewarding unconventional work and disincentivizing idleness).

Conclusion

From Thoreau's writings we can piece together a vision of a Basic Income variant that we have labeled the genius grant. The purpose of the genius grant is to facilitate human flourishing. It is entered into with intention (a declared purpose), but otherwise is unconditional.¹ It is voluntary. In principle, when scaled up, it should be available to all who want to participate.

Some would choose not to participate. The wealthy would not require the funding (though they may nevertheless take advantage of the form of the genius grant to declare an intention and distinguish creative endeavor from idleness). Those lucky enough to make a living from their "upland farm" will not require the genius grant. When Thoreau calls this "the rarest success," he is speaking of those who make a living from *creative* endeavor. Then there are those with a genius for conventional occupations: the born lawyer or woodchopper, the dentist or financier who find genuine fulfillment in their work. There are undoubtedly many of these. "I do not speak to those who are well employed, in whatever circumstances, and they know whether they are well employed or not" (Thoreau, 1971, p. 16). Though genius grants are not an anti-poverty program, the poor would be eligible to participate. Why should they not? There is talent and creativity among the poor (Thoreau, 1971, p. 150). Since developing creative talent would probably be an attractive alternative to many types of low-wage labor available to the poor, genius grants might incidentally drive up wages by reducing the effective labor supply in the market.

In its implementation the genius grant could resemble a traditional Basic Income or it could take other forms. It could take the form of cash grants or other types of material support. It could be administered by the state, or it could be the project of grant-making nonprofits or foundations, or it could take the form of employer-sponsored sabbaticals, or it could be crowd-funded. It could cover 100% of living expenses, or provide fractional support (e. g. covering one day per week for self-directed pursuits).

In our systematic working out of a vision for genius grants, we are extrapolating beyond Thoreau's own statements in some ways. For example, Thoreau generally treats subsidies as a project of town government. We are not as restrictive. Thoreau is fascinated by the internal work of character development. Without discounting the possibility and value of internal work, we place more emphasis on tangible, outward manifestations of genius: talents and skills, creative accomplishments.

On a personal level, Thoreau would have had little appetite and patience for the social and political activism necessary to implement genius grants in the policy arena. Activists ("reformers") he considered the greatest bores (Thoreau, 1971, pp. 153–54, c.f. 74). He was a firm believer in doing things for oneself, picking oneself up by the bootstraps, starting *now*. "[No] really important work [can] be made easier by cooperation" (Thoreau, 2004, p. 40). "The man who goes alone can start today; but he who travels with another must wait till that other is ready, and it may be a long time before they get off" (Thoreau, 1971, p. 72). You don't need a program, or a subsidy, or some other person's permission to develop your gifts, he would say. And he would be right. Genius grants are not *necessary*. But we are not all as single-minded and stubborn as Thoreau, or as adept at perceiving the distant music to which we should be stepping. That, indeed, was Thoreau's particular gift. For the rest of us (and indeed for him as well, if it comes right down to it—he intimates as much) some structure, support, and encouragement would be valuable and helpful.

Basic Income critics frequently worry that subsidies will lead to laziness, erosion of virtue. The form of the genius grant might alleviate some of those concerns. The genius grant can be considered the "moral equivalent of work." This is, of course, an allusion to William James's "moral equivalent of war." James, though a pacifist, recognized that war had its charms. It inspired virtues like physical courage, patriotism, and camaraderie. James argued that other harmless and even socially beneficial pursuits, like civilian service corps, could instill the same virtues. Just so: if we are to wean ourselves away from work, why not do it in a way calculated to produce the discipline and self-respect traditionally associated with work?

As a young man, Thoreau desperately wanted to believe that the world would not be so cruel as to punish an individual for having a calling. In a letter to a classmate, he put a brave face on it:

Did it ever occur that a man came to want, or the almshouse from consulting his higher instincts? ... What did Homer—and Socrates—and Christ and Shakspeare [sic] & Fox? Did they have to compound for their leisure, or steal their hours? What a curse would civilization be if it thus ate into the substance of the soul.

He concludes, alluding to the New Testament: "Let us trust that we shall be fed as the sparrows are" (Thoreau, 2014, p. 109). Experience would prove that the world really is that cruel. It is cruel to a Thoreau who must sedulously cultivate a lowland farm at the expense of the upland. ("I feel and think rather too much like a business man," he laments in a letter to Harrison Blake. "This is the way I am serving King Admetus, confound him! If it were not for my relations, I would let the wolves prey on his flocks to their bellies' content" (Thoreau 1982, p. 107–08, c.f. Thoreau 1971, p. 69–70).) It is cruel to the poet who lacks the courage to "go up garret at

once” and settles for a grey life as a merchant instead, until he can afford to retire (Thoreau 1971, p. 54). It is cruel to the artist whose calling is so compelling that he or she is fitted for nothing else and therefore suffers privations, along with his or her family—like Alcott, or (perhaps the paradigmatic example) the English poet William Blake. The universe does not take care of these people the way it does the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field. But society can fulfill that Gospel promise. Material support for genius would enable us to finally “cease from anxiety, as the squirrels manifest no concern whether the woods will bear chestnuts this year or not” (Thoreau 1971, p. 166). And when “the reign of poetry commences,” Thoreau prophesies, special reverence will be had for the humble ground nut, symbol of Nature’s promise to feed her own children (Thoreau 1971, p. 239).

And what would this new world be like? Besides being populated with more fulfilled and satisfied individuals, living lives filled with meaning, it would be a cornucopia of creative products: novels, musical compositions, artwork, inventions, business ventures, charitable initiatives, free software. The world of “Web 2.0” (social media and user-generated content) gives us some taste of the creative potential of the billions who populate the planet and the appetite they have for self-expression. In a world of genius grants, both the quality and quantity of output would be richly enhanced. To give Thoreau the last word: “men’s capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried” (Thoreau, 1971, p. 10).

Notes

1 If the idea of a requirement (to declare an intention) that is not policed and adjudicated by some authority seems puzzling, consider as an analogy the “self-evaluations” that are common in many workplaces. Preparation of a self-evaluation is mandatory, and the supervisor who reads the evaluation might ask probing questions and encourage revisions, but ultimately the evaluation is a self-authored document, produced by and for oneself. The declared intention that is the prerequisite for a genius grant, similarly, might (perhaps) be subject to improvement and refinement with the coaching of a grant administrator, but ultimately it is a contract with oneself.

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Bionotes

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