A. Gosseries and Y. Vanderborght, eds.


This is a collection of forty-one essays written in honor of Philippe Van Parijs to mark the celebration of his 60th birthday. As Axel Gosseries and Yannick Vanderborght indicate in the foreword, the authors were asked to take risks and explore new ideas related to some part of Van Parijs’ work. Given the wide range of that work, it is no surprise that the essays in this volume cover much terrain. The result is a book that is rich in insight, highly rewarding, and broken down into easily digestible chunks. There are, however, far too many of these chunks to engage with, or even summarize, in this review. Instead, I will first highlight the admirably practical nature of many of the contributions, and then focus on a subset of the essays that coalesce around questions regarding Van Parijs’ defense of an unconditional basic income.

One noteworthy feature of Van Parijs’ life and career has been his active engagement with public policy. In light of that, it is appropriate that many of the essays in this volume directly address practical issues. The book, which is arranged alphabetically by author, begins with Bruce Ackerman’s exploration of an internet-based funding model designed to support the independent, critical journalism necessary for a flourishing democracy. Ackerman’s suggestion is to create a National Endowment for Journalism that would provide compensation for online articles according to the number of readers who indicate that the article contributed to their understanding of public issues. As Ackerman acknowledges, work is needed to show that this sort of system would effectively promote the kind of journalism he takes to be essential for a healthy democracy, but it is gratifying to see philosophical analysis of democracy directly connected to a specific proposal for addressing an ongoing threat to actual democracies.

This emphasis on solving real-world problems is perhaps most evident in the essay by Sangick Jeon, Evan Bendavid, Joshua Cohen, Katherine Hoffmann, and Terry Winograd, in which they report on their efforts to improve access to clean water in Nairobi. Growing out of an assignment for a course taught by Cohen and Winograd, they have developed a project that will allow water vendors to use their mobile phones to advertise the location, price, and quality of available water, and will allow water buyers to access this information on their mobile phones. Given the ubiquity of mobile phones, even among those who currently have difficulty accessing low-cost, safe water, this project holds great promise for improving real freedom, which is among the central concerns of Van Parijs’ work.
This sort of attention to concrete problems, and to possible public policy or NGO solutions, manifests in many of the other contributions to the volume, such as Anne Alstott’s discussion of marriage policy, François Blais’ analysis of funding sources for public services, and Paul De Grauwe’s argument for lower interest rates for debtor nations within the eurozone. These and several other practically-oriented essays all merit individual attention, but I will focus on just one more that I found particularly engaging: Bea Cantillon and Wim Van Lancker’s paper criticizing the Flemish policy of requiring parents of students with excessive absenteeism to repay their school allowance. Cantillon and Van Lancker raise what I take to be important concerns about the excessively punitive nature of the Flemish system, about the difficulty of holding parents and children responsible for one another’s behavior, and about the effectiveness of such sanctions in combating truancy. It is also important to notice that although they focus specifically on this particular case, similar issues arise in any reciprocity-based system that provides benefits to those in need but sanctions recipients who fail to exhibit certain required behavior. I have elsewhere defended some such systems, provided the sanctions are designed in such a way as to promote future compliance, and I suspect that the Flemish system could be revised to overcome many of Cantillon and Van Lancker’s objections. For instance, I would argue that shifting from the current policy of clawing back multiple years’ worth of school allowance that has already been distributed to a policy of withholding future allowances and reinstating them if attendance improves would both align the Flemish system more closely with legitimate concerns about reciprocity and free-riding and also help alleviate Cantillon and Van Lancker’s concerns. Nonetheless, they raise powerful objections that must be addressed, and their essay is well worth reading, not only for its criticism of the Flemish policy regarding school allowances but also for its significance for broader questions about the sanctions necessary to implement conditional public assistance programs.

Van Parijs, of course, has long been an advocate of an unconditional basic income, under which such sanctions would be unnecessary, and many of the essays in this volume engage directly that with his defense of such a system. In an interesting paper, Karl Widerquist argues that Van Parijs’ concept of real freedom is too vague to support an argument for an unconditional basic income, and suggests that it should be replaced by a concept of freedom understood as the effective power to decide whether or not to cooperate with others. His central claim is that an unconditional basic income is necessary to ensure that everyone has the effective power to refuse cooperation. This line of analysis may have some promise of vindicating an unconditional basic income, but it also raises questions about the nature and significance of the kind of